



## Old Wyoming

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Full Citation: Helen Roberta Williams, "Old Wyoming," *Nebraska History* 17 (1936): 78-90

Article Summary: Williams writes nostalgically about life in a town that flourished in the 1860s but faded away after the railroad bypassed it.

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

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Jacob Dawson, Joseph Lutz, Mrs. Clark Read, Brigham Young, Fleming Robb, Overton Brothers, Annie Fey, George McWaters

Nebraska Place Names: Old Wyoming (later called Dresden), Weeping Water

Keywords: Jacob Dawson, Lewis and Clark Expedition, Wyoming *Telescope*, Joseph Lutz, Mormons, freighting, Wyoming Lyceum

Photographs / Images: Mormon Pioneer Monument, home of Joseph Lutz, survey plat of Old Wyoming, chicken house of Joseph Lutz



PHOTO BY LOUIS R. BOSTWICK, OMAHA

Mormon Pioneer Monument

Dedicated at Florence (Winter Quarters), Omaha, Nebraska,  
September 20, 1936.

## OLD WYOMING

By HELEN ROBERTA WILLIAMS, Nebraska City

### First Prize, Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska 1936 Contest.

Looking out over a rolling cornfield seven miles north of Nebraska City it is practically impossible to imagine a be-whiskered Englishman sitting there putting the following words in type: "The houses are springing up around here so fast we have given up the attempt to keep any count of them. Jim Wasson has worn his finger nails off handing out goods to his customers at the cash store." Yet those words were printed there, in the *Wyoming Telescope*, a newspaper of metropolitan appearance which heralded abroad the fortitude of a pioneer community and gave vent to the enthusiasm of its editor. Scattered through the field and extending several miles west were the homes and business places of Jacob Dawson's reading public in the town of Wyoming, Nebraska Territory, in 1856.

#### *Town Disappears*

Not even a few battered bricks mark the spot which was once alive with the crack of the bull-whacker's whip, the rumble of a printing press, the whistle of steamboats, the whiz of bullets from the guns of "bad men."

Once doctors, lawyers, real estate agents, store keepers, a postmaster, school teacher, preacher, and editor were banded together, making the embryo city, on the bank of the Missouri, seven miles north of Nebraska City, a leading early day center.

Viewed from the river there is no more on the townsite today to suggest the promising village of Wyoming than when the Lewis and Clark Expedition camped near there, July 20, 1804, fifty-one years before the first citizen arrived. Under a high bluff a little above the place where the Weeping Water trickles over a clay bank into the Missouri, the two famous explorers camped. Doubtless the high river bank, with its fringe of native hickory, cedar and plum looks much the same as when Lewis and Clark's two hunters rode horseback there, returning with two deer for the company.

*Indian Legend Gives Name to Stream*

Doubtless, too, the Weeping Water flows over its rocky bed with the same mournful sound that these two early explorers heard. There is a legend that two Indian tribes met in battle several miles above the point where Wyoming was later to be, and that nearly all the warriors were killed. The Indian maidens shed so many tears for their lost braves that it started a tiny stream. Each year they returned to mourn. The stream grew, and flowing over the uneven, rocky surface, made a mournful sound as though it had caught the lament of the Indian maidens. The tribes began to call it *Nehawka*, Weeping water. When the French traders came they heard the lament of the stream and repeated the name, saying *l'eau qui pleure*.

*Town Born in 1855*

Old Wyoming, bordered by the Missouri and the Weeping Water, had its beginning like many of the early Nebraska towns, such as St. John City, California City, Jacksonville, Marietta, and others which sprang up like Mexican jumping beans, and are now relegated to the list of Nebraska ghost towns. Settlers from the east became infected with the speculation bug and engaged in the business of buying and selling town lots, staking out additional townsites, and projecting new banks. When Wyoming was born in 1855 many thought it would rival Nebraska City.

*Main Routes Pass Wyoming*

The early mail routes and stage routes all made Wyoming one of their stops. The *Pioneer Stage Company*, operated by A. H. Barnhill, passed through Wyoming on its 48 hour trips from St. Joe to Omaha.

