



## Twenty-two Years in Keya Paha

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Article Summary: Their daughter describes the accomplishments of pioneers Otto and Ella Mutz, who settled near Ainsworth in 1887. Otto Mutz created an irrigation system on his farm and provided his children with musical instruments, ice skates, and fondly-remembered opportunities to swim, fish, and picnic. Later he became a county judge and a state senator.

Note: This essay won second prize in the Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska 1936 Contest.

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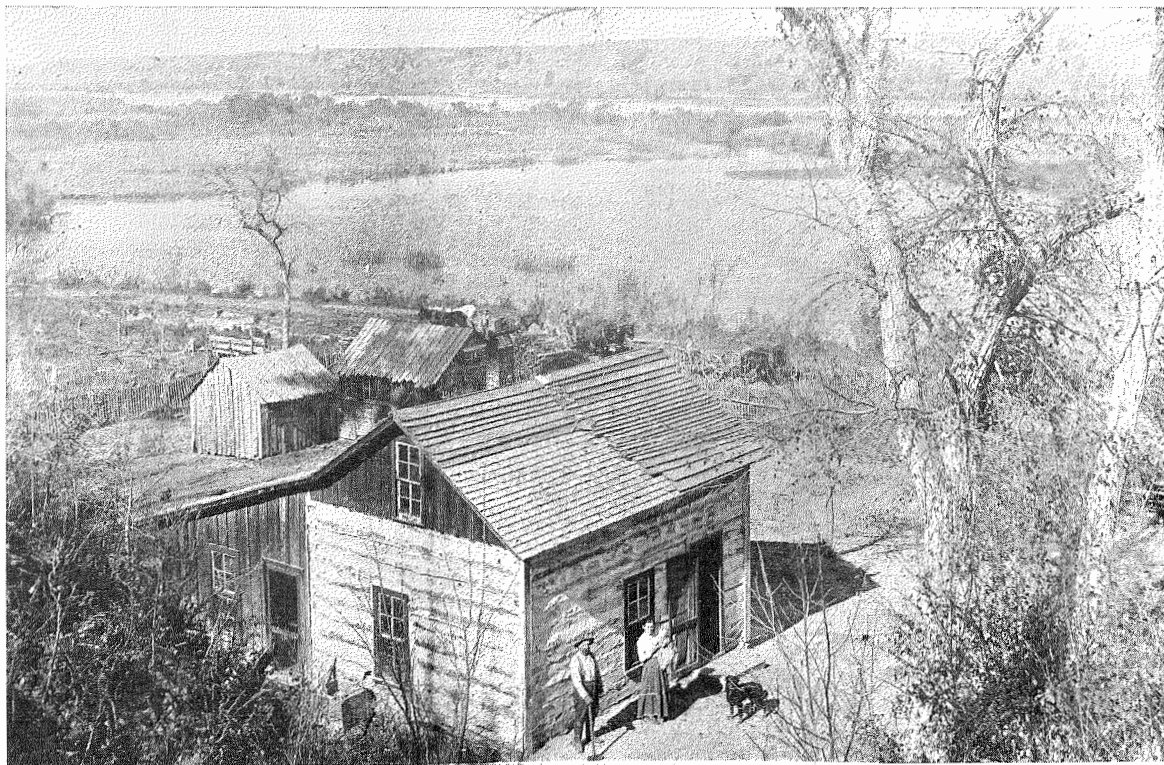
## TWENTY-TWO YEARS IN KEYA PAHA

By MRS. EUNICE MUTZ HEARD, Lincoln  
**Second Prize, Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska,  
1936 Contest.**

The two-seated spring wagon came to a stop at the top of Mead's hill fifteen miles north of Ainsworth, Nebraska. Its occupants peered out from behind well-buttoned curtains. This was their first glimpse of the new country which was to be their future home. At the foot of the hill the Niobrara river hugged its steep south canyon walls, a black ribbon in the thin snow of late February. It was a mild day, presaging an early spring that year—1887.

