
A blizzard can (sometimes) be fun

Have you had enough stories of disaster and social isolation? Here's one that's more lighthearted.
Young people have a different perspective on the hardships of winter. During the legendary winter of 1949, Charlie Wright was sixteen years old and staying at his uncle’s farm northeast of Scottsbluff. Wright went on to become a Scottsbluff attorney and is longtime History Nebraska member. Here he tells the story of that winter, which we’ve illustrated with some 1949 photos from our collection. Keep reading.

Would you live in a library?
Our series of blog posts about restored Carnegie libraries continues with this piece showing how the former library in Neligh has been restored as a home. Keep reading.

The power of parchment

Paper conservator Hilary LeFevere shows how she restored a water- and mold-damaged parchment diploma at History Nebraska’s Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center in Omaha.
First lesson? Parchment is not paper. It’s made from the scraped skins of domesticated animals such as sheep or cows. It’s more resistant to tears and abrasions than paper, but in some ways is more susceptible to the environment. Keep reading.

Law protecting Native graves turns 30

What you do if you learned that a museum held the bones of your ancestors? In the late 1980s Native tribes demanded the return of skeletal remains held in the collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society (aka History Nebraska).

It was a tough battle with emotions running high on both sides. The controversy
centered on the relative value of science and museums versus human rights and religious freedom. It led to a 1990 federal law called the Native America Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). In the years since, History Nebraska’s repatriation program has had an unanticipated and very positive impact on archeological investigation. Keep reading.

How Nebraska vaccinated 300,000 people in one day

This year will see a major campaign to vaccinate people against COVID-19. We’ve done mass immunizations before. In 1962 more than a million Nebraskans drank the Sabin oral polio vaccine part of a highly-publicized campaign involving health officials, volunteers, and news media across the
state.

When the Nebraska campaign kicked off in Omaha on May 27, nearly 85 percent of the city’s population drank the vaccine—the best one-day result of the nationwide campaign thus far.

- Read our 2019 article about the campaign.
- Listen to NET Radio’s recent story, and watch clips of 1962 Omaha TV news coverage.
- If you were there, share your memories on our Facebook page.

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**Evicted and Nebraska’s Housing Stories**

We plan museum exhibits far in advance. A traveling exhibit called *Evicted* is at the Nebraska History Museum (along with *Nebraska Housing Stories*), but the museum is closed due to COVID-19. Sharon Kennedy shows you the exhibit in the video below, and you can also learn more here.
Upcoming events

History Nebraska is back with Homeschool Wednesdays. In our new, virtual format we can take you across the state to visit all our historic sites in addition to the Nebraska History Museum. Tune in for a 40-minute Zoom session at 10:30 am on the first Wednesday of every month. Keep reading.
Complete articles:

https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/blizzard-can-sometimes-be-fun

A Blizzard Can (Sometimes) Be Fun
By Charles E. Wright, Scottsbluff, Nebraska

Editor’s note: Young people have a different perspective on the hardships of winter. During the legendary winter of 1949, Charlie Wright was sixteen years old and staying at his uncle’s farm northeast of Scottsbluff. Wright went on to become a Scottsbluff attorney and is longtime History Nebraska member. We’ve illustrated his story with some photos from our collection.

This is the way it was on Sunday, January 1, 1949. I was a sixteen-year-old junior who lived in Scottsbluff with my parents and a younger sister and brother. A spring-fed stream called Winter Creek ran for about one-half mile through the farm of my uncle, Martin L. Gable (who also served a term on the Game and Parks Commission). His farm was located seven miles northeast of Scottsbluff. Each morning during the holiday season I would run an assortment of thirty-six muskrat traps with my good friend (and trapping partner) Dick Mead. A prime muskrat pelt would bring two and a half to three dollars from the local hide and fur dealer, and we usually came up with two or three prime pelts each morning. With traps costing fifty cents and gasoline costing twenty cents a gallon, our profit margin was good. Out at dawn, it took about thirty minutes to run, move and reset the traps, and another hour or so to skin the muskrats and stretch their pelt over a shingle to dry. Muskrat fat had a peculiar odor, and I needed to scrub-up if we ran the traps on a school day. No one really wanted to sit next to me in class and my girl friend made me feel unwanted.

