

# COLONISTS WHO HAVE SEEN WONDERS OF HALF-CENTURY

Simple Story of Some Sturdy People Who Made Their Selection on the Virgin Prairie of Nebraska and There Built Homes and Aided in Bringing Civilization Into the Wilderness

GRAND ISLAND, Neb., June 15.—(Special.)—The fiftieth anniversary of the original settlement by white men of this vicinity will be celebrated on July 4, preparations for the same being now well under way. On the evening of July 2, 1857, a colony comprised mostly of Germans struck camp here. On July 4 they set out stakes and decided that this was the place they would lay out a town site, which was to be the future capital of the United States. Eight of the men and women who were in that colony half a century ago are still alive and well. They will be the honored figures of the occasion. They are Fred Hedde, the venerable newspaper man, William Stolley, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Joehneck, Mrs. John Thomssen, Mr. William A. Hagge, Kay Ewoldt, and Christian Menck. Messrs. Hedde and Menck, indeed, were in the very advance guard, accompanied by a surveyor and several other Americans who remained only a few years.

A little over fifty years ago a prominent banking firm of Davenport, Washington and other important towns of the east, Chubb Brothers & Barrows, conceived the idea that some day a railroad would run up the valley of the Platte and cross the continent, that thereafter the capital of the nation would have to move, and that it would naturally be centrally located and since Nebraska would be the hub of the universe, it would be located in the Platte valley. The town that was most promising would get it. The thing to do, in their minds, was to locate a town, build it up and—own a good deal of land around it! Thus a company was organized to colonize a section in central Nebraska. R. C. Barnard, Fred Hedde, William Stolley, the others here mentioned and in all over twenty Germans and five Americans thus came to this section. The company that was to support the settlers until they could grow crops failed during the first winter, and the colony was on half rations for three weeks until, under the leadership of Mr. Hedde, new supplies could be secured from Omaha by ox team and over swollen streams.

All of the old colonists took up land, half of which was to go, under the terms to the company of bankers—and some congressmen were said to have been indirectly interested. Town lots were also distributed, by lot, and the timber land on the island in the Platte was apportioned. After a severe storm in the early part of the winter, in which one of the present survivors nearly lost his life—Mr. Joehneck—and in which his comrade was overcome, and perished, the first winter was a mild and pleasant one; and the settlers, aside from the half rations mentioned, experienced no trouble. In 1855 Mr. Stolley, who had participated in the organization of the first settlement, led a second expedition to the settlement and the numbers were largely increased.

### Hardy Holsteiners in Colony

Davenport, Ia., from whence the colony to this county came, was in those years regarded as the Mecca in America of the Schleswig-Holsteiners. In the first colony that left the Iowa city there were twenty-five German men, five German married women, one young unmarried woman—the present Mrs. Thomssen—and one child. Of Americans there were five. Of the Germans all but five were from Schleswig-Holstein, the others from Prussia and other provinces. All of the Americans soon left, none remaining longer than a few years. Some few of the Germans left, but only to emigrate further west. The majority, however, remained and they were soon to undergo a test of their staying qualities.

In the first place, the company which sent them out and was to provision them until such time as they could take care of themselves, failed during the first winter of the colony's presence in Nebraska. It made good in the matter of the provisions for the first winter, though through the faithlessness of some emigrants sent to secure supplies, the colony was compelled to go on half rations for some weeks, until, through the determination of Fred Hedde and his leadership, provisions were brought out just as the last had been consumed on the half-diet. They were then in a new country, with nothing to fall back upon. The arrival of a second colony, however, in 1858, lessened the danger and made it more easy, and they fared fairly well until the succeeding year every house but one or two were destroyed by the fire set by the roving ranch employe. It was said at that time that this was a man in the employ of a present citizen of Omaha, who had large interests some miles west of here, and had men engaged to look after the same from time to time. Upon his return to Omaha, and, it must be emphasized, without the knowledge of his employer, he set fire to the abundant dry grass north of the village, the wind being from that direction, and declared that those damned Dutch had no rights in this country anyway. He believed that he was protecting his ranch owner-employer, though the latter's holdings were forty or fifty miles west of here. The man was not a permanent settler, but only came out with some fellow employe once or twice a year to go over the range. Such is the recollection of one of the old settlers, who, however, only remembers this story as hearsay at that time. Lamentably a fact it was, however, that most of the settlers at the time lost the provisions of an entire winter, much clothing and nearly everything excepting their bedding.

