

Prairieland Experiences

By ROMAIN SAUNDERS
Editor-in-Chief, Diamond Jubilee Edition

To a boy just transplanted from the settled society beyond the Mississippi to the rugged and sometimes rough elements of the open prairie everything held the charm of adventure. A lush day in May the native flowers touched with color the sea of green and the wind of Spring fanned across the far-flung landscape. The only visible objects to rise out of the waving miles of grass were here and there the abode of a homestead family.

The wind had blown steadily out of the South throughout the day and as night spread its dark mantle across Holt county storm clouds gathered on the far Northwest horizon. A homestead family—my father and mother, my younger sister and I—had retired for the night in an unfinished house setting forlornly on a spot of the open prairie a few miles out from O'Neill. Father and mother occupied a room below, sister and I rooms above. At the stroke of 11 the storm struck out of the Northwest with raging fury.

A crash and the house moved under us. We were all awakened to what approached frightened panic. Sister and I screamed, left our beds and hastened down stairs.

The house had been moved off of the heavy timber on the West side in a way to rest on the timber on the East side, thus leaving the building leaning against the storm. Father assured us it would move no farther, while mother leveled up her pans of milk and mopped up the streams that had come from them now trickling down across the room.

Storm insurance that had been secured through the Omaha Bee provided some of the funds to set the house on a brick foundation, and otherwise put the home in liveable condition. That storm occurred during the first week of my kid days in Nebraska.

Other storms blew out their rage upon us but after that first one we always had a good storm cellar for refuge if it seemed best to take to cover. It was not uncommon to see the head of a homesteader emerged through the door of a storm cellar to learn if his shanty was still standing.

My father had professional training but the blood of the pioneer was in him. He had preceded us to prairieland and had begun what he planned for the family future home. It reached fruition when death took him. He was laid to rest in one of the very early graves on the hill in O'Neill.

Came November.

The Summer had been fruitful. The cellar was stocked with the bounties that virgin land can produce and grain and other feed provided for the stock. A barrel of fresh meat stood in the open at the Northeast corner of the house. A cold November night brought a gale out of the Northwest that upset that barrel, rolled it across the prairie, and scattered the contents along the way. Father went forth in the morning and recovered both barrel and the meat.

Life on the prairie was open-handed hospitality. Cowboys stopped for water and something to eat. Winter days half-frozen settlers would stop on the way to or from town and thaw out. The custom was not to knock at the door, but ride in and give a lusty "Hello!" or fire a shot.

There was a Summer night when father was away, leaving mother, sister and I at home. About midnight a wagon drove up to the house and a man shouted to awaken us. Mother got me up while she went to the door to see what was wanted. There were three men in the wagon and they wanted to put up for the night. Mother explained that she was alone with the children and could not keep them, but that there was a place a mile farther on that made a business of keeping travelers for the night.

I made the mistake—if it was a mistake—of getting into the picture. These fellows insisted I go with them to show them the place. With boyish temerity I climbed into their wagon and we wheeled away. I directed the course and when in sight of the buildings they let me out after slipping me a silver dollar. Think I ran that mile in midnight darkness back home, where I displayed my night's earnings.

Alex Boyd was holding down a claim two miles farther out and passed our home each morning and evening on foot. He worked as a carpenter in O'Neill and walked the seven miles from his claim in town and back each day.

On a warm day in early Autumn a beautiful English setter came trotting into our yard, lapped up a drink of water, and stood eyeing us with aristocratic dignity. I spoke to him and received a friendly wag of his tail in a sort of haughty way. Evidently a hunting dog that had become separated from a party of hunters out after prairie chickens, of which there were thousands. To his ultimate undoing and my sorrow, the dog adopted us. Some weeks later, whether he got into bad company or something primitive from remote ancestors stirred within him, he had a part in driving off our small herd and was caught redhanded by my father chasing the cattle over the countryside. Father was a man of action rather than words. He shot the dog on the spot, and sister and I grieved for days for our haughty English friend.

