

EARLY HISTORY OF WEBSTER COUNTY

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WEBSTER COUNTY, in the southern tier of Nebraska counties bordering the Kansas state line, is 150 miles west of the Missouri river and is approximately midway between the east and west boundaries of the state. On the north it is bounded by Adams County, on the west by Franklin, on the east by Nuckolls and on the south by Kansas. Webster County is twenty-four miles square, with an area of 576 miles, 368,640 acres. The county was named in honor of the statesman, Daniel Webster.

With level bottom lands, terraced fields, rolling plains and curving hills, the topography of the county offers an ever-changing scene to the traveler. The Republican River passes through it from west to east. A large number of creeks flow into the Republican and the river increases regularly in breadth and volume. At flood stage it is destructive and on June 1, 1935 swept everything, homes, barns, bridges, cattle--before its angry rush. Other streams include one branch of the Little Blue in the northwest corner of the county; Elm creek, which furnished water power for the Amboy mill; Crooked creek, a spring fed stream, and Walnut Creek.

In 1870, when the first settlers came to this community, the trees to be found along the rivers and creeks included burr oak, water elm, cottonwood, willow, box elder, hackberry, wild plum, red elm and chokecherry. The remainder of the county was mostly covered by buffalo grass and by a sort of slough grass in marshy places. The valley was almost devoid of timber, because of prairie fires and the beavers. Trees any distance from the bank of a stream were destroyed by fires, and if they grew close to the water, were cut down by the industrious beaver. In recent years numerous varieties of trees have been planted and add much to the beauty of the region.

Sorghums are now produced on large acreages; grasses of many different kinds, both for pastures and lawns, sweet clover and alfalfa have been introduced, and much of the land has been cultivated. In addition to the regular farm products of corn, wheat, oats, rye and barley, there is considerable raising of stock and dairy cattle, hogs, sheep and poultry. Turkey raising is one of the major undertakings and many thousands of these birds are shipped to the markets each year. The first crop in the valley was turnips, raised by Abe Garber who broke an acre or more of sod in August 1870.

It is believed that A. T. Hill of Hastings recently discovered the location of the lost Pawnee village, which was visited in 1806 by Zebulon Pike, a United States army officer who there hoisted the American flag where the Spanish flag had previously waved. The site is believed to have been six miles southwest of Guide Rock. Chief Characterish lived in this village and ruled Pawnee tribes over a vast area. It was the mission of Pike and his hardy band to visit this chief and to inform him that the land over which he and his people roamed had been purchased from the Spanish and that the Indians had become subjects of the United States.

However, the true location of the Republican Pawnee Indian village has been questioned by Kansas, which claims that the site is near Republic, KS, and has erected a \$3,000 granite monument to commemorate it. The Nebraska State Historical Society board believes that the true site is in Nebraska, between the towns of Guide Rock and Red Cloud. Students have reached the conclusion that the Indian village site in Webster County filled all the requirements of Pike's narrative and map while the Kansas Historical Monument site totally failed to fill them.

Explorations in this county of the Indian graveyard have brought to light many interesting things. The pottery work, flint and stone implements, bone awls, picks and hide tanning tools are of the same design and workmanship as those of the Pawnees on the Platte and Loup Rivers. Several articles foreign to Indian workmanship were found, among them Spanish bridle bits, and spurs, United States, British and Spanish peace medals, coins, soldiers' buttons and two brass medallions. On the buttons and medallions are fifteen stars and on one is the raised figure "1" the number of Pike's infantry.

The following is a description of the Pawnee Indians, as published in 1812 in the Louisiana Gazette: "The Pawnees seem to be a sober good kind of people; the men are not so stout as the Osages and Kansas, nor so active and enterprising, though they are handsome and well formed; the women are ugly and filthy but very ingenious and industrious." The Pawnees were a race distinct from the other Indians and their language was radically different. This tribe consisted of at least three distinct bands, distinguished by the appellations of the Grand, the Republican and the Loup Pawnee. The two former acknowledged a common origin, but the latter denied any affinity, although their habits and language were said to indicate the same ancestry. These bands were further divided into sub-bands and families, each of which had its appropriate mark or token, such as the sun, the bear, the eagle, the beaver, etc. The Pawnee carried on a predatory warfare with the Sioux, the Cheyenne's and the Arapahoes, for many years.

The site of the Pawnee village said to have been visited by Pike is not on any well-traveled or improved highway, but many people have viewed it. A. T. Hill, the present owner, has dug up the site of a large Indian ground house, complete down to the original floor and showing the decayed stumps of the outside circle of large posts and the fireplace in the center. Quantities of pumpkin seeds were found together with other articles which indicated that the occupants of that house had died of the smallpox and no one cared to use the supplies left.

