Reminiscences of a Wayfarer

Some of the Important Events of the Pioneer Days of Richardson County and Southeast Nebraska, as remembered by the writer, who has spent fifty-one years here.

THE GRAVEYARD OF THE TOWNS

When the historian of the west shall recount the facts attendant on the settlement of these new countries, he may, if he intends to make his history, as an entirety, the story of the people themselves, tell the secret that everywhere obtrudes itself upon the attention, but is nowhere completely manifested, why the first thing a pioneer in any country does, is to look out an available place to build a town. The sociological philosophers would probably account for this phenomenon upon the theory that the impulse to do that was a necessary resultant of the gregarious nature of man the animal, for we find him nowhere on the earth and at no time in his history when he is not engaged in town or city building. And that was just as true of the savage as the civilized man, ah, more so as the savage is the raw material of nature out of which the conventions of enlightened society have fashioned the man civilized.

I never saw much evidence of this propensity of men to found and build towns till I came out west, as the country in which I was reared had passed that period of social gestation before I came upon the stage, but I saw it galore out here.

I wonder how many people now living in Richardson County know the number and names of the towns that were projected and actually located on the public lands of the government in this county in the early days of its existence, many of them surveyed and incorporated under the laws of congress regulating the disposition of the public lands for that purpose and are now numbered among the things that have been? The number is small indeed. Let me call the roll of the dead, and maybe some other persons besides John W. Holt and myself will remember them.

Socrates said that all learning is merely reminiscence: that when a person thinks he is learning something new, he is in fact only remembering something he had known before, possibly in some other state of existence. It follows therefore, if the old philosopher was right about it, and I don't see how we are to prove he was wrong, that there is nothing new but the forgotten. In that sense I will deal with things new, because they have passed from the memories of men, or were never in them, which is much the same thing, in spite of all philosophy.

Let me see, Salem and Archer were the first in time and at about the same time, in the fall of 1854. When Richardson county was organized with seven others by proclamation of the governor immediately after the machinery of the territorial government was set in motion in the former year, two voting places were designated, one at the house of William Level out near old Archer, (it was not a town then,) and the other at the house of Christian Bopst (pronounced Bopes,) out on the south fork of the Nemaha. He and the Fries family started the old town of Cincinnati, long ago dead with all its founders. When Pawnee County was carved out of Richardson (the latter originally included all of Pawnee and some of Gage,) old Cincinnati, and Fries' Mill were included in the new county.

Further down the same stream was another called Middleburg. It had a kind of lingering spasmodic existence, was a local post office, and in recent years was metamorphosed into what is known as Nims City.

Away out in the northwestern part of the county, on Long Branch, Frank Ferguson, who was an early settler, laid out a town, which he called Franklin, but it was never much more than a creature of his imagination, but somehow the name got fastened on the township, and it has been known as Franklin ever since.

Further east, and a little northwest of Salem, an old timer named Pierce took a claim and laid out a town on it called Geneva. It went the way of all the others, like the little girl's little brother, of whom she was always talking. Someone asked her how old her little brother was. "Oh," said she, "he was no old at all, he died abornin."

Northeast of Geneva, and somewhere on the Muddy, Frank Goldsberry established another town at about the same time, which he named Breckenridge, in honor of his illustrious compatriot of Kentucky (Frank was from Kentucky,) who was then vice-president of the United States. It never materialized as a town, and its proposed site is known to nobody living.

Down at the falls of the Nemaha, two brothers named Hamilton, and a certain E. C. Sackett, sometime after Falls City was located, purchased some land of the elder Stumbo, on the north side of the river, and surrounding the falls, on which they organized a town to be known as "Nemaha Falls." It was to rival the town on the hills, and to be a world beater in the business. These gentlemen came out from Ohio to engineer the enterprise, and I will presently show in what way they did it, and the success that attended their efforts.

Down on the Missouri, and a few miles above Rulo, a town was started early in the history of the county, but I cannot give the date, called Yankton. It was probably the work of some gentleman who had been in the half-breed business, but my information on the subject is too uncertain as to the actual founder or founders, to be relied upon as veritable history and will not be recorded here.

