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Article Title: Bookwalter, Agricultural Commune in Nebraska

Full Citation: Musetta Gilman, "Bookwalter, Agricultural Commune in Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 54 (1973): 91-105

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1973Bookwalter.pdf>

Date: 12/12/2014

Article Summary: Today Bookwalter is a ghost town, one of many that sprang up along the branch lines of railroads. Unlike those other towns, though, it began as a commune intended to create an ideal agricultural community.

Cataloging Information:

Names: John Wesley Bookwalter, William B Bookwalter, James Leffel, Eliza Leffel, Charles Schwab, Eugene Berry, E J Shinn, John Campbell, William Jennings Bryan, Charles H Hibbert

Place Names: Springfield, Ohio; Bookwalter and Burchard, Pawnee County, Nebraska

Keywords: John Wesley Bookwalter, commune, Bessemer process, free silver, Wittenberg College, Relief and Aid Society

Photographs / Images: John W Bookwalter; Bookwalter Methodist Church; Bookwalter schoolhouse; students attending the school in 1916; village of Bookwalter plat, 1917 (*Standard Atlas of Pawnee County*)

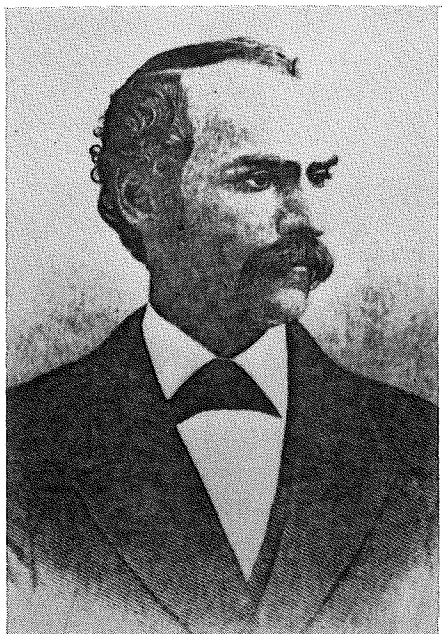
BOOKWALTER, AGRICULTURAL COMMUNE IN NEBRASKA

By MUNETTA GILMAN

Six miles south and one mile west of Burchard, Nebraska, stands an abandoned schoolhouse, now used for storing grain. Its sagging door, its boarded windows, its porch rotting away are the last parts of the skeleton of a village. This village was once a symbol of a rich man's dream: John W. Bookwalter, a multi-millionaire of Springfield, Ohio, envisioned this spot on the prairie as a commune, an ideal farmers' village.

As a five-year-old child, I climbed the steps of this school building along with some forty other children to begin my education. Although I had never heard of John W. Bookwalter or of his dream, the experiences and the exceptional people of this community exerted a tremendous influence on our family. These things I still treasure: the memories of the "neighbors" (beloved as kin), who gathered in the beautiful little church with its genuine stained-glass windows; the country store; two tall grain elevators (one belonged to Bookwalter); the long row of corn cribs where the Bookwalter tenants brought their share crop; the depot where the trains came in. They are all part of a very real past.

Both of my grandparents were land owners in Pawnee County. But my father John Campbell, like many of his contemporaries, was a renter. The oldest of twelve children, he went out on his own as soon as he had accumulated enough stock and machinery to cultivate a farm for himself. By the turn of the century there was no more government land for homesteading in southeastern Nebraska. Large tracts were owned by speculators. The farm west of Bookwalter on which my parents were living was sold "out from under them." One of the better quarter sections of Bookwalter land one mile east of



John W. Bookwalter, at one time owner of about 60,000 acres of Pawnee County land, established a commune there in 1889 and named it for himself.

the village was available, and so we became a part of the Bookwalter "empire."

My father paid \$400 for the improvements on this farm. They consisted of an ugly, brown, four-roomed house which was relatively new (no basement, no closets); a clutter of poorly constructed sheds for livestock; a well; a cave, often partially filled with water; and a cistern with a new-fangled pump. The cistern water was filtered and the chain, steel-cup pump allowed the water to be used for drinking. These buildings sat on a treeless knoll close to the south side of a wagon road.

