

A Cow on the Roof and a Bullet in the Head

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Full Citation: James E Potter, “A Cow on the Roof and a Bullet in the Head,” *Nebraska History* 84 (2003): 42-55.

URL:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/sites/history.nebraska.gov/files/doc/publications/NH2003SolButcher.pdf>

Article Summary: Solomon D Butcher’s 1886 photograph of the Sylvester Rawding homestead at West Union, Custer County, Nebraska, has appeared many times. This article delves into more minute details now evident with digital scanning technology. The background of the homesteader, Sylvester Rawding, is also explored.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Sylvester Rawding, Emma Rawding, Bessie Rawding, Harry Rawding, Willie Rawding, Phillip Rawding; John E Carter, Jabez T Ledbetter, George Rawding

Place Names: Sargent, Nebraska; Custer County, Nebraska; Fort Blakely, Mobile, Alabama; Leavenworth National Cemetery, Leavenworth, Kansas

Keywords: “the cow on the roof photograph”; Solomon D Butcher: Photographing the American Dream; National Soldiers’ Home at Leavenworth, Kansas; Burwell Mascot; Butcher Collection; Company A, 135th Illinois Volunteer Infantry; one-hundred-day regiment; Eighth Illinois Volunteer Infantry; National Military Home

Photographs / Images: Sylvester Rawding homestead, West Union, Custer County, Nebraska; Detail showing Sylvester Rawding; Detail showing the cow on the roof; Sylvester Rawding’s headstone in Leavenworth National Cemetery, Leavenworth, Kansas; Digitizing the Sylvester Rawding Homestead Photograph – comparative photographs.

A COW ON THE ROOF AND A BULLET IN THE HEAD?



By James E. Potter

Solomon D. Butcher's 1886 photograph of the Sylvester Rawding homestead at West Union, Custer County, Nebraska, has appeared hundreds of times in books and articles about Great Plains settlement. The stern-visaged Rawding stares directly at the camera, a prominent lump clearly visible above his right eye. His wife, Emma, sits nearby, while the four children (Bessie, Harry, Willie, and Phillip), a dog, and a team of horses form a rank to his left. The family cow stands placidly in the background, seemingly on the roof of the house. A watermelon on the table has been cut, adding a festive note to the otherwise stark scene. Together,

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these elements have made the image, often called "the cow on the roof photograph," a popular icon of homesteading on the sod house frontier.¹

There is more to the photograph, however, than meets the eye. Within the darkened doorway lies information that only now can be revealed through digital technology. And within the historical record lies an even more interesting story than the tales that have long been associated with this well-known Butcher image.

Butcher provided scant identification and context for some of the more than three thousand photographs that constitute his amazing collection, now preserved at the Nebraska State Historical Society. It remained for later scholars, notably Society Senior Research Associate

John E. Carter, to flesh out the descriptions and supplement Butcher's faulty memory or explain his clumsy retouching of certain negatives. Carter's book, *Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream* (1985), remains the preeminent analysis of Butcher's contribution to our perceptions of Great Plains settlement in the late nineteenth century.²

Because the Butcher collection is so extensive, many photographs, including this one, have never been thoroughly researched. Carter included it in his book, drawing largely upon Butcher's identification and on a contemporary

The Sylvester Rawding homestead, West Union, Custer County, Nebraska, photographed by Solomon D. Butcher in 1886. NSHS-RG2608.PH:1784

