



The Birth of the South Omaha Stockyards: A Photographic Essay

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: The sprawling stockyards that once defined South Omaha developed rapidly in the 1880s, but only a handful of photographs document their origins. The three earliest known images have never been published as a set; one of the three has not been previously published at all. A careful look at the photos reveals how the stockyards were built using the earth-moving technologies of the time.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Alexander Swan, Frank Drexel

Omaha Meat Packing Companies: G H Hammond, Fowler Brothers, Armour-Cudahy, Swift

Nebraska Place Names: South Omaha

Keywords: Alexander Swan, Frank Drexel, Fresno (mule and horse-drawn scraper), bucket scraper, Burlington Railroad, Union Pacific Railroad

Photographs / Images: Figure 1: Frank Drexel farm in South Omaha, c. 1880; Figure 2: Omaha Stockyards Building, c. 1884 (exterior and close-up of sign); Figure 3: Stockyards Exchange building and complex of offices and financial institutions, c. 1903; Figure 4: construction of an eight-foot wooden sewer, 1887 (5 cropped views and the complete photo); Figure 5: sketches of J Forteous dirt scraper; Figure 6: train flatcars loaded with dirt being delivered for grade development



The Birth of the South Omaha Stockyards:

A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

BY JOHN E. CARTER



By the 1870s the cattle industry in western Nebraska was booming. Thousands of head of Texas cattle came either to meet the railroad for transportation to Chicago markets or to be driven further north to meet the demands of military posts and Indian reservation.

During this decade large ranches grazed cattle on huge tracts of government land. The high quality grasses produced high quality beef, and demand for this Nebraska product grew. By 1880 ranchers

clamored for a stockyard in Omaha. They were tired of their animals losing weight by traveling the extra five hundred miles from Omaha to Chicago. Lost weight meant lost profits.

In 1883 Wyoming rancher Alexander Swan came to Omaha to encourage local entrepreneurs to establish a stockyard. The location was perfect. Omaha was surrounded by plenty of grass and corn, and the Missouri River provided both ample water and a swift moving stream to haul

Figure 4: Construction of an eight-foot wooden sewer, ca. 1887. The photo has been cropped and the foreground digitally compressed. The complete photo appears on p. 192. NSHS RG1085:77-1

