

# Thayer County an Example of Pioneer Industry and Nebraska Fertility



THAYER COUNTY COURT HOUSE, HEBRON.



AUGUST KRENKE'S FARM, THREE MILES EAST OF HEBRON.



HEBRON HIGH SCHOOL.

**W**E THINK of pioneer life as a thing of the past, something the younger generation must learn of from their school books or histories. Here and there are survivors of that historic migration, actors in the stirring drama of half a century ago, from whose lips our children may learn of the mode of life of the pioneer settlers of the Nebraska prairie. We shake our heads regretfully and say: "We shall not see its like again." The day of the pioneer is over, for no longer is there any frontier. The last west is gone. Yet, though few are aware of it, there are scattered throughout the remote districts of the western part of Nebraska, scores of settlers whose homes and home-life are unchanged from the era of the pioneer. Here, far from the beaten trail, time has stood still. Here we may step back into an era that we thought existed only in books and see perfectly reproduced, the daily life of the early pioneer.

Thayer county has been very successful in subdividing the wilderness. Many years ago the free rural mail box and the telephone pole drove back the frontier all along the line.

Thayer county is in the southernmost tier of counties in Nebraska. It is the fifth west of the Missouri river, from which it is distant 100 miles, and is the ninth county east of the Colorado line, from which it is distant 23 miles. It is sixty miles southwest of Lincoln, the capital of the state, and 130 miles in the same direction from Omaha, the metropolis of Nebraska.

The surface of Thayer county is what is generally termed a "high" rolling prairie. There are no "hills" in the general acceptance of the term, but there are occasionally prominent "bluffs" to be seen along Little Blue river. While there are many tracts of plain land, there are none so flat as to lack natural drainage, or so level as to be monotonous to the eye. There is no sameness to the surface, but an ever-changing and agreeable variety. The streams run through valleys from a quarter of a mile to two miles or more in width, and are bordered generally by trees. It slopes to the east.

To gain a clear conception of the topography of the county, one must cross the valleys and divides nearly at right angles. The observer will by this means discover that the most rolling lands generally border the valleys or bottoms. As he advances, the rolling sometimes broken character of the surface disappears when the divide is reached which separates it from the next drainage stream. Here the land swells out into a gently undulating plain, presenting an appearance of great natural beauty, and possessing characteristics only met on the western side of the Missouri river. The flat, treeless monotony of the prairie, the central and southern Illinois is entirely lacking while in its stead is the appearance of the graceful contours of an ocean's undulating swells suddenly solidified—its waves transformed into fruitful soil and dressed in rich verdure.

No questions relative to a new country are of more importance than those relating to its climate. Upon the climate of a country very largely depend not only the agricultural productions, but comfort and healthfulness of the inhabitants. The temperature of the winter months, December, January and February, is somewhat higher than that of central Illinois and Ohio. It is by no means an uncommon sight to see farmers plowing during the winter months. There are, however, storms of considerable severity, but the dryness of the atmosphere renders them more endurable than storms of a less degree of cold further east. The mean temperature of Thayer county during the year is about 55.

In the fall there is no lovelier country to live in than Thayer county. Although the sun shines brightly in the summer, with frequently oppressive heat, yet this is tempered with a gentle breeze, which is constantly blowing. The nights are cool and refreshing and sleep is afforded, and thus nature is recuperated. With its splendid climate, the purest water and excellent crops, this county is attracting the attention of parties locating in the west. Many causes combine to make the atmosphere exceptionally clear and pure. Among these causes may be mentioned the mean elevation of Thayer county, 1,850 feet above the sea, its fine alluvial soil and perfect natural drainage, its constant breezes, and its freedom from swamps, bogs and sloughs. Fogs are rare, and except in autumn, even haze does not occur. The rainfall is increasing from year to year, and corresponding changes in the streams and vegetation are taking place. The buffalo grass that once covered the country has now almost entirely disappeared before grasses indigenous to milder climates. The growth of native timber has largely increased. The mean volume of water is also increasing. It is thought that the planting of trees and the increasing absorptive power of the soil, resulting from cultivation, are the principal causes of the increased rainfall. But it is also probably true that the great rain belt is moving westward from the Atlantic coast in obedience to some great periodic law.

