



## Biography of James Chambers, Nebraska Pioneer

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Article Summary: James Chambers lived in several Missouri and Kansas communities in his early years. In 1890 he bought the "Old Homestead" near Fairbury, Nebraska, where he ran a cattle-feeding operation. There he and his family experienced the Great Drought of 1890 and the Panic of 1893.

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James Chambers

**BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES CHAMBERS  
NEBRASKA PIONEER**

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*By MARGARET CHAMBERS, Fairbury*

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James Chambers was born near Washington, Indiana, on April 16, 1855. The following October the family came west, locating in Missouri, three miles northeast of Brownville, Nebraska.

It was a great day when the little party of pioneers topped the bluffs west of Rockport, Missouri, and looked over the broad valley spread out below; the great rolling, turbid stream that for centuries had been enriching the "bottom with deposits of silt and alluvial soil. Stretching its devious and shifting length, it barred the way of progress to weary travellers, saying, "Thus far shalt thou come

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Note:—This story of James Chambers was an entry in the 1933 Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska Contest. It has been revised and shortened by the editor, without changing or eliminating any information of importance to Nebraska history.

and no farther, and here shall thy inquiring steps be stayed." Great oaks, maples, walnuts, pawpaws, cottonwoods, with underbrush of hazel and sumac, covered the eastern bluffs with a gorgeous tapestry of red, gold and russet; a fringe of almost impenetrable willows lined the banks of the stream, and blue-stem, shoulder high, waved like a rippling sea over the broad bottom. The rugged bluffs on the west cast purple shadows of evening across the stream, blending and subduing the riot of color on the other side.

The early years on the Missouri were years of toil, hardship and uncertainty; primitive conditions of living and a rapidly increasing family called for an unceasing round of labor. The Civil War with its attendant difficulties—exorbitant prices of food-stuffs and farm machinery—added to the troubles. Days grew into weeks, weeks stretched into years; baby James grew up into plain Jim, a lank, freckle-faced stripling with an innate love of the soil, a leaning toward adventure and a bent for swapping.

Nebraska Territory lay just across the river. Day after day trains of covered wagons topped the eastern bluffs, crept over the "bottom" and ferried across the river to Brownville—"Wagons West"—bound for adventure, open range, cattle upon a thousand hills. Young Jim longed to join them; almost his dream came true. In 1866 my grandfather traded three mules and six young cattle for a quarter section of land south-west of Brownville, but my grandmother refused to cross the river so the land was traded for a seven-acre tract across the river from Brownville. Here my grandfather built a warehouse and boat landing called Rockport Landing. In October, 1868, the St. Joseph and Council Bluffs branch of the Burlington Railroad<sup>1</sup> was completed, affording cheaper and more efficient transportation, spelling doom to further river traffic. In 1869 he sold the warehouse and landing to Harve E. Muir and bought land six miles northeast of Tarkio, Missouri. The Chambers family prospered slowly in a financial way.

At the age of twenty years my father set out on his own with a team of sorrel mules, a wagon and harness. James Chambers married Susannah Shackelford on December 24, 1876, and went to work for Rankin Brothers<sup>2</sup> on one of their ranches. My mother did the cooking and housekeeping for the other hired hands. Here the first daughter, Lena, was born on November 23, 1877. The following spring out of his savings he rigged up an outfit and set out to farm for himself. On July 15, 1880, the little girl, Lena, was seized

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<sup>1</sup>A consolidation of the St. Joseph and Council Bluffs with the Missouri Valley on April 1, 1870, formed the Kansas City, St. Joseph and Council Bluffs Railroad. The C. B. and Q. secured control in 1880. **Poor's Manual of Railroads**, 1878, 1888.

