



The Biography of a Nebraska Pioneer, Judge Monroe W Neihart

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Full Citation: Stephen J Turille, "The Biography of a Nebraska Pioneer, Judge Monroe W Neihart," *Nebraska History* 18 (1937): 163-171

Article Summary: As a young man Neihart served as a government photographer. Later he was a Nebraska City justice of the peace and city police judge. Throughout his life he was known as a talented musician and dancer.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Monroe W Neihart, J Sterling Morton, Mrs Morton, Samuel Clemens, Jesse James, Frank Ireland, John C Watson, W J Bryan

Nebraska Place Names: Nebraska City

Keywords: wet-process photography, Waumbum Studio, accordion, vaudeville, Rock Island Railroad Company, Burlington Railroad, Nebraska City Cornet Band, International Musical Encampment, two-step (dance step)

THE BIOGRAPHY OF A NEBRASKA PIONEER JUDGE MONROE W. NEIHART

By Stephen J. Turille, Nebraska City

Monroe W. Neihart was born in Lehigh County, Pennsylvania, on November 13, 1853, the son of German parents. His father, a medical graduate of Heidelberg Academy, Germany, came to America at an early age and soon became a prosperous, peripatetic country doctor. Traveling through sparsely settled regions when but a lad of five, continuously changing localities until a young man of twenty-five, Monroe W. Neihart moved slowly westward with the ever-vanishing American frontier, meeting new and varied obstacles each day along the way of progress and expansion.

The family moved westward in 1865, settling along the banks of the Mississippi River at Davenport, Iowa. There being no schools at Davenport, Monroe attended school for the next three years across the river at New Boston, Illinois, a town made famous by daring Indian raids and escapades.

Vividly recalling the famous total eclipse of 1865, when many sectarian groups had made elaborate preparations for the end that was presumed to be near at hand, only to discover on the morrow that all was well, Mr. Neihart relates in part:

“Although a mere boy—thirteen years of age—I could not force myself to believe such a thing. As a matter of fact, at the particular hour destined to be the last, I was dangerously marooned on a sandbar in a steamboat, doing my very best to aid the sweltering crew to pry loose from its moorings so that the barge might continue its journey down the Mississippi. The zealous religious convictions fanned by huge bonfires on either side of the river failed to disturb anyone on board.”

His religious convictions have always been of a similar, comprehensive nature. Although never definitely affiliating with any particular church, his deep reverence and belief in the Supreme Being has won him countless friends among all denominations.

The outgrowth of a hobby (photography) gave Mr. Neihart his first and only profession, one that he followed for forty continuous years—engaging in judiciary service in the justice of the peace and police courts after retirement.

A chance coincidence brought Neihart his first employment. During the period prior to the Civil War the United States Government employed photographers on a large scale (much in the same manner as our fingerprint experts are today employed). The government had sent a photographer, Luke Stroug by name, to Fort Madison, Iowa, to photograph some criminals, but, due to over-indulgence along the route, he was unable to proceed with the task.

Young Neihart, an amateur chemist and photographer was sent for and employed to photograph eight notorious counterfeiters. His work won immediate approval and he continued as government photographer for eight years, from 1868 to 1876, traversing the entire United States and visiting practically every state in the Union. The old "wet-process" of photography was in vogue during this period, a process involving the mixing of his own sensitive plates and carrying a complete chemical laboratory on his treks across the country. Much of this early equipment is safely preserved among his prized possessions of early pioneer equipment.

During these government circuits Mr. Neihart contacted such notorious characters as Jesse and Frank James, the Younger Brothers of Missouri, the Bill Lee gang, and the treacherous Bender family of Kansas.

Such famous men as Mark Twain, Theodore Roosevelt, Grover Cleveland, John L. Sullivan, General Pershing, W. J. Bryan, Colonel William Hayward and J. Sterling Morton came to know Mr. Neihart by name, the two

last mentioned being good friends and frequent visitors. Mrs. J. Sterling Morton, an adept art student, often sought his advice on color harmony; the thousands of handpainted and colored photographs by Judge Neihart attesting amply to his artistic ability.

While stationed at Hannibal, Missouri, as a government photographer, Mr. Neihart met Samuel Clemens, better known as "Mark Twain". Of him he says: "He was a very common and friendly man. Appeared to be a lazy fellow, due to his gangling posture, slovenly dress and awkward stances while sitting or standing. He always smoked a pipe and used strong backwoods talk. He was a very sympathetic man and writer."

In 1875 a government mission sent Neihart to Lincoln, Nebraska, to photograph some convicts. Crossing the Missouri River at Nebraska City he was so impressed by the beautiful panorama of nature—the wooded tracts, the noisy Missouri, and the ever-abounding green foliage everywhere—that he decided to reside permanently there. He fulfilled this ambition the following spring, arriving at Nebraska City when Nature was at its best. He opened one of the first picture studios in that city, which he operated for thirty consecutive years. It is well remembered by other pioneers as the Waumbum Studio.

