It's Monday, February 1, 2021. In today's issue: Museum reopens; Black porters; Our five capitols; "If it's valuable to you, it's valuable to us"; Snow!; #1 country albums; Car of the future; First woman in the legislature; Virtual homeschool.

Nebraska History Museum reopens Feb. 2

The Nebraska History Museum at 15th and P streets in downtown Lincoln reopens tomorrow. Make plans to visit soon, because the clock is ticking on our newest exhibit!
*Evicted* tells the national story of housing and the ongoing eviction crisis. It has proved to be a lot timelier than what we anticipated when we scheduled it before the pandemic. But our recent Covid closure means you don’t have much time to see it. The traveling portion of the exhibit **closes February 27**.

But our portion of the exhibit, *Nebraska’s Housing Stories*, will remain. Watch the [video](#) above for a preview, or read the [Lincoln Journal Star’s review](#).

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**The Black doorman at Grand Island’s Hotel Yancey**

When it opened in 1923, the Yancey was the height of luxurious lodging in Grand Island – big city amenities in a small but rapidly growing city.

This postcard shows us the kind of amenities that higher-end travelers expected in the mid-20th century. But why did hotels and Pullman cars make a point of employing Black porters? [Keep reading](#).
Nebraska’s Five Capitols

Our state capitol is one of the nation’s most recognizable, but did you know it’s the third capitol built on that spot, and the fifth to serve as Nebraska’s seat of government?

In its early years, Nebraska built a series of capitols that were either too small or poorly constructed. And one of them had a dirt-floor basement that members of the legislature used as a latrine.

For photos and stories about each one, keep reading.

The Ford Conservation Center is here to help
We’ve posted a lot of photos over the years showing the amazing work of History Nebraska’s Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center—treatments of damaged paintings, artifacts, and documents. They work with many valuable objects from museums, including the Nebraska History Museum.

But that’s not all they do.

Ford Center conservators are happy to work on family heirlooms and items that don’t necessarily have great monetary value or historical significance beyond your family. “If it is valuable to you, it is valuable to us.” To learn more about what they can do, keep reading.

Snow!
Click the photo to roll back time at 13th and O Street in downtown Lincoln.

HN's Rusty Dawkins took this photo on January 26, 2021, the day after 14.5" of snow fell on the city. It matches a view of the Miller and Paine department store after a snowstorm in the early 1900s.
We hope you didn’t get stuck like this streetcar on Lincoln’s Sheridan Boulevard in 1910. Read more on Facebook.
And from Holt County in 1949: “Mrs. H.R. Holcomb carried her scoop shovel with her everywhere she went while doing chores, and always brought it in the house at night.” Read more on Facebook.
When Nebraskans ruled the country albums chart for three straight months

Born in Spalding in 1933, Thomas Paul Glaser was a Nebraska farm boy who made it as a country solo artist. His biggest hit (included on this album) was his 1975 version of Shel Silverstein’s tongue-in-cheek “Put Another Log on the Fire (The Male Chauvinist National Anthem).”
The album shown here knocked another Nebraskan’s album from the top of the country charts in January 1976. Do you know who it was?

When busses were “the car of the future”

We were intrigued by this 1928 photo of the Hotel Norfolk. The building is a local landmark and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, but to be honest we were looking at the busses. The one in front served an intercity route connecting O’Neill, Neligh, Norfolk. When did intercity busses become a thing?

“Motor busses” began to draw the attention of Nebraska newspapers in the early 1900s, and not everyone was a fan. Keep reading.

Pioneering legislator Mabel Gillespie
She boasted that “the voters of Sarpy County know that any woman who sold 42 dozen eggs to buy a new grate for her kitchen, as I did, will not introduce high tax laws.”

Mabel Gudmundsen Gillespie was one of the first women elected to the Nebraska legislature and the first to be re-elected. In 1928 the daughter of Danish immigrants was blacklisted as a public speaker by the Daughters of the American Revolution, and in 1944 she challenged Warren Buffett’s father for a seat in the US House of Representatives. Keep reading.
Virtual Homeschool February 3

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! Learn more.

