



My Recollections of Pioneering in Cherry County

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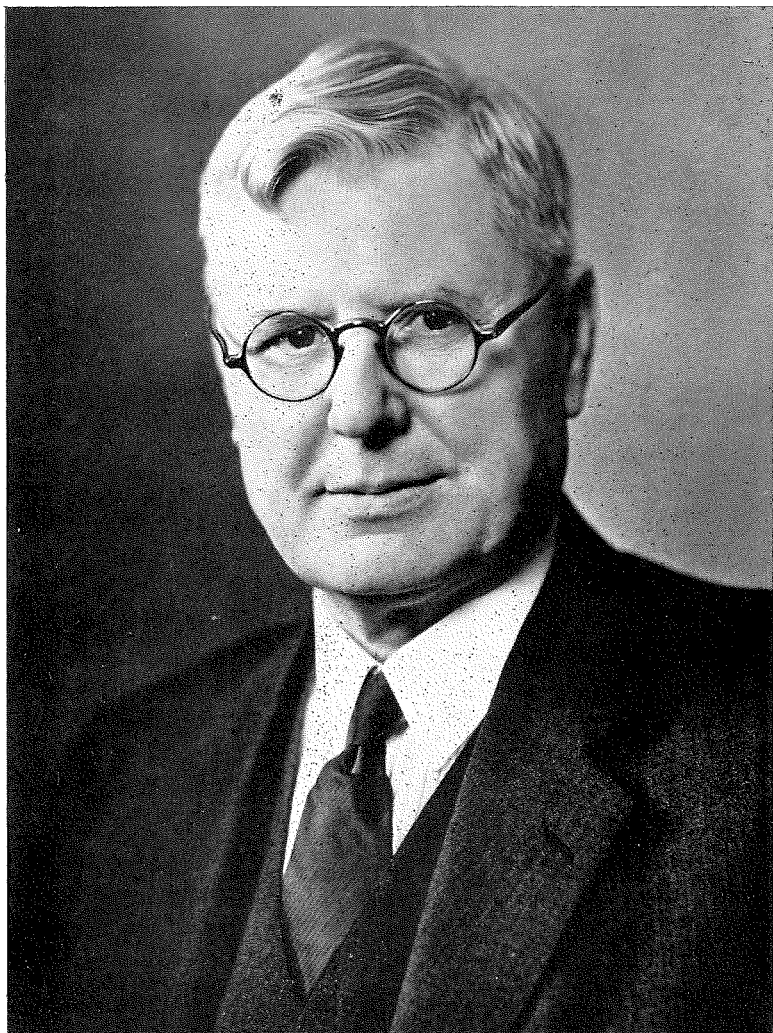
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J. R. Farris
Nebraska State Purchasing Agent

MY RECOLLECTIONS OF PIONEERING IN CHERRY COUNTY

By J. R. Farris

In the year 1879 my father, Matthew R. Farris, moved from Iowa to that part of the unorganized territory of Northwest Nebraska that is now Cherry county. He first engaged in freighting supplies for the federal government from the terminus of the Chicago and Northwestern railroad to Fort Niobrara, four and one-half miles east of the present city of Valentine. In the fall of 1880 father was awarded a contract for supplying beef for the soldiers at Fort Niobrara, and he felt this gave him sufficient permanency to justify having his family join him.

My mother, Mary A. Farris, my younger brother, George, and I started on the journey from Le Mars, Iowa, by train. I remember that the railroad coach in which we were traveling was pushed upon a boat at Missouri Valley and ferried to the Nebraska side of the Missouri River, where it was attached to a regular train that took us to Long Pine. This was the end of the railroad at that time.

We made the remaining hundred and ten miles of the journey by stage coach. Starting very early in the morning and changing horses every few miles, we arrived at Fort Niobrara shortly after midnight the same day. The stage was drawn by four horses; as we reached each relay station we found fresh horses already harnessed and standing by the side of the road. As the stage stopped every man near by helped to change the horses, which ordinarily required about one minute. There was just as much pride on the part of the stage driver in keeping up to schedule as there is now in keeping streamlined trains on time. The stage driver wore a brace of 45 caliber pistols and had a powerful rifle at his side. All the male passengers were armed.

My mother often told the story of this trip. Being an eastern woman she felt that the display of easily accessible firearms could only mean that the stage was in imminent danger of attack by Indians. Mother also said that she and her two baby boys would have frozen on that trip but for the kindness and thoughtfulness of a fellow passenger, Al Thatcher, who loaned her his buffalo robes to wrap us up in.

For our home the first winter, father rented a ranch headquarters a few miles east of Fort Niobrara. The ranch home consisted of two one-room log houses built facing each other and about twenty feet apart which made an effective barricade against possible attack by Indians. Then there were commodious log barns, sheds and corrals, which were needed by father for the care of his beef cattle as well as for the stock used in his freighting operations, which he continued.

