

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Robert Wilkinson Furnas was born on May 5, 1824, to William and Martha (Jenkins) Furnas near Troy, Miami County, Ohio. His parents were of English Quaker stock and were natives of South Carolina. Robert was orphaned in 1832 when his parents died from cholera, and he went to live with his paternal grandparents in Troy. Later while still a youth, he left this home and worked as a tin and printing apprentice. In the late 1840's he became engaged in a number of business enterprises in the southern Ohio-northern Kentucky region, including book and job printing, publishing a newspaper in Troy, and various positions as a railroader, including station agent, conductor and engineer. In 1852, while still living in Ohio, he became involved in the insurance business which he continued until he moved to Nebraska Territory in April 1856.

Furnas established the *Nebraska Advertiser* in Brownville and it soon became a newspaper of note, primarily because of his frank comments on contemporary issues. He participated actively in promoting the Territory, and wrote a number of pamphlets advertising the region to prospective settlers. He was also extremely interested in developing the full agricultural potential of the land and to this end founded the *Nebraska Farmer*, Nebraska's first agricultural periodical.

Furnas attempted to be politically neutral when he arrived in the Territory, although he had been a Whig in Ohio. He soon found himself, however, aligned with the newly organized Republican Party. He served in the 3rd-6th Territorial Councils which met during 1857-1860, and was a member of the Agriculture, Education and Horticulture committees.

Furnas was an officer in the Territorial Militia when the Civil War started, and was soon appointed a colonel in the U.S. Army. He organized several Indian regiments prior to commanding the Second Nebraska Cavalry which participated in campaigns against the Plains Indians, most notably in the battle of White Stone Hill. He returned to civilian life after the Civil War and served from 1864 to 1866 as Agent for the Omaha Indians. He returned to Brownville in 1867, where he became actively engaged in a nursery business in which he had purchased half interest. Although he was owner and editor of the *Nebraska Advertiser* from 1870 to 1871, his main vocation after his term as Indian Agent was the operation of his nursery business located on the outskirts of Brownville, where he resided until his death on June 1, 1905.

In 1872 Furnas was elected governor of Nebraska on the Republican ticket even though prior to the election he was involved in a controversy when it was charged that he had accepted a bribe in voting against the removal of the capital from Omaha in 1857. His two years as governor were clouded with a number of problems including administrative questions and economic hardship, originating from Nebraskans being plagued by grasshoppers which necessitated various relief measures. Furnas did not seek re-election in 1874 and he never again held an elective public office. Later, he was interested in a number of appointive positions, particularly that of Commissioner of Agriculture.

Furnas' career after his one term as governor centered on the promotion of agriculture and the preservation of Nebraska's history. He was instrumental in creating the State Board of Agriculture and served as its first president and later as its secretary for approximately two decades. The latter position consisted almost entirely of planning and arranging for the Nebraska State Fair held annually in September. Furnas was active in the development of agriculture in numerous other ways, such as advocating the adaptation of irrigation, and introducing new plant varieties. In addition, he served as a commissioner to several national and international expositions, including those held in New Orleans in 1884-85, Paris in 1889, and Mexico in 1898. He was an active participant in several agricultural, horticultural and other related organizations and served as president of the International Fairs and Expositions and the American Fair Association. Furnas was one of the organizers of the Nebraska State Historical Society and for many years served as president before relinquishing the position to J. Sterling Morton. Furnas wrote a number of historical addresses, biographical sketches, and was one of the first persons to deposit his papers in the Society's archives.

Furnas married Mary Elizabeth McComas on October 29, 1845, and they were parents of eight children. Mrs. Furnas died on April 1, 1897, and Furnas was married for a second time on December 25, 1899 to Susannah Emswiler Jameson.

EDITORIAL NOTES

The Robert W. Furnas Papers were given to the Nebraska State Historical Society by Furnas. The papers consist of approximately 10,000 letters, twelve archival boxes of scrapbooks and fifteen boxes of records, clippings, printed matter and other miscellaneous material relating to Furnas' life. The majority of the papers concern the promotion of agriculture. Specifically, the material relates to Furnas' activities as Secretary of the State Board of Agriculture and his subsequent management of the Nebraska State Fairs from 1884 to 1904. In addition the papers reveal his responsibilities as Nebraska Commissioner for various national and international fairs and expositions during the late 19th Century, and his duties as Governor of Nebraska from 1873 to 1875. Other broad topics of interest include his early business career in Ohio and later in Nebraska, his duties as commander of the Second Nebraska Cavalry during the Civil War and his administration of the Omaha Indian Agency during the 1860s.