History Nebraska Newsletter, David Bristow, Editor, history.nebraska.gov
Want to change how you receive these emails? You can update your preferences or unsubscribe from this list.
The Black doorman at Grand Island’s Hotel Yancey

By David L. Bristow, Editor

This 1940 postcard tells multiple stories about Grand Island and mid-20th century America. The building itself remains a local landmark, while the postcard tells us about travel, small-town ambitions, and racial views.
Grand Island was a small but rapidly growing city in the 1910s, though it was only a fraction of its current size. It grew from 10,300 residents in 1910 to nearly 14,000 in 1920.

The “Hotel Yancey,” as it styled itself, was Grand Island's premier hotel for many years. Construction began in 1917, during the height of the passenger rail era. Auto travel was in its infancy, and Grand Island was located along both the Union Pacific Railroad and the new Lincoln Highway.

Plans called for a 150-room, 11-story hotel featuring the latest in high-rise architecture. It was to be part of a chain of first-class hotels operated by the North American Hotel Co. (North Platte’s Pawnee Hotel was also part of the project.)

The building began to rise above downtown Grand Island—and then stopped abruptly in 1918 due to financial difficulties and World War I shortages of labor and materials. The building stood as an embarrassing half-finished skeleton for five years before new investors took over.

When it opened in 1923, the Hotel Yancey featured amenities such as a ballroom, party and banquet rooms, public bath house, pharmacy, coffee shop, cigar shop, barber shop, billiard room, laundry, and other amenities. Its restaurant offered truffles, caviar, and calf brains, and hotel guests were greeted by doormen and bellhops. This was how to travel in style. One didn’t have to forgo big-city amenities even in the heart of Nebraska.

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And that was the point of picturing the Black doorman with a “Yes, sir” word balloon. It showed that this was a classy place.

By why were Black doormen and bellhops a thing?

The idea that it was fine thing to be waited upon by African Americans went back to slavery, of course, but post-Civil War history is also important. When George Pullman introduced his luxurious sleeper cars for railroads, he hired formerly enslaved people to staff them. Partly this was to reduce labor costs—because people will work cheap when they have few other employment options besides field labor—and partly it was because having a Black house servant was already an icon of American wealth. Pullman wanted to give passengers the experience of being treated like plantation aristocracy.

Pullman’s scheme was so successful that Pullman porters were exclusively Black into the 1960s, and high-class hotels and other establishments followed suit. The uniformed, smiling, unfailingly polite and obliging Black porter, doorman, or chauffer, became a luxury item for White people during the worst years of racial segregation.

This is one of the ironies of “segregation.” It was never about keeping people separate. As the smiling doorman illustrates, African Americans were welcome to be
in close contact with White people in railcars and hotels, as long as they were present in servile roles. Segregation banned proximity only under circumstances that implied equality.

And yes, Nebraska was segregated. Not as blatantly or completely as southern states, but housing and employment discrimination were rampant, and many businesses violated state anti-discrimination laws with impunity. There is no reason to think that the Yancey would have welcomed African American travelers any more than Omaha's Hotel Fontenelle did at that time. (Some years ago, Omaha musician and bandleader Preston Love Sr. told me that traveling Black orchestras had to stay in Black-owned boarding houses because they were not allowed in Omaha hotels—even famous artists such as Count Basie. The only exceptions Love could recall were Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, though Love recalled Ellington having to take his meals in his room while staying at the Fontenelle.)

While the Nebraska section of the 1940 Negro Motorist Green Book may not be comprehensive, it's telling that the listing of Black-friendly lodging fills less than a page, and includes no Grand Island entries.

All that said, the story of the Black doorman is also an example of African Americans making the most of an unjust situation. Because of employment discrimination, jobs as Pullman porters or hotel bellhops were among the best available to Black men, and having such a job brought a measure of respect. “They became in many ways the middle-class of the African-American community,” historian Spencer Crew told Smithsonian Magazine.