During all the years my family lived in western Nebraska father operated a farm, including a herd of cows, and sold substantial quantities of butter. Mother **had** a reputation for making excellent butter. In the early eighties this butter sold for a dollar a pound. This was before the railroad reached that part of the country and all prices were high. For instance, thread cost 25c a spool and pins and needles in proportion.

In the winter of 1880-81 the weather was very severe. Eight hundred head of cattle died from hunger and cold within sight of our ranch home. As spring opened up gangs of men came and skinned the animals for their hides. For years range cattle had been able to rough it, but this unusually hard winter took a dreadful toll. Before, and for years after this disastrous experience, no provision was made for feed or shelter for range cattle.

In the summer of 1881 father moved us into a new three-room log house about one mile down the river from Fort Niobrara and on the military reservation. A con-

dition of his contract was that he might locate his operating plant on government land and use such government timber as might be needed. This house remained our home until father lost his beef contract to a lower bidder.

Our next move was into a log house on Schlagle Creek southeast of Valentine. A couple years later we moved to a farm located on the Niobrara River half a mile above the present Bryan Bridge. This was the fourth log house we had lived in; each of the three had dirt floors covered with canvas and sod roofs that leaked when it rained. This fourth house was rather pretentious for its time, with wooden floor and shingle roof. The logs were carefully hewn and well put together, and we were mighty proud of our new home.

As the railroad advanced westward new settlers came in large numbers. The free land was attractive to the land-hungry people from all eastern and southern states. Nearly all the new-comers undertook to farm their land. Prices were low and credit of course was almost an unknown quantity with strangers in a new country. Life in those days was "a fight to the death," always. Many abandoned their land; most of those who were able to make proof and secure a land patent mortgaged it to insurance companies and left the country. Those who remained and become seasoned pioneers had a desperately hard battle to fight.

I remember one fall, when the crops had been good, the merchants in Valentine started out offering seven cents a bushel for corn on the cob in cribs alongside the railroad tracks. It soon developed there was no market for the corn at any price f. o. b. Valentine. The freight rate to market was more than the prevailing price being paid in the territory where corn was being fed. Local merchants were compelled to stop buying corn, for to continue would have tied up all their capital in corn and put them out of business.

The only salable products of our county that year,

aside from range cattle which the settlers did not have, were cedar posts and old bones. There was a steady market for the first-grade cedar posts in the east, and a sugar factory in Norfolk used bones instead of lime in manufacturing sugar beets into refined sugar. Range cattle that had died on the prairie constituted our bone supply. Two men with four horses and wagon with a hayrack and cooking outfit would sometimes spend two or three weeks finding enough bones to weigh a ton. The price paid by merchants in trade averaged about \$18 per ton. Cedar posts were cut wherever the timber was available and frequently hauled forty miles to market—the price, about ten cents each.

Many settlers went for months without knowing the “feel” of real money. During the peak of bad times many families lived on fat pork and corn bread with such game as they might capture. Children went barefooted, and heads of many families wrapped their feet in gunny sacks in winter for want of boots or shoes.

M. R. Farris, Contractor

Before coming to Nebraska my father was a contractor constructing grades for new railroads being built into the then state of Dakota—before the state was divided into North and South. Upon coming into this state as a pioneer he naturally looked for opportunity to continue in the same line of work for a livelihood. His activities as a contractor included transporting military supplies from the railroad to Fort Niobrara and supplying this military post with fresh beef, cord wood, hay, grain, and lumber manufactured from native timber; also operating a freight train composed of six-yoke ox teams from the western end of the railroad to Deadwood and Lead, now in South Dakota. As the railroad moved on west from Valentine he built several miles of the grade.

The home folks were pleased when “Matt” Farris was awarded any contract, for he always permitted local people to supply all material and service so far as they

were able to do so, and at the same price it would have cost him otherwise. In this way many of the homesteaders were able to earn money when they were in desperate need of it. Knowing from personal experience the obstacles and hardships that confronted the pioneer settlers, father felt they deserved every consideration that could be extended to them.

M. R. Farris, Surveyor

Immediately after the railroad reached Valentine and the United States Land Office was opened, homesteaders came in by the trainload. Each one desired the service of a land locator—one who could show the land open for filing and help them make the official filing. Each one was anxious to file before all the good land was taken, and many were willing to pay well for this service. The number of locators multiplied daily. The earlier settlers were not averse to sharing in this harvest of dollars, and new-comers, after getting the “lay of the land,” joined the ranks. Some of those who offered to assist were unscrupulous in their dealings. Fraud on the part of so-called locators brought about great confusion when several claimed the same piece of land. The papers issued by the U. S. land office showed the legal numbers of the land actually filed upon. So the burning question was to locate the land covered by official filing papers.

The federal government had previously surveyed these publicly owned lands and marked the corners with wooden posts and holes in the grounds at a certain depth, distance and direction from the corner posts. Prairie fires soon destroyed the posts, and sand-storms and rain obliterated other markings. Surveyors were in great demand but none were available.