The papers are divided into eight subgroups, the largest of which is incoming letters found in boxes one to ten and on the first ten rolls of microfilm. A partial calendar of letters received by Furnas during the period February 1881 to February 1905 are in the papers and were microfilmed on Roll 1. Roll 11 consists of outgoing correspondence and constitutes the second subgroup. Approximately a dozen bound volumes relating to Furnas' career in printing and publishing, military duties, Indian Agency administration, and later business ventures were microfilmed on Roll 12. The concluding roll is composed of treaties and reports, warrants and deeds, bills and speeches, agreements and resolutions petitions, and miscellaneous items.

The last three subgroups consist of material which was not microfilmed. Subgroup five consists of boxes sixteen to twenty-seven, and is composed of scrapbooks. These books are described in detail in the Society's Manuscript Record and include a variety of mounted clippings, many of them undated, relating to agricultural development, Nebraska and national affairs, and political campaigns, issues and parties. Subgroup six is composed of records, invoices, warrants, bills, receipts, account books, tax statements, newspaper clippings and some printed matter. This material is described in more detail in the Manuscript Record and is in archival boxes twenty-eight to forty-one. Subgroup seven consists of about 130 newspapers, primarily out of state, from New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco, and other large cities dating from 1832-1892. These are identified individually and are located in the archives.

The physical preparation and actual microfilming of the documents were conducted on the basis of simplicity of arrangement and minimum utilization of editorial comments and microfilm targets. All dated incoming letters are in chronological order. Undated and complete or incomplete letters were placed at the conclusion of the dated material. Letters where only the month and/or year were indicated were inserted at the end of the particular month, or year, as appropriate. Dates which were supplied by the project staff are enclosed in brackets. Letters which are obviously torn or in some way altered from their original appearance were microfilmed without any target noting their condition. Targets were utilized to indicate where endorsements were filmed before a letter or enclosures after a document. A number of enclosures and/or endorsements have become separated or are missing from their original letters; this fact has not been noted when it occurs.

Some of the papers have the notation of "Ans" or a check mark, which apparently indicates that a letter was answered. There are also some letters which have a number on them, either in blue or black ink, some of which appear to have been placed there by Furnas. There are drafts or complete letters interspersed throughout the papers some of which the Society has transcribed and these were microfilmed without any explanatory note.

In order to facilitate viewing the documents, only one page of a letter appears on a frame. Thus a four page letter is on four frames. The partial calendar incoming Furnas letters are microfilmed one page per frame; however, the bound volumes of his business, military and Indian Agency affairs were microfilmed two pages per frame. Every exposure, including targets inserted in the correspondence noting the appropriate years, was given a number by the automatic numbering device located in the lower right hand corner of each frame.

The outgoing correspondence on Roll 11 has three small groups of press copy letters. The first group consists of letters marked 1 to 65 which were microfilmed; pages 66 to 201 were blank and not filmed. A bound, indexed, volume of letters numbered from 98 to 495, not all inclusive, was also microfilmed. The roll concludes with unbound press copy letters numbered from 1 to 92.

ROLL NOTES

Roll 1

December 1844-September 1872

The contents of this pertains to the activities of Robert W. Furnas as commander of the First Indian Regiment and of the Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry during the Civil War, his duties as agent of the Omaha Indian Agency, and to Nebraska politics. There are a number of orders and instructions to Furnas regarding troop movements during the war. Correspondence concerning the Indian Agency relates to administrative exchanges between Furnas and the Office of Indian Affairs, various damage claims against the Indians, problems of the acquisition of supplies, and disputes over the subsistence of the Winnebago and Ponca Indians who were tenants on the Agency. John H. Maxon, Joseph Harrison, Julian Metcalf, William E. Hill, John F. Kinney, Augustus Kountz, and J. Sterling Morton write a number of letters to Furnas about the possibility of constructing a railroad line along the eastern boundary of Nebraska. The content changes near the end of the roll to include a number of letters from Phineas W. Hitchcock, Daniel H. Wheeler, George B. Moore, and other prominent Nebraska political figures who discuss the election of 1868, Furnas' nomination as governor in 1872, and early Republican organizational problems in Nebraska.

