



Biographical Sketch of Edward Creighton

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: Creighton organized the construction of public works, particularly telegraph lines, across the country and became a major stockholder in Western Union. Later he was one of the first to raise cattle in western Nebraska. When the First National Bank of Omaha was founded, he was elected its first president

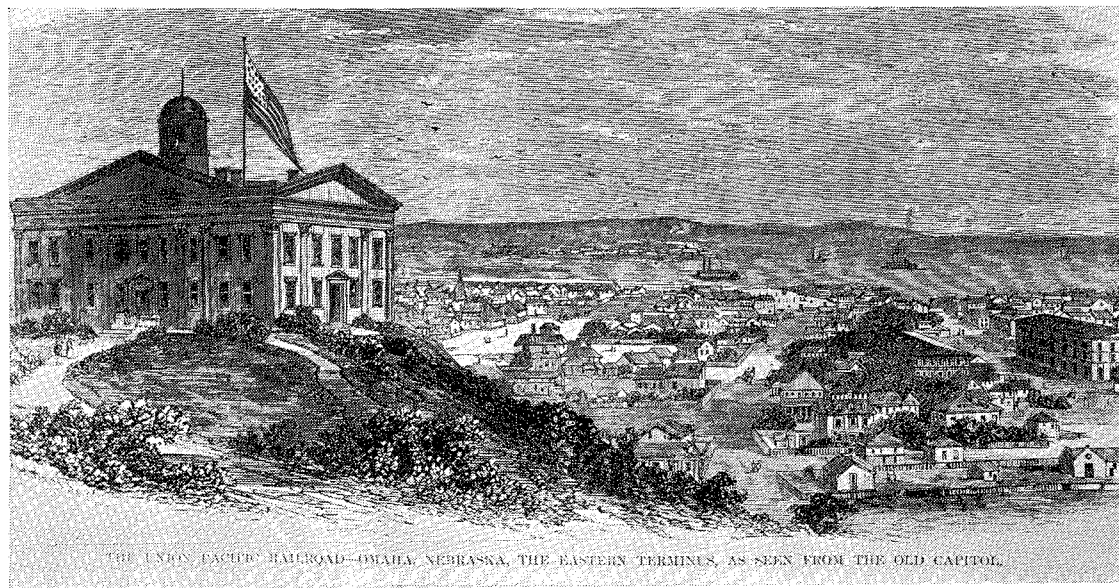
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Photographs / Images: Omaha from Capitol Hill, 1869; Missouri River from Fontenelle Forest



Omaha, From Capitol Hill, December, 1869

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF EDWARD CREIGHTON

By ALFRED SORENSON

A pioneer is "one who goes before, as into the wilderness, to prepare the way for others to follow".

The name of Edward Creighton will ever remain pre-eminently interwoven in the history of the pioneer development of Nebraska and the vast trans-Missouri country. Born in Ohio in the year 1820, he began his business career when a mere youth, as a wagon freighter between Cincinnati and Cumberland, in Maryland, but the profits were not large enough to satisfy the ambitious young man, and he accordingly decided to enter some other field that might prove more remunerative, leading to fortune and fame.

On May 24, 1844, an event of world-wide importance occurred that soon changed the tide in favor of Edward Creighton. It was the sending of the first telegraphic message, "What hath God wrought," from the United States Supreme Court room in Washington to Baltimore.

After many years of struggle and privation, Samuel F. B. Morse had succeeded in demonstrating the practicability of his great invention. For years he had appealed in vain to the National Congress to promote the electric telegraph, but in the closing hour of the session of 1843—it was midnight—he was granted \$30,000 with which to carry out his idea. Morse had retired early in the evening, discouraged, hopeless, and worn out. Imagine his surprise when he arose next morning and learned that Congress had extended him a helping hand. The Washington-Baltimore line was constructed within fifteen months and then the memorable initial message was transmitted.

Immediately following the announcement of Morse's success short telegraph lines were erected here and there. Their operation proved beyond a doubt the general usefulness of the invention. Capitalists, who had for some time regarded it as the dream of a visionary, were soon won over and invested large sums of money in the enterprise. In 1856 these capitalists brought about a consolidation of all the weak and small companies into one strong organization—The Western Union Telegraph Company.