No place is absolutely free from disease, but this part of the state is singularly exempt from its severer forms. Nearly every one who comes into this county from the east feels a general quickening and elasticity of spirits. Digestion and appetite experience a wonderful improvement, and the mind and body respond to livelier impulses.

All the cereal grains common to this latitude are produced in Thayer county. Corn is, however, the principal crop, and sedi-

mentally proves the most profitable when fed to stock. Wheat, oats, barley, rye, alfalfa, sorghum, millet, timothy and clover are among the most important crops raised, and the average yield will compare favorably with the best agricultural states. One of the best watered counties in the state is Thayer. It has a number of beautiful streams, chief among which is the Little Blue river. Rapidly flowing, almost centrally through the county from west to east, with many turns, through one of the loveliest valleys in the west, it affords many scenes of quiet rural beauty, charming enough for the brush of a Landseer. The volume of water is large and constant, the bottom often rocky, the current rapid and the banks firm. These qualities render it an excellent stream for water power, for which purpose it has no equal in the state. It is said this stream possesses water power sites every two or three miles along its course through the county.

The other principal running streams are the Little Sandy, Big Sandy, Spring creek and Rose creek, nearly all of which are clear and beautiful. Big Sandy and Rose creek each afford water power for flouring mills.

On no other deposit, except the solid rock, can there be such excellent roads. From twelve to twenty-four hours after the heaviest rains, the roads are perfectly dry, and often appear, after being traveled a few days, like a vast floor formed from cement and by the highest art of man.

Railroads and telegraphs are among the most important factors in the development of the west. Thayer county is well provided with railroads and telegraphs. The Chicago & Northwestern railroad has 44 miles of tracks, St. Joseph & Grand Island, 25.55 miles, Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific, 25.37 and Chicago, Burlington & Quincy, 24.73 miles. Total miles in the county is 100.36. No quarter section in the county

is more than eight miles from market. A writer would find it difficult to properly describe the general intelligence, enterprise and morality of the citizens of Thayer county without apparent exaggeration. Few, if any counties, east or west, contain a more generous combination of the best elements of good society. The religious interests of Thayer county are actively

advanced. There are about twenty-five church organizations representing some six or seven denominations. Nearly all appear to be well supported. In nothing do the citizens of Thayer take warmer interest or more pride, than in the public schools. Her school system is among the best and her school fund among the largest. It is to be expected that a county

possesses would prove a worthy part of the state in these respects. The fruitful soil, rich grasses and genial climate of Thayer county have especially fitted it for farming, dairying and stock raising. Corn is the main crop for Nebraska. No where in the world does corn grow better or yield larger returns for

care and cultivation. The heavy corn yield of this county has naturally caused the most profitable of all kinds of agriculture, farming and stock raising combined. By this plan the farmer finds a good market for his corn at home. He feeds it to his cattle and hogs, and ships the product in condensed form. In other words "he sells his corn on the hoof." Those farmers in Thayer county who engage in this business rapidly accumulate wealth. Of all branches of agriculture business, it is the most profitable.

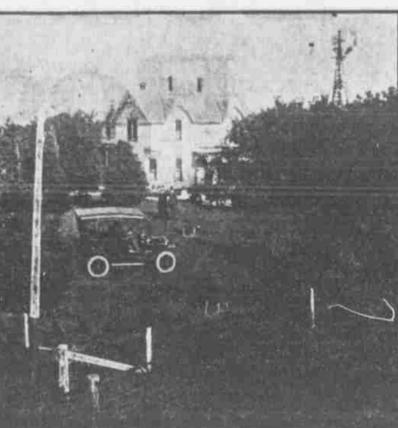
Butter, eggs, fruit and poultry can be profitably produced and finds an accessible and ready market in Denver and other western cities. In short, almost all farm products, including mortgages, can be successfully "raised" from Thayer county land, if one is willing to work, and young men who are growing up on eastern farms, where the boys increase faster than the acres, will find it much more profitable to work for themselves on a quarter section of Thayer county land than to work as "a hand" for some of their neighbors or seek employment in the over-crowded cities.

