

Old Niobrara's Long Wait for a Railroad



OLDEST INHABITANTS OF NIOBRARA—WILLIAM LAMONT AND RED CEDAR CABIN, BUILT IN 1860.



HOME OF F. BURNS, "OLD NIOBRARA."



OLD HULLIHAN HOUSE—BUILT IN 1867.

FOR FORTY-FIVE YEARS Niobrara, Neb., has waited at the gateway of the Runningwater valley for the whistle of a railroad locomotive and the welcome sound of car wheels at her doors. Gray-headed men who came here in the flush of early manhood to locate on "the only direct route to the Pacific through South Pass" and reap the reward of an early location at the future metropolis of the Missouri valley have long since passed across the range where speculation in town lots is unknown and steam transportation unnecessary. Only one of that earliest band of adventurous spirits who nearly half a century ago cast their lot at the junction of the Niobrara river with the Missouri will be able (let us hope) to welcome the first train over the Elkhorn railway when it steams into the station of Niobrara in the early summer of 1912, announcing with deafening whistle-blasts that the dream of fifty years have at last been realized in some degree—that Niobrara is united with steel bands to the rest of the world, and to Omaha in particular, only seven hours distant.

Before that glad hour comes—before the cords upon cords of ties, piling and bridge timber that now choke the narrow valley at the terminus of the Elkhorn railroad in Verdigris have been marshaled in solid and symmetrical order and knit together with the tons of steel and iron now elbowing them for more room in the Elkhorn yards; before the "Old Niobrara" of unfulfilled dreams, of old graves on the hill, of unsatisfied longings and untold legends is swallowed up and becomes a part of that modern world of steam, commerce and manufacture, from which it has all its life been separated—surely the vagrant historian and legend-lover may linger among her memories and even the hurried newspaper reader find a moment to totter with him to contrast the old with the new and be admonished how elusive is this empire of commercial wealth in which he lives and how uncertain man's efforts to track its path in the wilderness.

Dream of the Founder

It was June 7, 1856, when Dr. B. Y. Shelley, the "founder of Niobrara," laid the log foundation of the first permanent white settlement near the old Ponca Indian village, at the mouth of the Niobrara. A few days later, at Sioux City, was organized the "L'eau qui Court Company," with Dr. Shelley as one of the leading spirits for the purpose of booming the townsite of the future metropolis at the junction of the L'eau qui Court, as the French trappers had named the beautiful swift-flowing river, and the Missouri. The large map that was gotten out by this company, shows 2,800 acres of land surveyed and platted into lots on the Nebraska shore, just below the junction of the two rivers. Along the river front of three miles stretches the significant legend "levee," magnificent space to accommodate

the future gigantic Missouri river traffic, while above is a map of the region from the lakes to the mountains, showing Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul, each with a railroad stretching across the prairie in direct air line to the rising emporium of railroad and river commerce—and from "Niobrara," as they spelled the word, westward on an air line through to the South Pass to the Pacific coast. The only copy of this map known to be in existence is the property of Frank Lundak of Niobrara, who has kindly loaned it for photographic reproduction—a difficult task for it was soaked in Missouri river water and discolored in the great freshet of 1881. Alas, for early dreams. Who would have believed that the South Pass, the only practicable road through the mountains, as the documents of the time recite—would have been avoided by each of half a dozen Pacific railroads? Who would have believed that the boasted direct route up the Runningwater valley would remain one of the wildest and most unfrequented parts of the great west long after railroads had covered the rest of the region, or that almost fifty years later Missouri river navigation would be an antiquarian study—and the advent of the first steam cars from Omaha be hailed with joy by the inhabitants of Niobrara long after their adventurous whistle had echoed amid the forests of Central Africa.

Attractions and Advantages.

Yet Niobrara has its compensations. It is in the midst of one of the most interesting geological formations, the Niobrara cretaceous or "chalk rock," whose variegated cliffs hundreds of feet in height crowned with trees and washed at the base by swift waters form a scene of attractive beauty for both tourist and geologic student, certain to become better known with the advent of the railroad. It is one of half a dozen points of intense interest to the student of early Nebraska history—and likely long to remain so not only because of the early white settlements, but also because of the presence of remnants of the Santee Sioux and Ponca Indian tribes, now citizens and voters of Nebraska and destined to remain here near the ancestral home of their savage forebears.

The American flag for the first time greeted the picturesque cliffs here September 4, 1804, when Lewis and Clark camped "just above the mouth of the rapid river, or as it is called by the French, La Riviere qui Court, on the south side. The place is a fine low ground, with much timber, such as red cedar, honey locust, oak, arrowwood, elm and cochenut," to quote their own account. The low ground where they landed, with all its timber, was long ago eaten up by the hungry Missouri, but the new Elkhorn railway bridge spans the Niobrara just where it mingles its waters with the Missouri and commands a splendid view of "Lewis and Clark Point," as the remaining spit of land which juts into the



DR. B. Y. SHELLEY, FOUNDER OF NIOBRARA.

Missouri is destined to be called if General Passenger Agent Buchanan of that road does his duty. The piling for the bridge braves a flood of ice, which is rushing down from the mountain reaches of the river and the chalk bluffs fronting on the Missouri echo with the volleys of giant powder which are blasting a path for the locomotive four miles long at the water's edge before it turns and rushes westward through the fertile Ponca valley to Bonesteel, S. D., at the edge of an undeveloped region of great promise. "Where is the Elkhorn headed for?" is one of the walking interrogations in this region. The shrewdest guess offered is that it is traveling in the path of Lewis and Clark and will parallel the Missouri river at a short distance from that stream, as it already has a road into the Black Hills, and there would seem no object in building another. If this surmise proves true it will bring Omaha into immediate rail connection with both South and North Dakota west of the Missouri river and make it by many hours the closest large city to that vast region which has hitherto traded with Sioux City, St. Paul or Chicago. Will the old dream of commerce down the Missouri come true and the trade of the Louisiana Purchase seek the sea down hill instead of crossing half a dozen divides, but seek it on steel rails instead of uncertain waters? Mighty question for the hustling Omaha business man as well as the dreamer by the shore of un navigated rivers in the centennial year of Thomas Jefferson's bargain with Napoleon.