### Defense Against the Indians

Three years intervened without any great calamity when the war of the rebellion broke out. The troops at Fort Kearny, which had afforded protection by their very presence within fifty miles, were called to the front. The officer remaining in charge is said to have spiked the guns, being a southern sympathizer and to have left the settlers even without the possible protection of going thither in case of necessity. But they had determination and resolved when the reports of massacres came nearer to fortify themselves. The old "O. K. store," established early in the sixties or late in the fifties, was made into a fort. Guns were secured, almost as great in variety as in number. The number of settlers had increased by this time and were scattered farther west than the old "town site," the first "Washington-to-be," and William Stolley erected another fort on his original claim, for these—a mile or so west of the O. K. store. This he called "Fort Independence," and relates that the first emblem of the Union, the Stars and Stripes, floated from this fort. It provided protection for some thirty to forty persons and had an underground barn for the horses. The settlers with this were determined to remain and give the red-skins battle were they to attempt to molest them. In the meantime all settlers who had gone farther west were causing the dust to rise on the old trail on their way back to Omaha. This was but natural, since they were more scattered, nor had the protection of even a poorly and hurriedly constructed log-house fort. Many of our settlers urged them to go no farther but to stay here, join the local settlement and be nearer to their claims, but they would not stop for a moment. The war finally was passed, a cannon in the meantime having been left to the settlers, the commanding officers sending it, commending the settlers for their bravery, and through the recommendation of the War department, the piece was finally donated to Hall county and is now kept as a relic of olden times. A fit place for its mounting will be made—the wheels and other wood work having long since decayed. The settlers, however, were never molested, the Indians probably having respect for the preparations made—and an exaggerated idea as to what these preparations and arms really were.

### Massacres of Those Days

In more remote sections of what at present comprises Hall county there was one massacre. Joseph P. Smith and one Anderson, his son-in-law were living near, where the village of Wood River now stands. Smith, Anderson, the latter's two sons and a grandchild went to the river to cut some logs. Anderson who took a load of logs home in the morning returned to find Smith, the two sons and grandchild to have been massacred by the Sioux Indians. The body of the old man, Smith, had several arrows in it and the boys had



HENRY JOEHNCK, SR. WILLIAM F. STOLLEY. MRS. JOHN THOMSEN, SR. FRED HEDDE. WILLIAM A. HAGGE. CAY EWOLDT, SURVIVING MEMBERS OF HALL COUNTY'S PIONEER COLONY.

been struck down with an axe, evidence that the Sioux war club had also been used, being in hand.

Another incident that is related is that of the massacre of two young men on the Loup river. One of them, Christian Goetsche, was one of the first to attend school in Hall county. They were with some older men on the Loup hunting. While the older men were away from the camp, down the river, a war party of Indians came along and when the older men returned, both boys—Franzen and Goetsche, lay dead in pools of their own blood. Two Martin boys were chased by several Indians and as they were riding on one horse, were shot at and pinned together with an Indian's arrow. They escaped, however, and both survived. These were the sons of N. Martin, the first settler south of the river in what is now known as Martin township, the same being named after the pioneer. All of these unfavorable and threatening incidents, however, caused no panic among the colonists nearer the original settlement whose main troubles with the Indians were their beggary and thieving.

### Trials of Many Kinds

The settlers had become fairly prosperous again—as prosperity went in those days—when, after the war, the long dreamed building of a railroad up the Platte valley was begun. But it was not an unalloyed blessing; for the contractors came and took all the timber for ties over their protests. Finally their counsel in Omaha advised them to have the contractors, the wood choppers and timber depollers, put under arrest. The sheriff swore in a large number of deputies. The men were arrested, but orders soon came that they must be released, as they had given surety for their appearance—their foremen or bosses had signed their bonds. And the wood chopping was continued, the best being taken for railroad ties and the rest for cord wood. This caused one or two to leave. The rest "stood pat." Late in the sixties the town site was moved a mile north of the original settlement, to the railroad. The farms increased in value, however, until the next untoward thing came on—the grasshopper plague which lasted for some years. One writer relates that they practically destroyed everything in one year and partially destroyed the crops in several other years, even eating onions out of the ground. A representative was sent to Washington to secure aid—Mr. William Stolley—and he finally secured an appropriation of \$150,000 for the state through the efforts of Senator Hitchcock and Congressman Crouse and ex-President Garfield—then a member of the committee concerned—and upon calling upon

Mr. Gould, owner of the Union Pacific in New York, secured free transportation for all relief goods.

