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Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska

ORA A. CLEMENT*

The organizaion of native Nebraskans which held its twentieth annual meeting on September 30, 1944, was not the first organization of its kind to be formed in Nebraska.

For the story of the original meeting and organization of Nebraska-born men and women we must go back to a meeting of the Real Estate Exchange of Lincoln which was held December 7, 1891. On this occasion H. M. Bushnell, a member of the Exchange, offered the following resolution which was unanimously adopted:

Resolved: That the president of this Exchange be, and he is hereby, authorized to appoint a committee of five from the membership, of which the president shall be one, to act with a like committee from the Board of Trade, the two committees to comprise a general committee whose duty it shall be to arrange and carry out a proper celebration in the city of Lincoln of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the admission of Nebraska into the Union.

The Board of Trade concurred in the action and the two committees were duly appointed and began functioning. It is apparent that their joint idea of a "proper" celebration was ambitious, to say the least. The committee of ten, with its sub-committees, held regular weekly meetings and developed plans for a fine program of events in honor of Nebraska's twenty-five years of statehood.

Although the date of admission was March 1, the date for the celebration was set for May 25 and 26 as being a more favorable season for the proposed jubilee.

It is well worth anyone's time to go to the old newspaper files and read the published account of this celebration. Long speeches were given *verbatim*. Extravagant descriptions were written of the window exhibits, the street lighting, the decorations in public buildings, and the great parade which high-lighted the occasion.

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One reporter observed: "Andrew Johnson would have felt like getting up and explaining his vote on the Nebraska Bill* had he been present last night at the Lansing theater and beheld the vast audience, tier upon tier, each particular individual inspired with a desire to learn more about the momentous event which they were evidently proud to celebrate. Bright sunflowers of velvet and silk, worn on the lapels marked the presence of Nebraska sons."

Among the various suggestions presented to the committee on arrangements came one, from what source we do not know, that a special meeting be arranged for native sons and daughters of Nebraska — the men and women born in the state after its admission March 1, 1867. The suggestion was favorably received and elaborate plans were made for this part of the program. The response was so good that the group was assigned to Representative Hall in the Capitol for its meeting and admission was by ticket only.

The Board of Public Lands and Buildings was given responsibility for decorating the Capitol for the occasion and covered themselves as well as the building with glory. Streamers of bunting ran from the dome to the four wings of the State House. Flags waved from the roof and from each window. Especially resplendent was the north entrance where the word "Nebraska" was spelled out in incandescent globes.

In Representative Hall bunting was used profusely. Flags were draped over windows, behind the speaker's desk, and about the chandeliers. Patriots of that day had no inhibitions in this matter of flag waving, it would seem. Sunflowers spelled "Sons and Daughters" about the walls and, crowning spectacle of all, an immense banner hung from the chandelier. It bore in large letters the State's nickname "Bug Eaters", and underneath was depicted the State's most hated and dreaded "bug" — a grasshopper.

The five hundred or more young people in attendance wore badges with "Bug Eater" printed in bold black letters, and many

* Johnson as a member of the House of Representatives voted for the Kansas-Nebraska Bill in 1854. The reporter probably referred to President Johnson's veto of the bill for the admission of Nebraska in 1867.

of them also wore a sunflower. A great deal of imagination is not needed to picture the gay, colorful scene, the first all-state gathering of native Nebraskans, none of whom could have been more than twenty-five years old. It is interesting to note that at this time (1892) and for some years thereafter residents of the State were always referred to as "Nebraskians."

This historic meeting of native Nebraskans was presided over by Prof. F. W. Taylor, born at Weeping Water, and a member of the faculty of the University of Nebraska. Roscoe Pound (he was plain Roscoe Pound of Lincoln then) welcomed the sons and daughters in a speech which stirs the heart of the reader today. He mentioned the pride of the New Englander in his ancestry and pointed out that these native sons and daughters of Nebraska were in fact the descendants of First Families — the pioneer families—who had founded and "brought to a glorious maturity" the commonwealth which they must very soon pass on to these, their children.

In introducing the speaker of the evening, Professor Taylor explained that from the first the committee had felt that it would be most fitting to choose the orator for this occasion from the ranks of the first organization of "natives" — the group known as the "Sons of Omaha." He then presented Gilbert M. Hitchcock, editor of the *Omaha World Herald*.

Editor Hitchcock's address was one to thrill and inspire his hearers.

"Can you," he asked, "imagine a man looking back over twenty-five years of his life and indulging in the reflection that nothing has changed, nothing has grown, nothing has progressed, from the time he was first rocked in his cradle until his mature years? . . . What is life in such a land compared with the privilege of living in Nebraska where we see great cities coming to perfection; where we see men earnestly engaged in solving the great problems of society, of government, of improvement?"

