

Important Part Played by The Bee in Development of Empire of Nebraska

Writer Pictures Historical Background of Events Out Of Which Have Emerged a Great State and a Great Newspaper—Early Territorial Development Retarded By False Reports Concerning Fertility of the Soil.

By ALBERT WATKINS.

(Albert Watkins, author of the following outline of that part of Nebraska's history which led to the founding of The Omaha Bee, is historian of the Nebraska State Historical society. He probably has more definite and detailed information about Nebraska's development, from trackless prairie, through territorial days into statehood, than any other living man. He was personally acquainted with almost all of the leading characters of Nebraska history since pioneer days—Editor's Note.)

As I conceive it, my contribution to the celebration of the semi-centennial period in the career of a great Nebraska newspaper is chiefly to supply a historical background for this main event—to give some account of the circumstances which caused its creation and of the conditions in which it flourished. But it seems proper to take advantage of a propitious opportunity for spreading some further knowledge of the history of the commonwealth than strictly appertains to the main purpose.

Moreover, a comprehensive body of facts, well tested, touching aptitude and accuracy, is not only essential to the ordinary purposes of history, but also for the suggestive inspiration to its picturing in an impressionistic whole, fiction being its favorite, and perhaps only practicable, form. At the present moment the most effective pictures of social life, past and present, largely, of course, because they are the most entertaining and widely current, are being painted by the world's great fictionists. For Nebraska Miss Cather is brilliantly leading in this imaginative work.

"The Nebraska Country."

The state of Nebraska is the final remnant of the vastly larger territory which was naturally shaped to the longest and the most important affluent of the Missouri river. The untutored American Indian had a John Burroughs' sensibility to the beauties of nature, including a sensitive musical ear.

Each of the three most important domestic tribes of Nebraska—the Omaha, the Oto and the Pawnee—give this great river an impressionistic name with the same meaning: flat water. As early as we can represent their pronunciation by our letters the Omahas called it "Ni-Bhaska" and their kinsmen, the Oto, "Ni Brathka," "Ni" meaning water and the other words, "flat."

The French, so far as we know the first white people to see this river, in their naming borrowed the Indian meaning, but, with the ugly, unmusical translation of the La Riviere Plate. Each of 14 of our states has the same name as its principal river, all but one native Indian words or close derivatives, and all pleasing to both eye and ear. Plate has the merit, rather measly as I think of being shorter than Nebraska. The natural name of the river prevailed in maps and in printed and spoken language until, only rather recently, while the 14 took time for taste, Nebraska took the distasteful short cut.

When, through the settlement of western Missouri and travelers over the Oregon Trail, the transmissourian plain became widely familiar to white people, that section of it, roughly rounded, between the divide of the waters flowing directly into the Missouri and those flowing into the Platte, on the north, and the divide between the Kansas and Arkansas rivers, on the south, came to be called The Nebraska Country, true tribute to the truly great river which nearly evenly bisects it.

"The Nebraska Territory."

In the first bill to organize this country into a territory, introduced in congress in 1844, it was called The Nebraska Territory, but it was commonly called Nebraska by promoters of its political organization somewhat earlier. In this first bill the 43d parallel of latitude was the northern boundary, and the 38th its southern. In the first three bills introduced for territorial organization the 43d parallel was the northern boundary; in the fourth, 43 degrees 30 minutes; in the other two the northern boundary was pushed up to the Canadian line, which was finally adopted.

It is an interesting incident that when the carvings, up and down, of the prolific parent territory's vast area of 351,558 square miles into numerous other commonwealths had been finished, this at first favorite, in some sort natural, territorial boundary, was adopted as the northern limit of the remnant state of Nebraska.

In the first bill the 38th parallel of latitude was the southern boundary; in the second, of 1848, the 40th; in the next three, 36 degrees 30 minutes; in the final bill, the 37th. The 36 degrees, 30 minutes line was the favorite because it was the southern boundary of Missouri and the division, touching slavery, agreed to in the Missouri compromise; but just at the last it was discovered that this line cut through the reservation of the Cherokee Indians, whose northern boundary was the 37th parallel; the boundary also between the lands of the Cherokee and the Osage Indians. So the natural and very desirable uniform boundary line for the two great states, Missouri and Kansas, was abandoned. At any rate, the resulting jag lengthens the long list, as it seems, of the cases of the "tail wagging the dog."