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The Yancey ushered in Grand Island's “golden age of hotel opulence,” writes Mark Coddington in the Grand Island Independent. The hotel went bankrupt during the Great Depression and was closed from 1931 to 1933 before reopening under new
ownership. As the postcard shows, it had resumed its glory by the time of World War II.

But the golden age began to fade within a few decades. Motor travel siphoned off railway passengers, and new “motor hotels” (soon contracted to “motels”) sprung up on the edge of town. And then Interstate 80 drew motorists away from the city entirely.

The Yancey closed in 1982. Today the building at 123 N. Locust holds offices and condominiums. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985. Until a few years ago, it remained the tallest building in Grand Island.

(Photos: History Nebraska RG3451-3-149; RG3451-3-15)

(Posted 2/1/2021)

Sources:


Categories: Grand Island; travel; African Americans
Nebraska’s Five Capitols

By David L. Bristow, Editor

Our state capitol is one of the nation’s most recognizable, but did you know it’s the third capitol built on that spot, and the fifth to serve as Nebraska’s seat of government?

Nebraska’s first territorial capitol was built in Omaha by the Council Bluffs and Nebraska Ferry Company. It was Omaha’s first brick building and stood on Ninth Street between Farnam and Douglas.

“The building is a neat and substantial one, but altogether too small for the purpose intended,” said the *Nebraska Palladium* (Bellevue) after the first legislative session opened in January 1855. The front door opened into a hallway, with the House of Representatives chamber on the left and the governors’ apartment on the right. A
winding staircase led upstairs to the Council chamber (equivalent to a Senate) and committee rooms. A real estate agent would call it “cozy.”

The first territorial capitol in Omaha, 1855. History Nebraska RG1234-2-10

In 1858 the legislature moved to a larger, partly finished building on the present site of Omaha Central High School. The new building began falling apart immediately. A year later it had to be repaired to keep a wall from collapsing.

And with no "privy" on the grounds, members of legislature relieved themselves in the dirt-floored basement. In this photo the capitol would have been drafty and chilly, but at least it didn't stink as much in cold weather.
Omaha newspapers ridiculed the state government’s move to the tiny village of Lincoln. “Nobody will ever go to Lincoln, who does not go to the Legislature, the lunatic asylum, the penitentiary, or some of the State institutions,” said one paper. Lincoln “is destined for isolation and ultimate oblivion,” said another.

Governor David Butler feared that unless a new building was ready to receive the state legislature in January 1869, Omaha would find a way to remain the capital city.

The new capitol was ready in time, but it was a rush job and its inferior stone soon began to crumble.
The third capitol was completed in Lincoln in 1868. History Nebraska RG1234-3-1

The fourth capitol was built on the site of the third. It was bigger but not much better. Completed in 1888, it soon settled and cracked. It was in poor shape by the early twentieth century.

By the 1920s Nebraska was planning its fifth capitol in less than seventy years. Here you can see the present capitol rising around its predecessor. This was done to keep the old building open until part of the new one was complete.
You might think the legislature would play it safe and try for a plain but competently-constructed building. Instead they commissioned an unusual, modern design. They spent ten years having it built, paying for it as they went. Our present capitol was completed in 1932—an enduring landmark at last.
The fourth capitol was demolished before the present tower was built. Here, the tower nears completion in July 1929. History Nebraska RG1234-40-18

(Photo at top of page: building the tower in 1928. History Nebraska RG1234-40-6)

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Posted 2/1/2021. This article was first published in the January-February 2020 issue of NEBRASKAland Magazine.

Sources:

James C. Olson, J. Sterling Morton (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1942), 81-82. (Regarding the poor condition of second territorial capitol.)