The eighty-year-old pioneer recalls the early scenes and locations of Nebraska City business in the late seventies. Some of his business neighbors and associates at that time were E. Hawke's General Merchandising Store, Lambeth & Brothers in the dry goods business, and H. F. Fass, clothing. Most of the firms were located east of Eighth Street with the central location at Sixth Street. The two hotels were the Barnum and Seymour hostelries. Tom White was captain of the ferry-boat "Vice-President", the same boat on which Judge Neihart had ridden eight years before while living on the banks of the Mississippi. The stage-coaches were on a large commercial basis and those running through Nebraska City were owned by eastern transfer companies. Many of

these drivers knew Mr. Neihart personally, having frequently transported him on government missions a few years previously.

The lure of his earlier hunting expeditions soon forced Mr. Neihart to start on another hunting trip into the Indian Territory to the south, now Oklahoma. With a party of four he started out in the spring of 1879, not to return until six months later. On this, his final trip, which took him as far south as the Rio Grande, for the first time he shot a buffalo and some deer.

On the journey homeward an amusing incident arose in connection with the Pawnee Indians who roamed this territory. Mr. Neihart, a musician of some ability, had taken an accordion with him on the trip. Stopping at an Indian village one evening, the instrument was produced and several selections rendered. Making ready to break camp the next morning the party was accosted by the Indian chief and his warriors and, after some discussion (mostly incomprehensible) it was decided that the party was not to proceed any further until the Indian chief's daughter had been taught by the Judge to play three selections, namely, "Home, Sweet Home", "Molly Darling" and "Captain Jinks"—the identical numbers the Judge had played as entertainment the evening before. With no alternative than to comply, the instruction was completed in short order and the accordion, a prized possession, exchanged involuntarily for two ponies which were brought back to Nebraska by the somewhat bewildered party.

In October, 1882, Monroe W. Neihart was quietly married to Matilda Hauber of St. Joseph, Missouri. County Judge Adle read the services in Nebraska City. He was twenty-nine years of age at the time of his marriage. To this union were born two children—Mrs. Grace Ingreham and John Neihart, both of Nebraska City.

In 1884, as a diversion, Mr. Neihart took over the management of the opera house, located where the present Eagles' Hall now stands in Nebraska City. Vaude-

ville being an extremely popular amusement, he booked many prominent stars of the day. He gained no little publicity when he refused a circuit booking for Frank James, former notorious outlaw, who was touring the country with a vaudeville company as its major exhibit. After some sharp rebukes on the part of the booking companies, Judge Neihart's strong protests convinced them that it was morally wrong to exploit a former desperate criminal as a hero to the public, and soon afterward Frank James was retired from the legitimate stage.

The fall of this same year a prominent Nebraska City business man was introducing one "Mr. Brown" to various business associates and friends. Neihart, passing unconcernedly along the rows of brilliantly varnished counters in Hawke's store that afternoon, was startled by the sound of a familiar voice. The next day this same business man asked Mr. Neihart if he had met "Mr. Brown". Neihart replied, "Yes, I know Jesse James. I photographed and talked to him in Hannibal, Missouri, several years ago, but I didn't know you knew him." After a sincere plea for secrecy, Neihart agreed to say nothing—a promise he kept for over forty years. Although not wanted by the government at the time, valuable private rewards made the life of Jesse James extremely precarious and incidentally explained his incognito.

From 1880 to 1890 Judge Neihart took a concealed interest in local politics and, although never a candidate for office until past his seventy-fifth birthday, was instrumental in the election of others. He has been personally acquainted with and interested in all of Nebraska City's mayors since 1880. Probably his most intimate political friend during this period was Mayor Frank Ireland. On the morning of St. Patrick's Day, 1890, Mayor Ireland pinned an artificial shamrock on Judge Neihart's coat as a token of friendship, and for forty-three consecutive years he has never failed to wear the same shamrock on St. Patrick's Day.

On August 19, 1890, and for several months previous, Judge Neihart publicly took part in the \$30,000 bond-issue campaign for a free wagon bridge to span the Missouri, to be constructed by the Rock Island Railroad Company. This would have increased the population of Nebraska City materially, even as it would decrease the Burlington bridge income. With old-time fervor Neihart took charge of the band on election day, urging citizens to vote for the issue. It passed by a sizeable majority.

The efforts of the local enthusiasts were in vain, however, as the Burlington officials, retaining J. Sterling Morton (later Secretary of Agriculture) as their attorney, immediately took the case to the State Supreme Court on the ground that the vote was unconstitutional because by such action Nebraska City had exceeded its maximum mill levy allowed by law. John C. Watson, a local attorney, was retained by the voters to plead their case. With dramatic suddenness Watson refused to continue, asserting it was a hopeless fight. The voters immediately charged him with "selling out".

Two days later Watson approached Neihart on the street and offered him \$50 for "band services" during the election. Meeting with a severe reprimand from Neihart and several other business men, he finally acknowledged that he had been paid \$2,000 to drop the "hopeless" case.