Every day or two a steamboat arrived at the port of Wyoming. On June 4, 1857, the *Monongahela* came. On the 5th, John Warner passed, carrying boards and shingles for new homes at Rock Bluffs. The *Edinburg*, according to the newspaper, "called here on June 4 and took on board a couple of our citizens who were going to Omaha to pre-empt their land and thus secure a fortune, and we advise others who have not already secured themselves a home to do likewise. The *Edinburg* is a regular and well officered boat."

*Twilight Sth* and *J. H. Ogglesby* were others which passed frequently. Steamboat arrivals were usually followed by profuse thanks in the *Telescope* for the late St. Louis papers.

*Town Company Sells Lots*

The lots of Old Wyoming were sold by The Wyoming Town Company, comprised of Jacob Dawson, S. F. Nuckolls, Allen A. Bradford, William E. Pardee, and William McLennan.

These men were known as the proprietors. Dawson seems to have handled the business of the company, however, because he published the following notice in his paper: "Caution to the public—all persons are hereby notified that all sales of lots, shares or otherwise in the city of Wyoming proper, without my signature are illegal and will not be recognized, as the premises belong to me and no person is authorized to dispose of any part thereof."<sup>1</sup>

Being an editor and town boss seem not to have consumed all of Mr. Dawson's time as he advertised in his paper that he was an attorney and councillor at law, general land agent, civil engineer, and surveyor.

#### *Dawson Surveys Wyoming*

In the county recorder's office in Nebraska City is a plat of the town as it was surveyed by Dawson. In a note with the plat Dawson explains: "I have carefully surveyed Wyoming, N. T. commencing at a 'Cottonwood' tree south 13° W one ch seventy five lks from the mouth of the Weeping Water creek . . . . I certify that the streets, alleys, squares, parks, and all public grounds are well and securely staked off and marked."

Dawson filed his plat of Old Wyoming in the recorder's office Aug. 26, 1856. The enclosed plat is copied from the original.<sup>2</sup>

The records show that some of the first town lots in Wyoming were bought by S. F. Nuckolls, Hiram P. Bennet, Jacob Safford, Washburn Safford, William Neligh, S. Oliver Mitchell, Charles C. Woodard, Rush F. Anderson and wife, and Mattie Van Alstine.

While ambitious merchants and business men were buying Dawson's town lots, persons on the surrounding acres were taking pre-emptions and laying the foundations of a prosperous community.

#### *Wyoming Papers on File*

One of the few tangible evidences of the existence of the thriving little village is the broken files of Jake Dawson's newspaper, the *Wyoming Telescope* to be found in the State Historical rooms at the capitol in Lincoln. The paper, published every Saturday, carried striking advertisements, and published timely news stories, those of the latest Indian wars, and the establishment of new banks. In the seventh number of the paper its purpose was stated thus: ". . . . to carry full description of our beautiful country, its resources, and advan-

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<sup>1</sup>1856.

<sup>2</sup>The plat of Old Wyoming accompanies this article.

tages and progress, so that persons living at a distance can view our goodly land. This is in accordance with the name we have assumed at the head of our paper."

The paper was established by Dawson in October, 1856. Later S. N. Jackson became associated with him and thus the firm was continued until Jackson's withdrawal in 1859. Later H. A. Houston appears as publisher with Dawson as editor. The entire equipment was sold to the *Nebraska City News* in the summer of 1860. The paper's importance as a public organ is shown by the fact that practically all of the business firms in Nebraska City and Plattsmouth advertised in it.

A present day reader might wonder if his news were not perhaps a bit stale should two articles in his paper bear dates a year and nine months apart. Evidently the people in Wyoming community were thoughtful of the difficulties in communication when they read an article from Nova Scotia dated June 1, 1854, and in the same column one from Sacramento City, California, dated March, 1856. However, no one could say that the *Telescope* did not gather news from a wide territory.

Editor Dawson was certainly no "pussy foot", when, in his editorial column, he branded the possible annexation of Cuba as "Great Big Humbug, Ridiculous Nonsense."

#### *Lutz Lives in Old Store*

Joseph Lutz, present owner of the townsite, has the distinction of living in a house which stood in the flourishing little village. When he came to the place in 1890, after the town had ceased to exist, he moved the building from the place where his cornfield now is, and gave it a new coat of paint. He also put in partitions, as the house had formerly been a store, home, and church. A family had lived in the basement, operated a store and the postoffice on the first floor, and the community had used the large room of the second story for a meeting house. Mr. Lutz' present house undoubtedly stood at Fifth and Park streets, because that was the place where the paper advertised that Sabbath School would be held.