Ella drew the blanket more closely around the baby in her lap, for a chilly breeze came out of the north. She wondered just which of those valleys held in its purple shadows her new home. She was not quite convinced as to the wisdom of this venture into the unknown. Her mind slipped back to her own childhood, when she had trekked across Iowa into southeastern Nebraska, at the close of the Civil war. Her parents had come in a covered wagon. She thought of her grandmother, who had helped break trails from New England to southern Wisconsin in a still earlier day. She had started out in an ox-drawn prairie schooner. These women had not faltered before the hardships of new lands. But she was leaving behind such precious things: schools for her children, doctors, close neighbors in time of need; relatives and friends, and she loved so much to be with people. There was not even certain mail service in this new country. Her eyes rested on her husband, who had lifted the older children down to stretch their legs. No, she must not—she could not fail him now.

Otto, born "going west" on the Iowa side of the Missouri river in 1855, felt little of all this. A visionary, he was exhilarated by the venture, the opportunity to begin at the very beginning of things in a new country; the chance to help build a culture to his own liking on the frontier; yes, and to make money, sufficient to give his growing family the opportunities he and his wife so much desired for them. His was the restless, surging spirit of the pioneer. Pointing with zest to a gap in the hills, and breathing deeply of the thin, crisp air, he shouted, "See, off there lies the ranch! We'll be there by nightfall!"



Niobrara River, on Road From Johnstown to Springview

And then, with brakes squeaking resentfully, the spring wagon slid perilously down the long slippery hill, passed the Mead ranch house, and crossed the pine-planked bridge over the Niobrara. The Mutz family, Otto, Ella, and five young children, entered Keya Paha county.

The history of the county up to this time had been brief and stormy. It was named for a small tribe of Dakota Indians<sup>1</sup> who had roamed its hills. The lyrical Indian name, meaning "Turtle Hill", refers to the low buttes farther west on the Keya Paha river. James Dahlman, later to figure actively in the political life of the state, as mayor of Omaha, had been a cow-puncher here in the early seventies. Doc Middleton and his gang of horse and cattle thieves had found ample hiding places in the pockets along the two rivers which bordered the county to the north and south, in the early eighties. Kid Wade, his apt young pupil, had been caught and hung to the whistling post at Bassett.

Keya Paha had been separated from Brown county in 1885, after a bitter fight, altho the Ainsworth paper states there was no real reason for the fight; indeed they were better off without it. The village of Springview had been established as county seat after another bitter fight, when there seems to have been little to fight about. It was located on a wide, level table near the center of the county. It stands there today, windmills its main decorative feature, much as it did that February day when the Mutz family for the first time stopped to stock up on supplies for the ranch.

The first election for county officers had been held, with Mr. Farnsworth for judge, Ralph Lewis, a Civil war veteran who had settled on a ranch to the northeast, as treasurer—there was as yet no treasury—and Charles Lear as clerk. Again the Ainsworth paper comments. It seems the election board took it upon themselves to pool the votes of Charles Lear and his brother William, both of whom had been running for clerk, conveniently give the office to Charles, making William his deputy, altho the republican candidate, a Mr. Pyle, had won the election with a vote of eight less than their combined ballots. Strangely, there was no protest action over this. Perhaps for the moment something else mattered more.

Settlers had been coming into the county for some years. In 1880 the railroads began a campaign to colonize northwest Nebraska. At that time there were not over five hundred people in the territory known as Holt county, which included

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<sup>1</sup>Editor's note:—The Smithsonian Indian Handbook does not list any Dakota tribe or band named Keya Paha.

what is now Rock, Brown, Sioux, Box Butte, Keya Paha, Dawes, Sheridan, and a part of Boyd counties.<sup>2</sup> Folders advertising this section were issued by the million and widely distributed from Chicago eastward. These folders stated boldly and in glowing colors that in six years a man could own, if he managed well, 480 acres of fine ranch land. People came, land hungry, home seeking, in covered wagons, and on the railroad, as the advertisers had hoped.

