

# Mining Engineer Writes of School Days in O'Neill

Recalls Rough-and-Ready Life in O'Neill—  
a Frontier Town

By W. E. MEALS  
of San Diego, Calif.

We, of the G. W. Meals family, came from Northern Missouri to Atkinson in 1885, and to O'Neill in the Spring of 1887. So it was that we missed the hard pioneering, the first house raisings, and the spectacle of a primeval prairie reaching to the horizon, lush and unspoiled.

I think the first settlers of O'Neill experienced all this, and perhaps found some buffalo still roaming these good grasslands. As a small boy, I remember seeing many buffalo robes, and some hides lying about in the stables where we played. Here and there were the buffalo wallows, roughly circular depressions where, I suppose, the animals had rolled and dusted themselves, and the dust, blowing away, had left the hollows, in my time again grassgrown.

If I should name one thing as making the prairie memorable, it would be the wild roses of early Summer—flowers so perfect on their small bushes, and of such exquisite fragrance, as to haunt the memory all one's years. There was also the well-loved Indian paint brush, sometimes making great areas glow red and orange. Sometimes one came upon a patch of wild plums, sweet and tasty, and there were by the Elkhorn pungent wild grapes. Now and then we small boys trailed along when the men hunted prairie chickens.

In those days there were many sod houses in the country, and I have often been asked about these. The idea seems to appeal to many, and I suppose this is because it suggests caves and cave dwelling, at which most youngsters have played, however modern and artificial their surroundings. I have never been able to tell how the inside walls were finished.

My years in O'Neill were from five to almost 13, so it is of school days that I write. Our old brick school building housed all grades, but one said he was in the third or fourth room, A or B class. There were six classrooms. Over the blackboard in each room was a frescoed motto, and another greeted us on the main entry wall: "God Bless Our School—Never Be Late." Others included "The Pen Is Mightier Than the Sword," "After Clouds, Sunshine," and "Knowledge Is Power. Try To Do Right." I cannot recall the remaining three.

We responded, for morning and afternoon sessions, to "first bell" and "second bell." If one reached his room after the final peal of second bell, it went against him in his report card, under "times tardy." My teachers, in succession, were Miss McNichols, Henrietta Kimball (Mrs. James Riggs), Della Marsh, Bridgett Welsh, Miss Howard, Bridgett O'Donnell, Jeanette Taylor and Lizzie Carlton, and of these teachers I have pleasant recollections. They taught us in the hard way, and I think it was not a bad way. We were expected to learn our lessons, or not move ahead. Other teachers of my time were Anna Lowrie, Maud Gillespie and Annie Murphy, but I was not in their classes. I should here mention the "professors," as we called the principals. There were John ("Daddy") Bland, Cheever Hazlett, Ebenezer Hunt, Thomas Morrow, and a Mr. McGuire. Sometimes the obstreperous ones among us, too difficult for the teacher, were sent to the professor and the looped rubber hose.

The day's work was started off with concerted singing in the lower grades, and to this day certain of the old songs, so well remembered, make our early years seem very real, and not so long past. There were "Darling Nellie Gray," "The Song of the Rose," "Swinging Neath the Old Apple Tree," "Come in the Twilight," "I Saw a Ship a-Sailing," "Bring the Ball and Bat, Boys," "Tra la la, la leiti-o" (to the tune of "I Saw Three Ships") and "Pompey." This last, in six stanzas, called for our standing in the aisles to pantomime the story, each stanza ending with "Oh, Oh, Oh!" and the hands clapped three times. We would enter into it with spirit, and finished flushed and happy.

In the lower grades we had the Swinton readers, and, who of that time, doesn't remember "Daniel Webster's First Case" ("Zekiel, Ezekiel! — you let that woodchuck go!"), "Abou and His Horse," and the story of the boy who cried "Wolf"? I was particularly intrigued with the opening lesson in the second reader, where Robin Redbreast was pictured, arriving, a traveled fellow, decked out in stovepipe hat and cutaway, with a valise under his wing. In the lower grades we still used slates, and the double ones, bound in red felt with black cord, were the deluxe version. I regret to say that we spat on our slates, as a preliminary to erasures, until they were too grimy to take the pencil. A good cleaning with hot soapsuds remedied this. La-



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ter, they took to passing around a little cup in which was a wet sponge. But we also had writing tablets, and some in assorted colored sheets were in high favor.

We boys had the usual boys' games, but I especially remember "swing out the Dutch." Hand in hand in a circle, backs to the center, we raced round and round, until someone, unable to hold on longer, went off on a tangent, usually tumbling. It was a variation of crack the whip, and was not for weaklings. On Hagerly's and Carlon's lakes we skated and played shinny, a free and easy form of ice hockey. It was a rough game, and some brawling usually resulted.