<sup>2</sup>Tarkio Valley has always been associated with the name of David Rankin, "millionaire farmer" and cattle feeder. He was the criterion to go by, the measure of success to which others aspired.

with diphtheria and in a few days passed away. During the five years they remained in Tarkio Valley they had gathered together a drove of young cattle, work mules and a herd of swine. The valley was now thickly populated, opportunities for expansion were becoming rare and, heartsick over the recent loss of their first and only child, my parents set about to look for a new location.

The next four years were years of indecision. In the spring of 1881, after a long cold winter, they set out for Seneca, Kansas, to make their home, crossing the Missouri River on April 9. The next day the river came out, flooding the "bottom" from bluff to bluff, a distance of four miles. Two years were spent in this neighborhood; here a second daughter, Lela, was born on June 30, 1882. However it is not easy to break away from the home of one's youth and two years later found them back in the land of tall corn, possums and pawpaws. Here they purchased an eighty-acre farm and thought they were settled for life, not counting on the fact that "he who has drunk Nile water must return". Two years of farming three-cornered patches and hills brought about the final rupture. Visions of big fields, half-mile rows, wide cattle range and an open skyline haunted waking and sleeping hours. The West was still calling.

On February 6, 1884, a third daughter, Pearl, was born, but the other girl, the little dark-eyed Lela, died that same year on July 16.

An opportunity offered to dispose of the eighty,—the West was again in line. James Chambers came out in March, 1885, and rented a farm from George S. Warren, one mile west and five miles north of Reynolds, Nebraska. Reynolds at that time was a thriving and prosperous village, having moved down when the Burlington railroad was completed in 1880 from the old station of Rose Creek Town, which had been built by Ives Marks, a pioneer minister and founder of Marks Mill.

W. C. Parker was the first to locate in Reynolds, running a general country store. A potter by trade, his original home had been Luthersburg, Pennsylvania. He had come west at the request of Moses Porter, who owned land at Old Town. The growing need of crockeryware and stone utensils, the difficulty of transporting them, and a good grade of potter's clay in the vicinity combined to produce a pottery in Lemonville, two miles west of Reynolds, with W. C. Parker potter. Eventually he became the leading merchant. W. Webster was the harness maker and shoe cobbler; Joseph Goellor, druggist; and Than Moore, the village blacksmith. Jim Taylor owned and operated another general merchandise store and later L. L. Garrison set up in business. Joseph Saunders was postmaster and merchant and later became the banker of the town. Frank Benedict was the first depot agent.

On October 26, mother came out on the train with her two little girls, Pearl, almost two, and a new baby, Bessie, nine days old. The train arrived at 7:15 and the journey was safely made through six miles of black night to the new home. A long wearisome day was finished and a new life begun. Next morning the glorious October sunshine flooded the rolling prairies and newly broken fields with golden light, the meadow larks were singing,—the clear resilient air was filled with the promise of a new day.

Five years were spent on the Warren land, five years of growth and development. Rainfall was plentiful, new settlers arrived and filled up the vacant sections, the prairie was rapidly broken up and put to crop. Roads began to follow section lines instead of angling across the prairie. Young cattle were plentiful; every farmer would have a bunch of yearlings or two-year-olds. James Chambers built up sheds of straw for shelter, set up feed lots, gathered up cattle over the country and fattened them for market.

On September 13, 1887, I was born, the last of the family. A number of other important event occurred that year; villages were being born all over the country with the building of the Rock Island Railroad.<sup>3</sup> Gladstone appeared seven miles north and one east of Reynolds; Thompson four miles east; Mahaska, Kansas, to the south—taking to themselves for trade territory the rich tablelands and leaving to Reynolds the meagre lands of Rose Creek valley. Reynolds still lives and her people carry on bravely, but the glory that was Reynolds is gone.

During that summer father was in the bank on business and Mr. Saunders called him out to his garden back of the bank to show him the new tame grass that was being sent out as an experiment. There were three rows of alfalfa across the garden, rank, thrifty and promising. Other features of the garden were rare species of budded peaches and fruit trees, forerunners of orchards that were to spring up on the newly laid out farms.