In common parlance, the Nebraska country comprised the territory opposite Iowa and Missouri and the Mexican line on the west. In a speech at Platte City June 6, 1853, Senator Atchison of Missouri said: "First, then, as to Nebraska. This territory was formerly called the Missouri or Indian territory and was so laid down on the maps. It lies west of the states of Missouri and Kansas and extending to New Mexico and the Rocky mountains. Within a few years it has been called Nebraska, or at least that portion of it which is now proposed to be organized under a territorial government and opened to the settlement of white men."

Called "Nebraska."

George W. Manypenny, commissioner of Indian affairs, in his report for 1853 speaks of "the specific wants to different tribes west of

Missouri and Iowa (what is generally termed just Nebraska)", and he calls this part of the plains just Nebraska several times in the report. In October, 1853, he inspected this country and found that "there was no settlement made in any part of Nebraska. From all the information I could obtain, there were but three white men in the territory, except such as were there by authority of law and those adopted by marriage into Indian families."

In this report he illustrates the utterly lawless condition of Nebraska just before its territorial organization:

"These emigrants travel through the Indian country to their abodes on the Pacific without the protection of law. There is no law there but the Intercourse act, and it gives them no protection whatever. Except the Wyandottes and Ottawas, who have simple laws, the Indian tribes in the territory are destitute of any prescribed form of government."

Panoramic Nebraska.

It would not be fanciful to represent the animal and plant life of early Nebraska in a moving panoramic pageant. Historic facts actually present a picture and the constantly commingled primitive American people and the American bison are its outstanding features. They were alike ignorantly miscalled—Indians and buffaloes.

The people found all over the continent of North America by its European discoverers are truly the American race; but these discoverers—Columbus especially—shores of India, named the inhabitants Indians. Peter H. Burnett, leader of the famous expedition of emigrants to Oregon in 1843, observed that when the season was wet so that the buffaloes could find water on the uplands and in the sand hills, they would go back from the Platte river to the uplands to graze. "The Indians followed them backward and forward, mostly northerly and southerly."

Procession of the Plants.

The native plants of Nebraska comprise an unusually large number of species. Plants, like all living things, continually move about, into new places. If the conditions are suitable in these new places, the new settlers stay and thrive there.

Nebraska is so situated that it is the meeting place of species of plants which have migrated from valleys and woodlands to the east, with other species which have migrated from the mountains to the west. Most kinds of trees and shrubs now native to Nebraska have moved in from the east. Probably about a score of species of these native trees and shrubs have moved down from the mountains of the west.

Procession of the Animals.

The original animal life of Nebraska was very rich in the number of species, especially of birds and mammals. The reason for this is the same as that given for the great number of kinds of plants.

By virtue of their great size, number and usefulness, bison, now commonly called buffaloes, were the most remarkable of the native animals of Nebraska. They were of more importance to the Indians than the domestic European cattle are to the present white inhabitants. Their flesh supplied most of the meat; their skins were used for clothing, for shoes, for bedding, for tent covers and many other purposes. Thread and cords were made of their sinews, tools of their bones, spoons of their horns, glue of their hoofs, ornaments of their teeth; their hair, like wool, was woven into many useful articles, and small boys used their great antlers for blades to make sleds on which they had great fun coasting downhill over the frozen snow.

The Desert Myth.