This advertising attracted an unusually fine type of settlers to Keya Paha county. Many of them came from New York and Pennsylvania. They brought with them an eastern rural culture; each had something to contribute to this new and formless community. Among these were the Lewis, Woods, Warner, Kenaston, Amspoker, Woolhiser, Munger and Vifquian families. Their holdings were mostly small ranches to the north and east of Springview, made profitable by rich hay land in the valleys, good water, and the short nourishing buffalo grass on the slopes of the sandhills. In the summer they used the free grazing land across the Keya Paha river on the Sioux reservation in South Dakota. None of these families lived in soddies or dug-outs by this time. Any family who stayed too long in a soddy was looked down on by these thrifty and enterprising people. In Springview had settled Charles Lear and W. C. Brown, young lawyers, Mr. Farnsworth, Mil-lays, Carrs, Hortons, Tarketts, Ripleys, Hayes and others. These began the first business enterprises in the frontier town.

The Mutz ranch was located in the low valley of the Burton creek, fourteen miles to the north and east of Springview. From it, six miles to the north, the hills of the Sioux reservation across the Keya Paha could be seen. Three miles to the northwest a small group of Germans had settled a short time before. Already, their little valley was called the Dutch Flats. They had built small homes, later to be enlarged, and a combined church and schoolhouse, where a German pastor presided. Chris Kirsch, reported often in early news items as a welcome "cash customer" in Springview, was to become one of the stable, outstanding citizens of the county; there were also the Thiedes, Baumerlins, Huffmans, Schoettgers, Sandersons, and the Josiessons.

These were the people who became the friends and neighbors of the newcomers to Keya Paha county.

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<sup>2</sup>Editor's note:—The area here given as included in Holt County was never a part of the county, though attached to Holt County for elective, judicial and revenue purposes. Holt County, as defined in 1862 and again in 1873, was identical with its present area.

The next few years passed quickly and uneventfully. A newspaper was established in Springview, several editors trying their hand at it for a short time. It reports prairie fires and storms, and the great blizzard of '88; runaways, claim-jumpers, thefts of cattle and horses. Legal notices filled some of its columns, especially the filing and proving up of timber claims. Every final proof was evidence that ten acres of the 160 acre claim was covered with a growing young grove of trees. There were deep silences in the winter months.

In the spring of 1891 Otto was appointed to fill out the term of County Judge Farnsworth. He and Ella planned anxiously. There had been rumors of trouble with the Indians along the state line for a hundred miles west, all the past year. This work would take him from home a great deal. Otto did not wish to leave her alone on the ranch with the children. Perhaps she had better take them and go to Grandpa Russells at Weeping Water until the scare blew over. Ella was indignant. Why, hadn't her grandmother come west a thousand miles thru Indian country, and without soldiers all along the way too, and not a hair on her head had been harmed. And hadn't her mother fed the lazy Omaha to get rid of them in the early days in Cass county. If Otto would get busy and clear out those rustlers who kept stirring up the Indians, and if he would help shut down on the red liquor the white men were giving them, the county would be safe to bring up children in. She would stay right there and manage the ranch, and Otto must accept this office, and get busy and bring some order into things. But the rumors became facts, and a few anxious days, with the women and children of the community gathered at the ranch while the men patrolled the border until soldiers arrived from Valentine to relieve them, changed the matter in their minds. They would move a little early to Springview and Otto would accept the office of judge. The ranch would be managed by hired hands.

Elected to the same office a few months later, Otto handled a task which carried much responsibility. Although Doc Middleton's gang had been scattered some years earlier, there was still much rustling done on a smaller scale. A dozen or more cattle thieves were apprehended, with the help of the still active vigilantes, and sent to the penitentiary at Lincoln. The first settlers were proving up on their homesteads. New-comers were still filing on claims and getting settled. These matters took up much of his time. The Indians still caused some uneasiness. They came occasionally to Springview, to do their trading, to hold pow-wows, and the Lamoreaux brothers, who had married white wives, to send their children to school.

The family returned to the ranch at the end of the term. A large new house was built, the lower part of native limestone, the upper part of pine. Half of the lower story became a generous living room. Ella had the children bring in clean oat straw, and spread it smoothly on the floor. She covered this carefully with newspapers, and stretched over them the gay new rag carpet she had prepared against this day. Forty yards it took, and she smiled to herself as she tacked it neatly against the wall, remembering what her oldest son, now standing up to her shoulder, had said to her one evening as she was working on her rags. He had gravely watched her as she cut and sorted. There were strips for the carpet, small pieces for quilt blocks, and only a few snips and ravelings in her lap. "Mother", he observed, "We'll be rich some day, won't we, because you are so saving."