Roll 2

October 1872-June 1874

This roll relates to the election of Furnas as governor in 1872 and his subsequent term of office. Items of interest during this period include letters congratulating Furnas on becoming governor and correspondence pertaining to state matters such as the imprisonment and extradition of criminals, the formation and organization of new counties, requests from settlers for permission to organize protective militias, and the establishment of immigration societies. In addition there are numerous letters pertaining to patronage sought by Republicans including appointments as registrars of land offices and notaries public. Later the context of the documents reveals Furnas' continued interest in the development of a railroad line in eastern Nebraska and his support and activity in state, national, and international groups engaged in advancing agriculture and horticulture. J. Sterling Morton, David H. Moffat, Benjamin P. Rankin, and John H. Maxon write to Furnas indicating support and concern for Furnas in his libel suit against the *Omaha Herald*.

Roll 3

July 1874-December 1883

This roll consists of documents regarding Furnas' years as Governor of Nebraska and the private interests he pursued upon the expiration of his term. The early part of the roll relates to the administrative duties of the governor, patronage sought by fellow Republicans, legal involvements of the state, and a discussion of the grasshopper invasion of 1874-75. Alvin Saunders, Algernon S. Paddock, Phineas W. Hitchcock, and other

Nebraskans write letters to Presidents Rutherford B. Hayes and James A. Garfield recommending Furnas as Commissioner of Agriculture. Other correspondence pertains to Furnas' work as a commissioner for the Department of Interior and his active involvement in the activities of the State Board of Agriculture, the State Horticultural Society, and the development of the Furnas nursery business.

Roll 4
January 1884-April 1885

This roll contains material which relates to the Worlds Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition held at New Orleans from December 1884 to June 1885. The bulk of the letters pertain to the administrative duties assumed by Furnas as Commissioner for the Nebraska exhibit including the procurement of agricultural products, the erection of an exhibition building, appointment of county commissioners to acquire Nebraska products, and provision for the transportation and maintenance of the exhibits. Additional correspondence concerns state aid for the Exposition and letters of support and interest from Governor James W. Dawes, H. D. Chapman, E. S. Phelps, and Daniel H. Wheeler.

Roll 5
April 1885-September 1887

The context of this roll is a continuation of correspondence pertaining to the New Orleans Exposition of 1884-85. Many people write inquiring about various aspects of the Exposition while others comment favorably on Nebraska's exhibit. The roll consists mostly of business affairs of the Nebraska State Fair, including the printing of fair tickets, the issuing and receipt of complimentary tickets, obtaining reduced transportation fares, the registration of fair entries, and the awarding of premiums. Norman J. Colman and Nathaniel H. Egleston of the United States Department of Agriculture write several letters relating to administrative problems within the Department, to the establishment of a permanent forest in Montana, and to a discussion of the appointment of a western agricultural agent.

Roll 6
October 1887-March 1889

This roll relates to the activities of Furnas as Secretary of the State Board of Agriculture and his administration of the State Fairs of 1887 and 1888. Edward McIntyre and S. M. Barker, fair officials, and other Nebraskans direct their letters to inquiries about provisions for the transportation of exhibits, payment of premiums and awards, issuance of complimentary tickets, selection of judges, and procurement of advertising materials and entertainment for the fairs.

Roll 7

April 1889-December 1891

The bulk of the contents of this roll relates to the administrative activities of Furnas as Secretary of the State Board of Agriculture in arranging Nebraska State Fairs. Correspondence pertains to the procurement of advertising materials, issuance of complimentary tickets, payment of premiums and awards, provisions for transportation of the exhibits and the selection of judges and entertainment for the fairs. Additional correspondence concerns Furnas' role as United States Treasury Expert and his subsequent report to the Bureau of Statistics on the commercial, industrial and mining opportunities in Nebraska. A number of persons write regarding annual reports of the State Board of Agriculture; organization of county agricultural societies; and Nebraska's participation in the Paris Exposition of 1889 and the Edinburgh International Exhibition of 1890.

Roll 8

January 1892-October 1897

The correspondence on this roll pertains to Furnas' activities as Secretary of the State Board of Agriculture as he manages the Nebraska State Fairs from 1892 to 1897. Silas A. Holcomb, John M. Thurston, J. Sterling Morton, and other prominent Nebraskans write to Furnas about such political developments as the election of 1896, a discussion of free silver, and comments on Populism. Additional Correspondence regards Furnas' appointment as Director General of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition of 1898, as Statistical Agent for the United States Department of Agriculture, and as Nebraska's commissioner to the Mexican Exposition of 1898.