If additional proof were needed of the fact that tillage increases the rainfall, one has only to note the annually increasing volume of water in the Blue, the Sandy, Rose and Spring creeks; the thousands of bushels of well painted, and in every manner living witnesses of the truth of the statement that the rainfall increases as the cultivated land is extended. In conclusion, I would advise those who are always complaining of bad luck, who are waiting for something to turn up, who are always tired, or who expect to get something for nothing to stay away from Thayer county and indeed from the whole western country. There is no room for them there—they are only in the way.

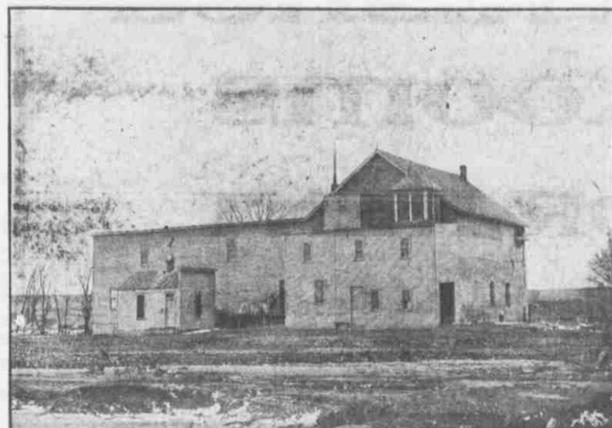
Alexandria is located at the east part of the county. The town is pleasantly situated on the north side of the Big Sandy.

Hebron, the county seat and principal town, is located in the geographical center of the county—in the broad and picturesque Valley of the Little Blue river. Practically a young town in a young state. It has a population of about 2,000 inhabitants, and is noted for its beauty and thrift. It has a new and very beautiful court house, costing about \$15,000. The large two and three-story brick business blocks, fine residences, costly church edifices, excellent school buildings, water works, electric lights and other like improvements show the energy and push of its people. Among the other enterprises, they have a water-power flouring mill with a capacity of 100 barrels per day. It has been truly styled and designated, the "Queen City of the Little Blue." The name it has merited leads us to say that it is a beautiful little city in a prosperous and productive country and is inhabited by noble, generous and happy people, who extend a welcome to both small and great who wish to locate within her borders.

Hubei is situated on the Burlington & Missouri river railroad in the extreme south part of the county, seven miles from the east boundary. It contains about 600 inhabitants and is enjoying the trade of a large extent (about eighteen miles square) of thrifty country. The creek in this vicinity is drained by Rose creek and its tributaries, a stream which affords



JOHN RODENBURG'S FARM, FOURTEEN MILES WEST OF HEBRON.



BOZARTH BROS. & CARTER FLOUR MILL, HEBRON.



MAIN STREET, HEBRON, LOOKING EAST.

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## Hero of Peace Defies Crucible of Frontier Strife

**T**O HAVE lived through the formative days of the great west, when life meant strife and violence with so many, as pioneer, plainsman, merchant and promoter, three times crossing the wilds to the Pacific coast by ox train, without so much as an encounter or adventure is the unique experience related by Samuel R. Johnson, a leader among the earlier business men of Omaha. Mr. Johnson, in the hearty good spirits of a man "70 years young" and successful, is enjoying a visit to his sons living here.

"Adventure? Why I didn't have any. I was too busy," said the old gentleman mildly. He smiled as he spoke, and his good natured countenance radiated the satisfaction of a long life of hard work that had conquered. His years rest lightly. White haired as he is, with the line in his face that bespeak long experience with men and varying conditions, Mr. Johnson looks more the man just turning 60 than he who is nearly the end of four score.

"Of course, when I crossed the plains way back there in the '50's, there was plenty of chance for trouble, but that wasn't what I was looking for."

"Why really I felt safer out there in the wilds, camped with the wagon train with thousands of Sioux roaming the prairie, than I would on the street of Omaha to-night. Those Indians were, not so bad as long as they were let alone. I have frequently had them come about the camp, but they never took anything that wasn't given to them, and they never offered to harm us."