The cemetery of this village is unusually large, covering acres of ground; there are three sections, the women and children buried near the base of the bluff, the braves on the higher slopes and the chiefs on the top of the hill.

Indian relics of all kinds which have been found in many parts of the county afford an interesting study for the archeologist, and a large display of Indian relics obtained in Webster County, is featured at the museum in Hastings.

Settlers were lured to Webster County by tales of great herds of buffalo, deer, elk and antelope, the large number of prairie chickens and wild turkeys, and occasional tales of gold. At that time the national government had been selling the public domain to anyone willing to buy. Any group of men wishing to settle close together had to go beyond the west line of Nuckolls County, as nearly all the land east of there had been purchased by speculators. The land west of this line had, by act of Congress, been reserved for homestead entry. The western two-thirds of Nebraska was then one vast prairie, uninhabited except for bands of Indians.

Webster County was the first in the Republican valley to be organized with a county government, the date of its organization being April 19, 1871. The preliminary steps toward the organization of Webster County were taken at meetings held in the dugout of Silas Garber, who a few years later became governor of Nebraska.

In the spring of 1870, nineteen members of the Rankin colony left Omaha, to settle near the Republican River, May 16 they arrived at a large elm grove south of the present town of Guide Rock and established the first settlement in the county. An Indian scare caused considerable uneasiness and induced all members of the colony to return to Omaha, with the exception of four, Emanuel Peters, George Gardiner, Richard Paine and Donald McCallum, a surveyor. Only two, however, Messrs. Peters and McCallum, remained permanently. They constructed as living quarters, a dugout, and the first of its kind in the county. They called the place Guide Rock, named for a conspicuous landmark, the large rocky bluff on the opposite side of the river.

About this same time Silas, Joseph and Abram Garber made an extended trip through the valley. Returning to Beatrice they found several other men desirous of locating on frontier lands, and in May 1870 the Garbers, A. M. Talbott, Albert Lathrop, Sam Davis, Thomas Comstock, and William McBride arrived at Guide Rock, where they found Peters and McCallum still living in a dugout. To protect themselves from the Indians they built a stockade on Soap creek.

The first white woman to come to the county was Mrs. Joseph Garber, who, with her husband, located at the stockade in Guide Rock. Another feminine first settler was Mrs. Sarah Rich, a widow who took a homestead near Guide Rock. Soon afterward came Mrs. Abram Garber and two children, Ida and Edward, Grandma Mick and son Luther, and Maggie and Minta Reiser, grandchildren of Mrs. Mick.

Silas Garber later in the season pushed on up the river to the present site of Red Cloud. On July 17 the first homestead entries were made in this settlement by Garber, Dr. Peter Head, W. H. Brice, August Roats and David Heffelbower. On Aug. 9, W. E. Jackson and James Calvert arrived with their families. That same month the settlers erected a stockade on a creek which flowed through the homestead of Governor Garber.

After the stockade was built immigration to the valley was rapid and the covered wagons or prairie schooners were seldom out of sight. Some of the conveyances were pulled by oxen, others by horses, cows or steers. The first winter was a lonely one for the settlers, the weather was cold, and provisions with the exception of meat were scarce. Butter and milk were unknown. Flour was cheap at Beatrice, but hauling it from the nearest mill a hundred miles away, was expensive.

In 1871 a settlement was formed on Elm Creek, between Guide Rock and Red Cloud, and a stockade was built there.

April 19, 1871 an election was held to organize Webster County and to locate the county seat. Forty-five votes were cast and it is thought that every legal voter in the county voted on that day. Silas Garber was chosen as judge, A. W. Brice, treasurer, Thomas B. Williams clerk, William E. Jackson superintendent of schools, Emanuel Peters sheriff, Donald McCallum surveyor, George Taylor assessor, Joseph Garber justice of the peace and A. Lathrop constable. A. W. Brice and William E. Jackson did not qualify for their respective offices, so Edward Kellogg was appointed county superintendent and Mr. Jackson county treasurer.

At the time of the election the territory of the county was all in one precinct. The settlements were mostly adjacent to the Republican, and as Red Cloud was the most nearly central and convenient place for the holding of this first election, it was named the county seat, with no objections voiced.

On May 20, Joseph Garber, Peter Head and William Fennimore, the commissioners elected, met in the office of the county clerk in Red Cloud for their first session as officers and divided the county into three commissioner districts. On Sept. 11 they ordered that an election be held in the several precincts of the county on the 19th of the month, to adopt or reject the proposed new state constitution.

The first regular election of the county, after its organization, was held Oct. 10, 1871 and resulted in the election of Peter Head, Joseph Garber, and Allen T. Ayers county commissioners, T. B. Williams clerk, Silas Garber judge, William E. Jackson treasurer, James Calvert sheriff, Donald McCallum surveyor, Edward Kellogg superintendent of schools, and Dr. Peter Head coroner. That same day the electorate voted to authorize the county commissioners to issue bonds in the sum of \$2,000 for the erection of county buildings.