What sustained the homesteader—most of them penniless? The virgin soil and a few cows produced an abundant table supply. My father was hired to teach three or four children that came from a wide range of homesteaders and received \$20 a month. I would be sent to town on occasion with a fat heifer for which I received \$15 or \$16. One load of corn

sold to Dan Tohill for 22 cents a bushel. Bear in mind \$10 then was equal to a hundred now.

My father died on June 15, 1887. It seemed advisable as Summer faded into Autumn to move into O'Neill before Winter. An older brother then employed in town secured for us the former home of the widow of Gen. John O'Neill, two blocks East of the present site of the postoffice. We had 18 acres of corn when I became afflicted with a crippled hand. Somehow, the neighboring homesteaders saw the situation and came and got that field of corn out for us. For lack of a better place it was stored in the house after we moved to town.

The nearest neighbor magnanimously offered to keep an eye on things for us. This he did by passing the word to a brother of his living some miles further on of our storage of corn. A load of something like 50 bushels was taken.

The following Summer that homestead home became only a memory. The house was moved into O'Neill and still stands as one of the substantial homes on South First street. Ed Welton dug the basement and Hank Mills put down the well. John Triggs did the brick work and a character out on Dry Creek by the name of Mason looked after the plastering. The other buildings were torn down, taken away and the old homestead reverted to its original status as the haunt of antelope and coyote, the playground of jackrabbit, and the holing up place of prairie dogs, rattle snakes and owls.

Life on prairieland in the long ago brought joy and pain. And today I weave a wreath again to the memory of father and mother, who had the vision to perceive, the courage to dare and handed on to their children the heritage of the pioneer.

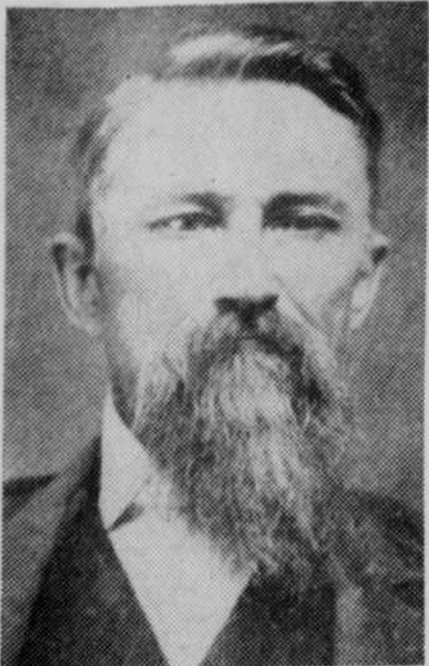
Sheriff Unarms Bronc Buster

Probably the most picturesque character that has filled the office of sheriff of Holt county was Ed Hershiser, who functioned as such during the Kid Wade and vigilante days. He held a rein over lawless elements in outlying sections of the county and was a one-man police force at the county seat.

Booted, belted, gun-toting broncho tamers were a part of the daily street scene. One of these gents had a span hitched to a wagon and had been pounding them over the streets and outlying open country until the little cayuses were near exhaustion. As they came up Fourth street they turned and stopped at the board walk just off of Douglas street.

The gent got out of the wagon and began to badger the ponies to get them going again. Not succeeding in this, he reached to his holster and came out with the familiar six-shooter and was about to use it on the horses when Hershiser stepped up, took the gun away from him and made him unhitch those ponies and give them a rest.

You might see Hershiser out in subzero weather without a coat. He wore a blue flannel shirt and buckskin underwear.



JUBILEE EDITOR'S PARENTS . . . J. G. Saunders and his wife came to Holt county in 1883. They were parents of Romaine Saunders, Jubilee edition editor. Infant is Constance Evans.



Father Smith in Action

Father Smith, one of the first if not the first pastor of St. Patrick's church, took his job of looking after the youth of his parish seriously. The church, a little frame building where the present edifice stands, and a small house where the priest lived, were not the confines of his activity if occasion required.

