



Irish Pioneers of Nebraska

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

This article is copyrighted by History Nebraska (formerly the Nebraska State Historical Society). You may download it for your personal use.

For permission to re-use materials, or for photo ordering information, see:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/re-use-nshs-materials>

Learn more about *Nebraska History* (and search articles) here:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/nebraska-history-magazine>

History Nebraska members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* annually:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/get-involved/membership>

Full Citation: Ralph G Coad, "Irish Pioneers of Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 17 (1936): 170-177

Article Summary: Coad describes the prominent roles that his father, his uncle, and other Nebraskans of Irish heritage played in nineteenth-century Nebraska.

Cataloging Information:

Names: James Ferry, Edward Creighton, J Sterling Morton, Sam G Daily, Experience Estabrook, Mark M Coad, Mike Brady, Jim Kelly, John A McShane

Nebraska Place Names: Nebraska City, Omaha

Keywords: Edward Creighton; First National Bank of Omaha; Union Pacific Railroad; telegraph; freighting; cattle raising; Sam G Daily; Mark M Coad; Russell, Majors, and Waddell; Nebraska Land and Cattle Company; Armour-Cudahy Company

Photographs / Images: Union Pacific depot at Omaha, September 1868



Union Pacific Depot at Omaha, September, 1868

IRISH PIONEERS OF NEBRASKA

(Portions of an address by Ralph G. Coad at the Irish American Club of Omaha, January 18, 1937)

* * * *

The man who built the first territorial capitol in Omaha was James Ferry, who was born in Ireland. He was the first contractor in the city of Omaha, and most of the early buildings were built by him. He was the father-in-law of John Rush, and the Rush family, as many of you know, was a very leading and important family in Omaha for a number of years. The first white child born in Omaha was Margaret Ferry, a daughter of James and Mrs. Ferry.

The first register of deeds of Omaha was an Irishman by the name of Tom O'Connor. He had his office in the clothing store of Vincent Burkley, Frank Burkley's father. The assistant register of deeds was John A. Creighton. Now that I have referred to John A. Creighton, let me tell you about his older brother, Ed. Creighton. I believe Ed. Creighton had more to do with the development of Omaha than any other man.

Ed. Creighton's parents were born in Ireland, and he was born in Ohio, in 1820. He first worked on the turnpikes in western Pennsylvania and New York, and later got into the construction of telegraph lines. He constructed a large number of telegraph lines in western New York and Ohio, and from Chicago to St. Louis.

In 1860, Ed. Creighton constructed the lines from St. Louis up to this point. Mr. Creighton then conceived the idea of constructing a telegraph line from Omaha to the Pacific Coast. He took a trip back to Cleveland, Ohio, to see his financiers, men who had financed him in other enterprises, a Mr. Wade, Mr. Sibley, and Mr. Cornell. By the way, Mr. Sibley's grandson is now the president of the United States Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Cornell was the founder of Cornell University.

These men were very much interested in Mr. Creighton's undertaking and instructed him to make a survey of the line. Mr. Creighton immediately came back to Omaha and started his trip on horseback over the Rocky Mountains setting out his trail for the telegraph lines. He was met in San Francisco by Mr. Wade and was then given instructions to build the line, which Mr. Creighton did in the following years. The eastern terminus of this line was Omaha. Mr. Creighton received a large amount of stock in this telegraph company, and this money was the foundation of the Creighton wealth.

From the time Mr. Creighton arrived in Omaha he was its leading citizen. Creighton had the greatest visions of any of the early

settlers, and he had force behind him. He was the first wealthy man to settle in Omaha.

In 1863 he established the First National Bank of Omaha, and put Mr. Herman Kountze in charge of it. He established the First National Bank of Denver, and put one of the other Kountze brothers in charge of that bank. Mr. Creighton was the first president of these two banks.

Through the Omaha abstracts of title you will often see Ed. Creighton's name. In the early 1860's he bought considerable property in Omaha, generally paying a fair price. He had considerable land in the northwest part of Omaha along Military Avenue. This, during his ownership was divided into farms. He also owned a large tract of land south and west of Hanscom Park, and also a number of building lots in the old town site.