Roll 9

November 1897-June 1900

Furnas' activities as Secretary of State Board of Agriculture constitute the major portion of correspondence on this roll. There are a number of letters regarding the cancellation of the Nebraska State Fairs of 1898 and 1899 and Nebraska's participation in the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition and the Greater American Exposition held during those years. J. Sterling Morton, J. B. Dinsmore, and several agricultural associates of Furnas direct their letters to a discussion of Nebraska Populism, comment on the nursery business, and make suggestions for the promotion of particular aspects of Nebraska agriculture, including fairs and experiment stations.

Roll 10

August 1900-September 1906

This roll is continuation of correspondence relating to the work Furnas performed in administering the Nebraska State Fairs. There are also a number of requests for agricultural information, endorsements of individuals to agricultural commissions, and letters from persons throughout Nebraska inquiring into different aspects of agriculture.

Samuel C. Bassett, J. Sterling Morton, Joseph H. Millard, and other persons write to Furnas commenting on a number of contemporary issues including fair business and national and state political developments. There are a small number of letters dating to September 1906, approximately one year beyond Furnas' death, relating to the State Board of Agriculture. Included in this roll are undated letters involving Furnas' term as Governor and his subsequent affairs with the State Board of Agriculture.

Roll 11

February 1845-November 1904

This roll consists of the out-going correspondence of Furnas and relates to his duties as commander of the Second Nebraska Volunteers, as Indian Agent for the Omaha Indians, as Governor of Nebraska, and as Secretary of the State Board of Agriculture. Information regarding Furnas' participation in the Civil War includes reports of troop movements and descriptions of the Indian Regiment he commanded. Letters concerning his position as Indian Agent pertain to his administrative duties such as the acquisition of supplies for the reservation. Correspondence relating to his term as Governor involves the administration of aid to settlers impoverished by the drought and grasshoppers in the early 1870s, the procurement of arms for the protection of settlers, the redemption of public lands and various legal and financial problems which confronted the state. A number of letters concern his interest and promotion of Nebraska agriculture including his administration of the Nebraska State Fair.

Roll 12

May 1849-1882

This roll consists of the following bound volumes: Ledgers of the Furnas and McConnor (1849-53), and Furnas and McComas (1852-55) jewelry businesses, including an undated subscription list of the *Nebraska Advertiser*; Ledger of the Furnas and Langdon printing firm, 1857-61; Journal of Furnas as commander of the Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry, 1863; Journals and Ledgers of Furnas as agent at the Omaha Indian Agency, 1864-66; Ledgers of the Furnas and Rogers Livery Stable, 1867-68; and Ledgers of the Furnas Nursery, 1872-82. The business ledgers contain records of transactions, lists of patrons, values of goods and services, and newspaper subscription lists. The military journal relates the participation of the Second Nebraska on the western military frontier and their subsequent engagement with the Sioux at the Battle of White Stone Hill. Furnas' Indian Agent journals consist of letters pertaining to the administration of the agency. There are also ledgers regarding the trading activity at the Indian Agency with accounts of daily sales and lists of patrons.

Roll 13

1844-1905

The concluding roll of the Furnas Papers is composed of items arranged in the following divisions: Treaties and Reports, 1864-66; Warrants and Deeds, 1855-89; Bills and Speeches, 1856-1901; Agreements and Resolutions, 1857-95; Petitions, 1856-86; and

Miscellaneous, 1844-1905. An editorial note preceding each division presents a more detailed content note. The treaties are between the United States and the tribes of the Omaha Indian Agency. The land warrants and deeds are primarily concerned with the Furnas family. The legislative bills relate in part to the granting of land to railroads in Nebraska while the speeches are in the main political or stress the promotion of Nebraska agriculture. The agreements and resolutions pertain to Brownville business ventures of Furnas. Republican River Valley settlers and other groups and persons send a number of petitions to Furnas requesting aid in combating attacks by Indians, or relief from the grasshoppers. The final division consists of reports and other items of interest relating to Furnas' duties at the Omaha Agency and his subsequent management of the Nebraska State Fair.