Mr. Lutz uses another building of the town for his wash house, and his chickens have full domain over one of the town's blacksmith shops. Louis Dickman is another who lives on the townsite. His home stood in Old Wyoming.

#### *Farmers Worry about Nebraska Climate*

The first spring and summer (1855) in Wyoming were times of anxiety to the farmers. But the sun shone brilliantly, rains came often, and when autumn came the great experiment had been proved successful. J. Sterling Morton said, "The joyous fields of golden grain nodded an indisputable affirma-



Home of Joseph Lutz

tive to the questions, 'Can Nebraska ever be settled up? Can she ever sustain any considerable population?' and gracefully beckoned the weary emigrant to a home of healthfulness and abundance."

*Laborers Needed Second Year*

On Oct. 30, 1856, the newspaper sent out the news that 25 laborers and 20 house carpenters were wanted at Wyoming, N. T., also ten stone masons, several blacksmiths, shoemakers and wagon makers. Dawson wrote, "Those who wish to settle in a good location cannot do better than to come to this place. Lots will be donated to those who will build and others sold them on low terms."

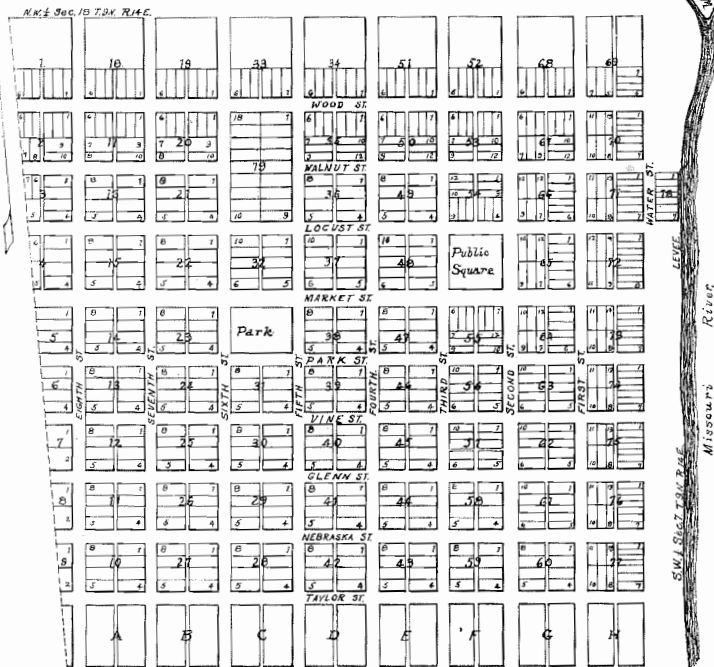
The crops were good for the first few years, and when the financial panic of '57 came, the pioneers had little to fear. They continued to prosper. Then came the clouds of war. As northern troops marched against southern, prices went sky high. Calico was 25 cents a yard, coffee 40 cents a pound (green, unparched, which usually sold at 8 and 10 cents), dried apples, oats, wheat 25 cents a bushel. In a letter written by Mrs. Clark Reed, March 9, 1863 to her brother in Ohio, are hints of the anxiety in Wyoming over prices. She said, "There are but few sheep in the country so people can do but little at making their own clothing. Tell mother to grease up the little wheel for I mistrust I shall have to come home and learn to spin linen."

# WYOMING

OTOE COUNTY.

Aug. 1856.

Scale 1"=300ft.



Copy of plat found in office of Register of Deeds.  
Filed by Jacob Dawson Aug. 26, 1856.  
Town incorporated May 25, 1857.

## Survey Plat of Old Wyoming

Mrs. Reed gave directions in case any of her relatives could manage to visit her. "Come direct to Omaha City right through Iowa, or come to St. Joseph on the cars, then take the boat here. It is true we are a great ways off, but we think of our loved ones at home often and would be glad to live near them. But we are better off here than we were in Ohio. We have 488½ acres of good land, and a comfortable home in town. Clark is very busy. He has a snug little grocery store and is postmaster here. The mail comes twice every day and four times on Saturday. I have three of the smartest little girls in Christendom."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Two of these girls still live in Nebraska—Mrs. Hattie Mohrman, Chadron, and Mrs. Rhoda Rice, Sterling. A son, C. C. Reed, lives in California.