Mr. Creighton's activities, though, were not confined to Omaha. After building the telegraph line he became instrumental in getting the Union Pacific to establish its eastern terminus in the city of Omaha. One of the reasons for the Union Pacific accepting Omaha for its eastern terminus was that the telegraph line was already here. When the Union Pacific was located at Omaha, the success of Omaha was well assured. Therefore, it can likely be said that Ed. Creighton had more to do with the development of Omaha than any other man.

Before leaving the subject of telegraph lines, I wish to make this comment. Creighton was with his construction crew in the western part of the state, and they were working several hundred oxen. Winter came on and Ed. Creighton ordered his men back to the river, and to get back as quickly as they could by using the horses and mules. They were to leave the oxen. If in the spring the oxen were dead, they would be able to get some more.

The following spring when they returned, they found the oxen in very good condition. Mr. Creighton then made the observation that cattle could rustle for themselves in the winter time on our western plains. Thus was the discovery of ranching in western Nebraska. Mr. Shumway, in his **History of Western Nebraska**, gives my father joint credit with Creighton in the discovery of cattle raising on our western plains.

Creighton had a freighting outfit and did considerable freighting between Omaha and Denver, and also in the Dakotas and Montana. His cousin, Long Jim Creighton, was in charge of his freighting business.

After the railroad was finished, Creighton started a large ranch on the North Platte River in western Nebraska. This ranch, by the way, was across the river and east a little distance from the ranch my father and uncle owned.

Creighton died in 1874, and left a request to his widow to start a college so as to give the youth of this city an opportunity for an education. This college was started two years later and was helped along in its course by Ed. Creighton's younger brother, John A. Creighton, who is often referred to as "Count Creighton."

Think of the thousands of business and professional men of Nebraska who have been educated at that University, and what an influence they have had on this State. There is no other nationality which can add up all of its achievements in this State which could compare in its influence to this one act of the Creightons.

The first Congressional fight in Nebraska was between J. Sterling Morton, the Democrat, and Sam G. Daily, the Republican.¹ Daily had settled in the bottoms near what is now Peru, Nebraska. Daily's farm was five miles from the farm of my grandfather, John Leahy. My grandfather and Daily were very close and intimate friends. Daily was a fighter, and he was shrewd. He was a very wise politician. He was a rough and tumble type, and somehow he put it over the Republicans and obtained their nomination for Congress. The Democrats that year put up J. Sterling Morton of Nebraska City, who was very dignified and cultured.

The campaign between Daily and Morton was hot and furious. My uncle, Patrick Leahy, who was then a young man of sixteen or seventeen, drove Daily to a number of his meetings where he debated Morton. He often told me of that campaign. He said that Morton was well educated and had a wonderful vocabulary. His speech was clear and distinct. His delivery was forceful and he carried an air of superiority. In his debates he would ridicule Daily and make fun of Daily's brogue.

Daily had gone to school but five or six years in Ireland before coming to America. He had a very limited vocabulary. He had an excellent Irish brogue, and his wit was very keen. He had pathos in his voice which few men possessed.

He would start his speech comparing his struggle for an education with the college education which Morton's father had lavished upon his hopeful son. Then he would gradually win the sympathy of his audience and finally he would start an attack on Morton. With his wit he would have the crowd in an uproar. When he finished his attack Morton was a discredited man. He won every debate. Daily was elected.

¹Editor's note: Daily's first candidacy was in the fourth contest for Nebraska Territorial Delegate in 1859, against Experience Estabrook. Estabrook was first seated, but Congress gave his seat to Daily after investigating the election. Daily's second opponent was Morton, in 1860. He defeated Judge Kinney in 1862.

The Democrats, the next time, ran Experience Estabrook against Daily. Estabrook had been attorney general in Wisconsin before coming to Nebraska. He was the best orator in the State. He challenged Daily to a debate and, much to the surprise of the Democrats and Republicans alike, Daily accepted the challenge. That debate was held at Plattsmouth. My grandfather, although a Democrat, drove to Plattsmouth with Daily. It took two days to make the trip from their farms. Everyone in the State was interested in that debate.