"Commune" had been a foreign word to most Midwesterners until an alert reporter from the *State Journal* published plans for an agricultural commune in Nebraska. On July 3, 1891, this reporter interviewed John W. Bookwalter, a well-known Ohio industrialist who had stopped in Lincoln after spending June in Pawnee County, where he owned some 15,000 acres of land. Records show that some of this land was in Mission Creek Precinct, some in Liberty Precinct in Gage County, and some over the border in Kansas. During his stay in the county, he had been perfecting his plan for the establishment of a "farmers' village" on his property. The interview published in the Sunday edition, July 5, 1891, quoted Bookwalter as saying:

I have long been impressed with the desirability if not the necessity of making farm life more attractive, especially to the sons and daughters of the farmers. I have traveled very extensively, and in my journeys have always taken occasion to inquire particularly into the conditions of agriculture and the methods of farm life in the different countries. Long ago I came to the conclusion that the most contented and successful farmers lived in the village communities like those of France. I spent twenty-four years on a farm, and know something of its monotony, the lack of social pleasures and the obstacles offered by the life to the proper organization of the agricultural classes. There is always a rush of the young men toward the towns. I went to town myself just as soon as I could get away from the farm. This tendency must be stopped, and to keep the farmers from going to towns you must carry the comforts, conveniences, and social pleasure of the town to the farms. That is what I propose doing on my property in Pawnee County.

The land lies in a single body. It is intersected by the Kansas City, Wyandotte & Northwestern railroad, and in just about the middle of the tract the station of Bookwalter has been established. There is to be located the only farmers' village that I know of in the United States. The town has already been platted and all the farmers who worked my land in that township are expected to live at Bookwalter. Instead of building a house on every farm for the tenant, I will build the house in town. Every farm will have its corresponding house and will go with the farm without additional rent. About half a block of ground, has been allotted to each house, and a comfortable stable will also be built. The farmer will have his garden and a place for his horses and a cow or two and chickens and a few things like that near his house in town. Everything else will be on the farm.

As it seems to me the greatest trouble with farming in the west is the attempt to cover too much ground, the land will be divided into eighty acre tracts, and no more will be rented to one man unless he is unusually well equipped with teams and help and ought to take care of more. The idea is to have the land cultivated thoroughly. The rental may be paid either in cash or grain. The amount for each tract will vary according to the distance from the town, and other considerations. The roads will be lined with trees and the farmers will be expected not only to keep the land in perfect order but to look after the roads and lanes a little and see that they do not become unsightly from the growth of weeds. There will be no fences except for pastures. If the whole tract can be cultivated like a garden I am satisfied that it will be better for the farmers and will yield more cash returns every year to all parties interested than the loose system that prevails in the west at present.

The aim will be to make Bookwalter a model town also. I have arranged to build immediately a town hall that can be used for all kinds of meetings. It will contain a library and reading room, and a librarian will be employed to take charge of it. The hall will be fitted up so that it can be used as a theatre when desired. All of these things will give the farmers as much pleasure as the people who live in larger towns. They will have opportunities for frequent meeting to compare notes and to arrange for co-operative work when it is desirable. The whole tendency of the system in my opinion will be to sharpen the wits of the people, make them better farmers, keep the bright boys on the farms and so to improve the condition of agriculture in every respect. What can you expect of the farmers when they live at a distance from their neighbors and have no opportunities for meeting more than once a week? They need to come together, to organize for their mutual good, and here they will have an opportunity to do so.¹

Who was this John Wesley Bookwalter whose "dream," philosophy, and money affected hundreds of lives in southeastern Nebraska from 1879 to 1915? Today his name is all but

unknown. How did he differ from many other absentee landowners at the turn of the century? His biography reads like a Horatio Alger story — the poor but ambitious boy who was willing to work hard, to study, to live a clean life, to be generous in order that he might grow up to be famous and rich.