Mrs. Reed devotes a good deal of space in her letter to a discussion of their economic status, leaving one of the few records of every day life as it was lived in Old Wyoming.

*Mrs. Reed Writes of Life in Old Wyoming in 1863*

"We have one cow and chickens," she said. "Also a nice pony and eight hundred dollars in money, but a good deal of it is United States money, so I don't know how long it will be good. We have plenty of walnuts and hazelnuts, but the hickory nuts are bitter. Butternuts do not grow here. We have lots of honey but no maple. Plenty of sorghum. We had a bushel of peaches last fall and two or three bushel of apples. The peaches grew here but the apples were brought from Missouri at \$1.00 a bushel. We had a nice wild goose baked yesterday. Clark likes wild meat but I don't care much for any of it but elk. That is good. Charley has been to school about nine months in the last year and to Sunday school. We pay \$2.00 and \$2.50 a term for schooling. It is close by. There are a great many children in Nebraska who get no schooling at all. We will have free school next summer."

*Mormons Stop in Wyoming 1864-1866*

One circumstance especially helped make Wyoming an important early day town. The Mormons, coming up the river from St. Louis, used it as a disembarking point where they fitted out with wagons and oxen to make their long overland journey to Utah. The records of the Latter Day Saint's Church in Salt Lake City say that in 1864 approximately 2,000 L. D. S. emigrants, in nine organized companies stopped at Wyoming. In 1865, because of the Civil War, emigration was somewhat interfered with and only about one thousand emigrants, in three organized companies, left Wyoming for the Rocky Mountains.\* Most of the Mormons lived in a tent city on the hill side awaiting the opportunity to continue their journey.

*Freighters Sell Outfits to the Mormons*

Freighting had been a very profitable business in the early 50's, but after ten years the freighters tired of following unmarked trails and fording unbridged rivers, and many of them were ready to sell out. Some sold their outfits to the Mormons who were anxious to start for their promised land. Among

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\*"In 1866, ten fully organized Latter Day Saint trains started from Wyoming loaded with emigrants for the Rocky Mountains. The number of emigrants in 1866 exceeded that of 1864", adds Andrew Jensen, Assistant Historian of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Salt Lake City, to whom a proof of this story was sent.

Jensen's sketch of Mormon emigration and freighting at Wyoming, 1864-1866, appears elsewhere in this issue.

those who sold their outfits to the Mormons were the Overton brothers, living near Nebraska City. They were freighting between Nebraska City and Denver with fifteen wagons and ninety mules. On one trip, while fording a stream which was deeper than they had expected, their cargo of thousands of bolts of calico was soaked with water. They were under contract to deliver the goods at Denver, and at that time calico was worth \$.75 a yard in Denver. So they unrolled the thousands upon thousands of yards of goods and staked them out on the prairie to dry. There is no doubt that the bolts of Dutch blue and turkey red calico, and white muslin, waving in the wind, made one of the most spectacular presentations of the "colors" ever seen on the plains. When the process was completed the bolts were rolled up, but back into the wagons, and delivered at Denver in good shape. On the return trip, the Overtons decided that freighting was a precarious business and sold their wagons and mules to the Mormons.

During the time that Wyoming was used as an outfitting post for the Latter Day Saint emigration it is noted that oxen were priced at from \$140 to \$175 per yoke. Flour was \$5.00 per hundred pounds, bacon from 18 to 20 cents per pound, sugar 25 to 30 cents per pound.

