It's Wednesday, June 1, 2022. In today's issue: Trevor Jones announces resignation; The story behind a newly-acquired Fort Robinson photo; Elvis's last TV performance; Mysteries of a Painting; Chadron and the New Deal; Nebraska's Siouan archeology.

Trevor Jones Resigns as Director and CEO of History Nebraska
History Nebraska has announced that Trevor Jones is resigning from his six-year post as Director and CEO, effective July 1st, 2022.

Under Jones's leadership, History Nebraska has become a leader in curiosity-based learning experiences and increased the organization's outreach and connection across the state. In addition, the agency has digitized millions of records, which has led to more access to History Nebraska's collections worldwide.

“Trevor’s work has transformed the organization, and he will be missed,” said David Levy, President of History Nebraska’s Board of Trustees. “History Nebraska has done great things. The board and I are confident that these successes will continue under new leadership.”

Jones joined the organization in 2016 and, during his tenure, renamed and rebranded the organization from the Nebraska State Historical Society. As History Nebraska, the organization’s budget and staff have grown dramatically, including a 55 percent increase in earned income. History Nebraska has become a recognized national leader in building curiosity into all of its programs, and attendance at all of its sites has grown. Jones particularly emphasized digital engagement, and the organization created over 14 million digital objects in the last two years, leading to an over 150 percent increase in online use of its collections.

In addition, History Nebraska has worked to tell lesser-known Nebraska stories, including the launch of a statewide historical marker equity program, and has established partnerships with diverse community groups statewide.
“I believe we must understand the past to create a better future,” wrote Jones in a letter to staff and board members. “We know that Nebraskans care deeply about history, and it is up to us to put the past into the proper context to that we can move forward together. History Nebraska is a stronger, more engaging, and more relevant organization than ever before, but the need for continued transformation remains. It is my hope that you will continue to strive to become the most engaging and relevant state historical society in the entire nation.”

The History Nebraska Board of Trustees will begin searching for Jones’s successor. It will soon name an interim director to fill the role until a suitable replacement can be found.

For inquiries, please contact David Levy at dlevy@bairdholm.com

“White as Any White Person”: An 1880s Fort Robinson Photograph
A late-1880s photograph provides a unique view of Fort Robinson and tells a story of race in late nineteenth century America. Photo curator Karen Keehr acquired the photo for History Nebraska’s collection and co-authored an article about it in the Winter 2021 issue of *Nebraska History Magazine*. 
What’s so special about this photo? For one, we didn’t have a similar view of this barracks row from such an early period.

What makes the photo even more special is the children who are pictured, and a handwritten inscription on the back. It reads:

“The little girl shown in this view is the daughter of a colored servant girl at this post. The little girl is white as any white person notwithstanding the fact that she has a negro mother.” Keep reading.

Elvis’s last TV performance was filmed in Omaha 45 years ago
Elvis Presley was not in good health when he arrived in Omaha on June 19, 1977, for a concert at the Civic Auditorium. TV cameras recorded the show for a CBS special, and the broadcast included city scenes and interviews with local fans (plus material from another show in Rapid City). By the time the program aired in October, Presley was dead at age 42. This final TV performance has never been rebroadcast and has not been officially released on video. But you can watch it for yourself thanks to fans posting it on YouTube.

Presley’s estate has not released the video because it doesn’t show him at his best. His drug-induced physical decline was obvious and he lacked the passion and energy of his earlier TV performances. But he hadn’t lost his voice, and the concert has its moments.
Read more about the 1977 show, and learn about Elvis’s controversial 1956 Nebraska concerts.

The Mysteries of a Painting

Everyone likes a mystery. The painting in question certainly was. What had caused the white surface? What lay beneath? The painting owners had bought it at an estate auction in western Nebraska. They brought it to History Nebraska’s Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center in Omaha to see if anything could be done.
How Chadron responded to the New Deal

The Great Depression of the 1930s was one of the major turning points in American history. Not only was it our most prolonged economic crisis—combined with one of our most severe droughts—but President Franklin Roosevelt's “New Deal” programs also marked a profound expansion of the role of the federal government in the lives of Americans.