The *Springfield (Ohio) Daily News* of September 27, 1915, on the occasion of his passing, headlined its editions: "SPRINGFIELD MOURNS THE DEATH OF A PROMINENT BENEFACTOR." Harry E. Rice of Xenia, Ohio, had written a biography of his friend Bookwalter, which was published in this issue of the *News* as an obituary. Paraphrased, this is what Rice had to say:

John W. Bookwalter, born June 30, 1839, was a typical pioneer boy growing up on a farm near Rob Roy, Indiana, in the middle of the 19th century. He experienced all the hardships that were common in new territory that had to be cleared for farming.

He had little opportunity for schooling. However, a teacher, a Miss Thayer from Connecticut, introduced John to the wonders of science by describing the design of a microscope. The next day John brought to school his own invention — a magnifying glass constructed of cardboard and a crystal-clear "prism" made from peach-tree gum. His next invention was a crude telescope. People flocked to his home from miles around to gaze at the moons of Jupiter and the rings of Saturn through Bookwalter's sky viewer.

As he observed the waterwheel that operated his father's saw mill, he was led into the world of mechanics. About this time a man by the name of McClure placed small libraries in Indiana schools. What a blessing to this young genius with the hungry mind!

John's interest in mechanics and especially mill wheels brought him to Springfield, Ohio, and an acquaintance with James Leffel, who had recently put a turbine waterwheel on the market. This acquaintance led Leffel to hire the young man. In 1865, John married Eliza Leffel, the daughter of James Leffel. She died in 1879. Young Bookwalter took over the shops that manufactured mill machinery and soon invented new devices and found new methods to solve old problems.

After a time John went back to Indiana, but when the Leffel



The Bookwalter Methodist Church, built in 1904, burned about 1948.

company experienced financial trouble, Leffel appealed to Bookwalter for financial aid. Young Bookwalter approached a financier in Lafayette, Indiana, and persuaded him to lend \$3,000 without security. He invested the borrowed money in the Leffel company, applied to it his creative abilities, and continued to study at night. He paid off the loan in one year.

He had neither knowledge nor experience with commercial agencies. One day while waiting to see a banker, he hit upon the technique of sending printed circulars to prospective customers. This new idea brought many inquiries and many orders, which he spent long hours answering in longhand because he had no typewriters or clerical staff.

Later, he went into the steel business. Whether the improvement in the Bessemer process of hardening steel was Bookwalter's invention or whether he merely had been able to secure the patent is not clear. It was so successful, however, that Charles Schwab offered him a million dollars for the patent.

Although always interested in politics, he had demonstrated no apparent political ambitions until 1881, when the Democrats nominated him for governor of Ohio. He was defeated by a narrow margin, and his supporters blamed the results on the fact that they were forced to cancel rallies when public attention was focused on the assassination of President James A. Garfield. William Jennings Bryan proposed Bookwalter as a standard bearer in 1904, but Bookwalter declined. The Democrats urged him to be a candidate for the Senate, but he turned his attention elsewhere.

There seemed no limit to Bookwalter's interests. He had always studied intensely, reading everything he had time for. He now turned his attention to the publication of a magazine in New York, *The Leffel Mechanical News*, to which he contributed articles on many subjects. An ardent admirer of free-silver exponent William Jennings Bryan, Bookwalter published in 1896 a book entitled *If Not Silver, What?* which outlined his personal opinion on free coinage. *Rural vs. Urban*, still another book, emphasized what he called "the evil of the day"—excessive city building. *Siberia and Central Asia* was written after he made leisurely journeys over both the Trans-Caspian and Trans-Siberian railways. Bookwalter was said to have been the first "outsider" allowed to ride over the Trans-Siberian railroad.

He accumulated much wealth at a comparatively young age, and having no immediate family ties, traveled throughout the world. He became a collector of art treasures, many of which he gave to the Cincinnati Art Museum. His travels took him out of the country for long periods of time, but he managed his business interests through able, loyal subordinates. He died in Italy, having just arrived there from France at the time World War I was threatening Europe.