These five years of prosperity seemed to warrant the purchase of land and in 1890 father bought a quarter section five miles southwest of Fairbury from Charles Wyatt and Ellis Mendenhall. He paid \$3300.00, giving a mortgage for part, and built a house, barn, feedlots, etc. C. W. Crouse, newly arrived from Illinois, did most of the carpenter work. At the same time my uncle, George Chambers, bought the quarter joining on the west from Nelse McDowell and broke out eighty acres, sowing it to flax. On September 13, 1890, we moved from the Warren place to the home which was ever after known as the "Old Homestead", although not so, strictly speaking. The total assets amounted to said land, six head of work

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<sup>3</sup>Chicago, Kansas and Nebraska Railway, a subsidiary of the Rock Island. **Poor's Manual of Railroads**, 1888.

mules, cattle, thirty stock hogs, three little daughters and a mortgage, which for some time appeared to be the most thriving "crittur" of the lot.

The "Old Homestead" lies in the center of a high tableland between the Blue River and Rose Creek. This location is ideal for the cattle feeding industry; two miles south lie the pasture lands on the brakes of Rose Creek, available for summer pasture and the source of cattle for fattening. Our Rose Creek neighbors were splendid people, a large body of them centered around the meeting house of the Church of Christ—James and William Quinn, John Shutt, Brother Collins, Dad Rhodes, George Myers, Eli Fickett, Eli Drake, Marion Pigg and others. Rev. J. O. Cramb, a Methodist minister, lived one mile east and one south and Luther C. Davis, the pioneer sheep man of Jefferson County, lived—and still lives—one mile south of Kesterson. In 1889 the half section joining us on the east was purchased by the county for a county poor farm. W. F. Downey was overseer. W. W. Simmons lived across from the poor farm, C. M. Long was next on the west and J. S. Records lived across the road from us. Ed Lawrence lived farther south and J. M. Koch a mile west.

To the northwest was the German Settlement; the Schoenrocks, Kujaths, Starks, Ridders, Junkers, Sieverts, Kriesels, Humfeldts, Fieths, Witts and many others reaching out to Gladstone, Alexandria and Daykin. These were also a splendid type of people, strictly agricultural with a few exceptions. They tended their land well and kept small herds of cattle; every year they would have a bin of corn, a crop of calves, a few colts and perhaps some hogs.

In the fall father would gather up odds and ends of cattle in the vicinity, sort out the inferior ones to ship to market and put the best in the feed lot for fattening. At that time two and three-year-old cattle were fattened and sometimes five or six-year-olds. Their corn he would buy up and store in cribs, bins and many times in a great rick in the edge of the pasture next to the feedlot.

Many other cattle feeders carried on extensive feeding operations in a like manner. Those in the immediate vicinity were George Cramb, four and one-half miles northwest of the "Old Homestead", and S. M. Barnes, north of him. Mr. Barnes was a cripple from rheumatism and went about in a buggy gathering up his cattle for feeding. W. S. Rounds, merchant and elevator man at Thompson, three and one-half miles southwest; George L. Smith, straight south on the Kansas line; and James Hughes, his neighbor on the northeast, were neighboring cattle men. Near Fairbury, McLucas Brothers, John C. Kesterson, the Mendenhalls and the Robinson boys each fed a string of cattle. The Helveys fed northwest of Fairbury and Walter Nutter ruled the roost around Endicott and Steele City.

The early nineties in Nebraska were anything but the gay years of song and story. The Great Drought came on in the year 1890 after the "Old Homestead" was purchased. This was the beginning of sorrows. 1891 brought a good crop and fair prices; father bought Uncle George's quarter that year for \$3200.00, assuming the mortgage. 1892 ushered in Cleveland's Administration and in 1893 came the Panic. Banks broke, factories shut down, merchants failed, prices of farm products fell to the lowest point and unemployment was rampant. In May, 1893, Coxey, leading his army of unemployed, passed through Fairbury on their way to Washington to protest to Congress. Farmers volunteered to help them over the road, hauling them in wagons as far as Wymore, preferring to do this rather than feed them for any considerable time.

