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Growing Celery in the Platte Valley

BY PATRICIA C. GASTER

Nebraska farmers have long experimented with alternative crops in the hope of bettering their income. For every success story (such as sugar beets in the North Platte Valley), many others failed to find a lasting role in the Nebraska farm economy.

Joseph H. Black was perhaps the first Nebraska celery grower. He farmed south of Kearney between the city and the Platte River. About 1882 he began experimenting with a small patch of celery, which gradually became a substantial operation.¹

Other growers soon entered the field. By 1894 Black was planting twenty-five acres of "White Plume" celery. The Nebraska Department of Agriculture estimated in 1895 that 480,000 pounds of celery had been shipped by Kearney area growers the previous year. Estimates for the total acreage planted in 1898 varied from 100 to 150 acres.²

The *Kearney Daily Hub*, on May 16, 1901, reported the field to be an inviting one that paid better than general farming. About 170 acres were planted to celery in the Kearney area that season, with about fifteen persons engaged in the industry.

Solomon D. Butcher's 1904 photograph of William L. Keller's celery farm, six miles west of Kearney on an island in the Platte River. The boards on both sides of the plants were used to blanch or lighten the color of the stalks and produce a milder flavor.
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"The total of about one hundred and seventy acres seems small to those unacquainted with celery growing," said the *Hub*, "but it represents an industry of considerable magnitude, gives employment to a great deal of labor during the summer, and puts many thousands of dollars in circulation from the sale of the product."

The *Hub* also praised the "superior quality and nutty flavor" of the locally grown celery. In 1907, the Black family fields were pictured in the magazine *Country Life in America* as part of a feature on H. D. Watson's 1733 Ranch.³

Most of the Nebraska celery was shipped by rail to commission houses in Omaha and Kansas City. Gradually other, less stringy varieties were developed in other parts of the country. When the national companies which bought Platte Valley celery started raising crops on their own land, production in the Kearney area gradually stopped.⁴ ■

NOTES

¹ Margaret Stines Nielsen, "The Black Family," *Buffalo Tales* 15 (May-June 1992).

² Mardi Anderson, "Kearney 100 Years Ago, Part II," *Buffalo Tales* 21 (November-December 1998). *Annual Report Nebraska State Board of Agriculture for the Year 1895* (Lincoln: Jacob North & Co.): 96.

³ Nielsen, "The Black Family."

⁴ *Ibid*; Anderson, "Kearney 100 Years Ago, Part II."