Figure 1: The Frank Drexel farm in south Omaha, ca. 1880. NSHS RG1085:24-11

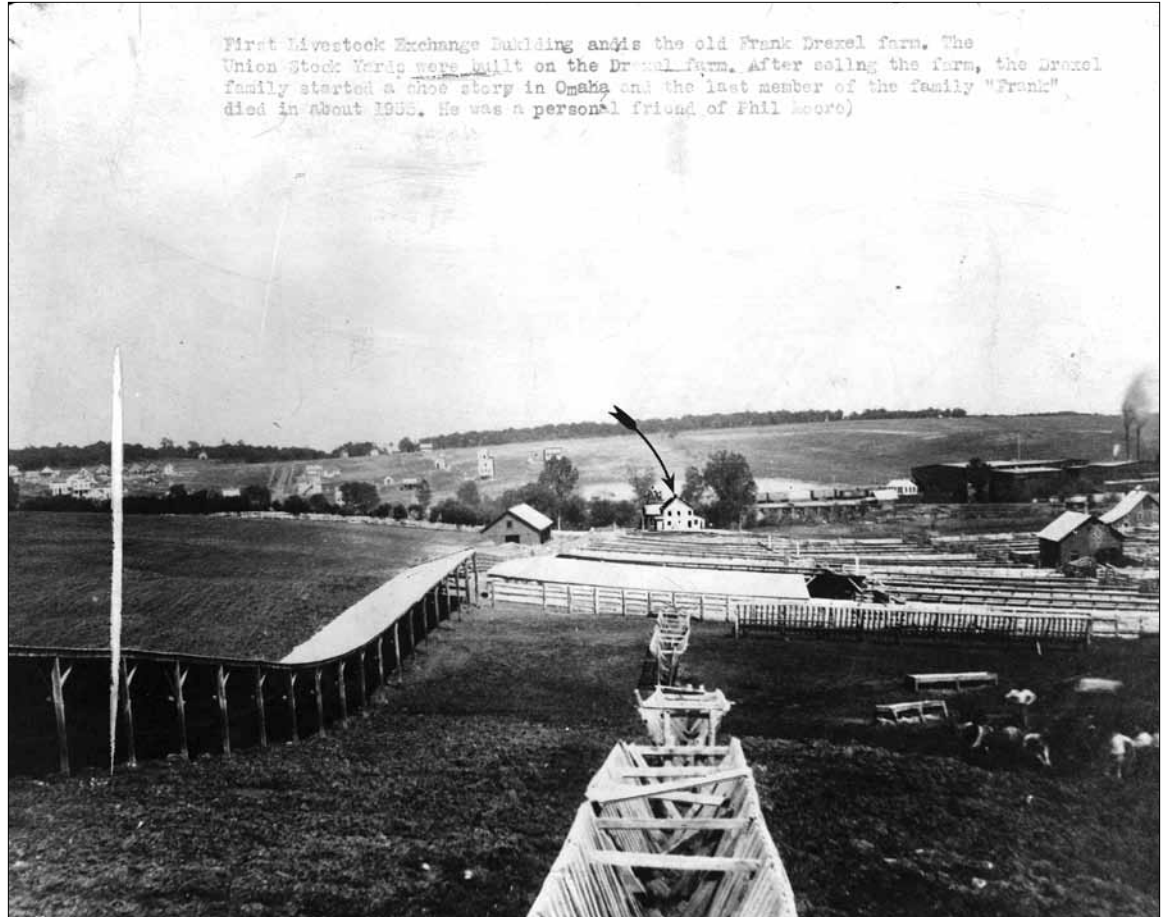


Figure 3: Stockyards Exchange building and complex of offices and financial institutions, ca. 1903. NSHS RG1085:24-10



waste away—a stark contrast to the slow-moving Chicago River that regularly backed up with rank sewage, creating an immense health hazard.

Swan assembled a group of investors and acquired land in what would become South Omaha. What began with a single farm exploded into a huge enterprise. By the end of the decade South Omaha was established as a major meat center, and by 1956 Omaha was the largest meat producing city in the world.

For something this big very few pictures survive of its birth. On these pages we present the few known images that do survive.

It is hard to imagine the speed of the stockyard's progress. It began with the Frank Drexel farm (see fig. 1). The farm encompassed ten acres of land; the farmhouse, marked with the arrow, served as the first exchange building.

Things moved at a breakneck pace. In 1886 developers erected the elegant Stockyard Exchange Building (see figs. 2, 2A, 3). Between 1885 and 1887 four major meat packers—G. H. Hammond (1885), Fowler Brothers (1886), Armour-Cudahy and Swift (both 1887)—established major plants adjacent to the stockyards.

One gets a good sense of the frenzy of building from the photograph of construction crews grading the land (see fig. 4) in what would become the large pen areas. On the horizon on the right of the

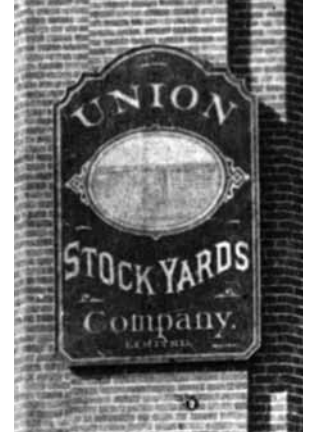


image one sees the array of newly-built houses and stores, the birthing of the City of South Omaha. To the left, the smokestacks and substantial industrial buildings locate the packing houses.

This image is amazing in its detail (see fig. 4A). The purpose of the work is to bury the immense eight-foot-square wooden sewer. One of the advantages of Omaha was its proximity to the Missouri, and a structure like this would be necessary to deal with the waste produced by the huge volume of livestock to come.

Clearly the work crews are moving huge volumes of earth. Their major tool in this endeavor is the mule- and horse-drawn scraper called a Fresno,

Figure 2 (above left):
Omaha Stockyards
Building, ca. 1884.
NSHS RG1085:2-10

Figure 2A: (above right)





Figure 4

invented in 1883 by James Porteus in, not surprisingly, Fresno, California.

There were bucket scrapers before the Fresno, but they were clumsy and required huge amounts of muscle power by both humans and animals (see fig. 4B). With the Fresno, you could push the handle up to begin scraping dirt, and when you had a load pull the handle back. That would lift the blade and allow the dirt to be easily transported to the unloading site. To unload, the operator simply pushed the handle to a vertical position; the draft animal's motion brought the bucket to a full upright position. Once unloaded, the operator simply moved the bucket back to the transporting position and headed back for more.