“Previous Capitols,” Nebraska State Capitol, https://capitol.nebraska.gov/building/history/nebraska-capitols/

https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/ford-conservation-center-here-help

The Ford Conservation Center: Here to Help

It's a new year and a good time to remind our blog readers of what we do at the Ford Center. The Ford Conservation Center is the conservation division of History Nebraska. We not only care for and treat the state’s collections, but we also act as a regional lab, taking in work from institutions and private clients in the region.
The Ford Center is in the Hanscom Park Neighborhood in Omaha.

We are named for former President Gerald R. Ford, as our building is adjacent to the Gerald Ford Birth Site at 32nd and Woolworth in Omaha, Nebraska. The house where Ford was born was located on the corner of what is now a small park, but burned down in the 1970s. James Paxson, a local businessperson, bought the land after Ford became president and gave part of the land to the city for the Ford Birth Site, and the other lot to the State of Nebraska for what is now the Ford Conservation Center.
Objects Conservator, Rebecca Cashman, makes repairs to the damaged leather of an office chair.

It is a common misconception that we only treat objects owned by Gerald Ford or that we only work with museums, or with very valuable works of art. Quite the contrary! While we have worked on many items that belonged to former presidents, we have yet to treat anything owned by President Ford. And items do
not need to have any particular monetary value or historical significance for our staff to treat it. **If it is valuable to you, it is valuable to us.**

*Hilary LeFevere, the Paper Conservator, examines a document under a microscope.*

So what do we treat? We have a Paper Lab, a Paintings Lab, and an Objects Lab. The Paper lab treats anything on paper: paper-based photographs, books, documents, drawings, prints, maps, etc. The Paintings Lab treats paintings on canvas or board, as well as murals or theatre curtains and backdrops. The Objects Lab treats almost everything else. Objects cover items made of wood, glass, metal, stone, plaster, ceramic, plastics, and other modern materials. If you have a textile that needs treatment, contact us and we can determine if we can help. Sometimes we are able to treat the textile, and if not, we can direct you to a textile conservator who can.
Kenneth Bé, the Paintings Conservator, begins to inpaint a loss on a portrait that has been filled.

We also have collections care guides on our website that can help you care for your own items. If you need help storing heirlooms or hanging artwork or want to know how to properly polish your silver, there is a guide for you.

If you have questions or would like to make an appointment, contact us any time via our contact form on our website, call us at 402-595-1180, or email hn.fordcenter@nebraska.gov to set up an appointment. We are here to help!

Categories:
Ford Conservation Center

https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/when-nebraskans-ruled-country-albums-chart-three-straight-months
When Nebraskans ruled the country albums chart for three straight months

By David L. Bristow, Editor

January 12, 2021

Country music’s first million-selling album was released 45 years ago today, January 12, 1976. *Wanted! The Outlaws* is a compilation of previously-released tracks by four artists associated with country’s Outlaw movement: Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Jessi Colter, and Tompall Glaser.
Born in Spalding in 1933, Thomas Paul Glaser was a Nebraska farm boy who made it as a country solo artist. His biggest hit (included on this album) was his 1975 version of Shel Silverstein’s tongue-in-cheek “Put Another Log on the Fire (The Male Chauvinist National Anthem).”

Outlaw Country broke away from the traditional Nashville sound by incorporating honky-tonk and rockabilly influences. Glaser played an important role not only as an artist, but also by founding an independent recording studio in Nashville that became known as “Hillbilly Central.” He died in 2013.
Glaser wasn’t the only Nebraskan in country music in the 1970s. When *Wanted: The Outlaws* hit number one in February 1976, it knocked another Nebraskan’s album from the top of the country charts.

Bill Fries was a creative director for an Omaha ad agency. In 1973 he created a hugely successful TV ad campaign for Old Home Bread featuring a fictional truck driver named C. W. McCall. Songs from the commercials led to the recording of full albums and hit songs featuring the deep-voiced Fries as McCall. Fries co-wrote the songs with fellow Omahan Chip Davis, who at the time was also recording his earliest classically inspired Mannheim Steamroller “Fresh Aire” albums.