Michael Sandstrom, an award-winning high school history teacher in Chadron,
researched in the impact of the Depression and reaction to the New Deal in Dawes County. His two articles in *Nebraska History* provide an in-depth look at how the crisis played out in northwestern Nebraska, and how local leaders made use of the new programs even as aspects of the New Deal remained controversial.

We’ve posted shorter summaries online. The first part focuses on the early years of the Depression; the second examines the New Deal years.

**Nebraska’s Siouan Archeology**
Nebraska is home to an important archeological record of several Siouan language family tribes from the Midwest. The Omaha, Ponca, Oto, Ioway, and Missouria tribes all have languages from this family. Unlike the nomadic Teton of western Nebraska (who speak Dakota), Nebraska’s Siouan-speaking tribes lived in large, multiyear agricultural villages in eastern part of our present-day state.

Pictured here are some early Siouan (Oneota) ceramic pots found at the Leary site in the southeastern corner of Nebraska. The site is a National Historic Landmark and covers more than 120 acres. These pots are about 600 to 800 years old. Keep reading.
Fort Robinson Photograph: "White as Any White Person"

By Breanna Fanta, Editorial Assistant

A photograph recently added to History Nebraska's collection caught historians' interest. Capturing a street view of the officers' barracks at Fort Robinson during the late-1800s, the image is unusual for several reasons, but the group of Black and White children pictured are particularly significant.

“The little girl shown in this view is the daughter of a colored servant girl at this post. The little girl is white as any white person notwithstanding the fact that she has a negro mother,” reads the inscription on the back – a reflection of the period’s racism.
This distinction of race followed the “one-drop rule,” meaning that any Black ancestry or “blood” present in someone’s lineage could define them as Black.

Karen Keehr, David L. Bristow, and Ben Kruse explored this in “‘White as any White Person’: an 1880s Fort Robinson Photograph,” featured in the Winter 2021 issue of the Nebraska History Magazine.

The rule was exclusive to American Blacks in the US, and when “Jim Crow” laws expanded to reinforce segregation, the rule became more solidified.

An 1896 US Supreme Court case, Plessy v. Ferguson, referred to the “one-drop rule” when a man was arrested for sitting in a Whites-only railcar. A Louisiana law (1890) established separate railcars for Black and White passengers. When the arrest happened in 1892, the Court described Homer Plessy as “seven-eighths Caucasian and one-eighth African blood” and ruled that the Louisiana law did not violate the Equal Protection clause under the Fourteenth Amendment. The Court invented the concept of “separate but equal” as a legal precedent.

“Legal discrimination against Black people required a legal definition of Blackness,” but opinions varied across the states. In some states, any visible indicator of Black ancestry would classify the individual as Black, but in others, it depended on the prevalence of “blood” in one’s family history.

Mark Twain’s 1894 novel, Pudd’nhead Wilson, ridiculed the “one-drop rule” in a story of two identical babies switched at birth where the White child became a slave and the 1/32 Black child became the master.

In the early 20th century, W.E.B. Du Bois fought this “racial scientism,” arguing that race was more of a social construct than a biologically supported concept. While humans have physical variances, biologists in recent decades have agreed that the concept of race is “too crude to provide useful information” about its expression in genetics.
Unlike Du Bois, however, the writer of the photo inscription accepts the notion of race that was common at that time. The image itself sparked interest because photos of African American dependents at frontier military forts are rare, but its message provided deeper insight about 19th century perceptions of race.

("The photograph's field of view." Graphic by Ben Kruse, History Nebraska)

The entire article can be found in the Winter 2021 edition of the Nebraska History Magazine. Members receive four issues per year.
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"Buffalo Soldiers at Fort Robinson, Nebraska"

Categories:
Fort Robinson, Buffalo Soldiers
Elvis Presley's Last Nebraska Performance

By Breanna Fanta, Editorial Assistant

While Elvis Presley, famed “King of Rock ‘n’ Roll,” didn’t have direct ties to Nebraska, Omaha and Lincoln were the sites for two of his final performances in the summer of 1977. Omaha was selected as the location for a CBS television special, “Elvis Presley Live.” But the suave and formerly scandalous heartthrob lacked his usual
stage presence. When the show was broadcasted after the singer’s death on August 16, it was apparent that the 42-year-old had been in poor health.