The dugout of Silas Garber was used for some months for the courthouse and county offices. Later the offices were moved to a small log building which stood on the northeast corner of Webster and Third Avenue, Red Cloud, and on April 16, 1872 to the first structure owned by the county, a frame building purchased by the commissioners for \$250. This was used until 1878, when a two story frame building was erected by the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company for and in consideration of the release of all the taxes that had accrued on their lands within the county prior to the year 1877. This structure was later torn down and the modern three-story brick building was erected in 1914.

In January, 1873, Webster County was again subdivided into road districts and four new precincts were formed. Subsequently from time to time, the old precincts were reduced in size and new ones were created to suit the needs of the increasing population. Early in the history of the county the political divisions of the county were called townships. Until 1885 the court conducting business for the county consisted of three commissioners elected at large by the electors of each of the three commissioner districts, which extended from the northern to the southern boundary of the county. Then, due to the fact that the commissioners were nearly always chosen from the more populous southern section of the county, leaving the northern part without representation, it was decided that it would be better for each township to have a representative on the board. There were eighteen men on the board under this system and due to the expense of paying this large group, the county form of government, after several years' trial, was again changed to the commissioner system. The county is now divided into five commissioner districts and each district is represented by one commissioner.

The county court was established under the name of probate court Nov. 16, 1871 and continued under that name until 1875, when it was changed to the present name.

The first term of the district court in Webster County was held June 6, 1873 with Judge Daniel Gantt presiding. The county first belonged to the first judicial district, then the eighth and now to the tenth.

The first trial in Webster County was that of Peters and McCallum vs. Hicks, where the former sought to recover the proceeds from the sale of buffalo meat in Beatrice from Hicks, who had negotiated the sale and refused to make settlement beyond a sack of flour and a few trinkets. Captain Munson and a Mr. Reid, the judges, decided in favor of the plaintiffs. William Hicks was killed on Ash creek by Richard Bobier July 4, 1871 during a quarrel over an oak tree. This was the first homicide in the county and Bobier was taken to Beatrice, where he was tried and acquitted on the grounds of self defense.

In 1884 William O. Cox, using a billiard cue, killed a Mr. Tobin at Blue Hill. Cox was brought to Red Cloud, waived a preliminary hearing and was taken to Lincoln for safekeeping. He was later brought back to Red Cloud, tried and found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to the penitentiary for five years.

In 1888 William Cole, a desperado, fired five shots from his revolver across the street in Guide Rock into a crowd of men, wounding two. Two nights later he was taken from the village prison by a mob and hanged at a railroad bridge east of town.

The first real law suit in the county was held in 1872, Rutherford vs. Fennimore, a suit for debt. Rutherford won. The first legal trial was that of a man named King, who was arrested on the charge of selling liquor without a license. This was brought before the county commissioners, who dropped the matter after ascertaining that they had no authority to try the case.

The great Easter storm of 1873 and the grasshopper visitation in the summer of 1874 caused many of the settlers to move away. Many of the remaining persons, even though practicing great economy, no doubt would have starved had it not been for the provisions, clothing and seed sent by residents of more fortunate states.

The Cheyenne were the tribe of Indians most feared in the South Platte valley. During the summer of 1868, according to Emanuel Peters, government surveyors who were sect ionizing Webster County, were killed near Red Cloud. Peter's group discovered the site where the slaughter took place the camp grounds were strewn with parts of burned wagons and other things belonging to the surveyors.

The first wagon road that became marked by travel was from the hills where Hardy now is located to the stockade at Guide Rock. Beyond that to the west there was no trail of any kind until late in the fall of 1870, when the stockade was built near Red Cloud. All the early roads, like the schoolhouses, were made by free labor. No bridges were built by county funds, except those over the Republican River; these first bridges all washed away. It required many years to learn to build bridges strong enough to withstand the floods that occur nearly every spring.

Schoolhouses of that early day were covered with poles, hay and dirt roofs. The dirt roofs were cool in summer and warm in winter, but were not waterproof. Mice often gnawed holes which were not discovered until it rained and the water poured through, however, the furniture was home-made and the floor was the earth, so sometimes the moisture was needed to settle the dust.

Dugouts and "soddies" were the most common types of homes at first but with the advent of the railroads, the settlers began to come out of the ground, i. e., they built houses of timber. However, it was many years before all the dirt homes were abandoned.