If that seems like the least-likely partnership in country music history, it gets even weirder, at least for anyone who doesn’t remember the 1970s. McCall’s biggest hit—and the song that propelled his 1975 album *Black Bear Road* to the top of the charts—was “Convoy,” a mostly spoken-word song narrated by a truck driver telling his story in CB radio slang. “Convoy” was full of references to “Smokeys” (highway patrol), “chicken coops” (weigh stations) and “putting the hammer down” (speeding; flooring the gas pedal). The song was so popular that it inspired a motion picture starring country star Kris Kristofferson.

Propelled by “Convoy,” *Black Bear Road* spent nine weeks atop the Billboard Country Albums chart before *Wanted: The Outlaws* began its six-week run. Granted that Texans Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson were the biggest stars on the latter album, it’s still fair to boast that Nebraska artists ruled the country albums chart for more than three straight months.
https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/when-busses-were-%E2%80%9C-car-future%E2%80%9D

When busses were “the car of the future”
Above, Intercity motorbuses come and go from Norfolk’s Union Bus Depot in 1928. The one in front is an intercity coach built by Flxible, an Ohio manufacturer for buses, hearses, and ambulances for much of the twentieth century. This one served a route connecting O’Neill, Neligh, Norfolk, and Omaha along US 275.

The first “omnibuses” of the 1800s were horse-drawn. “Motor buses” began to draw the attention of Nebraska newspapers in the early 1900s, starting with reports of the new machines in London that were “huge, heavy, emitting much smoke, churning the streets into mud and splashing walls and pedestrians with it when not throwing clouds of dust with their broad, heavy wheels.”

Buses spread to American cities, usually against legal opposition from electric streetcar companies. In 1915 a Norfolk auto dealer put into service “four especially constructed six-passenger pay-as-you-enter motor street cars.”

By the mid-1920s, improved roads allowed the rapid growth of intercity bus service. The “motor coach,” as long-distance buses were called, was the “car of the future” according to an article reprinted in the Nebraska State Journal of April 26, 1925, and attempts by railroads or “aristocratic communities” to stop the growth of motor coach travel “is like trying to sweep back the ocean with a broom.”

Here is a Google Street View from the same location today, on 4th St. looking south to Norfolk Ave. The former Hotel Norfolk is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
(Top photo: History Nebraska RG3267-1-41)

(Posted 1/26/2021)

https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/mabel-gillespie-first-re-elected-woman-legislature
Mabel Gillespie: First Re-elected Woman in Legislature
Mabel Gillespie was one of the first women elected to the Nebraska legislature, and the first to be re-elected, serving five consecutive terms from 1925 to 1935. How did she do it?

A daughter of Danish immigrants, Gillespie was born in Ord. Desiring a different career than most women, she left the Teachers College in Kearney to work for the Omaha Bee, becoming their first female reporter on a regular news beat.

Elected to the legislature in 1924, Gillespie was Nebraska’s first farmer’s wife in the legislature and one of the first three women. Of the three, Gillespie was the only Democrat. From the beginning, she thought that the state suffered from too much legislation. She later stated that “real reforms come slowly; hysterical and radical reforms are useless.”

During her second term, she was the only woman returning to the legislature. Asked if she believed that men preferred voting other men into office, she replied, “The consideration is not of sex at all, but of efficiency and honest purpose while in office.” (She had already demonstrated this in the November 1926 election when she defeated a man who had previously served in the legislature.) Gillespie said that being a good legislator requires “loving” your peers, men or women, because together you can sink or you can swim.

On another occasion, Gillespie was asked if she ever felt lonely as the legislature’s only woman. She replied that she wore the same dress to each of the three occasions “the oath of legislature had been administered.” Gillespie doubted that any male had noticed, but said that if a female had been present, she would have noticed.