Ella glanced at the deep windows, already filled with growing plants and laced with dainty smilax vine. She pulled the Mason and Hamlin organ from the wall to fit the carpet well behind it. That was the first thing she and Otto had purchased together after they were married. How they enjoyed having the children gather around it with them in the long quiet evenings, teaching them the old songs. It was almost as good as the old singing school at Eight Mile Grove. Why, she pondered, they were rich right now.

One Saturday a few years later Otto came home from the weekly trip to Springview for mail and supplies, with the spring wagon filled with queer looking bundles. "Musical instruments for the whole family", he announced, "And tomorrow Mr. Akers, who has been a bandmaster 'Back East', will be down to give you your first lesson". It was probably as well that the nearest neighbors were some miles away for the next few months. The Springview *Herald* records that the Mutz family band entertained at the Fourth of July celebration there in 1897. There were many unrecorded occasions when they added to the pleasure of community gatherings.

Life was not all pleasant during these years. The drought of the early nineties blew in on the wings of hot south winds, scorching hay lands, crops, and gardens, and drying up the streams. One June day in 1893 Otto and Ella sat looking out over their garden. A month before it had been green and promising. Now there was no green thing to be seen as far as the eye could carry. Ella watched the children playing along the creek. "I just do not know what we would do without that creek", she said to Otto. "It seems to flow as much



#### Home of Otto Mutz

Left to right: On horse, Otto Mutz, Jr. Standing; Otto Mutz, Sr., Mrs. Otto Mutz, Winifred Mutz (Stahl). Sitting; Walter D. Mutz, Dorothy Mutz (Young), Eunice Mutz (Heard), R. Dennis Mutz, Sterling F. Mutz.

as ever, and at least it will water the wild fruit along its banks. We can be sure of wild plums and grapes for winter use." Otto was thoughtful, and then jumped up.

"I have it, Ella, a real idea. Why not use that creek to irrigate the garden? It's too late to help this year, but not a bit too early to plan for next." A letter was sent to the state capitol at Lincoln requesting water rights, and a survey begun. It was made with the simplest equipment, a carpenter's level and a board ten feet long. The method proved to be tedious but effective in laying out ditches and dams.

Their plan called for a series of dams to be thrown up in the big pasture, some 2500 acres of fenced land, to hold back water in low marshy ponds for the hay land. These dams were made of tough prairie sod, and fourteen of them were built of varying sizes. It was a matter of family record that the following year, with drought conditions about the same, 300 tons of hay were put up in the big pasture. There was plenty of grass beside for summer grazing.



Just a little distance above the ranch house, where the little valley was narrow, and the fall quicker, a much larger dam was built, also of prairie sod, but flanked with broken stone and dirt for added strength. Burton creek was spring-fed all along, but just above this dam were two of the finest springs. The new pond was about a quarter of a mile long, and three or four hundred feet across at the widest place. It was twelve feet deep at the lowest point. Flood gates were built on either side. The west outlet carried water down the ditch for irrigation, and provided a bountiful supply of water for the garden, and a smaller supply for a newfangled crop Otto was trying out in the field below, called alfalfa. The outlet on the east side carried water down a ditch about 600 feet, and there a mill was built, with a water wheel for power. This wheel was homemade, with a wooden pole for an axle, and its squeaky groans while at labor live in the memories of all who ever came within its hearing. In this mill was ground not only feed for stock, but cornmeal and cracked wheat for family use. Otto served the community as miller, and neighbors brought their grain from miles around.

Early spring of 1894 found the dams and ditches ready for use, and it was a day of high hopes for all when water was turned into the ditches for the first time. What a thrill it must have been when water trickled the full length of the ditches, proving to Otto that his amateur surveying calculations had been correct. Also dispelling the fears of Mr. Jossiesson, who came often to grumble pessimistically about the whole affair. He insisted skeptically, "Ye can't make it work, fer ye can't make water run uphill. It ain't nacheral. Besides, if the Lord had intended water to run there, he'd of put it there".