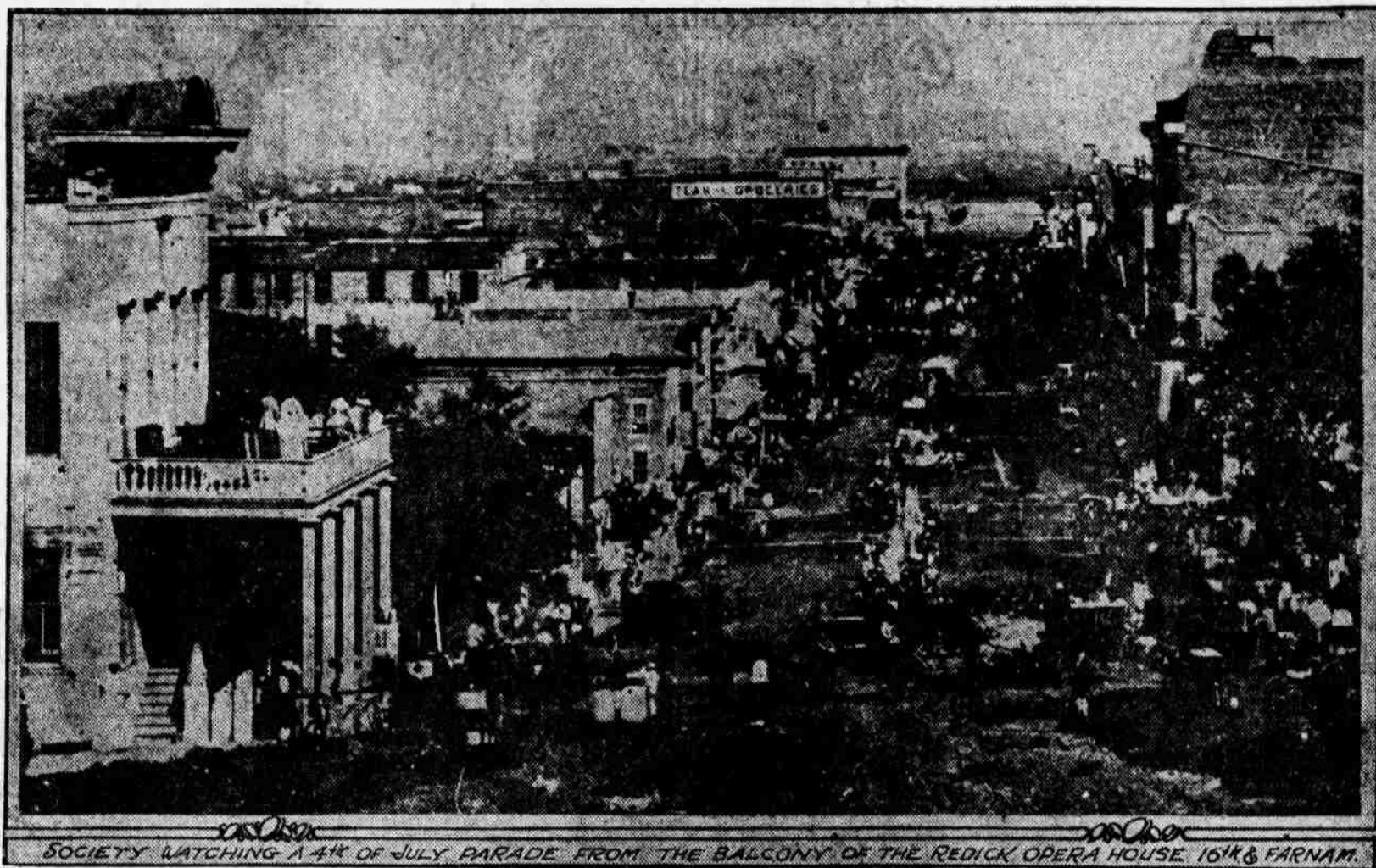
A misapprehension that Nebraska was a "desert" was caused partly by superficial observation of explorers and travelers, and, for the rest, by the slanderous reports of residents of the eastern and southern states, who were afraid that opening the vast territory to occupation would hinder the settlement of their own great area of vacant land. They wished also to preserve these western plains as a dumping ground for their own undesirable Indian population. This influence hindered the development of the Nebraska country for about 50 years—while it gradually vanished before the experiment of actual cultivators of the soil and the spread of the knowledge gained by competent scientific investigation.

G. K. Chesterton has lately been very prosperously floating a series of lectures in this country in which he talked mostly about "the uneducated educated." His original conceit touching this topic, "All vulgar errors arise from education. The uneducated are generally right; the badly educated are always wrong," seems to solve our present puzzle. A group of half educated reputed scientific explorers did most of the mischief in question.