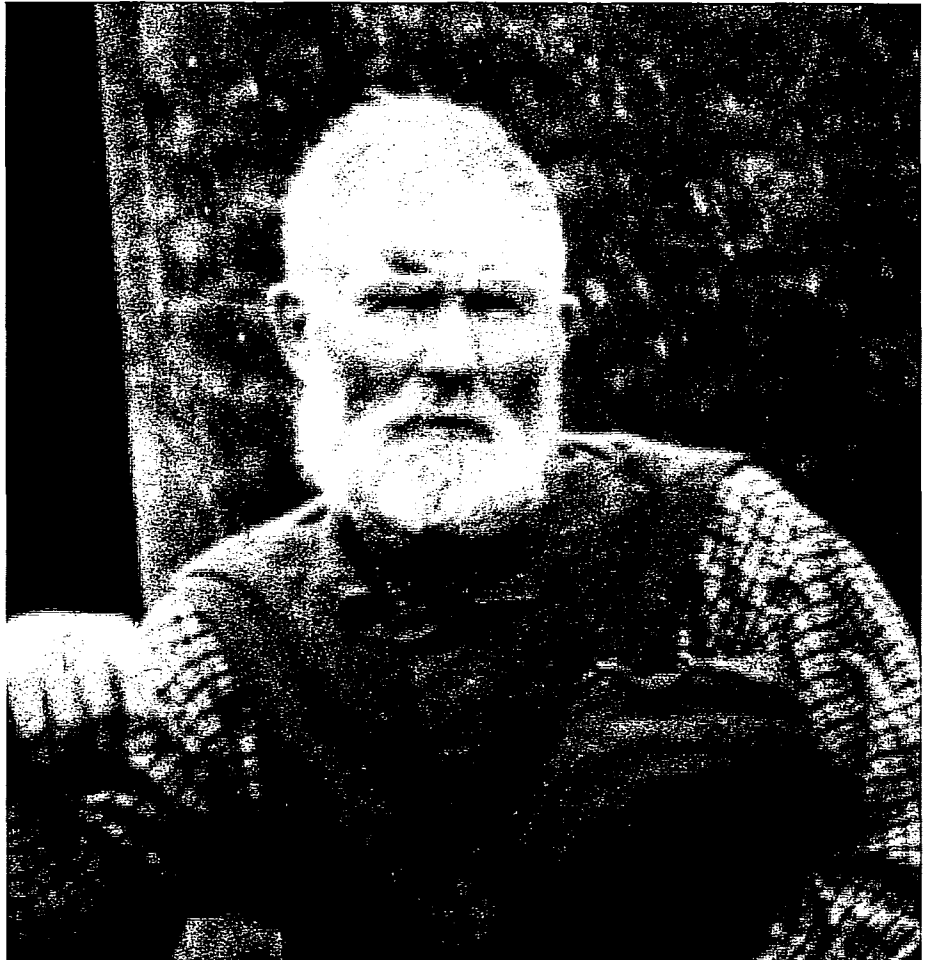
Solomon D. Butcher Photograph

newspaper article for its description. Therein lay the basis for the captivating, yet mostly fanciful, story that has grown up about the image.

Sylvester Rawding was born August 12, 1828, in England. He emigrated to the United States in time to serve in the Union Army during the Civil War. Like many veterans, he was lured to Nebraska by the availability of government land. On November 7, 1884, he filed a homestead claim near Sargent in Custer County. Those facts are beyond dispute. But an 1897 article in the *Burwell Mascot* provided much of the story that became associated with Butcher's photograph of Rawding's homestead. The article reported Rawding was about to move to the National Soldiers' Home at Leavenworth, Kansas. It noted his Civil War service, mentioning a gunshot wound that shattered his left hip, and remarked that a musket ball was still embedded in his forehead, an injury Rawding received while participating in the Union Army's April 1865 attack on fortifications at Mobile, Alabama.³

The article went on to say that Rawding owned a good farm near Sargent, but "an unnatural and unfeeling step son" had forced his move to the old soldiers' home. The stepson had agreed to take charge of the farm in return for caring for "the aged and infirm father." Once the arrangement was consummated, however, the stepson asked his father to deed him the farm and when Rawding refused, the boy threw him out. "The father, old and infirm, went—was ejected from his own house, built on his own farm, from the result of his own labor, by a member of his own family."⁴ The stepson was Harry Rawding, the oldest and tallest of the three boys in the Butcher photograph.

Information from that article accompanied the photograph in Carter's book and he subsequently recounted the stepson's harsh treatment of the aging and disfigured Civil War veteran during hundreds of public presentations about the Butcher Collection. The story seemed beyond dispute, based as it was



Detail from NSHS-RG2608.PH:1784

on a seemingly credible contemporary source. In time, Carter's explanation, derived from the 1897 newspaper article, became the accepted interpretation of the Rawding photograph. Recently, the Nebraska State Historical Society reproduced the image on a computer mouse pad for sale in its museum stores. Descriptive material provided with each pad repeated the tale of the bullet in Rawding's forehead and of the ungrateful stepson.⁵

The more I looked at the photograph and the lump on Sylvester Rawding's forehead, however, the less the story of the embedded "musket ball" rang true. Knowing something about Civil War rifle-muskets, which fired huge .58 caliber

bullets, I decided any such projectile that had embedded itself deeply enough in Rawding's forehead to prevent its removal probably would have killed him. The lump appeared to rest just under the skin; surely even a relatively unskilled nineteenth-century surgeon could have removed the offending projectile. Nor did the photograph seem to bear out Rawding's claim that a bullet had shattered his left hip. He is sitting with his left leg crossed in a perfectly natural position, suggesting he had suffered no major injury to his hip joint. Did the story of Rawding's eviction from his farm also deserve further scrutiny?