Among the far-seeing men who accomplished this result was Hiram Sibley, a banker and a seed raiser of national fame who had become deeply interested in the early experiments

of Morse, and had the greatest faith in him. Sibley was of great assistance in securing the thirty-thousand dollar appropriation from Congress.

Another investor was Ezra Cornell who also had the utmost confidence in Morse, believing from the very first that his electro-magnetic experiments would eventually be crowned with success. As early as 1842 Cornell had suggested that telegraph wires be strung on poles. When the telegraph was put in operation he devoted his best energies to the construction of lines.

Still another man of great wealth, Jephtha H. Wade of Cleveland, Ohio, likewise placed unbounded reliance in Morse and his marvelous invention, and became a heavy investor in the new enterprise.

In the early days of the telegraph, Edward Creighton, who had abandoned wagon freighting to take up public works construction, secured an important contract—the repairing of the National Turnpike between Springfield, Ohio, and Cumberland, Maryland. He next entered upon the work of telegraph construction. During the years from 1847 to 1859 he built thousands of miles of telegraph connecting Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, Buffalo, Chicago, St. Louis and several southern points. In 1859 he was engaged by a contractor named Stebbins to build the Missouri & Western from St. Louis to Omaha. This was the first line to reach Nebraska. It was completed on October 6, 1860, and in the evening of that memorable day several messages were transmitted between Omaha and Brownville. On the following day connections were made with all eastern points. From his numerous contracts Mr. Creighton accumulated \$25,000.

In 1859, after unsuccessful attempts had been made in 1857 and 1858 to lay an Atlantic Ocean cable, Mr. Creighton planned to run a telegraph line up the Pacific Coast to Bering Strait across which he proposed to sink a cable, and, by extending a wire through Russia, connect Europe and America. He induced the Western Union to make the survey and his plan would in all probability have been carried out if Cyrus W. Field had not made headway with his Atlantic project, finally meeting with success in 1867.

While constructing the Missouri & Western Mr. Creighton had conceived the idea of a line from Omaha to the Pacific coast. In the summer of 1860 he journeyed to Cleveland where he laid his plans before Mr. Wade in the hope of interesting him and his associates in the undertaking. Mr. Wade, thoroughly familiar with the success of Mr. Creighton as a builder, carefully considered the proposition and was most

favorably impressed with the project. He was a large stockholder in the Western Union—already grown to large proportions—and, assisted by Hiram Sibley and Ezra Cornell, he convinced the company of the feasibility of a line to the Pacific coast. The Western Union accordingly agreed to finance Mr. Creighton's preliminary survey.

On the 15th day of November, 1860, Mr. Creighton began his long trip, starting from Omaha. Traveling by stage to Salt Lake City he there made the acquaintance of the great Mormon ruler—Brigham Young—who became his lifelong friend.

Mr. Creighton pushed on from Salt Lake City alone on horseback. It was a long, wearisome and perilous ride. The snow was deep, the weather was intensely cold, and he suffered from a frost-bitten face. His route lay through a region occupied here and there by hostile Indians. However, the adventurous and brave prospector urged his faithful steed on and on, along precipitous mountain paths, through lonely valleys, across dreary plains, following the trail of the Pony Express until at last, after many fatiguing days, he rode into Sacramento, where he met Mr. Wade, who had come to the Pacific coast by steamer via the Isthmus of Panama.