One Sunday morning some boys of the families of his congregation absented themselves from church and had the affront to engage in rough-and-tumble stuff less than a block from the open door of the church.

The black-robed priest was aroused to action and came forth with a rattan cane in hand, got after the boys, administered the rod over their backs and herded them into church.

The Comely Widow

Mrs. Hooker, the blonde and comely widow of Captain Hooker, who had been in military service at the Ft. Randall post, maintained with the aid of two maids a somewhat aristocratic establishment where the residence of Judge and Mrs. Harrington now stands and served meals to a few choice young bloods of the town.

A New Years day these pretentious bachelors made formal calls and to give it a Fifth avenue touch amid a setting of cowpunchers and pony herds I was drafted, had my face blackened and equipped with white gloves and a tony outfit carried a platter of personal cards, went the rounds with the gentlemen and took their cards to the door of each home on their list. Mrs. Hooker, regal yet haughty, called me a black devil.

This humiliation was amply compensated by the gents in that party raising a two dollar fund for me. The short time we were on the rounds that just about matched today's union scale.

Pat McManus may recall the day, as he was one of the "young bloods."

Blow from Fist Instead of Kiss

He wore tailor-made clothes, hand-made boots—and by boots is not meant shoes—washed his face before going to the barber for a shave, walked with the air of military aristocracy but was as friendly as a month's old pup. Everybody knew him simply as Roscoe.

He had fought with Grant in the campaigns down the Mississippi and wore the Grand Army badge. He was never known to work and his sole occupation during his years in O'Neill was to preside at the desk at the old Commercial hotel, which still stands on lower Fourth street and is now wrapped in a cocoon of brick-roll.

Among the guests for the night at the hotel was a lanky gent from the cattle range and also one of the demi-monde profession that had dropped into town on professional business.

Official restrictions on personal conduct didn't exist or were disregarded in a pioneer community. She arranged a date with the lanky gent who had wandered off the range, the guide at the end of the trail after ascending the steps was a handkerchief at the door to a room.

Roscoe discovered the plot and repaired to his room, removing the handkerchief to his door and when the fellow came up to meet his engagement he got into the wrong stall and instead of being greeted with a kiss received a jolt in the jaw from Roscoe's capable fist.

A Prairie Sailing Rig

B. F. Cole, an early day jeweler, was also an inventor. Also a sodhouse homesteader in the lush grasslands out by Amelia. Everybody got around those bays on foot, on a pony or bedays on foot, on a pony or bedays on foot. Mr. Cole had a pair of them. He adopted neither method. He secured a buggy, removed the top and box, built a platform and equipped the outfit with a sail. He took advantage of windy days and made it out to his claim with his sailing outfit and when the wind changed came back to town.

Youth Trained as Speakers

Mrs. Adams, the comely and capable widow of Waldo Adams, capable widow of the name correctly, was an active Woman's Christian Temperance Union

worker and was the inspiring genius that decorated a lot of rising young elocutionists of the town with those Demerest medals. It was during a period of a great temperance wave sweeping the country and contests were held where young people displayed their speaking ability by twisting the neck of John Barleycorn.

The amber fluid flowed freely in frontier towns and what these contests did to check it was not noticeable at the time.

The town, however, found itself with a lively set of the young element organized into a Good Templars Lodge. The Demerest Medal contests drew continual crowds for a year or more and maybe did something beside entertaining people and giving the youth an experience on the platform.

A Sod House Classic

"The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim" became a classic of the frontier literature. In verse that was set to tune the sod house was immortalized. And down there two miles South of Inman, the Southwest quarter of section 31, township 28, range 10, originated this crude bit of classic, the author, the homesteader, Joseph Raymond. It first came to light in the Inman Index, a small four-page paper published by Cross & Son. The vivid picture, the clever rhyme at once caught the popular fancy and it has been something of a favorite in recent years with radio audiences. What Raymond got out of his production if anything no one seems to know. He was one of those patriots who left to posterity a popular bit of jingle while he passed out in oblivion.