Referring to the Sons of Omaha, Mr. Hitchcock said that it was perhaps the only organization of its kind in the nation and he hoped a similar group might be formed in Lincoln and that, "Nebraskians all over the State and in every city in the State, would organize with the idea of joining together in closer bonds of union, the native citizens of each community."

The address closed with a truly eloquent tribute to Nebraska, ending with the sentence: "Thou (Nebraska) art young and strong and beautiful; thou art our mother and we love thee."

Considering the enthusiasm and pride generated by such oratory, it is not strange that the company voted to organize then and there as the Sons and Daughters of Nebraska pledged to carry out the spirit of the addresses they had listened to. The presiding officer, in offering the matter for consideration, suggested that the object of such an organization would be to preserve the history of the first families that came to Nebraska. Such a record, he said, will be priceless to future generations, and though it can easily be compiled now, in a few years it will be impossible.

Roscoe Pound made a motion that a committee be appointed to nominate officers and draft a constitution. Professor Taylor appointed Messrs Patrick, Pound, Estabrook, Keys and Mercer. (Initials not supplied by the reporting newspaper.)

The plan for state organization recommended that in each county there be formed associations of native Nebraskans "who have reached their majority" and that the officers of the county associations make up the executive board of the state organization. Prof. F. W. Taylor was elected president and H. R. Estabrook secretary for the state.

The new organization made its initial appearance the following day when the "Bug Eaters" formed a part of the three mile long parade which marched down O Street as a feature of the great celebration. They wore their "Bug Eater" badges and carried a banner on which was inscribed "Genuine Nebraska Product". A dozen or more of the young native sons rode horses in the parade, and the Sons of Omaha appeared in a body with proper badges and regalia.

Groups other than natives were also organized. In another meeting, held on the same date, the territorial pioneers were indulging in a session of reminiscing and handshaking such as they had rarely enjoyed in such numbers. Before the meeting was over they, too, formed a permanent association, electing as president W. M. Maddox who settled in Pierce County in 1854. John MacMurphy, Omaha, who came to the Territory in 1857, was chosen secretary. This organization, like that of the Sons and Daugh-

ters, had as its object the preservation of historic material, and proposed to carry on its work through local and county organizations. The enthusiasm of this body quite equalled that of the younger generation and forward-looking plans were outlined before its adjournment. One suggestion is worth noting here. W. F. Davis (Cass County) registered his disapproval of the nickname "Bug Eaters" which the younger people had been making so conspicuous. He excused them for their flaunting badges by saying: "Of course the young people do not realize how it looks," but he urged that a more appropriate nickname be selected for the people of Nebraska and asked that a committee be appointed to take this matter under advisement. The chairman appointed such a committee.

The members of each group qualified by very different common experiences but they were drawn together by a common interest. Although the meeting of the Sons and Daughters excelled in numbers, the estimate being from 500 to 800 in attendance, one need not be a seer to know the story of these two organizations. The Pioneers, made up of the older people, did in fact promote their old settlers picnics and formed many county and local groups of pioneers. The Sons and Daughters were among those present on such occasions, but very few, if any, local groups of younger Nebraskans were organized and their state organization did not function. Research to date, has failed to discover any minutes of a state meeting after the initial one of 1892, which has here been described. None the less, the young people did their part in keeping up the interest and attendance at the old settlers gatherings and out of the combined efforts of the Pioneers and the Sons and Daughters some real results accrued. Histories of families, places and incidents were written and put into print, and an interest in State history was stimulated.

The Territorial Pioneers and the Sons and Daughters rendered one especially important service through their cooperation in common meetings. In 1894, at the annual meeting of the former association, the committee appointed to change the state's nickname made its report, recommending that the name "Tree Planters" be substituted for the odious "Bug Eaters".

By that time the Territorial Association had its own organ,

the *Territorial Record*, published first at Verdon and then at Auburn. The publishers and Secretary MacMurphy of the Association were very much in earnest about the desirability of this change and, following the acceptance of the committee's report the *Record* appeared always with the words "Nebraska, Tree Planter State" conspicuous on its cover. Editorially it appealed to the people of the state to encourage the use of the new name. At many of the old settlers picnics of those years a special feature of the program was the parade of "Tree Planters" — the native sons and daughters. It was reported that on Nebraska Day at the 1895 State Fair nearly everyone wore a "Tree Planter" badge.

The *Record* is also authority for the following story about the origin of the opprobrious "Bug Eater": An Eastern man who visited the state at the time of the grasshopper scourges, so the *Record* claimed, returned to his native environs in great disgust. When his friends asked him for a report of the activities of the new western state he told them; "The grasshoppers have eaten all the grain. The potato bugs have eaten all the 'taters'. And now the inhabitants are eating the bugs."