Last of the Pioneers.

But here is the "oldest inhabitant" of Niobrara to warn against indulging in dreams of the future—William Lamont. The same William Lamont who in 1857 came from the mountains of Pennsylvania to cast his lot for life at Niobrara—the only one now living here of that early band of hope-

fuls who spun golden threads out of the morning mists on the banks of the Missouri. The same William Lamont and the same log cabin of red cedar logs built by his own hands forty-two years ago this winter, standing in the same place—and the railroad grade stakes set not fifty yards away. With some gentle leading the oldest inhabitant is persuaded to tell incidents of the old times—how from a hustling, hopeful embryo city in 1856-7 Niobrara was transformed into a collection of deserted shacks by the Pike's Peak excitement of 1859. The whole town literally got up and moved off on the trail for Pike's Peak, leaving Mr. Lamont to run his own city government and carry on his own system of public improvements. It would be interesting to know how many of the trailers for Pike's Peak found their fortune at the end of the trail, while Lamont held on to his half-section of Niobrara bottom, where he has just sold the railroad land for depot grounds and yards.

In Mr. Lamont's back yard is an historic old cannon, survivor of forty or fifty years of service on the frontier. Some say it was abandoned by General Harney while marching across this region in 1860, its old-fashioned carriage making it little suited to field work. In 1867-78 it is found at the old Ponca Indian Agency, three miles away. Valiant stories tell Colonel Herko Koster of the Koster hotel—how as sergeant in charge at the agency he routed a hostile attack of the Sioux on the agency in 1875 with a volley from the old gun. Colonel Ed Fry of the Niobrara Pioneer is inclined to be skeptical on the subject of this particular battle, but there's no settling a dispute between colonels on a war topic more than between admirals on a naval fight. At any rate the old gun has "seen service" on the frontier and is engaged to make the trip to the St. Louis exposition as part of Nebraska's historical exhibit.

Bad Land River Lost and Found.

Sixty years ago on the maps of the west was a river, "Mauvaisa Terres River," rising near the center of Nebraska and pouring its floods north into the Niobrara. That river was lost. In the past year letters have come to the State Historical society asking what had become of that proud stream. It is now Verdigris creek—and though much abbreviated in length from the lines of the old geographers, is a strong, rushing stream, flowing through picturesque scenery from the prairies of Holt county to its junction with the Niobrara, a few miles above the Missouri. It is a type of mountain Nebraska stream. "Mountain Nebraska?"—how many people in the state know that Nebraska has a mountain area larger and higher than the White mountains or the Adirondacks, with real mountain scenery, pine-covered peaks, rushing mountain brooks, lofty cliffs, deep canyons, pillars of white and gray and blue rising from plains to the clouds—when there are clouds—these not in Colo-

rado or Wyoming or the Black Hills, but in our own Nebraska, land of corn and wheat and sugar beet field.

Through the whole length of this mountain Nebraska runs the Niobrara river—the most remarkable and constant stream in the state, capable of developing thousands of horse power with small expense every three or four miles of its whole length. "If they can ever find work for their water power," said Civil Engineer Stout of the State university, "the Niobrara country will see the most remarkable development of any part of the state."

Holds One Record.

Niobrara has not only outlived her early disappointments from failure to become the great railroad center and port of entry for Missouri river navigation. She is the only town in the state that has fulfilled the early Baptist requirement of "going down into the water and coming up out of the water." Old Niobrara was platted on the Missouri river bottom. The great flood of 1881 covered the townsite with three feet of water and the enterprising citizens moved their city two miles upon a beautiful bench above anything except a new Noachian deluge and commanding a view of both the Niobrara and Missouri valleys. On this tableland at a depth of 700 feet artesian water has been found in abundance, running the machinery of a flouring mill and flowing through the city in a strong, never-failing brook. Surveys have been made and a company formed to tap the Niobrara and bring its waters across a point a few miles, developing a water power which will offer powerful inducements to future manufacturers in this western region.

Injustice to the Poncas.

The story of the Ponca Indians—when will the poet or novelist be found to flit frame it for literature? There is no sadder story of the white man's injustice to the red, not even the one Helen Hunt Jackson has given us in "Ramona." As far back as the earliest French voyageur the Poncas lived at the mouth of the Niobrara. Always the friends of the whites—never on the war-path, their lands confirmed to them by the most solemn treaties—what was their surprise to find that in the Sioux treaty of 1868 the United States had deeded away their lands to their hereditary enemies, the Sioux. Then came the period of removal to Indian Territory, in 1877, followed by congressional investigation, by a report from a committee headed by Senator Dawes which cuts the white man's face like a whiplash. Sickness and death followed and in the middle of winter Standing Bear and others left their reservation in Indian Territory and returned to Nebraska, bringing the bodies of their dead children with them. Then came the arrest by General Crook, under orders from Washington; the volunteer by John L. Webster and A. J. Poppleton of their services in behalf of the Indians; the celebrated trial and decision by

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HISTORIC CANNON AT "OLD NIOBRARA."



LEWIS AND CLARK POINT—CROSSING OF THE FREMONT, ELKHORN & MISSOURI VALLEY ROAD.