This Sunday morning Dick and I ran the traps on Winter Creek and decided to reset them in some new runs that we found on a small side creek. Dick (who had not been rejected by his girl)
drove back to Scottsbluff while I phoned my parents and told them that Uncle Mart would drive me in to school Monday morning.

My two younger cousins, Marty and Johnny Gable, were good companions, and we planned to hunt rabbits with our .22s in the nearby hills that afternoon. Staying out at the farm was great fun. Aunt Doris would always let us make fudge or molasses taffy if we were hungry—which was all the time.

The morning radio report came out over Denver station KOA. First, Happy Jack Turner would sing “Good morning, good morning, a new day is dawning. A happy, good morning to you!” The weather report followed, predicting a clear day with possibly a little snow. Little did they know what was in store for all of us—they had filled up on that Colorado kool-aid and it had not worn off by Sunday morning.

Aunt Doris taught school in Lyman (a small town about thirty miles west of Scottsbluff which was famous for its Silver Glide Ballroom where the band played each dance tune three times in a row). Uncle Mart would drive her up to Lyman on Sunday afternoons, then return to referee the boys until she returned the following Friday. There was leftover mincemeat pie from Christmas and a half-eaten batch of liebkuchen to hold us until supper.

About two o'clock in the afternoon the wind came up out of the north, and it was spitting snow. By two-thirty it was snowing so hard that you could not see the power pole about twenty feet south of the house. The cousins were playing poker and paid little attention to the storm. About three PM Uncle Mart and Aunt Doris returned. They were unable to make it to Lyman and lacked confidence in our ability to ride out the storm, particularly if we lost the electric power that was necessary to operate the oil furnace. This was okay with us because Uncle Mart could teach us some more poker games—and perhaps give us a little pinch of the Copenhagen snuff that he slipped in between his lip and gum. It continued to snow, and the wind gusted up to one hundred miles per hour throughout the night and the following two days.
After breakfast the next morning Uncle Mart had to walk about one hundred yards to the cow shed to break ice and feed and milk four cows. On the way back to the house, he had to carry...
water and grain to the chicken house that was about twenty-five yards east of the home. The cousins and I bundled up, rigged lines out of binder twine to keep us close together, and went with him. It was difficult to see or even breathe while exposed to the direct force of the wind.

The storm continued for about two-and-a-half days, but our power and telephone lines held. The roads were all snowed shut with ten to fifteen-foot drifts, and the schools shut down for two weeks. We had some bacon, a few lamb chops, and some leftover ham from Christmas. There was plenty of flour and sugar, and almost ten pounds of potatoes, but this would get old and boring in a couple of days.

Located about two miles southwest of Lake Minatare, Winter Creek originates near the northeast corner of the farm. Mart's farmhouse was about one quarter-mile west of it. The creek is full of holes, riffles, and overhanging banks, providing excellent habitat for the rainbow and brown trout that were stocked by the Game Commission. It is full of watercress in the fall, which the ducks loved to eat. The creek flows all year at a temperature of fifty-four degrees. It was surrounded by cornfields at its north end, and we could see large flocks of mallards flying back and forth from the cornfields to the creek. Despite the heavy snow cover, some of the ducks were able to find corn. In some places the wind and snow had created a solid bridge over the running water flowing southwest down the creek. The temperatures hovered around zero after the wind stopped blowing. It was, as they say, “colder than a dead witch’s toe.”

What to do for variety in our diet. Aunt Doris had an idea. The freezer was full of ducks which we had shot in late November and early December. Aunt Doris was a wonderful cook and we all loved roast duck. And so, when we had finished off the ham, bacon and a few lamb shops there was still a good supply of fresh meat. We enjoyed roast duck for just about every noon meal until the county graders were able to plow us out.

As the weather cleared, the ducks continued to fly in and out of Winter Creek. However, there was significant death loss. I don’t know if the birds actually froze to death like the cattle and sheep, or whether they suffocated from the wind-driven snow. A businessman from Scottsbluff named John Cook had built a substantial feedlot at the headwaters of Winter Creek adjoining Uncle Mart’s farm on its northeast corner. The feed lot had no shelter and was enclosed with a four- or five-strand barb wire fence. About one week before Christmas, he brought in fifteen hundred steers from Mexico. They were never “backgrounded” and were not ready for the strong wind and sub-zero temperatures. When the storm subsided there was not a single steer left in the feedlot. They broke out or drifted through the fence and more than seven hundred were never found. However, they all had one thing in common—they were all graveyard dead. Some froze standing up. Others drifted into draws and ditches and piled up like chord wood. It was what one might call “one helluva mess.”