On June 4, 1895, thinking to further his feeding operations, father bought a half-section of pasture land on the brakes of Rose Creek from Mrs. Mary Ingraham for \$2000.00. So rough in some places that there was not enough level room to whip a dog on, it was promptly and paradoxically named "The Flats". But there was rich grass, an abundance of spring water and plenty of shade. It seemed a good investment. However, circumstances, in the form of drought, hog cholera, interest, taxes etc., intervened and almost spelled ruin to the Chambers exchequer.

We were still in the throes of the Panic. Money was tight. That year father had two hundred acres of corn which, on the morning of July 28, stood rank and green, promising fifty bushels per acre. In the evening, after twelve hours of hot winds, nothing remained but blistered white stalks, too immature to even make fodder. Out of a large crop of fall pigs that were farrowed soon after only the most promising were allowed to live, the brood sows were carried over and there was sufficient roughage to carry over the sixty cattle on hand.

That year the mortgage became due. There was nothing with which to pay but "sport and laughter", and that was below par on the market. Father offered to turn over the land to the mortgagees without cost of foreclosure, but through the kindness of these people this was foregone. Perhaps the land was not worth the foreclosure costs.

That winter there was little to do. Father decided to clean up "The Flats" of dead timber and offered the neighbors all the trees save that large enough for fence posts if they would grub out the stumps. This offer was accepted and "The Flats" rang all winter with strokes of axe and maul.

The yield of corn in 1896 was enormous. Father had 230 hogs on the first of August. Then came the plague of cholera. Hogs died like flies. For one month the stench of burning hog flesh filled the air and when the plague lifted only thirty-two of the would-be

mortgage lifters remained, immune to further contagion. Back to the starting point; we had to reorganize completely. "The Flats" were sold to E. A. Wood of Chicago; the west eighty to Peter McCurdy. A new crop of pigs came on in February, the feed lots were filled again and busy days followed in which father "traded all the beds off for lanterns and worked day and night".

A new problem arose. The breaking up of the prairie meant a shortage of hay for horses and cattle. Clover and timothy did not thrive in this country. Father thought of the sample of alfalfa in Joe Saunders' back yard. Why not try that? In the spring of 1896 he planted ten acres; George Cramb and S. M. Barnes also planted a small field. It grew well, so the experiment was continued and others joined in. Soon there were great fields of alfalfa. These three were the first to sow alfalfa in Jefferson County.

The fall of 1896 was the year of the Great Commoner's entrance into national politics. Everybody was concerned; men and women argued on street corners and all but came to blows concerning party merits. Children left their play to argue high tariff, free silver, sixteen-to-one and other timely issues. McKinley was elected. Confidence was restored, markets picked up, rain came, crops increased and people again smiled. Everyone worked with a will—"some gentleman's nigger had to do the work, and if the nigger wouldn't work, the gentleman himself would have to roll up his sleeves and go to it".

In 1902 father built a hay barn fitted with a track carrier to unload the hay from the wagon and with open sheds for shelter for the cattle. While this seems very primitive now, it was a great advance then. This barn was patterned after one of the Rankin barns in Missouri and was the first one to be built in this part of the country.

Father's liking for mules increased with the years. In scouting around over the country he discovered lone specimens here and there, well built and shapely, but rough and shaggy and unbroke. So along with the cattle he bought up, in 1900, twenty-five young mules, fed them well, sheared their manes and tails and broke them to work. In February he sold them to Art Evans for a neat profit. It was this sale that cleaned the last remnant of mortgage from the farm and free from debt for the first time in years, he went home and slept like a hired hand. This venture promised well; there were many mules grown then, the time of feeding was short and there was a ready sale for the finished product.