It is certain, however, that the establishment of Rulo put Yankton out of commission as a town and it ceased to exist.

Not many miles above Yankton, at the mouth of Winnebago branch, another town was projected and named for the branch or creek. That did a little better and lasted a little longer than Yankton, but another town was started further up the river called St. Stephen, and Winnebago was absorbed by it, and so became one of the lost things of the earth.

St. Stephen in turn was depopulated by the city of Arago, a town founded by a German colonization society from Buffalo, New York, and it, too, (St. Stephen) went the way of Yankton and Winnebago, and in time became a corn field.

Of the original towns in the early days, only Rulo, Falls City and Salem remain. Arago died a natural death. The post office and the old name were moved out in the country, and a new name given the old site. It is now known as Fargo. When railroads invaded Nebraska, steamboats disappeared from the Missouri and Arago commenced to die and has been at it ever since.

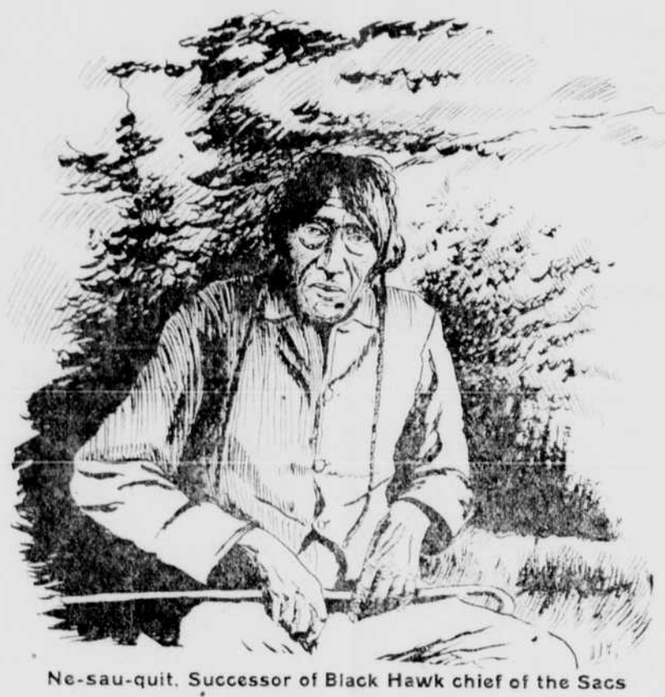
The town graveyard might be extenden up the river to Omaha, and all over the country, for those wrecks are scattered everywhere, but I shall confine my researches nearer home.

At the falls of the Nemaha, there were two towns, one on the north and one on the south side of that stream. They represented the two contending forces in the life of man, the savage and the civilized. One was an Indian village, inhabited by the remnant of the Black Hawk subdivision of the Sac Tribe of Indians, confederated with the Fox Tribe. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Sac Tribe dominated the whole of the Mississippi valley, from St. Louis, Missouri, to Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, and early in the decade of 1830, under the rule of its powerful chief Black Hawk, war was declared against the United States. The tribe was not unanimous in that movement, and a division followed. The followers of Black Hawk came to be known as the Missouri and the others, as the Mississippi Sacs, and from that time those bands were never again united.

The Mississippi Sacs were subsequently located in the Indian territory while the Missouri branch, in the year 1842, about sixteen years before I saw their village, were located by the government on the reservation, where their village stood in 1858.

The treaty for that purpose provided that the reservation should be on the west bank of the Missouri, or on some affluent of that river.

On the morning after my arrival at Falls City in company with one or two others, I went to visit the falls and the Indian village beyond. I had never seen a real blanket Indian, but like all the youth of America I had heard about them, read about them and seen innumerable pictures of them in their native costumes, bedecked in paint and feathers, with their murderous warlike weapons always in hand and ready for use, and I was anxious to see those people in the flesh as they really existed, disassociated from the romantic embellishments thrown about them by Fenimore Cooper and writers of his ilk, and hence my early visit to their village.