He was best known in Ohio for his philanthropy. Springfield charities had received generous help over the years. When times were especially hard during an industrial panic in 1914, he gave \$12,000 to Springfield with a stipulation that part of it be spent for toys. He remembered his childhood when there were no toys. He gave Springfield's Wittenberg College \$30,000, an endowment which made possible the chair of philosophy which bears his name. Wittenberg responded by giving him an honorary doctor of law degree. Although he knew many of the

scholars of Europe; his greatest disappointment was that he had been denied a formal college education. His wealth at his death was estimated to be \$10,000,000. Besides his extensive property holdings in Springfield and in Clark County, Ohio, he was said to have owned 65,000 acres of land in Nebraska, Kansas, Illinois, and Ohio.²

Just how this John Wesley Bookwalter, the self-educated, scientific scholar, inventor, businessman, writer, politician, and world traveler became interested in this particular portion of Nebraska is a question. Harry Rice said that John had studied the rural development in Illinois and Ohio and had anticipated a like growth in Kansas and Nebraska.³ John's brother William Bookwalter had come to this Pawnee County area in 1877 or 1878. The 1880 Census lists the youngest child Eliza, 3 years old, as having been born in Indiana. Whether or not brother William came to Nebraska before John had determined to invest in land there, it is evident that the latter saw tremendous possibilities for profit.

Bookwalter began purchasing tracts of land in Pawnee County, Nebraska, in 1879 according to the records in the county clerk's office. Some of the former owners had acquired their land from the federal government. It had been possible for farmers to homestead, buy land for \$1.25 an acre, or add to their possessions by filing a timber claim.⁴ The industrialist with cash in hand found many farmers willing to sell. The 1870's had been a decade of financial crises, grasshopper invasions in 1874-1876, frequent crop failures, and drouth.⁵ The Springfield newspaper stated that Bookwalter was able to buy land by paying from 40¢ to \$2.50 an acre.

Times were so hard in Nebraska that in 1875-1876 prominent Nebraskans formed a Relief and Aid Society and solicited some \$74,000 from Easterners to help the destitute. The churches, the Grange, and even government agencies distributed rations to the needy.⁶ By 1877 the dry cycle had ended and rain fell, bringing some relief.

Evidently the building of an ideal farmers' village had not been the first dream that Bookwalter had for his Nebraska holdings. He first invested in a large sheep ranching operation. The *Omaha Bee* of September 14, 1881, carried a feature story "Realities of Ranching" based on the experience by an

unnamed Cincinnati woman who had spent part of the summer on the John W. Bookwalter sheep ranch.

According to the article, his 20,000-acre ranch was located in Mission Creek Precinct, Pawnee County, fifteen miles from the Kansas border. The newsstory also placed his land ten miles east of the Otoe Reservation. Records show that he eventually owned tracts in Gage County, which were farther west than indicated here. A well-wooded stream called Arkeketah, named for the hereditary Chief Arkeketah of the Oto, flowed through the great ranch. The Cincinnati visitor described the ranch house as follows:

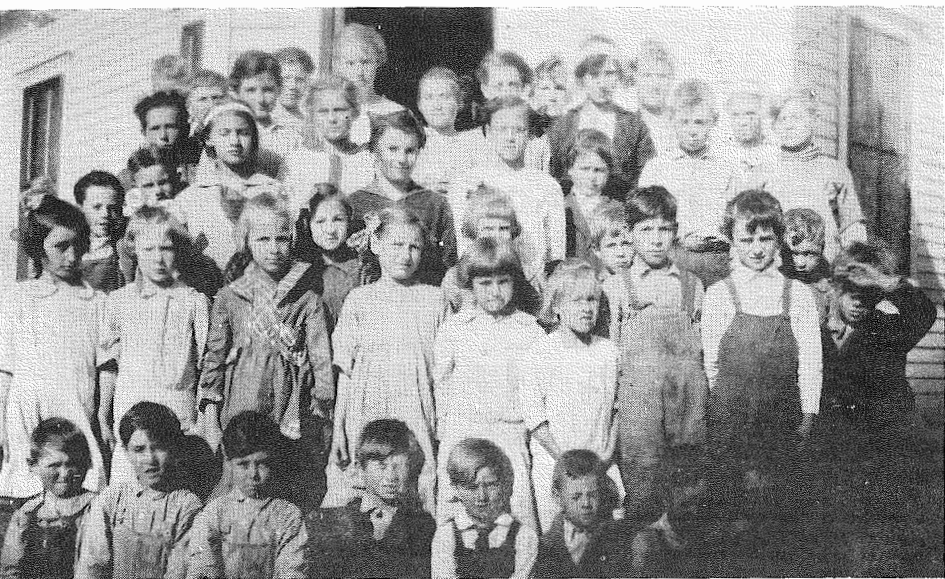
The mansion house of the ranch is one of those patent structures built in sections and transported all ready to be put up. It is an affair of eight not large, but comfortable rooms, and which by no means limit the hospitality of the master of the house, which is something worth and unparalleled.

Could this be the record of the first pre-fab house in the state? The lady also commented on Bookwalter:

Mr. Bookwalter, who has drawn a good many of the prizes of life, values his western possessions (He owns, beside Arteketa [*sic*], 20,000 acres in the Loup country) above all others. He holds the most enthusiastic hopes of the future of the trans-Missouri country, and entertains magnificent plans for its future development. His friends have always regarded his interest in the western country as a kind of insanity. A good many people regard a rich man who has any thoughts or aspirations beyond sitting like Atropos, and forever clipping coupons. . . . He appears to possess the enviable faculty of surrounding himself by people adapted to carrying out his plans, and he recognizes, in the most liberal fashion, their success in doing it. Mr. Charles H. Hibbert, the gentleman in charge of Arteketa ranch, and Mr. Bookwalter's partner in the sheep-ranching, is a Boston man who has spent eighteen years of his life in South America.⁷

The 1880 agricultural census recorded that a Mr. Hibbert was renting 2,000 untilled acres of land on shares. The value of the farm, including the improvements, was estimated at \$12,000. The 2,000 sheep had yielded 1,900 fleeces weighing 12,000 pounds. The management had lost 100 head from disease. By 1885 the Hibbert operation was a fixed rental enterprise and had grown to 186 tilled acres and 9,000 unimproved acres. The farm was valued at \$80,000. He sold 3,000 sheep, lost 100, slaughtered 20, and had 250 on hand.

The census also showed that Eugene Berry was involved in the Bookwalter sheep ranching. In 1880 the Bookwalter-Berry flock of 1,350 sheep produced 8,100 pounds of wool. Berry owned 160 acres of his own. By 1885 his flock had dwindled drastically, with 68 fleeces producing 344 pounds of wool.



The only visible evidence today that the town of Bookwalter once existed is the frame schoolhouse (above). Students attending the school posed for this group picture in 1916.

When William Bookwalter farmed his 160 acres in 1880, no sheep were listed in the census. However, by 1885 he was renting some 900 acres, and 600 sheep on hand yielded fleeces weighing 4,200 pounds of wool. He sold 600 sheep that year and slaughtered 20. George Baldwin was the only other farmer in Mission Creek Precinct reporting sheep in 1885.⁸

Since the census records for 1890 and 1900 are not available, the end of the sheep ranching story is lost or buried in some forgotten account book. This we do know: conditions were changing in rural Nebraska in the 1880's.

The 1880's were years of speculation throughout the country. Population growth in Nebraska was phenomenal. The average rainfall increased to 24.18 inches, much above the parched 1870's average, and many sincere agriculturists believed the theory that "rainfall followed the plow!"⁹ Railroads were projecting their iron rails in every direction. Mortgage money was readily available for land purchases or for the new farm machinery which was becoming so popular even in the Midwest. The sulky plow, corn planter, end-gate seeder, twine binder, threshing machine, and even steam-powered thresher appeared in the middle 1880's.¹⁰ The census of 1885 indicated that most of the residents in the Mission Creek area were from Indiana, Ohio, or Illinois, where farmers were accustomed to raising grain. Sheep range must have fallen to the furrow.