Every summer after that there was an abundance of vegetables. Cabbages were harvested by the wagon load, pickles put down in brine by the barrel. Settlers came from miles around for the surplus, and from Springview, for the drought persisted. Otto laid out a large strawberry bed, and one year invited friends from Springview to spend the day when they were at their best. That meant everyone in town who was able to ride, but Ella was prepared for them. She had the family up at daybreak, filling pans, crocks and jars with luscious berries. Everybody had their fill.

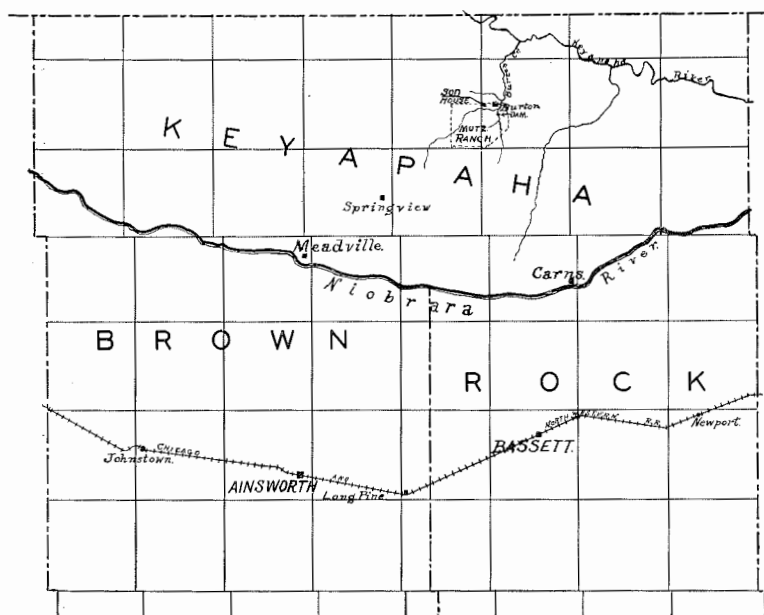
When the pond was first planned, there was no thought of its use except for irrigation, and water power to run the little mill, but the winter brought on fine skating. Ella, herself a beautiful skater, sent enthusiastically for skates to outfit the family. Otto considered the possibilities for storing ice

for summer use. He worked out a plan for a dugout, filled to the top with ice packed in clean oat straw. This he covered with a roof of heavy timbers, covered with more straw, and topped with a layer of prairie sod. It was a good plan. For as many years as there was need, he and the growing sons filled the ice house each winter, packing enough extra to insure ice cream for celebrations and community gatherings.

The pond became a recreation center for all. Down the friends came from Springview, or from the Dutch Flats, or the ranches to the north, to picnic under the trees along its banks, to fish and swim. The state fisheries at South Bend supplied fish to stock the pond. Carp was sent the first time. Later the pond was drained, and restocked with brook trout and other better kinds. Otto taught all the children to swim, and thrilled the little ones with rides across the pond on his back, their legs crossed tightly under his bearded chin, hands clinging to his curly hair. A boat was ordered made in Springview, and gave pleasure for many years. Baptisms were held—with Ella watching anxiously lest her own brood get other than good Methodist ideas of religion.

Families lived far apart, and the summer gatherings were long anticipated. One such picnic, where the Woods, Warner, Lewis and perhaps other families gathered for the day, was long remembered for a joke on Mr. Woods. He often came to the Mutz ranch on business, and as was the custom, stayed for a meal. All spring Ella had been missing one after another of her cherished set of red and white checked linen napkins, with fringed edges. Then came the picnic, and Mrs. Woods, unpacking her basket, brought out the missing napkins, and the mystery was solved. Her husband did not know where he had gotten them. He was accustomed to think, in his manlike simplicity, of red and white squares for an entirely different purpose, and had pocketed them, one after another. This joke enlivened many a gathering afterward, but Ella never trusted him far enough to use her precious napkins when he came again to eat.