Mr. Johnson now has his home in the sunny valley of Santa Clara, a few miles to the south of San Jose, Cal. His attachment for the golden west was formed in the days before he became of prominence in the commercial affairs of the then young city of Omaha. He made his first journey into that far country from Missouri in 1852. That was so long ago that the dreamers who suggested the possibility of a transcontinental railroad were scoffed at as insane.

The tedious overland journey in the Suisun valley not far from San Francisco. Mr. Johnson, with a calm fastness

of purpose which the gold fever could not shake, settled down to farm.

"You couldn't get rich in a day farming in California even in those days," remarked Mr. Johnson, "but it was certain that the soil would produce something every season, while there were lots of gold miners who starved to death."

This observation is quite typical of the attitude of mind that has carried Mr. Johnson so smoothly along his life journey.

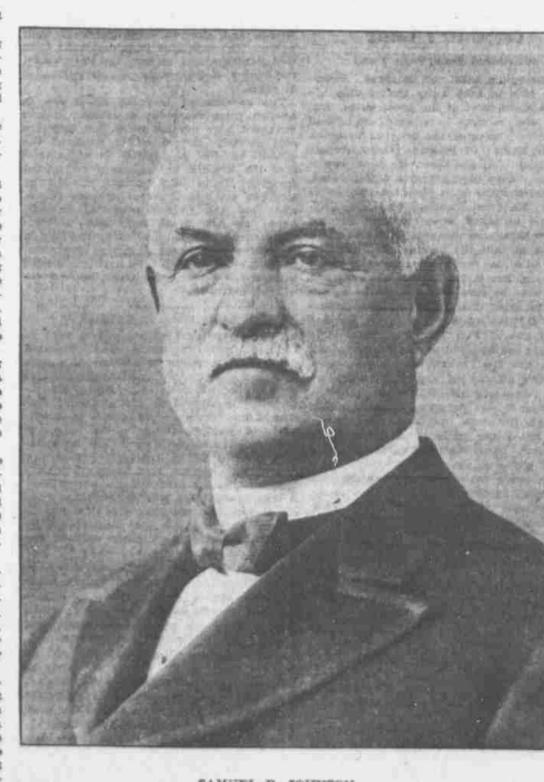
For two years Mr. Johnson wood the soil of the Suisun valley. Then he returned to the Missouri river valley, locating finally at Sidney, Ia., where he engaged in the mercantile business. Eleven years later he opened a wholesale grocery house in Council Bluffs. This marked the beginning of his commercial life here, which became so largely occupied with movements concerned with the development of Omaha. He took in D. M. Steele as a partner and the firm of Steele & Johnson became widely known in the west.

Alert to the possibilities of the growing city of Omaha this firm established a house on this side of the river in the course of the business developments of the day. This enterprise prospered and in the years that followed Mr. Johnson became interested in many projects.

The first cable street car company was formed here in 1884 and Mr. Johnson became the president. The company erected the old power house at Twentieth and Harnoy streets. The cable company was absorbed by the horse car company, which in turn was taken over by the electric traction company.

"If you never ran a cable railway company, you don't know what grief is," remarked Mr. Johnson, sighing in the memory of the struggles of the young company. I think that you can spend more money, get into more trouble and grow more gray hairs in the cable business than in any other form of investment.

"At the same time we were in the infancy of the Omaha Water company. That was a project that my friend Nathan Shattuck, an old timer, who came here with the Union Pacific, got me into. There was some work about that, too. However, we got the water works established and it wasn't such a very bad financial transac-



SAMUEL R. JOHNSON.

tion, either," said Mr. Johnson, with evident satisfaction.

"Why, people don't know what work is like, nowadays; that is, real hard work. Back in the big timber in Indiana, where I was born, we had to hack a field out of the forest before there was room to plant anything. That was work."

"I never saw a prairie until I was 16 years old, and that was just a stretch of Indiana prairie on the road to Lafayette at that. Chop down an acre of timber. Then rick it up and burn it; when that is done, you will know something about work."

