



The Book of Box Butte County

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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The Book of Box Butte County

MRS. ANNA M. PHILLIPS, Hemingford*

I am very much honored to have this opportunity to speak to you about our humble little county in the northwest. We offer no apologies—it has made the most of itself, having nothing but Mother Earth to draw on.

I had always supposed everyone thought kindly of my county until I met an old schoolmate in Dawes County, where they had always had a supply of wood for building homes. She told me what they had not the courage to tell us before—that they had always called us “the Box Butters” in sympathy and kindness, but with a little contempt mixed in. Just a little too sorry for us—the Box Butters who lived in dirt houses, with dirt floors, walls and roofs; people who, when they wanted timber, had to drive oxen sixty miles to get ridge logs to support that roof.

Box Butte County is about twenty by twenty-five miles in size. Its altitude varies from two thousand to four thousand feet. It is a land of health and vigor; its huge spaces have always seemed to be a fitting floor for the magnificent dome of the sky; it is a land of health. It was settled in 1885 at the same time that its neighboring counties were settled. A few stragglers came in at that time to make their permanent homes, and it required courage to stay.

Dr. Sheldon has been ever kind with us when we attempted to make the record of this early-day history on the north side of the railroad. For a time Valentine was the most northern point of the railroad, and some of the settlers had to go back there for supplies. One pioneer told me of his father having to return to Valentine for a sack of flour. In the three weeks' period while he was gone his family ran out of food. A friendly Indian caught a badger for them and taught them how to cook that badger. That was when the end of the road was at Valentine. Later on Hay Springs was the terminal, and before that there was a village called Alliance.

On the Union Pacific the early terminal was the wild, hard town of Ogallala, of which much has been written. At the time my parents came out, Sidney was the western terminal, and they paid fifty cents each for the privilege of walking across the Camp Clark Bridge.

I am very proud that those western people have done all those things, with almost nothing but Mother Earth for their aid.

The thing I like to remember about Box Butte County is the happiness of her people. Over and over we have heard them express the thought that they wouldn't have it different, either in our own neighborhood or in the city of Alliance.

Those early settlers were all so young, so buoyant, so happy! It is told that when a re-survey was made, long before Alliance was there, they considered it a joke that their neighbor was to get their barn when the

*Address at Annual Meeting, State Historical Society, October 19, 1940.

re-survey came. Another story is told of a group of neighbors who were digging a well. One day they discovered water, and after they had dug to the water they went indoors to eat their noon meal, and while they were eating, a little boy fell in the well. It so happened that a man nearby had bought a piece of rope for use at home, and they let a man down in the well by means of that rope and he rescued the child. That little boy is today mayor of Lusk, Wyoming.

Those early pioneers had their good times in Sunday School, prayer meetings, and at church. We have departed from that nowadays. It was nothing for them to drive ten miles to church or prayer meeting, and to spend an entire evening in singing together.

And the cowboys! It used to be thought that cowboys were a hard, tough lot. At the age of three and a half years, I went to school to one of those cowboys, and every afternoon I took my nap on a desk top covered by his coat, and I came to the conclusion that cowboys were nice people, had nice manners, and were even very nice looking.

Those people, with their happy outlook on life, found out in the next few years that there can be drouths; that grasshoppers can come, bad blizzards can come, and prairie fires—which were a menace in those days. As one resident said, there would hardly be a time when one might not look up and see the smoke of a small prairie fire in the distance and wonder—Would somebody get it under control, or would it be driven by the wind to his home?

An old lady in Alliance told me about her children going four miles to school, the little boy four years old going too. They couldn't reach home before dark, and she, holding another child in her arms, went to meet them. The only thing she had to guide her was the sound of their childish prattle and the clink of their dinner pails, but she met them out there every night and walked with them back home.

People remember the nineties as a very serious period, and by 1895 Box Butte County had state aid given to people who had no trade. My father had a trade, so we were not included in that. But a neighboring bachelor was the recipient of a Prince Albert coat. He was a short man, and his tails dangled almost to his heels over his disreputable pair of pants. He wore a cap with a visor, and when he disappeared into the dugout that was his home in the hillside he was quite a sight—he rivalled Ichabod Crane.