My father owned a surveyor's compass, level and measuring chain. He had studied surveying in college and had used this knowledge in his railroad contract work. He, however, was too busy with his contracts and the operation of his home farm to spend any time either

as locator or surveyor. Father was anxious to help but was not willing to loan his expensive transit to irresponsible strangers. Anything that smacked of graft or extortion was repulsive to father. To treat each one fairly he selected a dependable young man from among his own employees, taught him how to run lines and measure distance, and announced that anyone might have the service of this young man, with surveying instruments, who would pay for his time at the same rate father paid him for his regular employment. This plan proved satisfactory in most cases.

Where serious disputes arose father was often called upon to act as arbitrator. Before he would agree to act he required a promise that each disputant would accompany him in checking every line that might have a bearing on the location. When this was done he would read to them any notes made by the original surveyors, as shown by the U. S. land office records, then made his decision. From his decision, made in this public and impartial manner, no appeal was ever taken. And thereby father acquired the cognomen, "M. R. Farris, Surveyor."

Evolution in Transportation

It was my privilege to witness the transient modes of moving merchandise and supplies during pioneer days.

First. The slow ox train for moving heavy freight, usually made up of six-yoke teams, hauling wagon and train wagon. From three to a dozen teams made up a freight train. The speed was about two miles per hour and from five to fifteen miles a day, depending upon available wild grass and water supply.

Second. The six-mule team, hauling-wagon and train wagon. This team was driven with a jerk-line and the driver rode the near-wheel mule. The speed of the mules was about fifty per cent faster than the oxen.

Third. The four-horse team hauling one wagon, the

speed being increased to approximately four miles per hour.

Fourth. The railroads. Here travel was continuous, day and night.¹

The Sioux Indian War

While the Indian trouble raged in South Dakota, Cherry County people were deeply concerned.

At the time the Sioux Indian war broke out in the fall of 1890 my father had the contract for hauling military supplies between Valentine and Fort Niobrara.

Rumors were heard frequently about crazy Indian "medicine men" attempting to incite the Indians to war. The most commonly related story was that the medicine men were telling the Indians that if they would show the Great Spirit real bravery by fearlessly attacking the whites, the Great Spirit would rain dirt to a depth of twenty feet over all the land formerly owned by the Indians; that only the full-blooded Indians would be able to dig their way up through this blanket of dirt; that when they reached the top they would find beautiful grass land and wild game just as it was before white men came to occupy the land that really belonged to the Indians; that there was nothing to fear, for the medicine man had power from the Great Spirit to bless "Ghost shirts" to be worn by the braves, and the bullets of the white man would not penetrate these shirts.

Our people, many of them pioneers, had lived through countless Indian scares and were not disturbed. Had we not seen the soldiers at Fort Niobrara keep their horses saddled for three days at a time, in readiness to repel an Indian attack that never materialized?

But one day word came that the Indians were out of control, and the army rushed soldiers to strategic points and cautioned all settlers in Northwest Nebraska to con-

1. The oxen depended entirely upon wild grass for sustenance; to this was added a small ration of grain for the mules and horses. Wagon trains provided safety for men, stock and merchandise.

gregate in the towns for protection. The state government called out the National Guard for additional protection. In all about eight thousand troops were shortly in the field.

Fort Niobrara was made the military supply base for all Indian war activities. Solid trainloads of government supplies began to arrive at Valentine daily, which were transported to Fort Niobrara and broken up and reconsigned to required destinations. Where in normal times two four-horse teams handled this transportation job, several hundred teams were required to provide for the peak load. Fortunately for father the demand for additional teams came at a time when farmers and ranchmen, with their families, were flocking into Valentine for protection. These men were very happy to have an opportunity to make money hauling military supplies.

One day, without notice, the First Regiment United States Infantry arrived in Valentine, coming from California. They were immediately transported and went into camp at Fort Niobrara. Late that evening father received telegraphic orders from the War Department to hold sufficient teams harnessed and ready to move this First Infantry back to Valentine within an hour. The railroad company had orders to hold trains, with steam up, to transport these soldiers to a destination to be announced. This team and railroad transportation was held in readiness for six days and nights.

About seven o'clock on the evening of the sixth day orders came to release railroad and team transportation, which was quickly done. Two hours later orders came to move the First Infantry to Valentine as quickly as possible, and the railroad had the same rush orders. At eleven o'clock the last soldier was in Valentine and ready to entrain. But here was a hitch in the procedure, for an order came to the colonel of the regiment to immediately take bids for a civilian transportation train of eighty teams to accompany the soldiers. The call for bids was posted on the door of the Colonel's temporary head-

quarters in a hotel room and the bids were to be opened in two hours, or at 1 a. m. This illustrates the feeling of the War Department for the need of haste.