#### *Warehouse Thought to be Temple*

There is a story floating about Nebraska City and the surrounding country that the Mormons at one time started to build a temple at Wyoming. However, the building which the Mormons erected was never intended for a temple. It was a large, two-story, stone warehouse where most of their goods were stored for the few months that they remained in the town before outfitting for the journey west. Many persons carried away stones from the site thinking they were hewn by the Mormons for a temple. The old limestone warehouse stood near the wharf.\*

#### *Mrs. Annie Fey Lived in Wyoming*

A few old settlers living near Nebraska City can tell of their parents living in the old town. One woman, Mrs. Annie Fey, lived there herself until she was eight years old. "Of course I don't remember a great deal about it," she says. "I can remember the people saying that few of them had ever seen Brigham Young, but those that had said he looked just like Hiram Hurst, a prominent figure in the town, who was

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\*Editor's note:—Historian Jenson notes that the statement that this building was a warehouse is correct, but says it was on top of the bluff, quite a distance uphill from the landing place on the river.

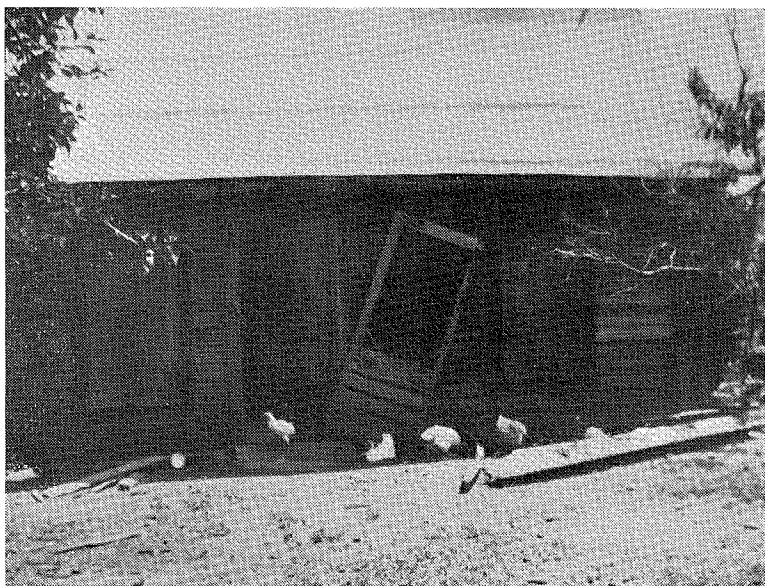
at one time Justice of the Peace." It is also rumored that Brigham Young had one of his wives there for a time, but no one saw much of her.†

"The Mormons really worked to get emigrants for their new settlement in Utah," said Mrs. Fey. "They even went to foreign countries and gathered together people. There were a number of French girls in the town, I remember. I do remember because they danced on Sunday."

When the largest group of Mormons left Wyoming they abandoned their heavy iron cook stoves. One old resident can remember about a mile of cook stoves standing on the hillside where the Mormons had been.

### *Wyoming Has Industries*

Fleming Robb, the father of Mont. Robb of Union, ran a saw mill in Wyoming down at the mouth of the Weeping



Chicken House of Joseph Lutz

This building was one of the blacksmith shops in Old Wyoming.

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†Editor's note:—Historian Jenson writes, "Brigham Young never visited Wyoming," and adds that the rumor concerning the presence of one of Brigham Young's wives is false.

Water. This mill was driven by a water wheel. Plenty of cotton wood, sycamore, walnut and oak timber grew along the creek and river. Many good logs were caught as they drifted down the river and were sawed up into lumber.

It is exciting to try to imagine just where in Mr. Lutz' cornfield stood the Wyoming buggy factory. It is a fact that some enterprising persons went into the business of manufacturing buggies for the young blades to take their ladies riding in, or for the more sedate citizens to use to drive to Nebraska City by way of the scenic road overlooking the winding Missouri.

The Messrs. Haight of Kennosha (evidently a ghost town now) erected a large steam saw mill in Old Wyoming. Jacob Dawson remarked in his paper that it would be a great benefit to the farmers and the Messrs. Haight deserved success for their enterprise.

#### *Social Life Makes Wyoming Gay Center*

Wyoming had its social life along with its growing industrialism. A literary society, called the Wyoming Lyceum, was organized. A notice in the paper bears the news that "according to adjournment the Wyoming Lyceum will meet Saturday evening the 18 inst.<sup>4</sup> at 6:00 o'clock at the school house on Fifth street.

The Mormon store house was used as a church as was the school house. After the Mormons ceased coming to Wyoming the old store house was used as a community house and many lively dances were held in that place.