John W. Bookwalter did not immediately implement his plans for the ideal farm village. In fact the *Burchard Times* of February 15, 1896, quoted the *Omaha World-Herald* as saying:

John W. Bookwalter of New York City is now on his way to Nebraska to make arrangements for the establishment of a number of farm villages. He owns about 60,000 acres of land in this state and proposes to gather agriculturists into towns of about five hundred, provide a library, theater and give them many advantages of city life.

The editor of the *Times* added: "A few thousand acres lie in this county, and many of them close to Burchard."¹¹

It was in 1888, the year of the great blizzard, that the Kansas City, Wyandotte and Northwestern Railroad was built through this area. (This line was later acquired by the Union Pacific.) The town of Bookwalter was platted in 1889. The east and west streets — Anna, Bertha, Gertrude, and Eliza were named for John's nieces. The north and south thoroughfares were called avenues and named for important national figures: Blaine,

Sheridan, Harrison, Cleveland, Hayes, Logan, and Thayer. The official location of the town was: the southeast corner of Section 11 and the southwest corner of Section 12; Township 1 North; Range 9 East.¹²

It has been stated that the population of the village reached 100 in 1897.¹³ Since the census records are not available, it is interesting to note that forty-eight different persons who listed their postoffice as Bookwalter paid personal taxes that year. Several of these were farmers who resided on outlying farms that did not belong to Bookwalter.

The town was not built at one time as its founder must have envisioned it. A schoolhouse was built in 1894, and Bookwalter donated three lots and \$400 toward the project. A history of the school district comments that the school was always large, averaging 40 pupils, and taught by one teacher.¹⁴

The minutes of the Nebraska Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, held in September, 1904, made the following report on its Bookwalter charge:

Building — We have built two new churches and secured three additional parsonages this year. On July 31, the splendid new church at Bookwalter was dedicated. It was built at the cost of \$3,500, and is a very gem of beauty. J. W. Bookwalter of Springfield, Ohio, gave \$1,500 besides the fine art glass windows costing \$300 and the lots. W. W. Hull is the successful pastor.¹⁵

Cleveland Avenue was the main street, although I doubt that anyone who lived there or did business there even knew that the streets were named. The original general merchandise store and postoffice was in block 8 on Cleveland. *The Burchard Times* on September 11, 1914, reported that the Ray Hartman store burned. The building was owned by W. H. Bookwalter (John's brother) and was not insured. The loss of the goods was estimated to be \$2,500.¹⁶