My father was awarded the contract for forty two-horse and forty four-horse teams with wagons. To show how quickly westerners could act in an emergency, these eighty teams and equipment were loaded on a train and followed the train carrying the soldiers out of Valentine between six and seven o'clock that morning, or five hours after the bids were opened.

The destination proved to be Hermosa, S. D. Immediately upon being unloaded from the trains the march started in a northerly direction from Hermosa and continued for two days. On the night of the second day, just before sounding taps, orders were received to burn all supplies and return to Hermosa as quickly as possible. When leaving Hermosa the soldiers marched while the teams were loaded with ammunition and subsistence for men and beasts for twenty days. On the return trip there was room in the wagons for half the soldiers to ride while the other half marched—part of the time double-quick. Under the supervision of the officers the riders and marchers changed places about every two miles. In this way in one night we covered the same distance that the command had covered in two days.

Railroad trains were waiting at Hermosa and transported the outfit to Chadron, Nebraska, where the march was renewed in the night to Pine Ridge Agency. Here the First Infantry became part of the field army and remained at that station for the remainder of the war. Father's teams were used thereafter in transporting military supplies from the railroad at Rushville most of the time. However, after the battle of Wounded Knee part of these teams were sent there to help gather up and bury the dead Indians; and again when the wounded soldiers were removed from the field hospital at Pine Ridge to Rushville to entrain for regular army hospitals,

father's teams were used for hauling the army ambulances.

This civilian wagon train was made up largely of teams owned and driven by farmers and ranchmen hired by father for this occasion. His contract called for a wagon boss in addition to three extra drivers, and father filled the job as wagon boss. However, on a number of occasions it was necessary that he be in Valentine on business that could not be delegated, and at such times I relieved him as wagon boss. I remember vividly one trip from Rushville to Pine Ridge when the thermometer registered thirty-six below zero. Every one of my drivers was frozen in some way on that memorable trip. Due to the ever-thoughtful and tender care of the most wonderful mother, my clothing was sufficient for even such terrible weather as this.

Lawlessness

In the unorganized territory of Northwest Nebraska there was, of course, no organized society and consequently no law-enforcing authority, except infrequent visits by a United States Marshal. In fact, each man was a law unto himself—and always ready and prepared to defend himself, his family and property.

Our first evidence of lack of law came early while father had some teams in a wagon train moving freight from Long Pine to Fort Niobrara. One of his horses became sick and it was necessary to have the team drop out of the wagon train, so father stopped with the driver to doctor the horse. The horse recovered and was picketed out with his team mates and father's saddle-horse for the night. The next morning at daybreak no horses were in sight—each picket rope had been cut near the horse's head. Both men felt it was the work of a roving band of Indians. It was useless to try to hunt for the horses on foot; if it were Indians and they found the wagon unguarded they would make way with the freight. There was nothing to do but wait.

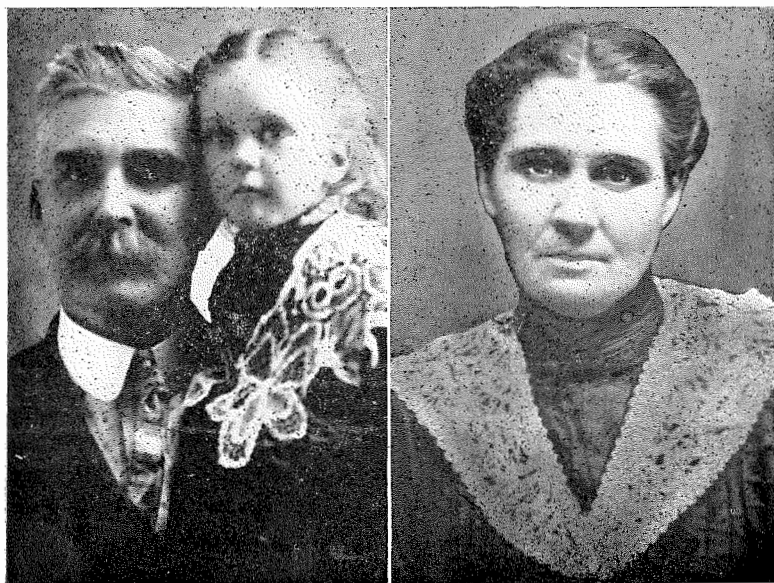
In the afternoon about a dozen heavily armed men on horseback appeared and asked for something to eat. Having finished their meal, the leader, a small man with piercing eyes, asked father about his horses. Upon learning the facts he said: "That is the work of the Black Jack gang; we may be able to return your horses." The following day the same group of men, several showing evidence of a gun battle, drove up a herd of horses and told father to pick out his five head. Without explanation or further words they moved on with the remaining horses.