Ne-sau-quit, Successor of Black Hawk chief of the Sacs

At the falls we met the Hamilton brothers, Frank Stumbo, a young fellow of about my own age, and some others, and were entertained for a while with glowing prophesies of the future greatness of their town, Nemaha Falls. I had become so used to that kind of talk, during the forty-eight hours I had been in the territory, that besides being exceedingly wearisome, it had become a little disgusting withal and I ceased to give it attention. Our friends, however, gave us a cordial welcome, and showed us every courtesy, and, being well acquainted with the dusky people on the other side of the river, went over with us and to the wigwam of their head chief, Ne-sau-quit, where we were introduced to that high functionary who greeted us with his sonorous "How," which, translated into the polite language of another order, would be to the effect, "I am happy to make your acquaintance"—with the difference, that in the case of this untutored denizen of the wilderness, it had the ring of sincerity, while in the other, we are not always entirely certain.

Ne-sau-quit was the immediate successor of Black Hawk, and was, without his knowing it, the last of his race. He was not able to hold a conversation in our language, and the little talk we had with him was through an interpreter, though now and then he would use an English word or two with apt effect. It fell out that he had lately been to Washington to visit the president (Buchanan) and from what he said I gathered he was not at all pleased with that officer. He turned his face from side to side, indicating that the president was not sincere, was two-faced, deceptive, and unreliable in his professions; and above all he was wroth with the white men for selling liquor to his people. The Indian word for whiskey "scaty-o-po," he pronounced as though he was wielding a tomahawk on the heads of the people who sold it to his children.

I did not think so much of what he said then as I have in later times, but, in serving my own apprenticeship to life, I have come to believe that the two controlling moral forces, that have lifted man out of barbarism, to his present high plane of Christian civilization, namely, the love of truth, and regard for order, were as strong in the nature of this ignorant nomad of the plains, as they had ever been in a Fenelon, or any others of the watchmen on the tower of human salvation in the slow procession of the centuries.

He took no pride in the fact that he was a total abstainer from the drink habit himself, but his concern was for the helpless people, over whom by tradition and custom, he had been made ruler, and whom, in their contact with the white race, were fleeced, debauched and made infinitely worse by this devil's agency, liquor.

I have often thought of that interview with the old chief, and his indignant complaint against the liquor traffic among his people, which, though the government had passed laws making it a crime to introduce or sell liquor in the Indian country, was carried on with apparent impunity under the noses of the officers of that government whose sworn duty was to prevent it.

The old chief has long slept with his fathers, and the tribe of which he was ruler, like a wreck on the ocean, has been going to pieces with every wave of the incoming tide of the white race, until not more than two with uncorrupted blood of the Sacs remain. Whoever goes over the Nemaha by the bridge above the falls, and travels the road south to the home of Mr. George Fisher, will pass over the site of that long deserted Indian village, which in its day occupied the ridge between those points and its slope to the east, and within easy earshot of the complaining voice of the river, tumbling its waters over the rocky ledge beneath, on their journey to the sea.

The reservation shrank to still narrower limits in 1861. In that year, by treaty, the Indians consented to a sale of all that portion between Honey Creek to the west and the Walnut on the east, and the village mentioned was deserted, the tribe and its chief Ne-sau-quit, moved down to Lost Creek, which forms the boundary between the Sac and Fox, and the Iowa tribes, where some years later the old chief died.

In 1876 another cut from the Sac reservation was made by act of congress, at the instance of the Indians themselves, when ten sections of the remaining reservation was put on sale to actual settlers through the U. S. land office at Beatrice. Since that time the balance of the reservation has been alloted in severalty to the remaining members of the tribe, and the once mighty nation has ceased to exist. And so with every other North American tribe of aborigines, who have come in contact with that all masterful race—the Anglo-Saxon,—they are either dead or are slowly dying. And that, when we come to think of it, is not at all surprising, for whoever does not know (and some pop gun politicians are of that class,) that the Anglo Saxon, the highest type of the Indo-Germanic races, is engaged in a conquest of this world, is ignorant of history, the signs of the times, and the inexorable logic of human events.