Mr. Johnson saw a good deal of frontier life in his early days. His father, Isaac Johnson, removed to Iowa Point, Mo., in 1846, and there the young man saw another country in the making. There he helped to reduce a bit of the virgin land of the "Platte purchase" to the purposes of a farm.

It was at Iowa Point that the youth heard the call of the Pacific coast and started on the long trek to the Suisun valley.

Three of Mr. Johnson's family, Frank E. Johnson, president of the Omaha Printing company; Mrs. Edward Williams and William Johnson, live here. His other son, S. R. Johnson, is on the fruit ranch near San Jose.

From its fortunate location in the center of a large agricultural and stock raising district it has made a large area of the country tributary to its business interests.

Just outside of the town the outskirts of the timber stretch southward for the distance of half a mile, giving a charm to the surrounding landscape.

Hebron is located six miles north of the center of the county, on the St. Joseph & Grand Island railroad. This town was laid out in 1875 by the Nebraska Land and Town company. The town is situated but a short distance from the confluence of the Big Sandy and the Little Sandy and thus is in consequence some broken land in the immediate vicinity. However, but a short distance north and south of town, are some of the finest lands our state affords and here are farms that will do for a model for any country.

Water is obtained at a depth of fifty to sixty feet.

Tame grasses, which have not been cultivated until the last five years, are now extensively raised. There are hundreds of fine groves of forest trees to be seen through the country and bearing orchards are numerous.

There is a large amount of grain and stock shipped from this point annually. Located on the south boundary of the county, partly on Kansas soil, is the town of Byron. For amount of grain, stock and produce shipped, it is not far behind some of the older and larger towns. It is situated on the "divide" between the Blue and Republican, and is consequently in possession of a view that will be prominent for many miles in every direction.

Carlton is situated in the northwestern part of the county, on the St. Joseph & Grand Island road, two and one-half miles south of Fillmore county and seven miles east of Nuckolls county. The town draws trade from an area of about 150 square miles, while trade is brought here exclusively for about ninety-six square miles. The trade at this place is brisk the greater part of the year. There were shipped in one year from this station 677 cars of corn, 239 cars of other grain and fifty-three cars of cattle and hogs. After making careful inquiry from farmers concerning seasons and average yield for the last five years, we must say it will compare favorably with Illinois and Iowa, where success in agriculture is never questioned.

The village of Chester is near the south line of the county and about midway east and west. It is situated on the B. & M. railroad and is the south terminus of the branch to Hebron. The population is about 500. The town is finely located on upland rolling prairie, and for a nicely built, well painted, and in every manner neat, this little place cannot be beat in the county. It has the trade of about seventy square miles of territory. Cattle, hogs and sheep seem to thrive well at all seasons of the year, and for evidence that the farmers are wide awake, your attention is called to the fact that in one year there were shipped from this station 300 cars of corn, fifty cars of other grain and eighty-five cars of cattle and hogs.

Davenport is very pleasantly located near the northwest corner of Thayer county, on the St. Joseph & Grand Island railroad, on a divide, which is beautifully undulating, with the Little Blue river on the south and the Big Sandy creek on the north. Settled mostly with people from Pennsylvania, Illinois, Iowa and a few Germans. All and all, it is one of the most select spots of Nebraska.

To the south of the Little Blue is a long stretch of very fine undulating country which is not quite so smooth as on the divide between the Blue and Sandy, but is very fine land, and in every manner desirable for farming and stock raising. It is settled with Americans and Germans. Goities Mr. Johnson kept a hold on his wholesale grocery business, and all of his enterprises prospered except one.

"But then, that was only an insurance company, anyway," says the old man cheerfully. "Fine experience, too."

In 1888 Mr. Johnson sold out his Omaha interests and went out to California, the country he had visited back in the old team days. Down in the Santa Clara valley he owns a big fruit ranch. He lets the sunshine and soil grow prunes and apricots with the aid of an army of employees.

"I'm good for a day's work yet, too," he replied, when it was suggested that he was taking life easy after his long and arduous experience in the commercial world.

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