Otto's judgeship had given him a wide acquaintance, and in the summer 1896 he decided to run for state senator on the populist ticket. Mr. A. E. Sheldon of Chadron would run for representative on the same ticket. Together they campaigned the large district they sought to represent, making long drives to reach the scattered vote. Both won by a good majority, and the next winter and spring found Otto in Lincoln. Ella, after a pleasant month with him at the capitol, went home to struggle with the management of the ranch and six children having the measles all at once. Otto supported Mr. Sheldon



Map of Keya Paha Region

in school and land laws he was interested in. He actively attacked certain forms of graft which had crept into the management of state institutions. At the close of the session he was appointed as chairman of an investigating committee to go further into this matter. But the way of a reformer is neither popular nor easy, and his work on this committee proved to be of little practical value. He went back to the ranch with a deep sense of disappointment. He was defeated by a small margin in a second campaign. Both he and Ella were privately relieved, for the needs of their growing family, now numbering ten children, were pressing more heavily each year. The older ones were ready for more schooling.

The first children were sent back to the grandparents at Weeping Water and Auburn for high school, but finally a home was bought in Ainsworth, and the family moved there for the winter months. They went by choice back to the ranch for the summers. Events at the ranch moved along, sometimes slowly, sometimes with the swiftness of a summer cyclone. A cattle disease called cornstalk disease struck the commun-

ity. A load of sixty-four raw hides going out of the ranch one morning to the railroad at Bassett, were mute evidence of their share of this disaster. The opening of the Rosebud Indian reservation came and went. That was an exciting summer, and the children spent long hours on the peak of the barn, watching thru field glasses the growth of the tent city at Gregory, South Dakota; waiting anxiously for the drawing to be over, and rejoicing when the glad news came that Dana, the oldest son, had won an early drawing. Automobiles came in, cutting down distances. The dam went out in a summer storm, destroying the pond.

After the opening of the Rosebud, more people found their way into the county, and the town of Burton was established on the Mutz and Horton ranches jointly. Otto ran the general store, and the first post office, with mail coming daily, unless the bridges were out across the Niobrara, as often happened, or the winter drifts too heavy. Sometimes he patiently helped customers who could not break the habit of long years of mail-order buying from necessity, make out and send from his postoffice, orders for supplies he had for sale in his store on the other side of the building. He built a modern creamery, and sent to the Agricultural College at Ames, Iowa, for a trained man to operate it. He built a new dam on the creek, close to the town. Below it this time he laid out a park, dreaming of a new and finer recreation center as he laid out roads, and planted trees and cuttings along the moist banks.

A day came, with the children almost all thru high school at Ainsworth, when it seemed no longer necessary to keep the home there, and it was sold. In the summer of 1909 the whole family had a happy month together at the ranch, the last time they were ever to be together. Otto and Ella were completely happy. The oldest daughter came from her teaching, the sons from the University at Lincoln. Two daughters were married, and brought home the first grandbabies. They swam and boated, picnicked and hunted, went plumming and for all day visits to old friends. September found only two of the youngest children left at home.

A long, lazy Indian summer followed. In October a man appeared who wished to buy the ranch. Otto and Ella considered. More and more they felt the pressure of the long, lonely winters as their children went out into the world of their own interests; none of the sons wished to carry on the ranch as a business; they felt the pull of old friends and kin-folk in the eastern part of the state; thus they argued—and in a few weeks all their holdings were sold—ranch, store and

creamery. Finally, one day in November, they were ready to leave. The sky had been threatening for several days, and broke that morning with all the fury of an early fall blizzard. Otto and Ella packed themselves snugly in the back of the two-seater. The two young children were tucked in front with the driver. The wind was at their backs, but before they reached Carns for a hot dinner, the roads were badly drifted in front of them. When they came out of the hotel, the storm had passed. The sun was shining with dazzling brightness across the virgin whiteness of the valley.

Silently they crossed the Niobrara, thirty miles below the crossing of some twenty-two years earlier, and in silence watched the horses struggle to the top of the hill. With one accord they looked back across the pine dotted canyons, and saw in imagination the still young land of the sandhill ringed valley beyond where they had lived so long. Ella glanced at her husband's grave face. Then, taking his hand she said, "I'm glad to be leaving, Otto—you don't know how glad. But most of all, I'm glad we are leaving none of them out in this lonely country—none married—none buried". But Otto, who loved the land into which he had put so much of his life, his hope and his energy, was silent.

The rested team pushed on toward the railroad at Bassett, and slowly the wide valley drifted back into the purple shadows, until it passed from view.