Upon reaching Fort Niobrara father called upon the commanding officer, the only possible source of lawful authority, and related his experience. He was told that undoubtedly the theft of his horses was by a band of horse thieves, commonly known as "Black Jack's Gang," who stole stock from settlers and freighters; that the rescuer of his horses was doubtless Doc Middleton and his pony boys, who stole stock only from the Government and Indians; that the two gangs hated each other and had a gun fight whenever they met; that Doc Middleton and his pony boys had done a similar service at other times for both settlers and freighters. Father did not see Doc Middleton again until after he had been arrested, convicted, and served a term in the federal penitentiary.

The volume of stealing increased as the country settled. To meet the situation citizens organized vigilance committees, the early pioneers taking a leading part. Each vigilante made a pledge to respond to the call of the leader whenever and wherever needed. Some sort of trial was given the prisoner and the penalty for theft of stock was to be hanged by the neck until dead. Each vigilante was sworn to secrecy, so there can never be an authentic record of their activities. One of the boldest known thieves was called Kid Wade. His body was found one morning hanging to a whistling post by the railroad.

Following the Kid Wade incident the thieves organized a vigilance committee of their own. One morning each of the leading citizens and pioneers found a notice tacked on his barn door telling him if he did not leave the country within thirty days he would be hanged. This threat did not lessen the drive to rid the country of the element aimed at by the original vigilance committee. However, the end of the thirty-day period remained vivid in the mind of each man who received the dreadful notice.

My father received such a notice. The dramatic incidents at our home are illustrative of the tenseness in other homes. Father had in his employ about a dozen "bullwhackers" driving ox teams hauling cord-wood from the Snake River district. These were hardy men and were held responsible for the livestock in their care. Each driver, in addition to his six yoke of oxen, was provided with a saddle horse and armed to meet any situa-



Matthew R. and Mary Farris
and First Grandchild

tion. Loaded with wood, headed for Fort Niobrara, these men stopped at our home the day before the expiration of the thirty-day notice. Father showed them the notice and invited any who wanted to do so to stop over a few days to help him defend the home if necessary. Every man promptly volunteered.

After waiting until noon the third day and nothing having happened, the men proceeded on their way. About two hours later a neighbor came by our house with word that the outlaws were meeting a few miles down the river from our home. Father was greatly disturbed; this was the first and only time I ever saw him have difficulty in making a decision. He did not dare leave his family alone, and he feared that if he sent me to call the drivers back I might meet the gang on the road and there was no telling what would happen.

Father finally decided to send me. I remember to this day how very earnestly, specifically and emphatically he instructed me just what I was to say to the foreman of the teamsters, and what I was to do should I see horsemen coming toward me. He put me on the fastest horse available and hoped for the best.

I reached the wagon train, and upon delivering my message heard the foreman give a terrific yell as a signal to the other men. As he mounted his horse he told me I was to stay with the ox teams. I suffered the torments of hell during the next few hours, thinking of what might be going on at home. At sundown one of the men brought word nothing had happened so far, and he stayed with me to help care for the stock. About noon the following day all of the men returned with the glad news that the outlaws had held their meeting and concluded they were not strong enough to fight all the settlers, hence decided to disband and leave the country. My mother said her entire family had aged ten years during that trying period.

All western towns, while the terminus of the railroad, were rather wild. They usually were composed of

a few general stores, twice as many saloons, hotels and boarding houses, livery and feed barns, stockyards and loading chutes, and about half enough loosely constructed frame shanties to house the population, the remainder living in tents. Gambling was extensive: there was always at least one dance hall, usually called Hog Ranch by reason of the debauchery that took place within its walls. Cowboys, freighters, railroad graders and soldiers would become inflamed with liquor at the saloons and then visit the Hog Ranch to continue their celebration. Nightly fights were the rule, and gun battles in which people were killed and wounded were not infrequent events. Yet a substantial majority of the frontier population were steady, sober, industrious, Christian men and women. The percentage making up the rough fighting, shooting element was in fact surprisingly small.

The lack of lawful authority made self-protection necessary and developed in the pioneers a ruggedness and strength (both for good and bad) that is scarce in the present civilization in our country. One way of settling disputes was to swear to kill each other on sight. One who could draw his gun quick and shoot straight had a big advantage. Often the weaker man would quietly leave the country; otherwise when they met one died on the spot.

When the railroad moved west from Valentine most of the wild and woolly element followed, and our town became a quiet, peaceful and law-abiding community.

The Cowboy

To be a cowboy was the crowning ambition of nearly all pioneer boys. This was natural, for the cowboy in town, with ten-gallon hat, loud shirt, red handkerchief around his neck and high-heeled boots, chaps, saddle, bridle and six-shooter all cleaned and polished, was a glamorous figure. This, however, was in marked contrast with his regular daily work. It was, in fact, grilling hard work, seven days a week, long hours, the major part of the year.

Prior to the advent of railroads all Northwest Nebraska was free range; as settlers followed the railroads into this new country their filings on land were largely confined to that within a few miles from railroad towns. This left a huge territory still open for the free use of cattlemen, or "free range," as it was called.