A branch line of the Burlington & Missouri, or Republican Valley railroad was completed in 1878 from Hastings to Red Cloud and Inavale. The first train ran over this road in December that year, but the road was not fully finished until early in 1879. The county commissioners, in April 1878, ordered a special election to be held May 4 to vote on the question of raising bonds to the amount of \$47,500 (at that time ten percent of the assessed valuation of the county) for the purpose of aiding in the building of the first railroad from Hastings to Red Cloud. It took about two years before the track was extended down the valley to Guide Rock and Superior. The CB&Q railroad now has approximately ninety miles of track in the county, and the Missouri Pacific tracks cross the extreme northeast corner.

The town of Blue Hill was surveyed and platted in September 1878 by A. B. Smith, the railroad town surveyor. Cowles, two and a half miles east of the geographical center of the county, was also surveyed that same month by Mr. Smith. Bladen was laid out by Mr. Smith in May, 1886 for the Lincoln Land Co. Inavale was laid out May 15, 1884 by W. H. Strohm for W. J. Vance, the original proprietor. Guide Rock was laid out by Daniel McCallum in September, 1873 and the site of Red Cloud was entered under the homestead laws July 17, 1870.

The first school district formed in the county was at Guide Rock, the next at Red Cloud and the third on Walnut Creek, all in 1871. The first school in the county was taught in the Guide Rock district by Miss Mary Kingsley. In 1874 the first teachers' institute was held for three days and a teachers' association formed--just four years after the first white settler stepped upon its soil.

Today there are seven accredited high schools in the county: Bladen, Cowles, Inavale, Red Cloud, Blue Hill, Guide Rock and Eckley (minor accredited). Two other high schools, Dist No. 25 and Rosemont, are approved high schools. In addition, modern well-kept and well-taught schools are the usual thing in all districts of the county.

It is a far cry from the present time, when well laid out roads provide excellent transportation facilities to that day in July 1872 when George W. Hummel hauled the first load of goods from the Burlington & Missouri River railroad at Juniata in Adams County to Red Cloud, for Messrs. H. Kaley and Saddler & Co.

Rev. Mr. Penney preached the first sermon in the summer of 1871 but Rev. C. W. Wells was the first Methodist minister to labor in Webster County. He arrived at Red Cloud in 1871 and on Aug. 1 organized the first religious society in the county. In 1872 and 1873 Father Lechlietner of the Roman Catholic Church held services in the log cabin of William E. Jackson. Other denominations soon had ministers and began to hold regular church services and a number of these pioneer pastors became well known over the county and state.

The first marriage was that of William J. Norris and Hulda J. Rennecker on July 14, 1871 and the ceremony was performed by Judge Silas Garber.

The first child born in the county was a son of W. D. McKinney, born in 1871 on Walnut Creek.

The first sawmills were built in 1872, one at Guide Rock by J. L. Columbia and M. Stratton, and one at Red Cloud by J. G. and J. Potter.

The first newspaper published was the Red Cloud Chief, established in 1873 by C. L. Mather. The Webster Argus was established in 1878 by A. J. Kennedy. There are now three newspapers in the county, The Commercial Advertiser, published at Red Cloud, The Blue Hill Leader and The Guide Rock Signal.

The first liquor license was granted to Silas Garber on March 20, 1872 for \$25 for one year.

The horse drawn street car in Red Cloud attracted the attention of travelers from far and near. Not only was it the first in this section, but was practically the last in the United States and as such received much publicity in metropolitan papers. It was in active operation from 1889 until October 1917, when the tracks were torn up for paving operations. The street car line at that time was owned by R. W. Koontz.

In September 1887 the board of trade endorsed the street car project and in October of that year the city council decided to submit to the voters the question of granting a franchise. Nov. 8, 1887 the proposition was practically unanimously endorsed--only four votes were cast against it. By June 1888, trips were made from the depot to the principal hotels in the business section. The business, however, soon "went on the rocks" and the car line was sold at a sheriff's sale in September 1889 to Lloyd Crabill, who successfully managed it for many years.

Among outstanding men who stamped the force of their personality upon the history of the county was W. N. Richardson, who came here in 1871, erected a building for banking purposes and influenced bankers of established character to start operation of a bank in Red Cloud; for some time this was the only bank in the Republican valley. Richardson's credit abroad was practically the only fund upon which the public business of the county was transacted for the first six years of its existence. He provided all the market there was for the farm produce until the coming of the railroad and was the principal feeder, buyer and shipper of cattle in the South Platte valley.

Another such man was Attorney James S. Gilham, who was regarded as having one of the state's keenest and most outstanding legal minds, and whose eloquence and command of the English language were not often surpassed. This made his services as a public speaker much in demand. He served as state representative from this district, was the instigator of the formation of the county's Old Settlers Association and added much to the intellectual life of the community.

J. L. Miner, a merchant, banker and rancher, was also of this same classification. He was the owner of one of the largest stores in the valley and later became an influential banker well known in other states. His advice and backing established a number of the community's residents in various enterprises and some of them became wealthy by following his suggestions.