I. Bonham of Mahaska, pioneer farmer and dealer in cattle and mules, was a frequent visitor at our home, and often bought a draught of mules from the lots to fill out a carload that went to the Kansas City or St. Louis markets. In October, 1905, father had a round hundred head of sleek-coated, long-eared gentlemen



Chambers Feed Lots, 1905

in the feed lots. Mr. Bonham came, took dinner and, as customary, the dickering began. It continued. Father was out to get the best price for his stock; Mr. Bonham was out to get them as cheap as he could. There seemed to be no middle ground. Finally Mr. Bonham said, "Mr. Chambers, I'm just going to make you one more bid. I'm going to bid you goodnight." Father answered, "Very well, Mr. Bonham, these mules are paid for and they have a good home. Any time you get your trading clothes on, I'm ready to trade". That meant things were getting interesting. Before he left, Mr. Bonham bought ninety head for the sum of \$11,760.00.

September, 1901, brought the Rural Delivery with L. L. Rise as mail carrier, who continued on this route thirty years, being pensioned in 1932. April, 1902, brought us the rural telephone of the Independent Company, which was eventually swallowed up by the Bell Telephone Company. These connections with the outside world mark a decided progress; daily reports of markets were available and this information was extremely valuable. They also mark an approaching discontent, divine or otherwise. Cultural advantages and news from foreign lands encroached upon the simple pastoral life. Years of toil and planning were yielding rapid returns; added means brought more luxuries, higher education and gradually a movement of youth away from the farm.

1901-1908 were mostly years of financial progress. The cattle feeding industry was at its best; except for minor problems everything was going smoothly. The problem of insufficient water arose; the gas engine had not arrived and, with deep wells and more or less calm weather when windmills were inactive, the water supply was often low. This was solved, in a measure, by building huge reservoirs or cisterns.

The labor problem was beginning to be troublesome. The man who hired out by the year or month for so much a month, his board, washing and a horse to ride on Sunday became less and less common. Transient laborers appeared, moving from the south to the north as the wheat harvest advanced, demanding exorbitant wages and shorter hours. Labor unions, successful in controlling factory labor but unsuccessful in farm labor, increasing labor strikes and shorter factory hours, created dissatisfaction among farm laborers so that the situation became increasingly difficult.

At fifty-three years of age, because of these difficulties and rheumatism brought on by years of exposure to the elements, father thought to retire partially and rented part of the farm, retaining twenty acres for light farming. On February 24, 1908, he called a sale of stock on hand: thirty-nine mules, four cows, one horse, farm machinery, "one thousand other things, not worth a dollar and a half, and four hundred lanterns which I will exchange for beds". Three days before the sale snow filled the country lanes with drifts. The sale was postponed a week and then the sale ring was made up of a mound of trampled snow and the thermometer was near zero. J. B. (Boss) Wright of Diller "cried" the sale and S. M. Bailey was clerk.

On March 14, while shelling a crib of corn, father was picking seed corn from an extension feed on the sheller. His coat caught in the gearing and in attempting to remove it his right hand was drawn into the gears and cut off. In spite of this handicap he continued for some time to do farm work, driving two and four-horse teams with the lines tied and thrown around his back. Seven years he struggled on against odds. Labor troubles increased; renting the land was not entirely successful. In 1915 we moved to Fairbury to make our home. In March, 1917, father sold the farm to Fritz and August Ridder, and invested in mortgage loans and bonds.

Father's success may be based on his belief, often repeated, that it always is poor policy to follow the crowd that is stampeding in one direction but rather to head the other way; when the crowd turns, as it always does, you will be at the head and not the tail of the procession.

My father, James Chambers, still lives, but my mother passed away on July 30, 1919. Pioneers are passing. "Wagons West" are no more, but these hardy men and women who braved the hardships of pioneer life have laid a foundation on which this generation may build for the future a finer structure than that of the past.