Each stockman had a brand that identified stock owned by him. Spring and fall roundups were held each year to brand new calves, return stray stock to the home range, select stock ready for market, and make a physical inventory of livestock. Usually during the winter stockmen would meet and make plans for the coming roundups and select a boss to do the job. At the proper time each ranchman would receive notice of the date and place from which the roundup would start, and his quota of grub wagons and men necessary to do the job. Each was required to have not less than eight saddle horses. These horses lived on wild grass and must rest a few days after taking a turn under the saddle.

The roundup boss selected the men who should make up each outfit and the territory to be covered. He desired many different ranches represented on each outfit, to better safeguard the interests of all in the branding of calves.

Cattle must be confined in grazing territory so they may have water at least once every twenty-four hours. This simplified the roundup work materially.

When each outfit reached the designated starting point the following working program was followed: At daylight each morning the men were called to breakfast, after which the foreman assigned definite territory to be covered by each rider; all stock found to be driven to the point designated for the camp ground that night. The riders would return with their "drives" any time from mid-forenoon until late in the afternoon, depending upon the amount of stock found and difficulties encountered. The rider then joined in the branding operations. Each

cow was cut out from the herd and the brand she bore was placed on the calf that followed her. Then both were turned back on the range. To brand a calf it must be roped and dragged to the branding fire and held while being branded. I do not believe mortal flesh could endure more exhausting labor than branding calves.

The branding operation continued until sundown; any unbranded stock was carried over till the next day. After the evening meal the men rolled into bed, for each one must stand a two-hour night guard before getting-up time the next morning. This daily routine continued for about six weeks, seven days a week. The fall roundup was about the same except that steers suitable for beef were driven along until the roundup was over and then delivered at the nearest railroad shipping point.

The grub wagon was drawn by four horses and carried the food, cooking supplies, fuel and beds for the riders. The food consisted of canned goods, flour, baking powder, salt pork and Arbuckle's coffee. Hot bread was served at all meals, cooked in a Dutch oven. The riders would occasionally kill wild game, which was always a welcome addition to the menu. There was no ice, so fresh meat could not be kept. A cook-tent was provided in case of bad weather.

The beds were all alike—a piece of waterproof canvas about eighteen feet long and five feet wide, made up as follows: Blankets were placed about four feet from one end of the canvas; the sides of the canvas were then turned up over the edge of the blankets; the other end of the canvas was then turned up as a cover over all and made secure with snaps and rings; the four feet of canvas at the head of the bed could be pulled over the sleeper's head in case of rain or storm. This made a bed impervious to water unless several inches deep. Each bed was surrounded by a piece of new rope well tramped into the grass, as nearly all cowboys felt this was a sure protection against snakes.

In 1902 I was employed temporarily on the ranch of the Standard Cattle Company in southern Cherry County. This ranch was approximately forty miles long and twenty miles wide—and all under fence. Ample feed and shelter were provided. The free range, roundups and glamorous cowboy had become a memory.

Side Lights

By the year 1880 the buffalo, elk and moose had migrated north and west from Cherry County. Deer and antelope were so plentiful that many were killed for the hides. The hunter for antelope tied a red rag on a stick at the highest point available. The antelope is inquisitive by nature and immediately, but cautiously, investigates anything new on his feeding grounds. The hunter hid within shooting distance and waited patiently for his game. If there was an antelope within that territory the hunter would soon have a perfect shot. But the deer was a wary animal: usually it required all the ingenuity of an old hunter to get within shooting distance of deer.

Near our home on the Niobrara River were springs that never froze over in the winter and attracted all kinds of wild game in search of water. Often the hired men arising about daylight would see deer or antelope, or both, drinking at these springs. One shot from the ever-ready rifle provided fresh meat for the family for several days—as well as great sport for the men.

In the early days there were no prairie chickens, but grouse were plentiful. These birds move in flocks and light in trees. The frontiersmen always shot the heads off the grouse with a rifle. It was peculiar, but nevertheless a fact, that if the flock of grouse did not fly at the first gun-shot the hunter could shoot one at a time until he had provided for his needs.

Trapping was an important source of income in the pioneer days. A cash market for skins was available.

Only a few were professional trappers—mostly older men. In almost every family on farm or ranch, if accessible to stream or lake, at least one of the male members enjoyed the thrill, as well as added to the income, by trapping either muskrats, beaver, otter, coon or skunks. Buyers traveled though the country contracting for these as well as deer and antelope hides. Careful instructions were given the embryo trappers in properly preparing hides to bring the best market price.

Wild duck and geese were plentiful before the settlers came in large numbers. I have seen a cow puncher ride up against the wind to the side of a lake and, as the ducks arose, fire his six-shooter into the flock a few times, killing from a couple to half a dozen ducks. When the dead ducks were blown to shore by the wind he took them to the cook-wagon for the next meal.