These doubts prompted an effort to learn more about Sylvester Rawding's

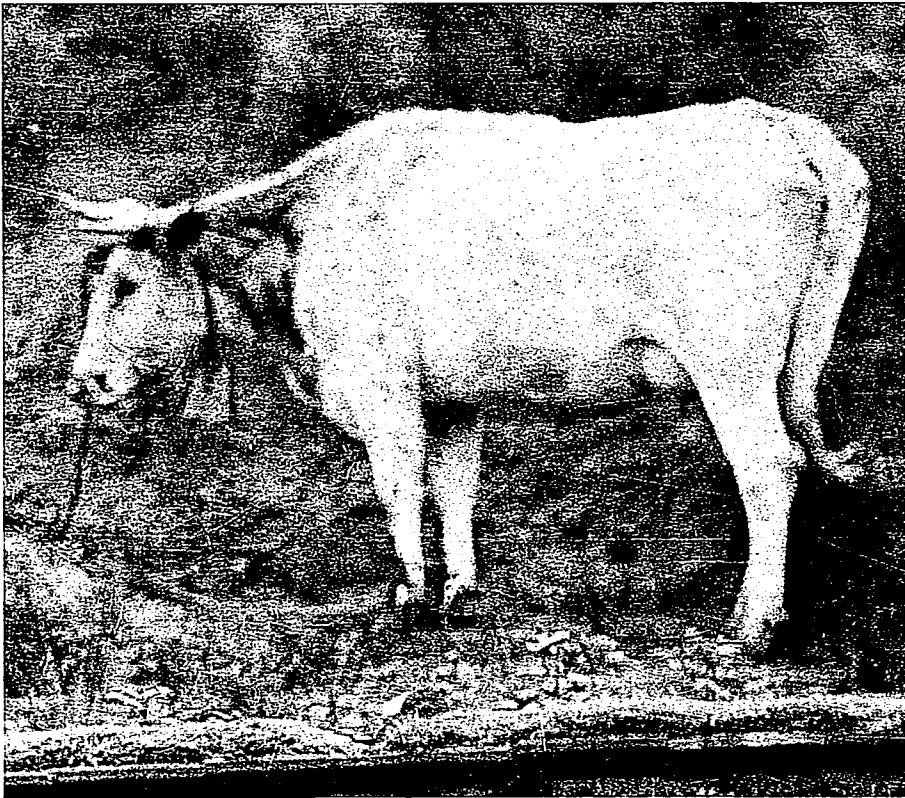
Civil War experiences, and about his later life in Custer County. Census and land office records confirmed Rawding's 1884 homestead claim near Sargent, his English nativity, his residence on the claim when the 1885 state census was taken, and revealed data about his family. Emma Rawding was some twenty-one years younger than her fifty-six-year-old husband. Rawding's

the 135th Illinois Volunteer Infantry (a one-hundred-day regiment), and then in Company F of the Eighth Illinois Volunteer Infantry. The latter regiment participated in the assault on Fort Blakely at Mobile, Alabama, during the closing days of the war. The regimental rosters published by the Illinois Adjutant General listed Rawding as a resident of Danville, but made no mention of his

Rawding made his initial pension application on July 25, 1889, claiming chronic diarrhea contracted in the service disabled him from performing manual labor. Pension applicants were required to submit to an initial medical examination and again when requesting an increase in the monthly rate. Rawding was first examined on April 16, 1890, and the examining board confirmed his diarrhea and also found he had hemorrhoids, but made no reference to any bullet wounds. Rawding also furnished affidavits from several neighbors and army comrades attesting to his disability.⁹

Because there were several errors in the military information Rawding furnished with his initial application, the pension review was delayed. He was next examined in September 1891, and again the surgeons found no service-related disabilities except chronic diarrhea. Significantly, however, they noted that Rawding had a wen, or sebaceous cyst, about the size of a walnut, above his right eye. This disfiguring wen evidently led Rawding to claim the lump was really a bullet that had struck him while he was fighting to save the Union. At least that's the story Rawding gave the Burwell newspaperman as part of his tale about being evicted from his farm.