Meanwhile, rescue operations were underway. DC-3 cargo planes with loads of feed, food and fuel would fly over and drop their cargo where needed. If you needed something you would tramp out a letter in the snow. L was for food, F was for fuel, and I think C was for cattle feed. Marty, Johnny and I wanted to spruce up our diet, so we went out and tramped a large L in the snow. Uncle Mart (who could swear with the best of them) had a bad case of glandular
infuriation, approaching apocalyptic status. We rubbed out the L before it was spotted by the rescue planes—so we continued to eat the roast duck and potatoes.

While we had overdosed on mallard ducks, they sure tasted good, and the wild mallard is still my favorite meat. It is even better than steak, boiled okra, or even raw oysters. I hope that Mother Nature and sound conservation efforts by Game and Parks, Ducks Unlimited and Delta Waterfowl will continue to preserve a strong and renewable population of this magnificent bird.

A handwritten note on the back of this photo explains the scene: “150 beef cattle caught in natural death trap, none survived. Driven before the wind, the cattle wandered out on the glassy surface of the lake near Ashby. One by one they fell and were unable to rise. Jan. 2-5, 1949.” The photo was taken February 3 by Frank L. Spencer. History Nebraska RG3139-0-117

While the blizzard killed several hundred thousand head of cattle on the central and northern plains, decimated upland game populations, and caused great misery for everyone, three cousins had a great time of it.
There were some other negative and positive aspects of the great blizzard. The cousins each missed two weeks of school—but we didn’t mind at this stage of adolescence. I learned at least seventy-five different poker games—enough to last me through six years of college and two years of active duty in the Navy. This, in turn, helped me “learn when to hold ’em and learn when to fold ’em.” My share of the profits from trapping muskrats ran to about $40.00.

(01/04/2021)

Read more about the winter of 1948-1949 in this special issue of Nebraska History Magazine (PDF).

https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/neligh-carnegie-library-saved-and-becomes-home

Neligh Carnegie Library Saved and Becomes a Home

Andrew Carnegie

It’s hard to imagine a world without free access to the unlimited knowledge offered by public libraries. But at the beginning of the twentieth century, this was not the reality but rather an audacious dream of the steel tycoon turned philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie. Before Carnegie started his grant program to build libraries all
across the United States, easy access to books was largely restricted to those with enough money for a private collection or access to subscription services. People in different towns from all across Nebraska saw free access to books as an opportunity to make a lasting impact in their communities, so they set to work applying for grants to build Carnegie libraries. Of the 1,689 public libraries in the United States, 69 were in Nebraska. Towns who applied were responsible for providing the land, purchasing all of the books, and providing salaries for librarians. Women, especially ladies’ clubs, were often the driving force behind raising the necessary funds to match Carnegie’s grant. They found creative ways to raise money through events like box socials (box lunches would be auctioned off) to bring the whole community together.

History Nebraska has been working hard to get as many of these Carnegies listed on the National Register as possible. Today these buildings are not always suitable for continued use as libraries, but that does not mean that these treasures should be torn down. As we have traveled the state to see old Carnegies, we have been impressed by the creative new uses that communities have found for these buildings. It was a community-effort this construct these buildings, and it oftentimes takes a community-effort to save them.
Downtown Neligh is experiencing a revival—old buildings in a state of disrepair are fixed-up, and small businesses move in. Heidi Rethmeier’s unusual home is right in the thick of all of this renewed energy and focus. When she purchased the old Carnegie building, there was very little interest in the building. Several small businesses had tried to use it but ultimately ran into too many issues with ADA Compliance. Fortunately, the building captured Rethmeier’s imagination, and she saw the potential for a unique residential home.

Rethmeier documented her experience transforming the old library into a home in her blog at oldnelighlibrary.blogspot.com. She describes herself as “very passionate about repurposing something that was once loved and well crafted” and the
experience of working on the building as “extremely gratifying and therapeutic.” Rethmeier sought a balance between maintaining the building's integrity and making sure that it was a livable space for her family.