The period from 1892 to 1895, commonly called the "drought period," is the only time in over sixty years that Judge Neihart recalls witnessing a crop failure in eastern Nebraska. Hot winds prevailed and corn eighteen to twenty inches high was completely flattened, necessitating an almost continuous replanting. About one-third of a normal crop was produced during this period. Corn was then being freely used instead of barley in the manufacture of whiskey.

The campaign of 1896 brought J. Sterling Morton's **Conservative** into sharp conflict with W. J. Bryan's **Commoner**. One was a strong gold-standard democrat

and political boss of Nebraska; the other, the world's outstanding free-silver democrat and a nationally known figure.

Monroe Neihart well remembers many of the prophecies of these two politicians, and in particular the one uttered in their Nebraska City debate in 1896. Quoting Mr. Bryan: "If free silver is not adopted on a bi-metallic basis, your starch works in Nebraska City will close in less than a year." To which Mr. Morton retaliated: "If Mr. Bryan will return to Nebraska City next year he will find that the overcast shadow of the starch works will reach this very court-house." Both predictions were somewhat in error, as time has proven.

The twentieth century saw the popularity of music ever-increasing, and Nebraska City found an able leader and director in Monroe W. Neihart. He organized, in 1899, the Nebraska City Cornet Band of thirty-five pieces, composed of such old-timers as Fred Welch, Frank Helvey, Ivar Iverson, Milt Thorpe and Jess McCallum.

The crowning achievement of this musical organization was the winning of first prize in Class C at the International Musical Encampment in Chicago, in competition with some fifty competing bands representing the entire country. Not only did he direct this organization, but his marked ability on numerous instruments put him in the role of a "fill-in" player for any absentee. The tuba and violin were his favorites, however, and on these he spent many hours of practice.

Though widely known for his musical ability, his outstanding musical accomplishment was probably the invention of several nationally-known dance steps. The two-step circle, danced the world over, is his own creation. Other original steps include the Chicago Globe, La Coma and the Newport, all extremely popular in their day. His fame spread, and in later years he was personally requested by Henry Ford to send a descriptive dance list to the Ford Company for use in their factory and social gatherings.

Next to hunting and fishing, dancing is his favorite pastime. Just recently at a convention in Grand Island, Nebraska, a judge of the District Court who had danced his creations forty years before begged Mr. Neihart to dance his own steps so that the assembly of over one hundred and fifty couples might learn them. Mr. Neihart finally yielded to the persuasion, and once again this man of eighty danced as a youth of eighteen, amid the delighted applause of the assembly.

From 1910 to 1918 he retired from active business and social service. In 1917 he tried to enlist as a photographer or chemist in the World War despite his sixty-three years of age, but without success. Always known as a charitable and kind man, he was appointed to serve on numerous local war boards, never once shrinking from his duty.

It was during this period that he was offered a fabulous price for a 200-acre tract of hay land he had purchased in western Nebraska thirty years before, but had never seen. He refused to sell on the ground that the price was excessive and unfair to the buyer. Visioning the future, he knew that land prices had reached a tottering peak.

During his sixty years' residence in Nebraska City Judge Neihart has seen many changes take place. He has watched Nebraska City increase and later decrease in population, and has noted a marked revival of community planning and spirit within the last twenty years. Not until his wife's death in 1924 did he enter any phase of the legal profession. The following year he was drafted to act as justice of the peace, a position he held for six years, trying over six hundred cases with but few reversals in higher courts. All of the proceedings are carefully and painstakingly handwitten in his court docket. Although substituting occasionally for the city police judge and county judge, his name never appeared officially on the ballot until 1932. In that year he was elected city police judge by an overwhelming vote.

Greater demands have been made on his time during the past five years than ever before. His recollection of early events and Indian stories, coupled with his personal contact with famous desperadoes of his day, make him an extremely popular and interesting speaker to both young and old. Talks on politics, dancing, juvenile court work and early Nebraska history are incessant requests, and almost weekly he appears at different civic meetings.

For the past thirty-five years he has been an officer of the Improved Order of Red Men, an organization dating back to the Sons of Liberty which was organized before the Revolutionary War for purposes of fraternalism only. At present he is the Great Chief of Records for this organization. He is president of the Izaak Walton League in eastern Nebraska and a member of the Ancient Order of United Workmen, the first fraternal insurance company in the United States. Locally, he is a member of the Nebraska City Chamber of Commerce and present chairman of the gardens committee.

Living true to the traditions of the old pioneers, he goes on his way quiet and unobtrusive, never looking for the glamour and praise so befitting their vanishing generation.

Monroe W. Neihart, a friend of all, a true lover of nature and its beauty, a fair and understanding jurist, a clean moralist and a real pioneer—Nebraska salutes you! We unite today in paying to you and your ever-receding generation sincere homage as a small token of our deep appreciation for your inspiring lives. May God bless each of you.