Rawding's pension was finally approved at four dollars per month, retroactive to August 2, 1889. During the next several years he spent much of his time seeking an increase in the monthly payment, citing additional maladies such as rheumatism, kidney disease, an enlarged prostate, and the wen. These afflictions, he said, rendered him totally disabled and destitute. On one affidavit he stated, "The wen bothers me about wearing my hat and pains me at times." The pension bureau, however, refused to consider the wen as justification for a larger pension because there was no evidence that military service had anything to do with it. Nor did the bureau accept several of the other ailments Rawding claimed because the regular physical examinations failed to



Detail from NSHS-RG2608.PH:1784

brother-in-law, Jabez T. Ledbetter, also a native of England, had come to Custer County from Illinois and claimed land nearby. The Rawding children (Harry, Bessie, Phillip, and Willie) were fifteen, twelve, ten, and seven.⁶ The 1885 census of agriculture recorded the bare subsistence the family had managed to eke out in the few months since their arrival in Nebraska.⁷

Research also confirmed Rawding's Civil War service from May 1864 through September 1865, first in Company A of

being wounded, either in the hip or in the forehead. Nor did Rawding mention any service-related injuries when the special census of Union veterans was taken in 1890.⁸ Perhaps his application for a pension, wherein service-related disabilities figured prominently in establishing the rate of payment, would provide the answer. A request to the National Archives for Sylvester Rawding's pension file was the next, and ultimately decisive, step in solving part of the puzzle.

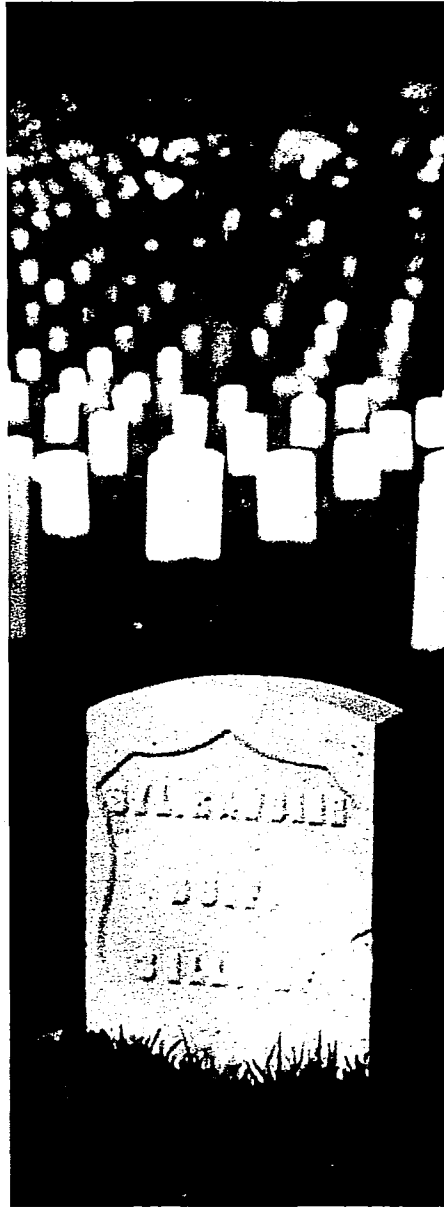
Solomon D. Butcher Photograph

substantiate them. Nonetheless, by 1896 Rawding's pension had increased to eight dollars per month.

That same year Emma Rawding died and soon afterwards, Harry Rawding moved in with his stepfather. Clearly the two had some disagreement and Sylvester decided to move to the soldiers' home in Leavenworth, Kansas. That's when he told the newspaper about being thrown off his farm by his "unfeeling stepson," who "became a member of his family at the early age of seven months, and whom he loved, cared for, 'toted' to school, and in every particular treated the same as . . . his own children."¹⁰

A few weeks later, Harry Rawding gave his side of the story in a *Burwell Mascot* article. According to Harry, he moved to his stepfather's farm in February 1897. "I was to take full possession and farm the place and have what I raised and I was to care for Mr. R." The arrangement had been the elder Rawding's idea. But Sylvester soon had a change of heart and wanted a fourth of the farm income, plus keep his own livestock, which Harry would have to care for. Then Sylvester demanded a third of the income from the farm and threatened to leave if he did not get it. When Harry showed Sylvester the first *Burwell Mascot* article, the old man "denied telling any such thing and said it was all a lie." Harry went on to say he had not asked Sylvester to deed him the farm. "He went to the [soldiers'] home of his own accord and not because he was driven from his own house, and reports to the contrary are false."¹¹