The interior of Rethmeier's home.

The great care that Rethmeier put into rehabilitating this building has paid off. She now has a beautiful home with original oak flooring and woodwork. Some of her home's favorite features are the massive windows, the cozy fireplace, open floorplan, and the 14-foot ceilings. The words “Public Library” is still etched in stone above the front door, so she occasionally has folks stop by in hopes of finding a book. Rethmeier doesn’t mind, and playfully adds that her “80-pound lab tends to startle them.”

For Rethmeier, fixing up an old Carnegie not only gave her family a new place to call “home”; it was also a creative way to invest in her community. Downtown
revitalization can be sparked by the initiative of a person taking an interest in an old building. Believing in the possibilities of reusing old buildings shows respect for a community’s past and a belief in its future.

To learn more about the National Register of Historic Places and how you can start the process for a building or district in your community, click here or email David Calease at david.calease@nebraska.gov.

https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/power-parchment

The Power of Parchment

It’s easy to take paper for granted. We use it for everything: writing, printing, books, receipts, packaging, money, even for cleaning. We throw it away without a second thought. But what did people use before paper? Paper as we know it wasn’t even invented until the second century CE. Before that, people used different materials for writing such as clay tablets, papyrus, and parchment which is our topic today.

Parchment is a sheet material that is made from the scraped skins of domesticated animals such as sheep or cows. Paper is made from plant materials. Often it can be difficult to tell the two apart, especially with modern, coated papers that actually feel like parchment and have misleading names like “parchment paper” or “vellum paper.” When it comes to conservation, parchment is usually treated by a paper conservator because paper and parchment share common issues like tears, surface dirt, and distortions. However, it is important to remember that true parchment is not paper. Some treatments that are appropriate for paper, such as washing, could be destructive to parchment.
This is a photo of the back side of a parchment diploma before treatment. The diploma was exposed to moisture which caused it to cockle. Mold also began growing in the lower half, causing staining and weakening resulting in the loss of the lower right corner.

Parchment is usually very strong and durable. It is more resistant to abrasions and tearing than paper. It is, however, highly susceptible to the environment. Parchment is hygroscopic, which means it attracts water. This makes it “dimensionally unstable,” causing it to expand and contract in relation to the temperature or relative humidity around it. This usually leads to distortions, which can look like ripples or undulations in the parchment. This can disturb the media on the parchment and cause flaking. High humidity can also lead to mold growth. Besides the cosmetic problems of staining, mold can break down the collagen structure of the parchment making it weaker.
The parchment was placed in a humidification chamber to carefully increase the humidity and allow the parchment to relax before it was stretched and dried.

How is parchment treated? Much like paper, it can be mended. In some cases, it can be mended with paper, but usually a tear or hole would be mended with another animal protein such as Goldbeater's skin which is made from cow intestine. Fish skin membrane, made from the swim bladder of certain fish can also be used.

Distortions are the most common conservation issues with parchment. They can be helped with careful humidification and flattening under weight or through tension drying. Like paper, once the parchment is humidified, it relaxes and will retain the shape in which it is dried. Drying parchment between sheets of blotter under glass with weights on top can be effective for thinner parchments. The blotter absorbs the moisture and the glass distributes the weight evenly.
With particularly challenging treatments, we sometimes have to call in reinforcements. This time paper conservator Hilary LeFevere was able to get the help of retired paper conservator Dr. Sheila Fairbrass Siegler to assist with putting the diploma under tension to dry.

Tension drying requires that the parchment is pulled tightly so the tension across the surface is evenly applied. This done using clamps or clips and pins. In order to get even tension, it usually requires at least two people to gently stretch the parchment on opposite sides. Each person then clamps the edge at the center and pins it to the foam underneath. Then they do the same on the perpendicular sides. From the center, they work their way out to the corners so the tension is as even as possible. The foam support allows the pins and clamps to give slightly as the parchment contracts as it dries. It is a delicate process as the parchment is more vulnerable when it is humidified and can tear if the tension is too strong. But once the tension is applied well, it is very affective in improving the appearance and surface quality of the parchment.
When using clips to hold parchment under tension, it’s important to cushion each of the clips so they don’t leave impressions in the parchment once it is dried. Each clip has foam and blotter on either side to distribute the pressure at each tension point.