Omaha was one of the few cities where Elvis performed that year, and when asked about doing a TV special, Presley and his manager agreed for it to be done in Omaha. CBS paid $1 million to record the show.

On the day of the performance, June 19, network security refused to let any reporters or local photographers take pictures or ask questions pre-performance. With a total of 72 CBS network personnel, The King was “amid extra security.” During the concert, the auditorium was packed and some audience viewing was obstructed by the cameras. The following day, the CBS crew hoped to attend the Lincoln performance, but the Pershing Auditorium manager, Ivan Hoig, refused. Hoig explained that it was too late and they should’ve requested to tape prior to ticket sales. The concert was sold out, but CBS managed to tape from the lobby and from outside. (CBS ended up filming a June 21 concert in Rapid City, SD; portions of both the Omaha and Rapid City shows appeared in the TV special.)

At the beginning of the Omaha show, Presley swaggered on stage wearing his usual charming grin. However, his on-stage behavior was more subdued than usual. Steve Millburg, an Omaha World-Herald review columnist, described Presley’s ill appearance. It was clear that time had taken a toll on The King. His flashy jumpsuit was cut a lot fuller and his dance moves were “reduced mostly to leg twitches and an occasional shake.” He appeared puffy, as though he were retaining fluids. It was the same man and style, but the enthusiasm seemed lost. While singing hits like “Jailhouse Rock,” the once lively and loud rock star’s spirit only appeared in flashes. Initial public reaction only alluded to this and shied away from directly commenting on any of it: letters to the World-Herald simply praised the performance, saying Elvis would “always” or “still” be The King.

After Elvis’s unexpected death in August, Jimmy O’Neill, a former program director and DJ for the KRCB radio, stated that he “[hated] to remember the way [Presley] looked at his last concert in Omaha.” O’Neill explained that it used to be so easy for Elvis, but that day he looked burnt out and tired.
One of Elvis's former bodyguards soon gave interviews detailing the star's drug addiction and its effect on his health. He said that Presley took pills for everyday activities such as waking up, using the restroom, and falling asleep. He would also use or inject himself before performances. “All he [wanted] to do was get himself completely out of his head.”

Captured in the TV lights, there was no disguising Elvis's physical condition. Even so, he was still the man adored by his fans, who still cheered him and his music, enjoying every bit of it regardless of how he looked. For Nebraskans, Elvis Presley's final performances in the state would never be forgotten.

Read about Elvis's first Nebraska performances in 1956.

Photos: 

The Mysteries of a Painting

Everyone likes a mystery. The painting in question certainly was. What had caused the white surface? Could anything be done? What lay beneath? The painting owners had bought it at an estate auction in western Nebraska. The estate had been owned by a man whose grandfather had been an art dealer in Portland, Oregon. The house had been vacant, and a pipe had frozen and burst, damaging the painting. The owners spent $2 on the painting and hoped they had a treasure on their hands. Their daughter lived down the street from the Ford Center, so they brought it here hoping it could be saved and that something beautiful might be underneath the clouded surface.
Kenneth Be, the Ford Center's painting conservator when we received the painting, examined it carefully. The oil painting on canvas had likely been stored sideways and exposed to a blast of freezing water from the burst pipe which had then dripped down the surface. The moisture had caused the varnish to blanch, becoming cloudy and opaque. The original canvas had also become infested with mildew and the paint had wrinkled and flaked. The varnish that hadn't blanched was yellowed from oxidation.
This detail photo shows the small solvent test. By testing the varnish layer, it was clear that it could be removed overall and the painting revealed.

With a few small tests, it was determined that the blanching could be corrected. The varnish was removed. The wrinkled and flaking paint was treated on the heated suction table. The old, mildewed lining was removed because the original canvas had been relined in the past. The painting was lined onto a new canvas and remounted on a new stretcher. A new varnish was applied, and losses to the original paint were filled and retouched.
After treatment, the painting is exposed. The artist’s signature is in the lower right corner. The area of painting that had been damaged by the steam is still slightly lighter than the area that was not damaged.