Sylvester Rawding remained at the Leavenworth soldiers' home until sometime in early 1900. While he was there, doctors removed the wen from his forehead. By 1898 physical examinations revealed that most of Rawding's ailments, such as defective hearing, poor vision, and heart disease, were due to old age, though he continued trying to connect them to his now distant military service. "Chronic diarrhea" continued to be the centerpiece of his disability claims even though a March 1901



Sylvester Rawding's headstone in the Leavenworth National Cemetery, Leavenworth, Kansas. Photo by James E. Potter

examination noted, "No diarrhea present, nor has not been for six years."

In the spring of 1900 Rawding returned to Sargent, and the *Sargent Leader* editor reported having visited with "Grandpa Rawding," noting he "can tell many interesting stories" of

his Civil War experiences.¹² The 1900 census recorded Rawding living in Harry Rawding's household, though it is not known whether Harry was still in possession of the original homestead. In June 1901 Sylvester sold the homestead; in the meantime, Harry had purchased property of his own. The elder Rawding retained a 160-acre timber claim, for which he had received the patent in 1893.¹³

Rawding's pension was finally increased to twelve dollars per month in March 1901 because of heart disease and "general debility." Although he remained in Custer County for the next several years, it is unknown whether he lived with Harry or one of the other children. On August 14, 1901, the *Leader* reported that "Grandpa Rawding" had been bitten on the wrist by a rattlesnake while in bed, or "so he claims." The skeptical tone of this remark suggests the editor may have grown tired of hearing Sylvester's "war stories" and other yarns. Sylvester also told the census enumerator in 1900 that he could read and write, while it is clear from his pension file that he was unable to write even his name, signing each document with an "X."

Rawding was back in the National Military Home by the fall of 1907, where he finally saw his pension rise to twenty dollars per month. He had less than a year to enjoy the benefit, however, for he died on February 25, 1908, at age seventy-nine, and was buried in the Leavenworth National Cemetery.¹⁴ Records at the home listed his next of kin as grandson George Rawding of Sargent, even though at least one of his children still lived in Custer County. One can only wonder whether the cantankerous old man had done something else since the feud with Harry to alienate him from his other children. Perhaps that was why they did not bring Rawding's body back to lie beside his wife in Sargent's Mount Hope Cemetery.

Based on what has been gleaned about Sylvester Rawding's life and his relationship with his children, it is no surprise that he died without a will. In

fact, he had almost no assets except the 160-acre timber claim. The administrator of his estate discovered two documents relating to that land. One was a September 21, 1906, contract between Sylvester and his son, William, deeding William eighty acres of the timber claim. The deed was conditional upon William paying \$1,000, plus interest, from half the annual farm income. When Sylvester died, William still owed some \$800 on the contract.¹⁵

The second document was a warranty deed, executed November 6, 1906, conveying the remaining eighty acres of the timber claim to Rawding's grandson, George. Because George was a minor, the deed had never been delivered or recorded. The administrator found no other assets at the time of Sylvester Rawding's death aside from a modest amount of cash.

When the estate was settled on October 25, 1909, only \$92.58 remained after all expenses and claims had been paid. William Rawding owed the estate the sum of \$802.75 to settle the land contract. Stepson Harry Rawding was not among the heirs. Accordingly, each of Sylvester Rawding's natural children received \$30.86 in cash and a share of the 160 acres of their father's timber claim.¹⁶

The evidence suggests that Sylvester Rawding was a bitter, devious, and unhappy man. His undistinguished military service and a disfiguring facial blemish prompted him to tell exaggerated stories of his Civil War exploits and the hardships he endured. After gaining title to 320 acres of government land, poor health or other factors frustrated his

efforts to make a productive farm. In his old age, he seemed to blame his stepson for his financial woes, devoting most of his time to securing a larger government pension to help resolve his impoverishment. He died virtually destitute and was buried miles from friends and family. Although we know Sylvester Rawding only through the Butcher photograph and the remnant records he left behind, it seems clear that for him, the American Dream remained largely an illusion.

Notes

¹ B200, Solomon D. Butcher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln (hereafter cited as NSHS).