Downtown had its interests. I have never since seen two rival drugstores set so companionably side-by-side as Morris' and Corrigan's. Then, as now, a drugstore carried about anything it could profitably buy and sell. Morris' had a soda fountain of sorts, and dispensed fruitz and other drinks. Most of the stores—J. P. Mann's, M. M. Sullivan's and Jake Pfund's, carried both groceries and dry goods, and the mongrel odor of tobacco, groceries and dyed woollens was altogether charming to a small boy. Then there was the daily arrival of the afternoon Westbound passenger train on the FE & MV, a snorting, hissing and bell-ringing drama of which we never tired.

O'Neill was rated a good show town. Performances were held in the "rink," which old hall served also for roller skating and other affairs. The crowd stamped and whistled when the curtain was late in rising. In all but stormy weather, the upper halves of windows would be open, framing bunched young fry, seeing things gratis.

Many of the first settlers were first or second generation Irish, and anti-British feeling ran high. It was about then that nitroglycerin was becoming known as an explosive, and when our teacher, Miss Welsh, told us that a piece the size of a cigar was sufficient to blow up the queen's palace, we accepted this as its logical application.

Those were rough and ready days. Sometimes we youngsters heard of knock-down-and-drag-out fights among the tougher grown-ups, usually relayed to us in half-whispered horror by children of men who had been on the ground. These accounts must have been exaggerated, however, for later I'd see the defeated party with a full set of features. Biting, eye gouging and like tactics were rated "fair."

Since O'Neill, Southern California has been my home, or at least, my base. My work in metallurgical plant design has taken me to Nevada, Montana, Arizona, New York, Alaska, Canada, Mexico, Cuba, Bolivia, Chile, London, South Africa and Southern Rhodesia. My wife and I have our home in San Diego. Our one son, 33, is a doctor (anesthetist) in Los Angeles, and has a son of 12, and a daughter of eight. It has been a roving life, but I wouldn't want it different. In Butte, I one time met Phil Sullivan, then cashier for Anaconda Copper Co., there. In Anaconda I met Jimmie and Mary Gallagher and their mother. In Southern California I saw Burl Martin's name in connection with the Chamber of Commerce, of Whittier. Those whom I've met, who know O'Neill only as transients, speak well of my old home town.

It is—and was—good, and I had a good boyhood there.

## Profit Surprises —

From the Holt County Banner, January 15, 1884: "The report of the committee elected to examine the books of the creamery shows that the institution made \$111 over expenses the past year. Much better than was expected."

Old English festivals were called "ales" whenever ale was the chief drink used, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica.

## KILLED ON EVE OF MARRIAGE

2 Die on Rail Crossing  
in Gruesome 1893  
Tragedy Here

Those living today speed over highway 275, cross the Burlington track a half-mile East of the railroad's station in O'Neill, and know not that they are crossing a spot made sacred to the memory of some Holt county citizens.

On February 15, 1893, a tragedy that moved the most indifferent citizens of the community struck at that crossing. William E. Moore, 23, and Newton C. McCleary, 29, were struck by a freight train coming from the East and not only killed but badly mutilated. McCleary's body was so cut to pieces as to be strewn along the track for 40 rods. Moore's head was cut open and one leg severed. They were in a buggy with the top up and as it was snowing and blowing apparently neither saw or heard the train. The team, belonging to McCleary's father, was not injured.

The young men were coming to O'Neill from Inman to secure a marriage license for Mr. Moore, who was to be married soon to Miss Amelia Poratha, of Ewing. Mr. McCleary had come up from Omaha where he was employed to act as groomsmen at the wedding. The McCleary family lived in the Inman community.

The remains of the two were buried at Inman. William Moore was a brother of Ezra Moore, who says he is reminded when he comes to O'Neill from the ranch near Inman and crosses that railroad track of that tragic hour in February, 1893.

That tragedy brought overwhelming bereavement to the young woman who would have been the bride of Billy Moore. In later years she married and became a resident of Page.

## Teachers, Merchants in Mann Family

In the group of 13 men, who made the first stand in 1874 on what became the townsite of O'Neill was John Mann. Whether this was the John Mann, of the prominent Mann family, who later became identified with the commercial, social, cultural and civic interests of the community, the promoters of this anniversary edition have been unable to determine.

It is the judgment of Edward M. Gallagher, of the First National bank, whose mother was the former Mamie Mann, that the John Mann of that group was neither his grandfather nor his uncle, both of whom bore the name of John.

During the 1880's and '90's a modest little house stood at the East end of Douglas street. Here was the home of the Mann family, consisting of a father, three daughters—Kate, Mamie and Mattie, and three sons—John P., Frank and Joseph A., whose recent death removed the last of the family.

But one of the descendants is now in O'Neill. He is Mr. Gallagher above mentioned.

The senior Mr. Mann conducted a harness shop, while J. P., who had investigated the possibilities in Texas and elsewhere, got into the mercantile business and developed the first department store here. That was in 1883.