Fish were plentiful and easy to catch. Surplus fish caught in the summer were salted down in small barrels and added variety to the menu during winter months.

The young people in pioneer days created their own means of entertainment; it was good, wholesome, and of a surprisingly extensive variety. Commercial entertainment was unknown to us before the early nineties.

At the age of ten years (July 11, 1885), I had never seen a school-house, there being none in that part of the state. However, my mother had taught me to read to the third reader. In the fall of that year I was sent to the home of Grandfather Farris at Jessup, Iowa, where I attended school for two years. By the end of this time a school had been established near my home in Nebraska.

The young people of Valentine had splendid facilities for bathing, boating, skating, fishing and hunting. And with the first snow each fall the coursing club became the center of activities for the boys. A few sport-loving citizens bought swift hunting hounds; these were worked in groups for chasing jack-rabbits, coyotes,

wolves, etc. Devotees of this kingly sport vied with each other in having swift saddle horses so they might be as near as possible to the end of the chase when the jack-rabbit was caught or when the coyote, wolf or other savage animal, tired from running, turned to give battle to the dogs. Well, this kind of sport can be appreciated only by the participants. South and west of Valentine was a large territory free from farms, ranches or fences which made an excellent playground for the coursing club.

Snakes were a source of worry to the early settler. The warning of a rattlesnake drove terror into the heart of both man and beast. Snake River derived its name from the fact of being winter quarters where countless thousands of snakes hibernated.

Farmers' Alliance and Populist Party

The pioneer farmers in Cherry County suffered both from drouth and low prices. Reasonable prices when the crops were good would have lightened the burden when crops failed.

There was almost a universal feeling that unreasonably high railroad freight rates for moving products to market caused the low prices. It would not be a mistatement to say the farmers' revolt of the early nineties was in fact a revolt against the railroads.

About the time Cherry County was organized Will Barker established the *Valentine Republican*. This paper was a strong advocate of republican principles. Al Thatcher, from the South, also established a paper to support the Democratic party. It developed that republicans out-numbered democrats by a huge majority, and the democratic paper soon suspended publication. The effect was that voters lost their bitter partisanship. The public was in a mood for anything that might relieve the

distressed conditions. The Farmers' Alliance movement was sweeping over the state at this time, and it was easy for republicans and democrats in Cherry County to join hands in that organization, which promised to promote mutual financial interests.

Local Farmers' Alliance organizations came into being in all parts of the county almost over night. My father joined, and I attended with him, the local Alliance at the station of Thatcher. The meetings were informal; usually it was suggested that a certain man should act as president for the evening. Each man present was invited to speak. Many asked to be excused, saying they came to listen. The speeches, as I remember them, might have been graded as fair, bad and just ordinary, but each speaker was in deadly earnest. As I recall they were divided about evenly as pessimists and optimists. One group drew word-pictures of the poverty-stricken condition of the farmers, the other discussed ways and means of getting the relief all of the farmers wanted. Speakers explained how the farmer vote in Cherry County (and the whole state for that matter) could completely dominate the political situation; that it was only necessary to elect county officers, state officers, legislators and congressmen who were one hundred percent in sympathy with the farmers and that in this way and only in this way could the farmers receive just and equitable treatment.

The next step in the movement was forming county Alliances, made up of delegates elected by the various local Alliances; then the state Alliance made up of delegates elected by the county Alliances. This called for the election of regular officers, payment of small dues, keeping records and making reports.

In the Thatcher local, I was elected secretary by acclamation. My father called attention to the fact that I was but sixteen years of age and the constitution provided that only legal voters might hold office or vote in the

Alliance. Immediately a resolution was passed asking for a special dispensation from the State Alliance authorizing me to hold the office of secretary and "have all the rights, privileges and prerogatives accorded to any member." This authority was given in due time.

Cherry County was very strong in the Alliance movement. Practically all democrats and a large majority of the republicans joined. Lawyers were specifically excluded and all business men were looked upon with suspicion—especially bankers.

Each local Alliance sent as delegates to the County Alliance its most forceful and effective speakers and workers, and the County Alliance did likewise in selecting delegates to the State Alliance. And yet with all these able and determined leaders, backed by equally determined men in the ranks, it was impossible to get desired results from either the regular Republican or Democratic party organizations.

The same situation existed in other agricultural states both in the west and the south. As a result the Populist party came into existence to furnish a political vehicle with which to crystallize the farmer demands into the law of the land.

In Cherry County the leaders felt they were seriously handicapped in not having a newspaper to espouse the cause and keep the entire membership informed and up on their toes. Father and I visited near-by local Alliances often. We found a strong demand for a weekly paper, but little hope that the necessary funds might be provided. In the year 1892 I was left a few hundred dollars from the estate of my Grandmother Farris. I was fired with the enthusiasm of a martyr, and had little difficulty in convincing father that it was my duty to use this money to supply the much needed and desired "official organ of the Cherry County Farmers' Alliance." This I did, and named my paper the *Cherry County Independent*. I published it until the summer of 1896.