In 1806, Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike, Sixth infantry, led a military expedition from St. Louis to the Rocky mountains and the sources of the Arkansas river. His course was through the richest part of easterly Kansas and for some distance along the Republican river; but west of a line not far from the eastern boundary of the present Kansas, he seemed to see little but sand and virtually a desert waste. And yet Pike's career was distinguished for honor, gallantry and general efficiency.

In 1820, Maj. Stephen H. Long, United States engineer, led a scientific exploring expedition from the first military post established in the Nebraska country (soon after called Fort Atkinson) up the Platte river to the Rocky mountains.

A Big Day in Downtown Omaha of 50 Years Ago



SOCIETY WATCHING A PART OF JULY PARADE FROM THE BALCONY OF THE REDICK OPERA HOUSE, 1914 & FARNAM.

ble round-up in the report of his exploration of 1855: "The general conclusions which I have drawn from my own observations and studies (though I may not have fully demonstrated them) are that the portion of Nebraska (which I have visited) lying north of White river is mostly of a clay formation, and that south of it is mainly of sand; that but a small portion of it is susceptible of cultivation west of the 97th meridian; that the territory is occupied by powerful tribes of roving savages and is only adapted to a mode of life such as theirs; that it must long remain an Indian country."

A Poor Prophet.

Of the country west of his starting point, then called Council Bluffs, he famously prophesied: "In regard to this extensive section of the country, we do not hesitate in giving the opinion that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation and, of course, uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence."

His observation was farcically superficial and his summing up graphically untrue. The bottom lands of the Platte, he found, were from two to ten miles wide; "Beyond these, the surface is an undulating plain, having an elevation of from 50 to 100 feet, and presents the aspect of hopelessness and irreclaimable sterility." It has been said, plausibly, and it seems, charitably, that Long was piqued because he was allowed only a scant outfit for his expedition, which had been ostentatiously started as a scientific arm of the famous and infamous Yellowstone expedition, and so revenged himself in a rampage on the country.

Lieut. G. K. Warren, topographical engineer, whose military prescience earned the title of "Hero of Little Round Top" at Gettysburg, made the following utterly incomprehensi-

cell, superintendent of Indian affairs at St. Louis, said:

"All Desert." "If we draw a line running north and south, so as to cross the Missouri about at the mouth of the Vermilion river, we shall designate the limits beyond which civilized men are never likely to settle."

"If they should go beyond this line, he said, they would never stop on the east side of the Rocky mountains. The mouth of the Vermilion river is in the very rich county of Clay, South Dakota, yet Mr. Mitchell said that "the sterility of sandy soil, together with the coldness and dryness of the climate," barred settlement thereabouts.

Senator Atchison of Missouri in his notable speech at Parkville on August 6, 1853, said:

"In one word, I have been told often and again by gentlemen who know that in all the country called Nebraska that there is not as much good tillable land as there is in the six counties constituting the Platte (purchase) country. And many persons in this assembly know that this information is substantially correct."

Prejudiced Senator.

But Senator Atchison's wish may well have fathered this slanderous thought, for he opposed the political

organization of the Nebraska country without slavery, and he feared that he could not get it with slavery.

At about the same time Lazarus H. Read, lately appointed chief justice of the Territory of Utah, also gloriously sunk himself in the bog of prophecy:

"After crossing this river (Big Blue) and its bottom, we enter a region entirely different. The face of the country is a succession of bluffs, hard, dry, stony and without timber or water, except at long intervals, and in my opinion will never be settled to any considerable extent."

A correspondent with Gen. William S. Harney's expedition to avenge the killing of Lieutenant Grattan and his command near Fort Laramie, writing from O'Fallon's Bluffs on August 31, 1854, said:

"In truth this Platte river is a humbug. It is about dry, and a person can cross it dry-shod. . . From 100 miles east of Fort Kearny to the foot of the Rocky Mountains the land is entirely unproductive and uninhabited. It belongs to the buffalo and the wild Indian and should be given up to them entirely. No white man has any business here. . ."