When the treatment was complete, a beautiful landscape was revealed. The signature reads “E.C. Williams” and could possibly be attributed to Edward Charles Williams, an English landscape painter of the Victorian Era, though that would have to be verified by an expert. As the after-treatment photo shows, some discoloration to the original painting could not be corrected. But overall, what looked like a lost cause has been brought back from the brink and saved from the trash heap.

Categories:
Gerald Ford Conservation Center, conservation
The New Deal in Dawes County

By Breanna Fanta, Editorial Assistant

The Great Depression left Dawes County withering from economic and environmental devastation. Chadron, a once booming city, was suddenly struggling. With the 1932 presidential election underway, residents looked for a sign of hope and put their faith in Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Michael Sandstrom explains the reactions and effects of Roosevelt’s New Deal policies in Dawes County in “The ‘Magic City’: A history of Dawes County and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal” in Nebraska History Magazine’s Winter 2021 issue.

(This is a continuation of a previous article: The Great Depression in Dawes County)

Roosevelt was the first Democratic presidential candidate to carry the traditionally Republican Dawes County. Residents generally received Roosevelt’s proposals well, believing they could stimulate the economy and improve conditions in the county.
In support of the new president’s policies, Chadron residents participated in two local initiatives.

The first was a “Confidence Days” event where merchants offered various bargains for three days in March 1933 in hopes of boosting people’s confidence in local business. Residents then came together in June to beautify the city and its landscapes as part of a national campaign to “renovize” communities.

The positive reactions seemed to lead to further support of other initiatives.

The National Recovery Act (NRA) promoted cooperation between business owners and employees through codes establishing uniform hours, wages, and other work factors.
In August 1933, Chadron began implementing NRA codes in their businesses. Following conflict with some merchants, the county formed a “Chadron NRA Compliance Committee” and held drives for NRA-conforming businesses.

New Deal policies also affected the county’s banking.

As part of a “Bank Holiday” in March 1933, banks nationwide were suspended and only reopened if proven financially stable. This was critical for Chadron, as the town had only had one remaining bank: First National. After only nine days of suspension, Chadron’s bank became one of the first to reopen.

In June, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) was also established. It prevented bank runs by guaranteeing deposits up to $2,500. First National Bank was included in this program, which covered 95% of depositors nationwide.

Another minor but notable boost to the economy was the end of Prohibition. The county previously spent countless hours and resources patrolling liquor violations, but when Congress passed the Beer and Wine Revenue Act on March 23, 1933, Nebraskans quickly responded. Liquor licenses were sold and papers benefitted from various advertisements.

New Deal relief programs helped improved infrastructure and environment, and provided employment.

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) employed and housed young men and their families. Those who enrolled worked on various project efforts such as reforestation and soil erosion prevention.

Dawes County had two CCC locations at Chadron State Park (“Camp Chadron”) and Fort Robinson (“Camp Crawford”).

In under a year, 760 acres of “wild, hill country, overrun with dense underbrush, choking the pine growth” were tamed by CCC laborers.

The camps remained in operation until May 1934 when the Chadron Camp closed and Camp Crawford moved to Halsey. The CCC never returned to Dawes County.
The construction of a FERA Camp (Federal Emergency Relief Administration) was then announced in September 1934. Located south of Chadron on the McDowell Ranch, it would house 200 unemployed men. Despite fears of it becoming a “hobo camp” for “bums, dope fiends and criminals,” the camp lasted until July 1938. The buildings were then moved to Chadron State Park where they were either reassembled or used as lumber.

Three other New Deal programs (CWA, PWA, and the WPA) helped fund relief projects in Dawes County.
The Civil Works Administration (CWA) was one of the first and largest of its time, receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars to purchase materials and take laborers off relief rolls. Operating from September 1933 – March 1934, the CWA helped nearly 1,000 Dawes men find employment that winter. The program ended after it couldn’t afford to fund an improvement project at Fort Robinson.

The Public Works Administration (PWA) provided similar services, funding projects like the construction of a new county courthouse and jail, the beautifying of two local parks, and the construction and renovation of facilities on Chadron State Normal College’s campus.