In office, Gillespie was a member of the agriculture and miscellaneous committees. Most of her constituents were farmers. She boasted that “the voters of Sarpy County know that any woman who sold 42 dozen eggs to buy a new grate for her
kitchen, as I did, will not introduce high tax laws.” Among her goals was to “suppress the food laws” and “vote against extravagant expenditures.” Gillespie’s farming background helped her understand voters in her district, and it was said that her 4,000 constituents voted for her out of faith in her honesty.

One of Gillespie’s early legislative bills was one to improve at least one road leading to and from each state-funded bridge. This was at a time when rural Nebraska had mostly unimproved dirt roads. After this measure, she did little in taking direct action. It was said that she seldom took the floor, “but when she [did], she [delivered] a short and snappy argument.”

Gillespie drew criticism in 1929 when she was re-elected for a third term but initially declined to accept her seat in hopes of being appointed to the state’s Board of Control (a position that would’ve paid $4,000 annually). But state law prohibited persons elected to the legislature from receiving appointments, so a week after the legislative session began, Gillespie accepted her legislative seat. Newspapers said her actions set a bad example that no one, woman or man, should follow.

This wasn’t the first time Gillespie received negative attention. In an earlier campaign, some praised Gillespie’s opponent, Millie Meredith, for her “satisfactory” answer to questions, while disapproving of Gillespie as “wet of record” (meaning that she opposed Prohibition). In 1928, the Nebraska State Journal reported that Gillespie had been “blacklisted” as a public speaker by the Daughters of the American Revolution. The DAR’s nationwide list labeled various individuals as “communist,” “feminist,” or “socialist.” Gillespie was labeled not as socialist, but as “socialistic.” Other Nebraska natives on the list included social reformer Grace Abbott (listed as an “internationalist, feminist, socialistic”) and Harvard Law School Dean Roscoe Pound (“socialist”).

In 1930 a newspaper noted that Gillespie had yet to give a speech from the floor of the legislature. The report praised her for this, saying “sessions would be shorter and accomplish more good if 99 other representatives would follow her oratorical example.”
In February 1932, Gillespie spoke up after Governor Charles Bryan mentioned holding a legislative session to address land re-evaluations. At the time, property values were assessed every four years. Land values had fallen by as much as half, but property owners were still being taxed based on the higher, pre-Great Depression value. Gillespie expressed frustration that she had earlier introduced a bill to re-assess land every two years, long before Bryan expressed interest in the matter.

Though she was not known for speeches in the legislature, in early 1935 Gillespie did a weekly series of political radio broadcasts on Omaha’s WOW station. A month later, in March 1935, before the expiration of her final term in office, she introduced a bill to pay the tuition of soldiers’ and sailors’ children provided by the Temporary School Fund.

Gillespie spent ten years in the state legislature, and in 1944 ran for the US House of Representatives in Nebraska’s Second Congressional District. She defeated Andy Jensen for the Democratic nomination, receiving 5,174 votes to his 4,983. (He requested a recount, but still lost.) Gillespie became the first Nebraska woman to win a Congressional primary. She lost the general election to Republican incumbent Howard Buffett (father of investor Warren Buffett). Her final statement on the election’s outcome was to quote former President Woodrow Wilson: “Only I have failed, my cause has not.”

As a young journalist, Mabel Gillespie had wanted “no soft-cushioned chair in the society department. She wanted nothing to do with assignments that ordinarily would appeal to a woman. She wanted newspaper work as it is done by men and she got it.” As a politician, she set out to make a difference and go beyond the norms: a lady working in a historically man’s field. Her ideas and the support of her constituents won her five consecutive terms in the state legislature, even though she remained quiet during most of her time in office. Though in her silence, she represented that actions can speak louder than words, and that sometimes, less is more.
Photos:

Top: A portrait of Mable Gillespie.

Bottom: One of Gillespie's newspaper ads for her campaign; April 6th, 1944 from The Enterprise newspaper.

(12-1-2020)

Categories:

legislature, women, politics