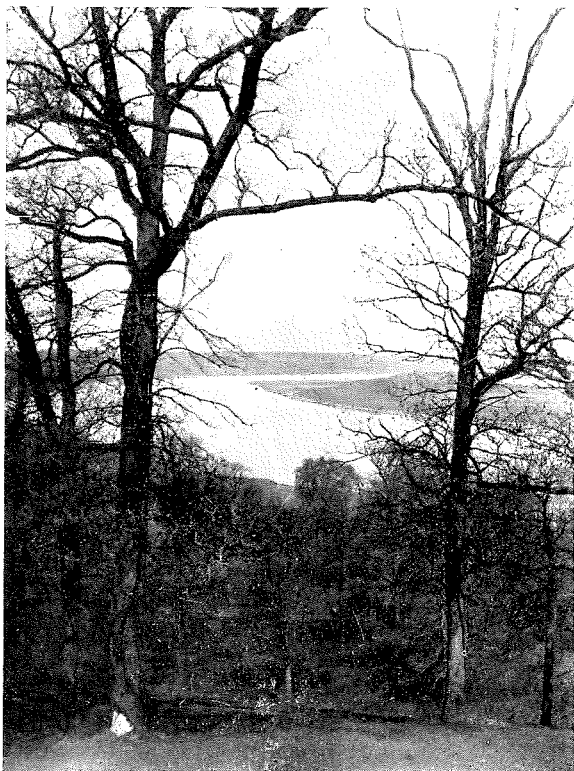
The California State Telegraph Company had erected a line from San Francisco to Sacramento. A conference with the officials of that organization by Creighton and Wade resulted in an agreement under which the California corporation was to build a line to Salt Lake, there to connect with a line to be constructed by Mr. Creighton from Julesburg, Nebraska Territory, (now Colorado), the Missouri & Western meantime having strung its wires from Omaha to that point.

On July 4, 1861, Mr. Creighton began construction with a large and well organized force. So rapidly was the work pushed that the wires were run into Salt Lake City on October 17th and on that eventful day Mr. Creighton sent this telegram over the new line from Fort Bridger, where he happened to be, to his wife in Omaha:

"This being the first message over the new line since its completion to Salt Lake allow me to greet you. In a few days the oceans will be united."

A week later the California wires reached Salt Lake and were connected with those of the Creighton line. The joining of the two systems was telegraphed east and west, the event being the sensation of the day from coast to coast.

That telegram sounded the death knell of the famous Pony Express. The riders of this company carried letters from St. Joseph, Missouri, the then western terminus of rail-



Missouri River From Fontenelle Forest

way communication, to the Pacific coast. The average time of the daring day and night expert horsemen, covering 2,000 miles, was eight days, and the charge was five dollars a letter.¹

By making Omaha the initial point of the Pacific Telegraph Mr. Creighton undoubtedly largely influenced President Lincoln in locating the eastern terminus of the Union Pacific Railroad at Council Bluffs and Omaha.

The Western Union now doubled its capital stock and that of the Pacific company was tripled, thus increasing Mr. Creighton's share in the latter corporation to \$300,000. Pacific stock now rose rapidly from 28 cents to 85 cents, and Mr. Creighton sold one-third of his holdings for \$85,000, leaving him \$200,000 in shares. This was the solid foundation of a

¹Editor's Note:—Root and Connelley gives the rate as five dollars a half ounce in the beginning,—later reduced to one dollar for the half ounce. Letters were usually written on tissue paper.

fortune which grew year by year until Mr. Creighton became a very wealthy man. He was general superintendent of the Pacific Telegraph during its construction, and was president and general manager from the time of its completion until 1867.

During the year 1865 the telegraph line was subject to frequent attacks from hostile Indians, but Mr. Creighton, ever alert, kept it open with a patrol of thirty brave men from the Eleventh Ohio cavalry who, under cover of the night, repaired the damage done by the red-skin vandals.²

Soon after the opening of the Pacific Telegraph, Mr. Creighton sold his oxen and wagons to Brigham Young and engaged in freighting on an extensive scale with an entirely new outfit. One of his freight trains, hauled by forty teams

²Editor's Note:—Ware gives an interesting account of Indian experience with the telegraph in his **Indian War of 1864**,

"In order to give the Indians a profound respect for the wire, chiefs had formerly been called in and had been told to make up a story and then separate. When afterwards the story was told to one operator where one chief was present, it was told at another station to the other chief in such a way as to produce the most stupendous dread. No effort was made to explain it to the Indians upon any scientific principle, but it was given the appearance of a black and diabolical art. The Indians were given some electric shocks; and every conceivable plan, to make them afraid of the wire, was indulged in by the officers and employes of the company, it being much to their financial advantage to make the Indian dread the wire.