² John E. Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

³ *Sargent Echo*, Apr. 30, 1897.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Carter, *American Dream*, 23.

⁶ Sources provide conflicting data on the ages of family members. Ages as given in the 1885 census are contradicted by information provided by later census records, marriage records, cemetery records, and Sylvester Rawding's pension file (cited below). Taking into account these sources, I have given what I believe to be the probable ages of family members in 1885.

⁷ 1885 State Census of Nebraska, Sargent Precinct, Custer County, E.D. 180:27 (with census of agriculture following); U.S. General Land Office Tract Books, v. 101, all at NSHS.

⁸ *Report of the Adjutant General of Illinois*, v.1:140, v.7:57, (Springfield, IL, 1900).

⁹ Sylvester Rawding's Pension File, SC727340, National Archives and Records Administration, copy in author's possession. All subsequent references to pension data are from this file.

¹⁰ Information about Emma Rawding's death appears in Carl Smith and Philip K. Gardner, *Custer County Cemeteries*, v. 4, (Broken Bow, Nebr.: N.p., N.d.), NSHS; The *Burwell Mascot* is missing for the date of the original article, which was reprinted in the *Sargent Echo*, Apr. 30, 1897.

¹¹ *Burwell Mascot*, May 13, 1897. Carter found Rawding's story of his Civil War injuries and his claim of his stepson's mistreatment in the *Sargent Echo*'s reprint of the original article from the *Burwell Mascot*. Because subsequent issues of the *Sargent Echo* are missing from NSHS files, Carter could have discovered Harry Rawding's rebuttal only by examining issues of the *Burwell* paper.

¹² *Sargent Leader*, June 1, 1900.

¹³ 1900 Census, Sargent Precinct, Custer County, Nebraska, E.D. 73:16A; Custer County Deed Records, 39:529, copy in author's possession; *Sargent Leader*, Feb. 22, 1901; George Ogle and Co, *Custer County Plat Book*, 1904.

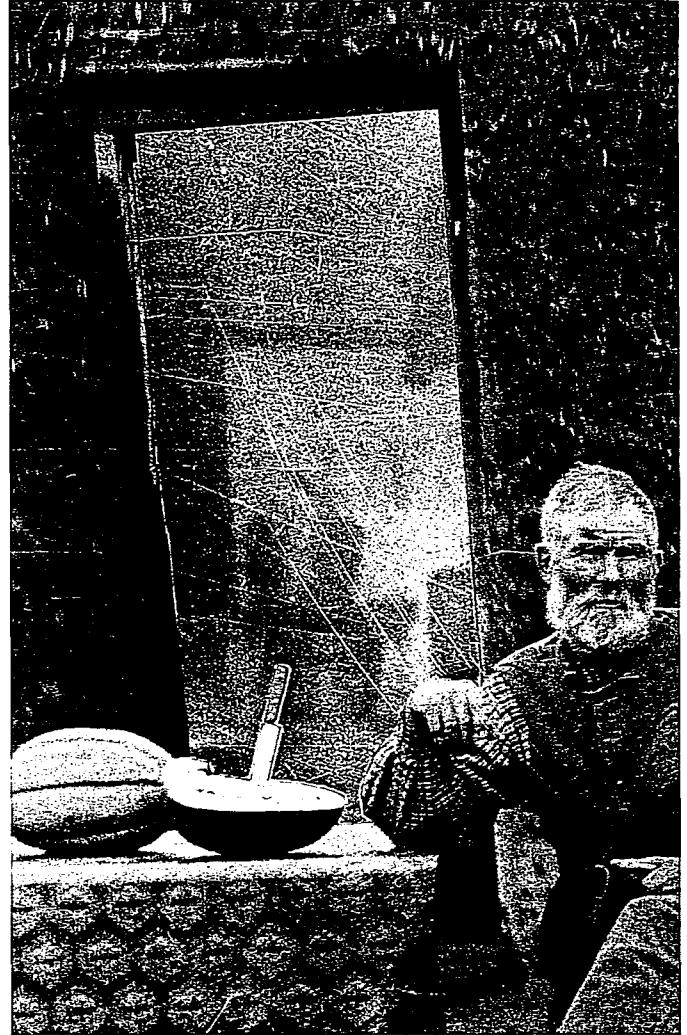
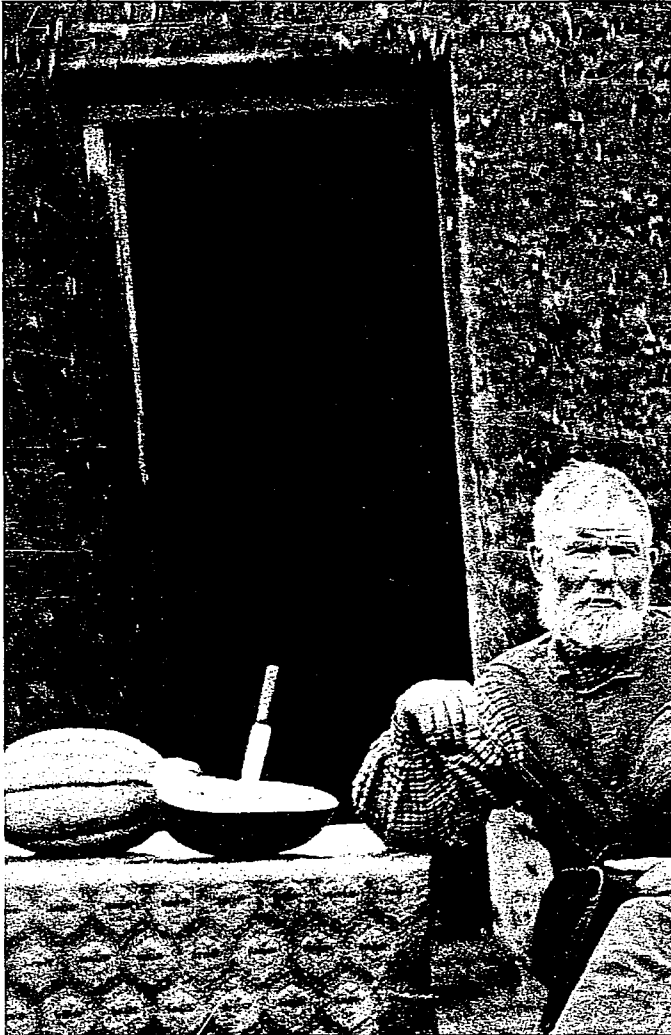
¹⁴ Record of Interment, Leavenworth National Cemetery, enclosed with Jeff S. Barnes, director, Leavenworth National Cemetery to author, Apr. 15, 2002.