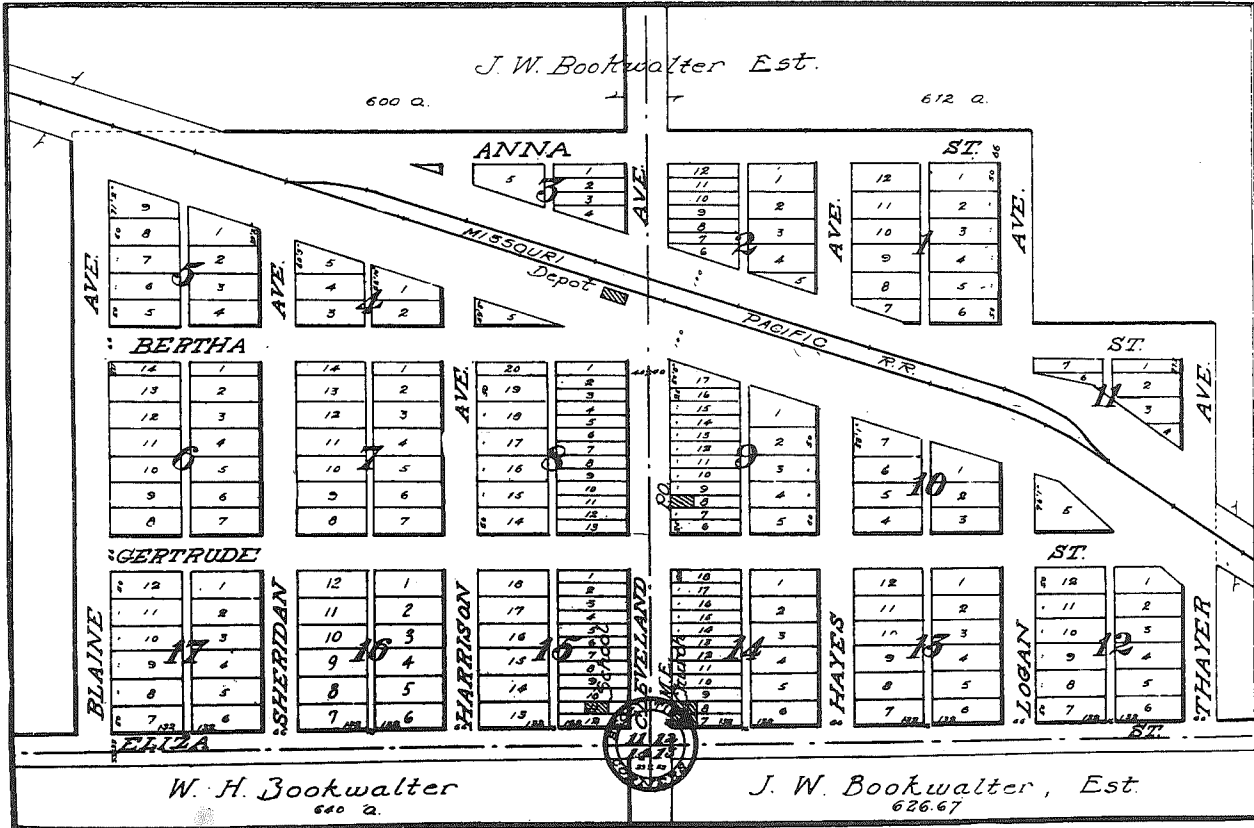
After the fire the postoffice was then established on the east side of the street. Between the original store and the schoolhouse was a large two-story building which was moved to Summerfield, Kansas. No one seems to remember much about it except that it might have been a store at one time. One lady remembers that some books were brought to the school library when the building was moved. Was this the Bookwalter hall, theater, and library which John reported that he was having built?

The two elevators (one belonged to Bookwalter), the long

BOOKWALTER

MISSION CREEK PREC.

Scale: 300 ft. = 1 inch



The village of Bookwalter plat, from the Standard Atlas of Pawnee County, 1917.

row of corn cribs, and the coal yard were scattered along the north side of the railroad tracks. There were also large stockyards serving a wide area. Ole Hanson presided over the local Bookwalter business in a small office on block 9. At one time there must have been a dozen or more substantial homes scattered about those seventeen blocks.

The 1890's, characterized by money troubles, the war with Spain, the influence of big business (especially railroad interests), made community planning difficult if not impossible.¹⁷ Bookwalter's ideal eighty-acre farms gave way to quarter sections. The life style of the French peasant, who lived in a village and tilled farmland nearby, was foreign to these independent Illinois, Indiana, or Ohio farmers. Deep snows in winter and hub-deep mud in spring were hardly attractive to a farmer who had to travel two or three miles to farm or care for his stock. The modern-dream tenant houses gave way to unpainted or ill-painted, hastily constructed shacks built on the quarter sections.

