

# Pioneers on Lush Grassland Had Problems

## Rough Boxes Served As Coffins in Which to Bury Dead

By HARRY S. WHITE  
of Amelia

In 1882 Will and Lester Sammons were making plans to move to Southwest Holt county from Guide Rock and Will wrote on March 23 of that year what he was bringing with him, livestock consisting of four cows with calves and two cows yet to freshen. He said: "Cows are very high this Spring from \$35 to \$50 a head and two-day old calves \$7 each."

On May 27 he wrote to his father in Illinois from O'Neill, saying: "We have had lots of rain this Spring and I have not done much yet. Have in an acre of potatoes, seven acres of corn and will continue to plant until June 15. Sowed about three acres of onions but they are not up yet, paying \$2 a pound for the seed."

Next the letter mentions the abundance of grass in the valley at the headwaters of the South Fork and that his stock were turned out to rustle for themselves along with something like 3,000 head of cattle feeding in the territory. Mr. Sammons invites his father to come out in August and see the country which was open to homestead and tree claim entry. The first job he took on was a three-day ride trailing a herd of cattle. The letter mentions Mr. Sammons having traveled around 2,000 miles at an estimated cost of \$15 and closes by saying:

"I am sitting on the ground while writing this with a pig chewing at my boot and a calf rubbing my back. I have a happy family, and that's what knocks."

The Fall of 1883 Will's father and my father, J. E. White, came out and filed on their claims.

In a letter dated February 6, 1884, Will wrote to his father who had returned to Illinois, that he was going to Greely county for seed corn for himself and his father. He also mentions in this letter that he had written to my father, who had also gone back to Illinois, suggesting that he come on soon to put up a house on his claim.

Then he describes to the folks back there the great household institution of the homesteader, the hay burner. "If you have," he writes, "an old wash boiler stuff it full of hay, remove the lids from the front of the stove and turn the boiler filled with hay upside down over the fire-box of the stove, set the hay on fire, and the way she goes." The construction of the hay burner was described as being made of Russian iron, and he said "eight times filling will last all day, and can't be beat."

Bill Sammons never married and may be said to have been the typical bachelor. He was a charming singer and was the first one I heard sing "The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim."

My father came to Holt county in September, 1883, acquired title to a homestead and tree claim in section 27, township 26, range 14, a mile and a half West and about the same distance South of Amelia, the property now being owned by my brother, Edward H. White.

Dave, father of the Sammons boys, took a homestead which in later years became known as the McGinnis holdings, and also acquired a timber claim, now the home of Allie Sammons. Del

Bower homesteaded the land where Berl Waldo and family now live. Phil and Charley Robertson were early day settlers in what is now Wyoming precinct, and Bart Bisbee, one of the big cattle men, introduced the first flowing well in the community. He had offered to pay \$100 for a well that would not go dry and the flow was the result of the efforts to obtain such a well. Mr. Bisbee also built the first frame barn West of Chambers. It was moved a quarter of a mile from the original site and still stands as a monument to the conscientious carpenters who built it. The property is now owned by Duane Carson.

Taylor Smith and wife, their son, Fleming, and daughter, Nettie, came from Missouri and settled where the Tom Doolittle family now resides. We were becoming something of a settled community but to the Northwest of the Smith's there was still unoccupied territory.

In the Spring of 1884 my father left us for the time being in Illinois and returned to Nebraska to prepare a home for the family on the land which he had taken as a homestead. That first home was a sod house with board, tarpaper and sod for the roof. This sod was held in place on the slanting roof by a strip of board fastened to the lower edge of the roof.

An incident of sod house living occurred one morning early when the family was aroused by a disturbance overhead and they rushed out to find the sod had slid off one side of the roof, when the board holding it gave way.

My uncle, Ralph, took land just North of where I now live. Will Sammons had a Winchester rifle. One morning standing in his cabin door he brought down an antelope with a shot from the rifle.

Our move from Illinois to O'Neill was effected by freight and passenger train, two of the boys, Ed and Ernest, going with the stuff by freight and the rest of the family by passenger train. Friends from the settlement met us to haul our machinery and furniture to the future home of the Whites.

The vast vista of open country stretching to the far horizons was alive with bird life which burst into song as we drove along as if to welcome newcomers into a new land. I was 14 years of age and as we came in sight of the home father had prepared for us I did not realize that this land was to be my home for more than 60 years.