Daily first brought tears to the eyes of his audience and then he started in on the Great Estabrook. The hall was in a riot in a short time. No one who heard the debate had any doubt who was the winner. Estabrook found an excuse for not debating any more in that campaign and Daily went to Congress again. Daily was elected three times. He was never defeated, but he died at New Orleans, in August, 1866.

It will be noted that none of the Irish Pioneers in this State went to school beyond the grades. Not one of them went to high school, yet they were able to compete in business and debate with the graduates of Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Harvard, and Yale. These men studied after leaving school. They had determination, vision, ambition, good constitution and grit.

When I was a young boy the most cultured men, and those best informed on all subjects, and the real educated gentlemen of Omaha were these Irish Pioneers whose heads were white from experience and adventure. John A. Creighton, John D. Creighton, Jim Creighton, John A., James H., Felix J., Tom, and Ed. McShane, E. A. Cudahy, William, Ed., and Joe Hayden, Frank and Andrew Murphy, James E. Boyd, Ben Gallagher, Richard Cushing, Major Furey, John Rush, Mark M. Coad and my father, John F. Coad.

*

*

*

*

*

My uncle, Mark M. Coad, had been in the general merchandise business at Dubuque, Iowa, before coming to Nebraska in 1858. He had a limited amount of capital but succeeded in obtaining credit from a wholesaler of provisions in St. Louis. My father and uncle spent the winter of 1858 in Nebraska City selecting sixteen oxen and two wagons. They then hired Mike Brady as a oxen driver and guide. Brady had made three trips to Denver with the Russell outfit and was very familiar with the route. And Brady was that type of Irishman who loved to be with those who were willing to take a chance, especially if that chance might lead to a good fight.

The provisions which my uncle had ordered from St. Louis were bacon, ham, flour, tobacco, beans, and other food stuffs. These provisions arrived on the first boat that spring along with other

provisions for the Russell outfit. My uncle and father were on hand and loaded immediately. Russell advised my uncle not to try to make the trip alone with two wagons, that the temptation would be too great for the Indians to steal what they had. Russell invited my uncle to wait and to go along with their outfit, but my uncle had a few ideas of his own and refused. They were the first out of Nebraska City that spring, and were the first to arrive in Denver, so they were well rewarded for their daring and speed because they received high prices for their cargo. Denver was low on provisions and they were willing to pay large sums for this new supply of food stuffs.

Nebraska City was a dead place during the winter months of those freighting days. The chief activity in the town was around the saloons. The men had nothing to do until the river opened up in the spring. There was also prevalent among most of the old freighters the idea that the oxen would starve in western Nebraska once the grass was covered with snow. My uncle and father had different ideas on this subject and they spent most of the winters in western Nebraska and eastern Wyoming where they supplied lumber and firewood to the outlying military posts.

It was while they were filling government contracts in supplying lumber to these posts that the idea came to my father of the possibility of running cattle on the Western plains during the winter time. He had observed his oxen rustle for themselves, and the dry grass was cured and was very nutritious for the beasts.

My uncle and my father then started preparing to go into the ranching business as soon as the Union Pacific Railroad was finished. Their freighting business had increased from the two wagons, which they started with, to over fifty wagons and 400 oxen. With the opening of the Union Pacific Railroad, the two strong freighting outfits of Russell, Majors and Waddell, and Hawke and Nuckolls went out of business. My uncle and father had established their ranch on the south side of the Platte, which extended from the Wyoming border to Pumpkin Seed Creek, now Bridgeport. Very little of this land did they own, but they held what the cattlemen called and recognized as possessory rights. My father went to Texas where he contracted for a large herd of Texas cattle to be driven north and delivered at Ogallala, Nebraska.

The cattle business in the western part of our State flourished during the 1870's and early 1880's. Millions of longhorn cattle were driven by the Texas rangers over the Chisholm Trail, and delivered to our ranchers. These cattle grew fat and multiplied, and the Union Pacific Railroad did an enormous business hauling the fatted, grass-feds to the Chicago markets.