By 1912 the Bookwalter land-management operation was highly organized. E. J. Shinn, who had married brother William's daughter Bertha, lived in Beatrice but carried on the business as John had planned. A tenant was carefully chosen. He was required to purchase the improvements on his quarter section. He in turn sold to the next tenant through Shinn's office. The tenant signed a lease giving a share of the grain and cash rent for the untilled acres. The lease was for one year at a time, and if the tenant failed to meet his obligation he would be forced to move in the spring.¹⁸ Bookwalter's nieces and nephews were allowed to pick out a quarter section of land as a wedding present with the stipulation that they must improve it themselves.¹⁹

There was no attempt to conserve the soil. It was intensively farmed, as John Bookwalter had suggested. To meet their obligations to the landlord, much of the land was cropped-out to keep the bins and cribs filled in the town. The *Springfield Daily News* printed a statement that Bookwalter was thought to be the largest cereal farmer in the United States at one time. Because he had facilities to store grain, he could take advantage of favorable markets.²⁰

Although the farmer's ideal village, French-commune style, did not materialize, and at the time of his death his renters were

for all practical purposes in a kind of a share-cropper bondage, many of the goals Bookwalter had envisioned for farmers were realized before World War I. Several factors were responsible:

First, the need to share expensive farm machinery compelled farmers to work together. Much of the interchange of ideas came to life around dinner tables as farmers moved from one harvest field to another. Corn shelling, wood sawing, and hay harvest were generally cooperative activities.

The second factor was the popularity of literary societies meeting periodically in rural schoolhouses to debate political and social issues or to study the best available works of literature or art. Musicales, plays, and box suppers also provided social diversion. The community church became a catalyst in bringing together disparate elements. After automobiles were available, the congregation extended for miles in every direction.

The third factor was the extension of the telephone services to the rural areas. The party line was a cohesive element. Five rings on the party line alerted the neighborhood to fire, tragedy, accidents, sickness, or distress. Neighbors shared material possessions, time, compassion, inspiration, and humor.

Today Bookwalter is a ghost town like many other Nebraska villages that mushroomed along the branch lines of railroads. The shell of the old schoolhouse, the cement steps of the church that burned in the 1940's, some old remains of foundations mark the spot. There is still a farm house in the vicinity. Rail transportation was curtailed during World War I, and the old tracks were removed in 1935.²¹

When John W. Bookwalter died in 1915, the land remained in an estate for a time, and then was divided among his relatives.²² Much of the spirit of the village of Bookwalter disappeared with the decline of the railroad. Improved transportation and better roads made it possible for farmers to trade in Pawnee City, Beatrice, Lincoln, and elsewhere.

When one considers the modern Nebraska farm home today, the impact on this state made by farm organizations, and the educational opportunities available for farm boys and girls, he is reminded that an ideal agricultural community was the dream of a commune in southeastern Nebraska at the turn of the century. And the name associated with that dream was Bookwalter.

NOTES

1. *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), July 5, 1891.
2. *Springfield (Ohio) Daily News*, September 27, 1915.
3. *Ibid.*
4. James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 165.
5. *Ibid.*, 181-182.
6. *Ibid.*, 183.
7. *Omaha Bee*, September 14, 1881.
8. For further information on Hibbert, Bookwalter, and Berry, see U.S. Census Records, 1880 and 1885, for Mission Creek Pct., Pawnee County, Nebraska, both Agriculture and Population.
9. *Ibid.*, 203, 211.
10. *Ibid.*, 207.
11. *Burchard (Nebraska) Times*, February 15, 1896.
12. John Q. Magie and Carl H. Jones, *A History and Historic Site Survey: Johnson, Nemaha, Pawnee and Richardson Counties* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), 88.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Hand-written histories of the school districts in Pawnee County File. Nebraska State Historical Society.
15. *Minutes of the 44th Session of the Nebraska Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church Held in Centenary Church, Beatrice, September 24-26, 1904* (York, Nebraska: Nebraska Newspaper Union, 1905), 40.
16. *Burchard Times*, September 11, 1914.
17. Olson, *Nebraska*, 242-243.
18. Author's parents rented Bookwalter land, 1913-1917.
19. Statement of Mrs. R. A. Broyles, a grandniece of Mr. Bookwalter.
20. *Springfield Daily News*, September 27, 1915.
21. Magie and Jones, *Historic Sites*, 88.
22. *Standard Atlas of Pawnee County, Nebraska* (Chicago: George A. Ogle and Co., 1917).