Unlike the other two programs, the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) focus was on funding street, road, and landscaping projects. WPA employed people to complete several road projects, replace sections of Chadron’s sewer system, and dredge drinking water reservoirs.
Despite how promising these initiatives and programs were, the county's economy suffered from another recession in 1938 and was forced into budget cuts to meet the reduction in taxable assets.

Though Dawes County didn't experience the recovery residents hoped for until World War II, Roosevelt’s New Deal policies helped residents survive the lean years. The series of initiatives stimulated employment, improved infrastructure, preserved landscapes, and boosted community morale. The local effects of federal intervention reflected the New Deal's wider impact on rural Nebraska.
The entire article can be found in the Winter 2021 edition of the Nebraska History Magazine. Members receive four issues per year.

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**Categories:**
Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt, New Deal, Dawes County, Chadron

**Siouan Archeology**

By Breanna Fanta, Editorial Assistant

While Nebraska is known for its rich Pawnee history, the state also has an archeological record of several Siouan speaking tribes. “Siouan” refers to two linguistic families – the “Chiwere” and “Dhegihan” – used by Nebraska tribes such as the Omaha and Ponca (Dhegihan), and the Oto, Ioway, and Missouria (Chiwere).

John R. Bozell explains how archeology provides insight into Nebraska’s Indigenous history in “Archeology of the Siouan-Speaking Tribes in Nebraska,” featured in the Spring 2022 issue of *Nebraska History Magazine.*
The earliest presence of Siouan-speaking Nebraska tribes was in the 1200s, but they retreated east in the 1400s and didn't return for three centuries.

When they made their return in the 1700s, they resided predominantly in the eastern parts of the state, particularly along river valleys. The Omaha and Ponca, once believed to be a single tribe, lived in northeastern Nebraska. The Oto were located around the lower Platte valley area (between what is now Fremont and Plattsmouth) and were eventually joined by the Ioway and Missouria tribes.

Extensive archeological research during the 20th century produced significant records of these tribes' lifestyles, technology, architecture, and social encounters.

Of the many Nebraska sites explored were Leary, Yutan, Ponca Fort, and Big Village.
Leary, located in the southeast, is now a National Historic Landmark. The 120-acre site was once home to hundreds of Siouan ancestors, though the specific occupations are unknown. The strategically located site may have been an exchange center between 800 and 600 years ago. Bison camps discovered nearby likely supplied valuable trade material.

The area was later abandoned in the massive retreat east.

"Early Siouan (Oneota) ceramic pots found at the Leary site."

Named after chief Ietan, the Yutan village in the lower Platte valley was inhabited by the Oto tribe. It was the Oto’s longest standing village, having been built in the 1770s and lasting more than 50 years. History Nebraska’s archeology team studied Yutan during the 1930s and '50s. They uncovered earthlodge floors and deep storage chambers containing assortments of plants, animals, pottery, and tools. European and American trade items were also found among the collection.
The Ponca Fort was constructed along the Missouri River. The large earthlodge village was ringed with a defensive fortification ditch. The impressive defense community served as a notable trade site. Jean-Baptiste Truteau, famed explorer and trapper, traded there in his “Ponca House,” which has since been washed away by the shifting of the Missouri River channel.

Around the time of the Ponca Fort’s existence, the Omahas built their largest and longest lasting community: the Big Village. The earthlodge town was located near Homer and was primarily inhabited from 1775 – 1819 (it was later reoccupied from 1834–1845). It was home to chief Blackbird who facilitated the Omaha’s dominance in local trade and developed the Missouri River fur trade.

These are just a few of the Siouan settlements established across Nebraska. In the 19th century, Bozell writes, “deadly epidemic diseases and a torrent of Euroamerican settlers” as well as pressure from rival tribes caused a dramatic loss of population “and grinding poverty on a dramatic scale. Archeological study... can add much
needed detail to arriving at a sharper understanding of this dramatic and woeful period in Nebraska history.”

The entire article can be found in the Spring 2022 edition of the Nebraska History Magazine. Members receive four issues per year.

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