The Bakers

O'Neill has had one or more bakeries since 1884. Dan and Mrs. Connally appeared in the pioneer picture at that time out of the congested areas along the Eastern Canadian border, put up a one-room leanto on the West side of the Giddings building that stood across the street from where the K. C. hall now stands. That particular corner at that day was the site of a hotel. That little bakery survived for a few years. A little Swedish gentleman came to town in 1886 and put in a pretentious affair next to The Frontier, but as pioneer women did most of their own baking, he did not last long. Barney Welton, a former sheriff of the county, next tried the bakery game in a small building about where the theatre now is. Then the Bentley bakery on the opposite side of the street put the business on a firm footing in O'Neill.

Another Holt county product dwelt on the heights of fame before his death some years ago in Minneapolis, Minn. Dr. Ross A. Gortner attained to international recognition in the field of science. He was born in the Gortner home in O'Neill in 1885.

Holt County Giant

Mike Carrol, a homesteader six miles Northeast of O'Neill, was the giant of the county. Nothing remarkable about Mike but his size, and he was a bachelor, good natured and open-handed liberality. A six-foot four-inch bedstead just lacked four inches of accommodating his 6' 8" perpendicular dimensions.

So, like grandfather's clock that "was too tall for the shelf" and "stood 90 years on the floor," Mike spread a mat and went to rest at night on the floor.

Just before leaf and bud withered and died in Kansas and Nebraska during a period of hot winds, Mike sought out a loan agent in town, mortgaged his claim for a wad, sold his cattle, loaded his stuff on a wagon and pulled out for the Missouri Ozarks.

Babe Unhurt by Cyclone

The last I knew of him he was living in Huron, S. D. He was alive because of a miracle in his boyhood when a cyclone swept across the old McClure ranch in Southeast Holt county when we were still pioneering on prairieland. George Majors, a ranch hand, and family lived on the lower end of the ranch. The day of the cyclone their baby was asleep on a bed. The storm opened the roof of the house just above this bed, drew the bed coverings out through the

opening but left the baby on the bed unharmed. Another son of the Majors, Bill, has lived at Chambers for many years.

Words Have but Hollow Sound

On November 19, 1863, Lincoln concluded the short Gettysburg address and sat down. There was a hush. Not a hand was lifted in applause. Applause? That may as well follow the praying of the Lord's prayer. Lincoln felt he had failed. As applause was presumptions on that day, a word from this generation eulogizing John McCafferty, Neil Brennan, John Mann, the Thompson and McEvony band, others who plucked the first prairie roses at a spot now called O'Neill; the able men and devoted women who came shortly after and joined in laying the foundation of this community, may now have but a hollow sound. Their remains are at rest on yonder hill. Their memory is revered by sons and daughters now greying in the shadows of life's sunset, while those here who never knew them will be conscious of a rich heritage.

Throw Rotten Apples

Patrick Hagerty, an erudite young Irish gentleman turned merchant, supplied the new settlers clustered in shanties that was assuming the proportions of a village from a conglomerate stock of merchandise got together in a frame building where the Golden hotel now stands. Two roust-a-bout functionaries, Den Hunt and my brother, Grant, were assigned the task by Mr. Hagerty of sorting apples stored in the cellar that had started to spoil. To expedite the work, that is to get any work out of the boys, they were separated, one being placed at each end of the pile of apples. The fruit had been brought in at some expense from Iowa. The boys found a way to continue contact by throwing rotten apples at each other. While engaged in this work Den went up into the store for a short time and when Grant saw a pair of legs start down the stairs, supposing it to be Den, let fly with a rotten apple which landed square to the solar plexus of the boss himself. Now at four score years Den recalls the accuracy with which those spoiled apples splattered his person.