Once flattened, the parchment is usually hinged onto a piece of mat board with many small paper hinges all the way around. These hinges will hold the parchment in place with even tension, but will also give slightly as needed as both the paper and the parchment respond to environmental factors.
After drying, the diploma is significantly flatter. Some areas had been damaged and hardened from previous exposure to water, and therefore the parchment couldn’t be completely flattened. But now the diploma is more stable, legible, and able to be safely matted and framed.

Our staff is ready to assist you with your conservation needs. Contact our conservators at 402-595-1180 or email hn.fordcenter@nebraska.gov.

https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/native-american-graves-protection-and-repatriation-act-turns-30-year-history-nebraska%20%E2%80%999s
The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act Turns 30 this Year: History Nebraska’s Repatriation Program

In the late 1980s, after learning that the Nebraska State Historical Society (now History Nebraska) held the skeletal remains of nearly 1500 ancestors, Native American tribes successfully pushed for the passage of the Nebraska Unmarked Human Burial Sites and Skeletal Remains Protection Act. It was a tough battle with emotions running high on both sides. The controversy centered on the relative value of science and museums versus human rights and religious freedom. The debate was also brewing in other states and eventually the Native American community took the fight to the national level. In 1990, Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act or NAGPRA (Echo-Hawk and Echo-Hawk 1994; McKeown 2013).

These type of laws required History Nebraska and hundreds of other institutions across the nation to complete detailed inventories of human skeletal remains, mortuary offerings, and sacred objects and then consult with descendant tribes regarding repatriation. Through this process, by 1999, nearly 700 sets of skeletal remains and associated mortuary offerings in History Nebraska’s possession had been returned to tribes. The majority of these remains went to the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma and related tribes. Much of History Nebraska’s early archeological investigations focused attention on the Pawnee and their ancestors. Other tribally identified remains were returned to the Oto-Missouria, Ioway, and Kansa during this period. The Ponca and Cheyenne also received ancestral remains in recent years. Identifying which remains should go to what tribes is challenging and has involved close consideration of burial location, burial type, archival records, skeletal characteristics, associated artifacts, photographs, field records, and oral traditions.
By the early 2000s, History Nebraska still retained about 650 sets of Native American remains that could not be associated with a particular tribe. During the period 2017-2020, staff worked closely with the Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs and the NAGPRA office staff in Washington DC and held several consultation meetings with many tribes. In the end, a solution was reached to jointly repatriate these ancestors to a consortium of 37 tribes including all groups that had any known history of living in what today is Nebraska. On behalf of the tribal consortium, the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska and the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma agreed to take responsibility for reburying the remains. That process will conclude in the spring of 2021. This 30-year program resulted in the repatriation of over 1400 Native American skeletons and nearly 50,000 funerary objects including ceramic vessels, stone tools, weapons, animal skeletons, and ornaments.

Inevitably, each year, disinterred human remains are discovered through natural processes of erosion or during construction. History Nebraska is the key agency assigned by law to determine who the remains belong to and return them through the NAGPRA process. If remains are non-Native American, they will be returned to the descendant family if the individual can be determined. More often though,
identity is not possible and then the remains are reburied in a cemetery in the county they were discovered in.

Members of the Cheyenne-Arapahoe tribe from the Lame Deer, Montana area during a prayer ceremony upon return of ancestors discovered in the Fort Robinson, Nebraska area.
A small mid-19th century Omaha Tribe cemetery (to the left of the vehicle) discovered during highway widening. The remains were moved to a nearby location away from the construction zone.
History Nebraska’s repatriation program has had an unanticipated and very positive impact on archeological investigation. Before the 1980s, the relationship between archeologists and Native people was not poor; it was non-existent. Through skeletal remains consultation programs, lasting professional relationships have formed between archeologists, museum professionals and tribal representatives that extend far beyond returning ancestors (Killion 2010). Blending archeological research with Native oral traditions has led to vital understanding of the past from a broader and richer perspective. We have found that all sides of what began as controversy and lawsuits now have common ground in striving for a deeper and more meaningful view of the deep past.

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