During the 1880's people from Iowa and eastern Nebraska started moving in on the ranges. Farming was gradually working westward. Towns were beginning to crop up all along the Union Pacific right of way. Some of the Irish ranchers saw a change coming. Scotch and English corporations started buying ranches. The golden era of ranching appealed to them. The danger of Indian raids was fading and the profits were exceedingly great. Most of these ranches were sold by the Irish to the Nebraska Land and Cattle Co. Ltd. of London, England, in 1883 and 1884. The range was soon thereafter broken up by homesteaders and the Nebraska Land and Cattle Company failed before the 1890's. Mark Coad took a trip back to Ireland to visit his old home town, after he went out of the ranching business. While in Ireland, he went over to Belgium and France and purchased forty head of Percheron draft stallions and mares, and had them shipped to a farm at Fremont, Nebraska, which he had purchased before going to Ireland. This shipment to Nebraska from Europe was the first importation of pedigreed horses into this State. My uncle maintained this farm of fine Percherons until 1907, when he disposed of them, desiring to retire from the horse raising business. Most of the Percheron horses in Nebraska today are descendants of this original shipment of my uncle's.

My father and uncle had several sisters who remained in North Adams, Mass. After they had been ranching several years, my uncle took a trip east to visit his sisters. While there he offered one of his nephews, Jim Kelly, a job on the ranch.

Jim agreed to take the job, but my uncle insisted that he should go to college first. My uncle brought Jim out to Notre Dame and requested the faculty to make an athlete out of him besides giving him an education.

Jim Kelly was a big strapping youth, six feet, two inches tall and weighed about 185 pounds. He took boxing, wrestling, foot racing and gym work. After Jim had been on the ranch but a short time, the news soon spread throughout western Nebraska that the Coads had a real athlete. Jim was made foreman before he was twenty-one. He won all the athletic events at the round-up, and he had the respect of all the tough characters who worked on the ranches in those days. Jim Kelly was the first college-bred cowboy. Many of the other ranchers followed my uncle's example, but without the same results. Jim Kelly was king among the cowboys until he went out of the ranching business in 1886.

My father once related to me the following bit of history: He stated that during the summer of 1879 he was at Ogallala with his brother Mark, and most of the boys from the ranch, waiting for the delivery of a large herd of cattle which he had purchased

in Texas for delivery at the end of the Chisholm trail. He met John A. Creighton there, who also was waiting for a delivery of cattle for his ranch. The day before there had been a number of foot-races among the cowboys from the various ranches. Jim Kelly was the winner. The games ended with wrestling and Jim was recognized as champion.

That night a big fight was started in one of the saloons and Jim Kelly settled the matter in short order. Creighton came over to my father the next day and told him that Ed. had left money to start a college in Omaha. The school was now going, and that in a few years they were going to have on their ranch some athletes as good as Kelly.

During the 1860's, the Union Pacific Railroad was built. A large number of Irish came to this State and sought employment in this construction work. After the Union Pacific was completed, the leading railroad contractors in the State were Irish. Most of them had received their start on the Union Pacific. John Fitzgerald of Lincoln, Richard Cushing, O'Keefes, Callahans, the McShane brothers, Sullivan and many others.

In the latter part of the 1880's, John A. McShane headed a large group of Omaha businessmen in establishing a stock yard and packing center in Omaha. They purchased the land of the Corrigans and Cassidys and a number of other Irish families. They had to get an eastern packer. McShane first interested [George H. Hammond, Fowler Brothers and Sir Thomas Lipton who built the first three large scale packing plants in 1885 and 1886.]

McShane [kept working to get Armour to come to Omaha.] Armour did not want to build in Omaha, but he had a young Irish boy working for him who wanted to be made a partner in Armours. Mr. Armour said he wanted his own boys to have his business, and yet he did not want to lose Cudahy. So the outcome of this was that the Armour-Cudahy Company was organized and it took over the Lipton Packing Houses [in 1887.]

Later Cudahy bought out Armour and Armour built its own packing plant in Omaha.