The citizenry had its drinks and its delicacies. Oysters and lunch were served every day at Biddleman's saloon on Port Street two doors east of Second street.

Stores were run by Chase, Grosjohn, and Johnson.

#### *Desperadoes Lend Color to Scene*

John Vantine, who now lives in the new town of Wyoming, once saw George McWaters, the desperado take from his cartridge belt two large cartridges and rub them together in a Dr. Wallace's face, asking him how he liked the looks of them.

McWaters staged a fight in the post office in Wyoming in 1873. Wolfe, the postmaster reported to Washington. An inspector picked McWaters up and was taking him to Nebraska City when he asked that he might be allowed to stop in the post office where there was also a store and lay in a supply of groceries for his family. When he entered, while the inspector waited outside, he spied Wolfe, and Wolfe knew the

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<sup>4</sup>Sept. 1857.

object of his trip. He fled up stairs and a woman, seeing there was trouble, closed and locked the door. McWaters killed Wolfe at the head of the stairs, according to a pioneer.

A woman living near Nebraska City still remembers the tune McWaters was whistling as he walked down the street after another of his escapades.

Jesse James visited Wyoming often. In fact, he had rented a house there, intending to move to the town. He had gone to Missouri to bring his mother to Wyoming when he met his death.

### *Cemetery is Neglected*

About a mile and a half north of the place where the little town stood is the cemetery. The field is under cultivation now, and the stones are piled under two trees at the top of the hill. The site of the cemetery was never deeded to any cemetery association, and no one seems to have been responsible for its upkeep. Some of the stones are broken, others have been carried away to stop ditches.

One of the stones has this inscription: "Wife of A. C. Reed, died Sept. 14, 1863, aged 32 years, 9 months, 24 days." She is the Mrs. Reed who wrote the glowing account of life in Wyoming to her brother in Ohio. She died in the combined dwelling and store building six months after she wrote the letter.

This odd epitaph is on one stone: "Go Home Dear Ma, Dry up Your Tears, I'll Rise Again When Christ Appears." It marked the grave of a two-year-old boy, Cornelius Barber.

It is thought that a few of the Mormon band are buried in the Wyoming cemetery, but their graves are not marked. The Mormon records show that a number died from drinking spring water found in the vicinity. It is told that the Mormons gathered sunflower seed and planted it as they crossed the prairies so they would know the road back. It may be only a story, but we like to think that perhaps some bereaved mother hoped to someday follow a trail of gold from the temple door back to a little grave under a cedar, high on a hill overlooking the Missouri.

### *Railroad Misses Wyoming*

There are persons still living who lay claim to lots in the old town of Wyoming. But by most people even the land boom during which the lots were purchased has been forgotten. The railroad was Wyoming's downfall when it missed the town by two miles. At a point about two miles west a town sprang up which was also called Wyoming. Old Wyoming has long since become just another of the ghost towns which dot Nebraska landscapes.

After Wyoming ceased to be of much importance the name was changed to Dresden, and in 1882 there was still a post office, store, and a few houses in the town. Persons say that the name was changed because there has been so many "bad men" in Wyoming.

### *Descendants Survive*

To all appearances Wyoming has folded her tent like the Arab and silently stole away. But the part of Wyoming which was the most vital really hasn't disappeared. The dauntless spirit which characterized her inhabitants lives on in the lives of countless descendants of those early settlers. In many states are leaders—holding aloft the torch of steadfastness of purpose handed them by their far-seeing parents in the days when Wyoming was young, and abounding in energy.

At least two legislators in Nebraska have come from Wyoming stock. W. M. Barber of Scottsbluff served in the state legislature from 1919 to 1929. Charles Reed, once of Wyoming, was sent to the legislature from Vesta about 1895.

Members of such families as the Grosjohns, Bannings, Chases, McCarthys, Hursts, and Davises still live in Nebraska City, close to the Old Wyoming community. All are the heads of prominent families.

### *Sounds Recall Old Town*

A portion of the land where the old town stood was leased last year and rock was extracted from the quarries to use in the Missouri riverwork. The rumble of the blasting brought the memory of the days when quarrying was an important industry at the foot of the main street of Wyoming. Now the corn waves and grows tall over the streets of the little town. Close by the Weeping Water repeats the lament of the Indian maiden.