¹⁵ Petition for settlement and final decree, estate of Sylvester Rawding, Custer County Probate Records, 12:466, copy in author's possession.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ For a fuller explanation of the potential of digital imaging, and a look inside several other houses and buildings that Butcher photographed, see Jill M. Koelling, "Revealing History: Another Look at the Solomon D. Butcher Photographs," *Nebraska History* 81 (Summer 2000): 50-55. An introduction to the Society's digital imaging capabilities also is available online at the Society's website www.nebraskahistory.org. From the homepage click the "Research/Resources" button, then click "Digital Imaging Laboratory." The entire Solomon Butcher Collection, accompanied by letters written from 1862 to 1911 by members of the Uriah Oblinger family, early Nebraska settlers, can be seen on the Library of Congress's "American Memory" website, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/award98/nbhtml/>





Digitizing the Sylvester Rawding Homestead Photograph

Traditional darkroom processing could never extract all of the information Solomon Butcher's camera recorded. With the advent of digital imaging technology, some information captured on Solomon D. Butcher's original glass plate negatives now can be seen for the first time.

When the Rawding photograph and other Butcher negatives were digitized with the Nebraska State Historical Society's sophisticated scanner, it suddenly became possible to peer into the darkened doorways and windows of the dwellings. Using this technology, one can see that the walls inside the Rawding house are whitewashed, and a wooden stringer is attached to the wall, presumably with pegs for hanging clothes and other household items. A pot-bellied stove holds a kettle with a cone-shaped lid.¹⁷

Digital imaging also allows a closer inspection of the "cow on the roof." Digitizing the photograph reveals that the cow actually stands on the hillside beyond the house, and the house itself stands apart from the hill (see p. 216). The cow has been tethered to a rock, perhaps by Butcher, so the animal will not wander off while the photographer composes the scene.

Digital technology, combined with traditional archival research, has provided new insights about one of the 218 best-known and most appealing Solomon D. Butcher photographs and the family that posed for his camera in 1886. Perhaps these efforts have also served to further humanize Sylvester Rawding, an accomplishment that seemed to elude him while he lived.