Ball Game Assures Teacher

The teacher gave up and quit the school in a district just out of town because he could not manage the rough necks that dominated the school. A husky young fellow who had come to town and attended teachers' in-

stitute, his only possessions being what he wore, blue overalls, high top boots, a shirt and hat that rested on a head of hair like a Fiji islander, learned of the situation, applied and got the school. He was sold a suit of clothes on credit by M. M. Sullivan and went forth to conquer or be conquered. Tension was at high pitch until the morning recess, when this new teacher announced, "Come on, boys, let's play ball!" That teacher, his first venture as a pedagogue, was Guy Green. He won the hearts of students and parents alike with a ball and bat. He later acquired the status of a journeyman printer and served as The Frontier's "devil" to make a start in that direction.

A 'Nigger' in Woodpile; Attorney Dickson Fumes

Deputy Postmaster Campbell received a letter from Omaha asking for the name of any reputable colored man in O'Neill. In the goodness of his heart, being anxious to accommodate, and not knowing just what color was wanted, Tom, after a consultation with Harry Mathews, sent in the name of Attorney Dickson and said nothing.

Last Sunday evening Dick went to the post office, and there among other mail was a letter postmarked Omaha. He opened it and found an appeal, beseeching him, as a friend and brother, to attend a negro convention. He read it several times and suddenly startled the crowd by howling, "Think I'm a nigger, do they? I'll be—". The balance of the remarks were of such a character that we firmly decline to publish them in this moral paper, circulating as it does among the very best class of citizens, and all we can say is there was a flavor of brimstone in that locality for awhile.

The Item and other friends are doing all they can to keep the matter quiet, and it is hoped the episode and the letter Dick sent will teach the association to plainly state what color they want, whether black or red, so Tom will not make another mistake.

Another World to Conquer

This is the way Jim Killoran wrote it for his paper, The Tribune, a day in March, 1887: "Judge Kinkaid last week dissolved the marital ties which bound Rozelle Hills to her husband, and she is now standing upon the tower of single glory waiting her sighs to heaven for another world to conquer. Both parties reside in Holt county."



Marcellus Implement Co.

WEST O'NEILL

PHONE 5

We will never realize the hardships under which the pioneers conquered this wild territory, which did not look too promising to the less observing settlers. The sturdy pioneers who settled this community—and North-Central Nebraska and Southern South Dakota—took a second look, investigated the possibilities. Sure, it was difficult to envision what time and work could do in making this truly a "land of milk and honey."

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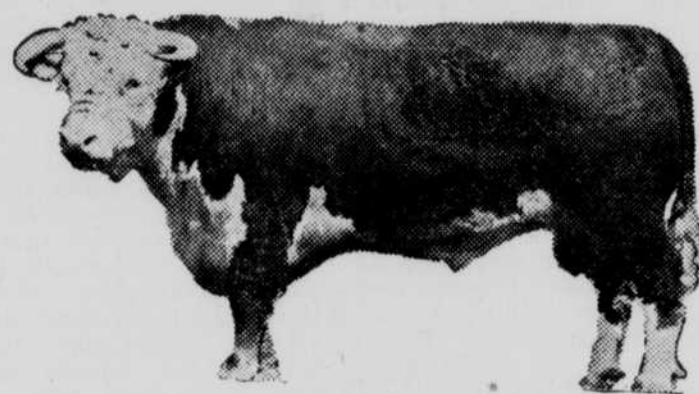
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WE DOFF our hats to this fine, uprising city on the occasion of its Diamond Jubilee. We're proud to be a part of this thriving town; we're glad that with us has been vested the privilege to serve the buyer and seller alike in the greatest enterprise of them all: the livestock industry.

THE FREDRICKSON LIVESTOCK COMM. CO is in its fourth year in business in O'Neill. We're newcomers here in comparison to those who came when the Elkhorn valley was untamed and the vast expanses of sandhills stretched out beyond the horizon with little sign of the White Man.

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