I realized that the establishment of a newspaper was a precarious financial undertaking. The purchase price was paid in cash, but the remaining working balance was small. An editor and printer were engaged with the understanding that each was to teach me his part of the business, then the race was to determine if I could learn to be both editor and printer before the reserve fund became exhausted. I won. But, even doing all of the work, it was difficult to "keep the wolf from the door." Our subscribers were poor and only about ten percent of them could pay cash. Cord-wood, grain, hay, vegetables and all kinds of wild fruit and game were accepted in payment of subscriptions, and turned over to my parents in exchange for my board and lodging. The most lucrative income for newspapers of that day was from legal notices of foreclosures on land by insurance companies. This was controlled by the lawyers, and as lawyers were excluded from the Farmers' Alliance they had no love for our paper. On many occasions my publication day was delayed while I made a mad scramble to raise the cash to take up the C. O. D. charge against my ready-print paper. But as the Populist party gained control of the county offices and thereby the county printing, the bitterness toward my paper was decidedly ameliorated. A new power was taking control of both the county and state government and it commanded respectful consideration. My experience was not uncommon with publishers of Populist county papers.

As editor of the official paper and secretary of the Populist county central committee I was in the center of Populist party politics. In the 1892 election we had a straight Populist ticket from president down to road overseers. Cooperating with the Populist Central Committee of Sheridan County we were able to bring our candidate for president, Hon. James B. Weaver, to western Nebraska for speeches at Valentine and Rushville. People traveled as far as a hundred miles by team and wagon to be present at these meetings. Enthusiasm

ran high following these two speeches. But our party was not nearly so successful at the polls as we had hoped to be. We elected only a few county officers and helped in the election of our candidate for congress—Hon. O. M. Kem.

In the campaign of 1894 the Populist and Democratic parties fused—each nominating the same candidates. In this campaign we were quite successful, electing Hon. Silas A. Holcomb for governor, several members of congress, and many new county officers.

Early in the summer of 1896 my mother was stricken with a serious illness; the doctors said she must be moved to a milder climate at once. The four years of depression and drouth had wrecked my father financially. I sold my paper to get money to help my family locate in a new home in Arkansas. I held no official position in the Populist party organization in that campaign.

The combination of crop failures and low prices from 1892 to 1896 had left the people at a very low ebb. I secured a job helping to hold beef cattle to be issued to the Indians at the Rosebud Agency. In a storm many of these steers drifted into the settlement north of Valentine and I spent several week rounding them up. This was rich farm land and produced huge crops when there was plenty of rain, but at this time it was desolation and a substantial majority of the farmers had abandoned their farms and moved to other states. O. W. Hahn was one who abandoned his land; a few years later I saw him in Lincoln, when he told me he had returned to Cherry County after an absence of two years and sold his land for \$20 per acre. This illustrates how rainfall governed the price of farm land in Northwest Nebraska.

Note:- In the state ticket the Democrats endorsed the Populist candidates for governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, land commissioner, auditor and state superintendent, but named their own candidates for the other offices.

In the winter of 1896 I moved to Lincoln to complete my education. In the campaign of 1898 I served as chief clerk in the Populist state headquarters. The Populists, Democrats and Silver Republicans fused that year and elected their state ticket headed by Hon. W. A. Poynter



J. R. Farris and Family
1903

for governor. In the 1900 campaign the Populist national convention endorsed the nomination of Hon. William Jennings Bryan. I served as chief clerk in the Populist national headquarters during that campaign. In the campaigns of 1902 and 1904 I was secretary of the Populist state central committee.

Mr. Bryan, the new Democratic leader, stood for every principle advocated by the Populist party, and our party just faded out of the picture. Some members returned to their former political home in the Republican party; a substantial majority, however, followed Mr. Bryan into the Democratic party, including myself.

Mr. Bryan had established a national weekly newspaper, *The Commoner*. At the close of the 1904 campaign I was invited to undertake the duties of superintendent in his office of publication; I remained with the paper until it suspended publication nineteen years later. And these were happy years: I was working for a cause I believed in and for a man whom I loved. Hon. Charles W. Bryan, brother of William Jennings, was business manager of *The Commoner* and Richard L. Metcalfe was associate editor. Charles W. Bryan was later elected governor of Nebraska three times and Richard L. Metcalfe has been prominent in the present Democratic national administration.

It is now forty-two years since I moved from Valentine to Lincoln. As I contemplate the sixteen years I lived in Cherry County it gives me a glow of pride and satisfaction to know that I was a member of one of the pioneer families that helped to start the development of that magnificent section of our great state. I had grown up with the younger generation, loved and honored the older generations; I personally knew practically every man, woman and child in the county. Many of these friendships have endured down through the years; the sad part is that so many have been called to the final reward. I will be happy if in some way, somehow, we may all be reunited in the world to come.