Those who went through those years, and there are many in Nebraska, relate with unanimity that at times the grasshoppers were so thick in their flight that the sun was clouded. One season, when it was too late for replanting and all vegetation had reached quite an advanced stage, everything was eaten, the completeness of the forage is illustrated by a local writer who at that time was in the observing age of boyhood. William Thomssen, the ex-representative from this county, and ex-county treasurer, son of the one woman who came out with the 1857 colonists as a single woman, accompanying a relative and his wife, relates the following:

Grasshoppers were regular and unwelcome visitors in early days. It is not necessary for me to repeat here that there were immense swarms of them and it took days for them to pass over in rapid flight and that all crops were destroyed by them, etc., as this has been told very frequently and repeatedly by others. One observation that I made one time with grasshoppers was very interesting. For relating this incident I have not just squarely been called a liar, but somebody would nearly always give me to understand that I was getting slightly away from the truth, nevertheless I shall repeat it once more just as it occurred. Mother had quite a garden patch every year. In the garden there was among other vegetables a patch of onions. Now it did not take long for the grasshoppers to clean up the cabbages, etc. They also tackled the onions. They first ate the green stems and then kept on eating further down into the ground till they were on the ground, and nothing but the tips of their wings was visible as they stood on head and ate downward. As many as could crowd into the hole would crowd in and there peacefully feast on onions. When the grasshoppers left there was nothing left of the onions but the holes in the ground where only a few days before were the onions. They had left them, the holes, smooth and undisturbed.

### Commerce Before the Railroad Came

Before the advent of the Union Pacific, when all of the travel through the country was by prairie-schooner, the Grand Island settlement fared well in the matter of disposing of their crops. Of this feature, Fred Hedde, the founder of The Independent, wrote in 1898: "In the fall of 1857 the first rumors came from the west about gold being discovered at Pike's Peak, the Colorado mountain, not far southwest of the present city of Denver. They were in the beginning not credited, but in spite of this doubt in the next spring quite a number of gold seekers started along the Platte valley for the new Eldorado, the embryo of Denver and of the state of Colorado, and though many of them returned in the fall disappointed and

sad, the stream of emigration not only to Colorado, but also to the other gold countries of Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Utah and the Pacific coast, yearly increased, so that for seven or eight years hundreds of parties, some of them with a number of wagons and teams passed daily and camped on the Platte near our settlement. These gold fields and the march of 'Pike's Peakers,' as they were called, had no attraction for our pioneers, who did not suffer with the gold fever. But this continually moving mass of gold hunters was of great advantage to them. Our settlement was nearly the last place where the travelers could buy anything, and in consequence our settlers had a splendid opportunity to dispose of their hay, corn, oats, garden vegetables and some provisions at high prices. From \$1.00 to \$1.50 for a bushel of grain was an ordinary price, and at extraordinary occasions the price went considerably higher. Some contracts of several thousand bushels were taken by the settlers from the commanding officers of Fort Kearny, to be delivered there at \$2.04, about half the price the government used to pay for the corn which had been delivered there from St. Joseph, Mo. The Grand Island settlers had no large fields yet and their crops were comparatively small, but these small crops paid better than large crops now and gave the settlers an excellent start, which put them in good condition, as they generally were as saving as industrious."

### Survivors of the Pioneer Colony

Of the first colonists who still remain residents of Hall county, Fred Hedde is probably the dean. He has reached the eighty-ninth year. He has been a most active life. He was a prominent attorney in Kiel, and it is stated that in the Kiel Turnhalle there are pictures of the venerable gentlemen as he made an address in the interests of liberty and freedom in that country. "Let Fred Hedde go to Kiel today," said a German recently who has been in the German metropolises within the decade, "and he would be taken up and down the street in the greatest of honor."

Christian Menck has always been a farmer in his active years. He is a younger man but for the last fifteen years has been taking life more easy, in a comfortable residence in this city, still, however, retaining his homestead. Mr. Menck was married in Omaha in 1858 and their wedding trip was to Grand Island—a la prairie schooner and ox team. The state room of the Pullman was not dreamed of in that day.

Cay Ewoldt also still retained the old homestead, a valuable farm (Continued on Page Four.)

## Neighbors and Friends for Last Fifty Years Meet for Reminiscent Half Day



GROUP OF THE EARLY SETTLERS OF CASS COUNTY TAKEN AT A REUNION AT THE M'KAKEN HOME AT PLATTSMOUTH ON MAY 22, 1907.