Over the course of the day these machines could move many cubic yards of dirt. The details from the photograph show the device in each of its positions, and the patent drawing illustrates how it works (see fig. 5). It is not surprising that these amazing devices were the inspiration for both the

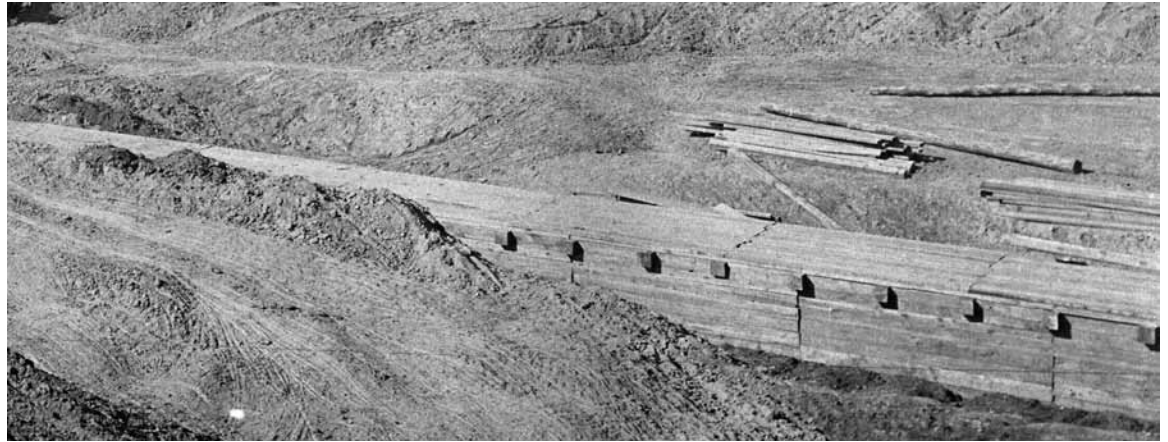


Figure 4A



Figure 4B



Figure 4C

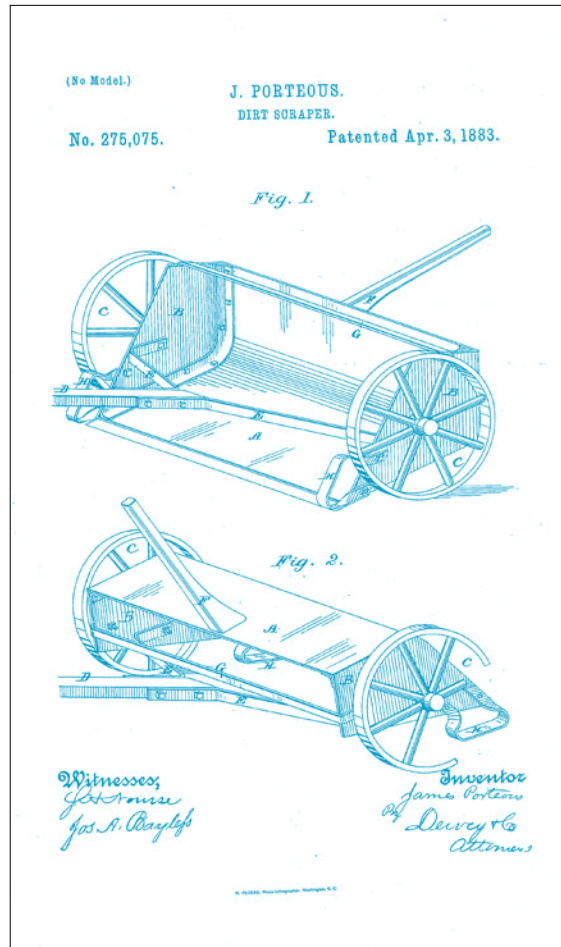


Figure 4D



Figure 4E

Figure 5



bucket blade on modern bulldozers and the entire design of modern earth movers.

One can see surveyors at work setting the grade for the earth movers. Wagons appear to be loaded with dirt as well (see fig. 4C).

If you look to the top right of the image (see fig. 4D) you will see that the land where the Fresnos are collecting has been plowed, apparently to make harvesting the soil lighter work. We also see the plows at work in the center left of the picture (see fig. 4E), no doubt preparing the next area for scraping.

The railroads were key to the success of the stockyards, and both the Burlington and Union Pacific developed lines into South Omaha. In figure 6 we see flatcars loaded with dirt being delivered for grade development. Recall that there were no sophisticated side deliver dump cars, but here we see a clever solution to the same problem.

The cars are lined up and loaded with soil. On the last car, a blade has been positioned (see fig. 6A) that is attached to a thick rope that runs under the dirt and across all of the cars. When the cars are in position the rope is pulled, no doubt by a locomotive, which draws the blade forward neatly scraping the cars of their loads (see fig. 6B).

South Omaha has long been known as a place of muscle and sweat; it was born of the same stuff—all of this was going on in a five-year stretch. It is no surprise at all that South Omaha became the hub of an exploding Nebraska meat industry. 🇺🇸



Figure 6



Figure 6A



Figure 6B



Two men sing traditional Omaha songs while NSHS curator Melvin Gilmore records their voices. NSHS RG2039-LS-20