After a quarter of a century of successful business operations in O'Neill, Mr. Mann went to Chicago, Ill., and became a prominent figure in the wholesale and manufacturing trade.

His sister, Kate, and brother, Joe, continued the business here for a time, when it was sold to an Omaha man. The Manns also had stores in Atkinson and in Spencer.

Miss Kate was identified with the O'Neill schools before there was any place to conduct school other than a one-room building about where the Outlaw now is located. This is where the more advanced pupils went, while Miss Mann had under her charge a group of the small children in the old Methodist church that was used at that period as a school room. That building also became the social center for aspiring young prima donas who met there in "singing school". Upon the dedication of the church to religious worship the teachers and school kids were required to withdraw.

After another quarter of a century spent in Chicago, J. P. and Joseph A. Mann returned to O'Neill, have now joined other members of the family, their early associates in pioneering on windswept prairie and now turned to dust of the earth on Calvary and Prospect Hill. Their memories live on as a cherished heritage.

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## Failing to Get Provisions at Station, Nels P. Gibson and Friend Slay a Deer

Just about down to bare corn cobs, a sodhouse homesteader 23 miles Northeast of O'Neill, who had declared his intention to renounce allegiance to the king of Sweden and become a citizen of the United States, together with a gent from Germany, who had holed up for the Winter with him, took off across the snow. It was a day in January, 1881, and objective was a point on Steel Creek. At that point was a pioneer provision station.

The homesteader was Nels P. Gibson, father of Albert Gibson, of O'Neill, who in 1889 was

born in that sod house. In 1881 both Nels and his German friend were bachelors. They walked that day in January over the snow to the provision station to buy supplies only to find the "cupboard was bare."

They carried a Winchester and on the return trip came upon several deer grouped on a knoll. The two men got within range of the deer, drew bead with the rifle and brought down a young doe.

The only means of transporting the slain deer to the homestead abode was to drag it over

the snow. This proved so exhausting that Nels and his companion abandoned that plan, skinned the animal, cut away the waste and split the carcass in two. Each shouldered a half of the deer and found their way in by midnight, followed by a pack of prairie wolves.

The papers for Mr. Gibson's naturalization were made out in Knox county on March 29, 1880, Vac Randa clerk of the district court, by Deputy C. E. Parker. On May 19, 1885, in the district court of Holt county at O'Neill naturalization was completed with Judge B. F. Tiffany presiding; Ed Hersher, sheriff, and John McBride, clerk of the court.

Gibson was issued a government patent to the Southwest quarter of section 32, township 31, range 9, on October 2, 1885. Grover Cleveland's name ap-

pears on the patent as president. S. W. Cearn was listed as recorder of the general land office. On May 13, 1891, Mr. Gibson acquired title to a timber claim joining his homestead.

Mr. Gibson married in 1888, bringing his bride from Sweden. He worked on the construction of the railroad West of O'Neill.

He died in 1909 and is buried in Mineola cemetery.

## Cowboy Race On —

From The Frontier, June 22, 1893: "The cowboy race is now fairly on and we believe it is safe to say that it is attracting more attention in the Northwest than any other feature of the exposition."

"Voice of The Frontier . . . thrice weekly.



# Happy Jubilee, O'NEILL!

## 75 Years Young and Still Growing

SEVENTY-FIVE years ago O'Neill began to grow on solid Nebraska soil. Pioneers planted its roots deep. Time and determined townspeople have worked hand-in-hand to make O'Neill's constant growth assured.

## Confidence Played an Active Part

Typical of good Americans, O'Neill forefathers, their children and grandchildren, all who have joined the community as it grew and prospered, have had confidence in its future. They have lived and worked in and believed in O'Neill and in the American principles for which it stands. Their belief, their toil and their sweat have provided the nourishment upon which O'Neill has thrived.

## We, Too, Believe in O'Neill

We believe that O'Neill has an abundance of the materials that have made this country great. We believe that, through constant diligence and effort of all of us, O'Neill will continue to grow and prosper and the community of O'Neill will continue to expand.

## What Can We Do to Help?

Every man, woman and child, every organization group and business has a role to play. We believe that our role, as a retail store, is to provide the people of this community with a pleasant place in which to buy those daily needs, and to provide those needs with the best possible quality at the lowest possible prices. We can play our roll well . . .

BECAUSE: The J. M. McDonald Co. was founded and has grown on the principle of selling only the best quality at the lowest prices possible.

BECAUSE: Our customers pay cash, lower our expenses, reap greater savings.

BECAUSE: Our buying power and distribution methods bring us buying opportunities, help us to obtain bigger bargains for the people of the O'Neill region.

BECAUSE: Our modern store, friendly salespeople who know your needs and preferences, make shopping easy and pleasant.

# BROWN McDONALD'S

It pays to shop FIRST at J. M. McDonald Co.