The story went the rounds of the unsympathetic Eastern press and Nebraska people, who had, it would seem, endured enough, had to suffer the additional indignity of an unsavory nickname.

All honor to the Pioneers and the Sons and Daughters whose good taste and persistence resulted in the speedy acceptance of the euphonious and entirely appropriate name of "Tree Planters". The *Record* pointed out: "Nebraska has planted more trees since she became a state than any other state in the Union. And the name fits in with the motto of J. Sterling Morton (then president of the State Historical Society) which is 'Plant Trees'.

The Territorial Pioneers Association was destined to disappear with the pioneer generation. For more than twenty years the Association, assisted, whether officially or not by the Native Sons and Daughters, worked as a subsidiary of the State Historical Society and succeeded, as already stated, in carrying out the purpose for which the two organizations had been formed. In 1918, or thereabouts, the Territorial Pioneers Association ceased

to function and the chief historical interests of the state were organized by the State Historical Society under the leadership of Dr. Addison E. Sheldon who was elected superintendent in 1917.

The Native Sons and Daughters as an organization was revived in 1924. When the regular annual meeting of the Historical Society was being arranged for, the suggestion was made that special attention be given the native sons and daughters of Nebraska, territorial and state. Mrs. A. E. Sheldon was given credit for this suggestion and the arrangements for the program were made her responsibility. Under her sponsorship it was a very happy event. The annual meeting, on January 16, 1924, produced a permanent organization to be known as "Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska". The following officers were elected: president, Mark E. Vance; vice-president, J. W. Searson; secretary, Margaret Thompson Sheldon; treasurer, N. C. Abbott.

The office of secretary was held by Mrs. Sheldon until 1939, when, at her own request, she was permitted to resign her active duties. In recognition of her services she was made honorary secretary of the organization. It was due very largely to her untiring efforts that the Native Sons and Daughters thrived and functioned so effectively through the years. The old book of minutes, written by her own hand and in her own sprightly style, is in itself a valuable historical document and will be preserved by the Historical Society for the interest and assistance of coming generations of Nebraska's sons and daughters.

The purpose of the present organization is similar to that of the first one back in 1892. According to their constitution the Native Sons and Daughters are pledged to the task of advancing the best interests of the state; promoting the ideals of human life and publishing the same; honoring and preserving all that is best in Nebraska history and tradition; and furthering the Nebraska spirit within the state.

The organization has had among its officers a goodly number of prominent Nebraskans all of whom have been active in promoting the interests of the "Natives" and also of the Historical Society. The following have served as president: Dr. Mark E. Vance, J. W. Searson, N. C. Abbott, Mrs. Josephine Marty, F. C. Radke, Kirk Griggs, A. J. Weaver, Mrs. Marie Weekes, Mrs.

Maude E. Nuquist, Emil von Seggern, Emil Roesser, Herbert L. Cushing, F. G. Hawxby, Frank S. Peterson, O. S. Gilmore, Judge E. F. Carter, Mrs. Carol White Mortensen and C. A. Sorensen. As stated before, Margaret E. Thompson Sheldon served continuously from the time of organization in 1924 until her resignation in 1939. Raymond J. Latrom was elected as secretary to succeed Mrs. Sheldon, and following Mr. Latrom, Horace M. Davis became secretary. The first treasurer was N. C. Abbott, succeeded by Max Meyer who has held the office continuously since his election in 1926.

In addition to the annual essay contest in which something more than \$1000 has been distributed in prizes during the years, the Native Sons and Daughters have co-operated with the national Oregon Trail Commission in marking the route of the Pony Express across Nebraska and have given support to various other historical projects which have been sponsored by the Historical Society. Announcements mailed to members at frequent intervals, together with other publicity, has served to stimulate interest in the annual meetings of the Historical Society as well as their own sessions held in connection with the meeting of the parent society.

An editorial clipped from a state newspaper at the time of the organization in 1924, and preserved by Mrs. Sheldon among other clippings and papers, approved the purpose of the newly organized "Natives", and saw a place for them as a potent force in the state's development. The writer mentions especially the need of such a group to do some real boosting and to tell the world the truth about Nebraska.

The editorial concludes: "If the Nebraska Sons and Daughters are able to preserve Nebraska tradition; if the organization succeeds in developing a greater love and reverence for the state; if it tells the world about the best state in the Union; it will have indeed played a useful role in Nebraska history."

The enthusiastic editor must be pardoned by non-natives. One's native state like one's mother is the best in the world. At any rate it's the only one we've got, and we all mutually agree the only and the best.