The correspondent's eye was kept enough to see the superficial faults of the country and the vast number of buffaloes through which the command was traveling every day excit-

Many Early Settlers Avoided Nebraska Plains On Basis Of Misinformation Widely Circulated That Large Part of Territory Was "a Desert"—Population Sparse When Territorial Organization Effected in 1854.

ed his wonder; but his mind was so dulled by prejudice that it could not reason the simple step to the plain conclusion that a region with a soil and a climate which supported such vast herds of wild cattle, without protection, was destined to become famous throughout the world for the production of domestic cattle and of the most important foods for them as well as for mankind.

"Great American Desert."

In Bradford's General Atlas of 1835 and Olney's Geography of 1837 the Great American Desert was indefinitely indicated as the region west of the Missouri river. In Mitchell's Geography of 1839 it is definitely shown as an oblong region just east of the Rocky mountains, south of the Platte and extending as far south as the headwaters of the Red river.

In S. G. Goodrich's Comprehensive Geography and History, published by J. H. Colton & Co. in 1855, the Great American Desert is indicated as extending from the south fork of the Platte southward to the Red river, to the Rocky Mountains on the west and including parts of Nebraska, Kansas and the Indian Territory on the east. Its general extent was noted thus: "An immense tract called the Great American Desert extends along the eastern part of the Rocky Mountains from the Nebraska territory to Texas, a length of nearly 600 miles."

Early Explorers' Views.

In a very superficial view these maps were as truthful as could be expected. From the earliest observers, on the other hand, we have stories of the great fertility of this region. Jaramillo, with Coronado's expedition in 1541, whom Chesterton would class among the uneducated, expatiated on the agricultural richness of eastern Kansas. In a letter dated April 10, 1706, Bienville, the distinguished French colonist of Louisiana, notes that Canadian travelers along the Missouri said that the country was the finest in the world; and Nicholas de la Salle, writing October 16, 1708, had ascended the Missouri river as far as 300 to 400 leagues "through the finest countries in the world."

An advance detachment of the military arm of the Yellowstone expedition of 1819 marched through a section of the condemned country from Belle Fontaine, a barracks about 25 miles west of St. Louis, to its winter quarters on Cow island, now 10 miles above Leavenworth. In a letter written at this camp an officer of the detachment said: "We have passed through a country which is not surpassed in fertility of soil and water courses by any in the world."

The promoters of territorial gov-

ernment for the Nebraska country, who lived on the Missouri border and knew precisely what they were talking about, revealed in descriptions of its richness.

"Desert" a Phantasm.

The desert, then, was a largely fictitious phantasm. The mighty sentinels of the Rockies, which immortalize the names of the discoverers of the half-educated originators and sponsors of the myth—Pikes Peak, Longs Peak, Fremonts Peak—at this moment look down upon the putative desert plains at their feet teeming with crops of agricultural staples, and, with improved methods of cultivation, destined to support a large population of general farmers.

Contemplating the world-wide ruin of the war, came an accusatory chorus of social seers against the institutions which should have prevented it, and religion and education are the derelicts most severely condemned. Wells' most profound reasons against the educational system and Chesterton paradoxically lampoons it: "There are no snakes to be met with throughout the whole island," is a whole chapter of "The Natural History of Ireland." That sums up the great American desert myths.

The Early Population.

The sparse population of Nebraska on its territorial organization in 1854 is quite explicable. By the provisions of the Indian country act of June 30, 1834, none of the territory was eligible to white settlers. The 275 who were here, most of them at Fort Kearny, comprised mostly licensed traders.

When Iowa was established as a territory in 1838 the Indians had ceded a large part of their lands to the United States, and the two great counties of Dubuque and Des Moines had been under territorial government for two years as a part of the Territory of Wisconsin. Consequently there were about 30,000 white settlers in the new territory when it started.

For similar reasons Wisconsin had a white population of 22,000 when it became a territory. In like circumstances the Territory of Missouri began with a fairly stable white population of 26,000. Minnesota had about 6,000, principally in the continuous group of eastern counties, Ramsey, Washington and Dakota, and in Pembina, Lord Selkirk's settlement on the Red river and now in North Dakota. So the political beginning of these neighboring territories was comparatively regular and orderly, while that of Nebraska was perforce irregular and disorderly.

Kansas and Nebraska Contrasted. Kansas, organized as a territory at the same time as Nebraska, was

(Continued on Page Three.)

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