The years 1885 and 1886 brought additional settlers into the community now known as the Amelia neighborhood. Among these were Al White, a nephew of J. E. White, Wilbur Wheaton and Will Ott, two bachelors. Levi Clemens and family now have the place homesteaded by Wheaton. Ott returned to Illinois and his brother, Gus, came out, became the husband of Etta Athon and developed a home where he remained until his death. Mr. Ott did much to improve the cattle industry.

Drouth and financial losses, "hard times" as we called it, started a movement to depopulate our community in the 90's, but some settlers stuck, among them my father, and he bought some of the buildings on places that were being abandoned.

Charley Thompson and family moved over here from Inman some time in the 80's.

One night there came a knock at our door. Tom Thompson, then a young boy, had come for help. He was

bringing in a load drawn by two yoke of cows and floundered in trying to cross the creek. Some of our family got out and extracted the cows, leaving the loaded wagon until morning. Charley Thompson lived to be 100 years of age.

The Thompson family of boys and girls grew up in the community, married and became substantial citizens of this section of Holt county.

Other settlers were Tom Curran, a warm-hearted, friendly Irishman, and R. D. Parsons, a Civil War veteran and a widower who made his home with the White family. Parsons was a man of parts, loved by everybody, started a newspaper in Amelia, The Journal, dubbed the Inez Valley, the Missouri Valley or Puke Flats. A little hill became known as Rabbit Mountain just back of the Berges place. Poverty Flats was applied by this genius for inventing names to the little valley South of our home. Another was Crowbait Valley, which seemed to be the hangout for plug horses. But our own community was known by the exalted title of Paradise Valley. Leather Tongue and Iron Jaw were names given by Parsons to certain loquacious gents.

Pioneer social functions were something to set young hearts fluttering. With dances, song fests, literary societies and just neighborly gatherings, the nights were filled with gladness and the cares that infested the day would "fold their tents like the Arabs and silently steal away."

With the coming in 1887 of the C. W. Moss family and the father and mother of Al White, the Baptists took over, instituted Sunday-schools and other religious services. On a hill South of Lee Gilman's on the West of Highway 11 there once stood what was known as Sunnyside schoolhouse. Here C. H. Frady, representing the American Sunday School Union, with the help of a Baptist minister, held a series of meetings, convicted and converted sinners, myself among them. These men were out to do good, not to make money, precious little of which they ever received. Thomas A. Moss, a son of C. W., by an earlier marriage, traveled over much of Northwest Nebraska as a Sunday-school missionary.

May I be pardoned for here paying a tribute to my own mother? Maybe I can do no better than to quote Mrs. Charley Thompson who said, "Mrs. White was the best woman that ever lived." Days and weeks passed that she did not see another woman and when asked by strangers if she did not get lonesome would reply, "No, I came here to make a home." The family had known pleasant surroundings in Illinois though there they rented. Here they were free on the soil on which they lived their own. My mother was a ministering angel to the poor and unfortunate. She lived to be 90 years of age, and if she ever shed tears they were hidden from her boys.

William Long, retired and now making his home in Neligh, upon the advice of my father, who was active in helping bonafide settlers find claims, took for his homestead a quarter East of the present town of Amelia, now the home of Mr. and Mrs. Link Sageser.

Long had a yoke of oxen. He drove to Chambers to celebrate the Fourth and those oxen kept up with the pace set by horses.

As a boy I trapped muskrats and mink, receiving 25 or 30 cents for mink pelts and a nickel for rats.

Isabod Brotherton walked here from Iowa, took land and made good. The Hesekiah Moorman family, also of Iowa, loaded a wagon with their possessions, yoked to the wagon four cows to pull the load and started for Holt county. The cows staged a runaway and broke the tongue from the wagon. But the family got here after repairs were made and those cows were used for plow horses.

The Moormans took land about two miles West of where the Carrs now live. One of the family, Frank Moorman, married Cora Thompson and they went to Canada.

Men of note came to dwell among us. Among such was Lafe Dimmick, a singer from New York, who settled in the vicinity of Swan Lake. Dimmick lake was named after him. Wilkes James and Oliver Cromwell were others down by Swan Lake. They used oxen with such names as Moody, Sankey, Pat, Jim, Bob and Al. Cromwell had but one leg and he rode a pony to drive the oxen while James held the 24-inch breaking plow. Philcotis Billings was a character in his own right. He lived a half mile North of the present Fryear home. He was known as Josh Billings. A report in the Amelia Journal after a Fourth of July celebration credited "Josh" with reading the Declaration of Independence so impressively that the hearers were moved to tears.