"About a Year Before We Were There, a party of Indian braves crossed the line up by O'Fallon's Bluffs, and one Indian who had been down in "The States", as it was called, and thought he understood it, volunteered to show his gang that they must not be afraid of it, and that it was a good thing to have the wire up in their village to lariat ponies to. So he chopped down a pole, severed the wire and began ripping it off from the poles. They concluded to take north with them, up to their village on the Blue Water River, about as much as they could easily drag. It was during the hot summer weather. They cut off nearly a half-mile of wire, and all of the Indians in single file on horseback catching hold of the wire, proceeded to ride and pull the wire across the prairie towards their village. After they had gone several miles and were going over the ridge, they were overtaken by an electric storm, and as they were rapidly traveling, dragging the wire, by some means or other a bolt of lightning, so the story goes, knocked almost all of them off their horses and hurt some of them considerably. Thereupon they dropped the wire, and coming to the conclusion that it was punishment for their acts and that it was "bad medicine", they afterwards let it alone. The story of it, being quite wonderful, circulated with great rapidity among the Indians, and none of them could ever afterwards be found who would tamper with the wire. They would cut down a pole and use the wood for cooking, but they stayed clear of the wire, and the operation of the telegraph was thus very rarely obstructed".

of oxen, and transporting merchandise and miners' supplies for western traders, netted him \$60,000. This train took goods into Montana in 1863, soon after the discovery of gold in Alder Gulch, later known as Virginia City.

Mr. Creighton's last important contract was the grading of a section of the Union Pacific Railroad. When this job was finished, he had in his service a large number of men, and instead of ceasing his strenuous activities with a fortune, after thirty years of constant work, he decided to engage in cattle raising in order to give continuance of employment to many of his faithful laborers. He accordingly gave a part ownership to his former assistants and most reliable workmen. Mr. Creighton, an excellent judge of character, carefully selected his helpers. In a few years he became one of the largest livestock raisers in the western country and the owner of extensive ranches. He was a pioneer in western cattle raising, setting the pace for others to follow.³

When the First National Bank of Omaha was organized in 1863 Mr. Creighton subscribed for a large block of stock. He was elected its first president, and held that office until the day of his death. In the financial panic of 1873 he offered to back the First National Bank with his entire fortune. He was a director of the First National Bank of Denver and also of the Rocky Mountain National Bank of Central City, Colorado.

In 1869 Mr. Creighton helped to organize the Omaha & North Western Railroad Company, which built a track from Omaha to Herman, a distance of forty-seven miles, and in 1876 extended it seven miles to Tekamah. This trackage is now a part of the Chicago and North Western system. Mr. Creighton always gave his hearty support to any enterprise that made for the upbuilding of Omaha and Nebraska. He was a public spirited citizen, having a sterling character and a generous heart. He was one who loved his fellow man. He was stricken with paralysis and died November 5, 1874. He was in the prime of life, dying at the comparatively early age of fifty-four years, mourned by all who knew him.

During his active career Edward Creighton was ably assisted in all his undertakings by his loyal brother, John A. Creighton, generally known as Count Creighton, the title having been conferred upon him by the Pope as an acknowledgment of his many private charitable deeds and public benefactions.

Edward Creighton often regretted his lack of education and frequently declared his intention of founding a college

³Editor's Note:—Bratt says that Creighton built the first ranch in Wyoming.—probably in 1867.

as had been done by his old colleagues, Ezra Cornell and Hiram Sibley. He died intestate, but his wife, who departed this life in 1876, provided \$100,000 in her will for the foundation of Creighton College, in accordance with the oft-expressed wish of her husband. This college was housed in a single stately building and in the course of a few years it was developed into a university, occupying numerous completely equipped departmental structures of handsome architecture. This achievement was largely due to liberal contributions by Count Creighton, who took great pride in thus assisting in the perpetuation of the memory of his beloved brother.

Today Creighton University is one of the leading educational institutions of the United States, attracting students from all sections of the country. It will ever remain a deserved and noble monument, honoring the name of *Edward Creighton*, eminent Nebraska pioneer.