During a period of bitter winter weather and deep snow

Charley Hale died and the remains had to be kept for some days before they could be taken to Chambers for burial. The family later moved away and they sold their house to the Free Methodist organization which moved and converted it into what is now the Bethany Free Methodist church.

### Pioneers Experienced Hardships

The following stories are given by the writer by Frank Pierce. The Pierce family and family of a brother-in-law, Emanuel Carrol, arrived in the Spring of 1883 and made selection of land on which to file. They removed the boxes from their wagons and arranged them for a shelter for the families in which were small children while the men went to O'Neill to get lumber with which to build the houses. During that time there was almost incessant rain and those mothers and little ones under the wagon boxes had that sort of introduction to pioneer life.

Grinding corn meal in a coffee mill was an experience of the families during their first Winter down by Amelia. The blizzard of Jan. 12, 1888, was long to be remembered by Mr. and Mrs. Pierce. That day the children were put in a hole under the floor to keep them warm and get them out of the way. Frank says they played contentedly until they heard a baby cry. Their sister, Minnie, was born during the storm.

On the 13th a man by name of Thornton came to the Pierce home and reported his wife had given birth to a baby and he appeared helpless to care for them and his wife was not recovering as she should. They gave him what instruction they could. He left but in a few days was back to report the death of both mother and child. A box was made of boards and that mother and child buried on the prairie under snow and earth to await the resurrection day. The next visitors were two starving men who had walked from Rush Lake. They had lost all their sheep in the storm. The starving and distressed men were fed. Frank says he saw his mother in tears and asked her what the trouble was. She replied, "O, if somebody who wasn't crying would come in and talk to me."

### Amelia Started Under Difficulties

Mr. and Mrs. I. D. Bliss came into the new settlement in 1885, opened a store in a sod house some 80 rods Southeast of the present site of Amelia. Then Mr. Bliss took up the enterprise of establishing a postoffice and mail route to O'Neill, 28 miles away. He found that in order to get the route started a carrier must be provided for a stated period without expense to the government.

But he went ahead and when no teams were going to O'Neill by which the mail could be sent out and brought in, Mr. Bliss, who was horseless but not bootless, carried the mail in a sack on his back and walked the distance to and from O'Neill. This continued for a year or more and then the government made the route official.

Mr. Bliss named the post-office Amelia as a tribute to his wife whose name was Amelia. Now came Carl Barthel and started a blacksmith shop, the little store and postoffice with the new enterprise of the smithy constituting the town of Amelia until removal to the present location.

A sod hall was built as a community center in which singing school was conducted by Prof. Will Ingles, of Ballagh, literary societies, preaching services and amusements. A sod school house or two forlornly on the open prairie became the forum for stirring Winter debates and pioneer social life took on a quality of worthwhile culture that is lacking in the giddy whirl of modern life.

The O'Neill mail route was abandoned and a route established from Atkinson to Ord which served Amelia. At present there are two daily mail services and one three times a week, centering at Amelia, though the territory to the East is served out of Chambers.

### Largest Shorthorn Herd

Will and Sam Riley came into the community in the early 80's, organized the Riley Bros. Shorthorn ranch, West of Amelia and developed the largest herd of purebred Shorthorns in the United States. The ranch was carried on in connection with farming operation in Boone with farming operation in Boone county. The ranch is probably the only one in the country that started when it was still producing purebred cattle. Thomas T. Baker and wife, the former Ruth Riley, operate the ranch and Mrs. Fannie Riley, mother of Ruth, and widow of Will Riley, is still on the ranch. Will Riley died in the early 1930's and Sam died some years previous.

The '88 Blizzard  
My father expressed a desire to see a blizzard. He had his wish. No stock or lives were lost in this valley in the blizzard of Jan. 12, 1888, but a number were exposed to its fury.

(Continued on page 6-D)

O'Neill Was Founded by Men and Women with Dreams



Grandmother's home on the prairie . . . or in the tiny O'Neill colony . . . was modest in every sense of the word. But the early settlers had vision. They foresaw a great future on the Great Plains. O'Neill . . . and Holt county . . . today exceed the fondest expectations of the founders. Today modern living begins in the home — with electric appliances.



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