In the later nineties claims were established. People had gone in more for stock-raising, not trusting to farming altogether after their earlier experiences, but thinking more of raising food for their stock. The creamery meant a great deal to that end of the state. At one time the creamery in Hemingford handled the greatest volume of cream and milk of any place in the state—and, they thought, in the nation. I believe that is true, because we have a photograph of these men with the Hemingford bank as a background, and there is a legend on the photograph stating that the town was outstanding in that product. Many an old settler will tell you they practically saved the situation there for a few of those difficult years.

By 1904 the Kinkaid Law had been passed permitting each settler to take four quarters instead of one, with the hope that a living might be made on that land. And we have a little bad history when the Kinkaiders sold out to the ranchers in whose area they had settled. The men who had the huge ranches did not own that land—they were just accustomed to using it; and they resented its use by the Kinkaiders. About that time the U. S. Law was passed which forced the ranchers to fence their land. But all this friction was ironed out eventually, and the ranchers found they didn't own the earth. However, the law did not solve the problem by making 640-acre claims.

By 1908 the Ford cars (I say Ford deliberately—the Model T's that we saw the most of) were seen everywhere climbing hillsides. After that the automotive machinery invited the cultivation of broader areas.

By 1914 the World War was at hand, and by 1916 our government was requesting larger production, especially of wheat for flour. So more and more acreage in Box Butte County was plowed up. The soil is productive and as it rained during those years we had good crops. Wheat went to two dollars a bushel, and more and more land was plowed. People didn't always care to buy Liberty Bonds or other securities for fear they might be conscripted for war purposes, but they did think land was a safe investment. So many, many buyers came up to Box Butte County and we enjoyed a land boom. Land that had sold for only a few dollars an acre went up to \$125, with a real average of \$60 per acre.

You know too much about the extravagant twenties for me to dwell on that. High prices, heavy production, and hope that it would continue on and on! It seems odd now that anyone would ever have believed it. A few conservative souls said that when an investment didn't return six percent it was unsound, but I was one of the common people who knew what the stock market was doing at that time. We bought National Cash Register—you probably did too—for \$27 a share, and were pleased when it made its way up to forty; and when it finally went to \$100 we thought it would go higher and refused to sell—and it went back to seventeen! I am just trying to show the extravagance of the twenties.

During the decade Box Butte County made a national reputation in the raising of dry-land potatoes, which would pay for a farm in one or two years, as did the grain. The twenties would have been a beautiful time if they had not had to end.

Then the stock market of 1929 ushered in the Terrible Thirties which are too recent in all our minds to need dwelling upon—what with the bank failures, with loss of faith in the individual and institutions; the dust storms which we had never had before, the alphabet soup administered by some thirty organizations; drouth, insect pests, grasshopper infestation; more dust storms and more grasshoppers, until finally they said the grasshoppers had eaten up the fence post and the beetles were following them rolling up the wire. People had to smile even in times like that.



Flowing laterals from irrigation well on Nels Peterson farm near Alliance. 1939.

In the middle thirties a kind government offered to furnish money to dam up streams so that water could be stored for the time when it would be needed. The dams were built; they would have held water—some of them—if there were water to hold, but at that time there wasn't even snow in the mountains. A few have water in them now; a few wouldn't hold water at all.

And by 1937 the question of the irrigation well became the most important one. Our good potato trade, which had been our trademark for a long time, had shifted to the Platte Valley. This business has to be learned. They over-irrigated then, and we thought it water-logged them quite a bit. And it was in a sort of a desperation that Box Butte County turned to the only source of water which they had—that in the ground. I should like to read to you what one of these well owners says. The Koester Well was the first to be drilled—that was in a loamy sand in the vicinity of Alliance. More wells were put down in that area. Then one day a well was sunk on the Ferd Trenkle farm some eight or nine miles southwest of Alliance in the sagebrush and sandhill district. He's gone in for truck farming, and truck-loads of water melons and other products go into town daily. This well was the eighth to be drilled and was in sandy loam near Heming-

ford; the other was in loamy sand. There is about a twenty-mile space there that is excellent land, but each new well is an experiment. They didn't know how it would operate, but they went ahead and put it in.

Now, I want to leave with you what one of these operators has to say about his well:

"After going through several dry years, in the fall of 1937 I decided to put down an irrigation well. This was not the first irrigation well in Box Butte County, but it was the first in which water had to be lifted higher than in any other well around Alliance.

"Owing to the high lift (which is about 175 feet), a good many people thought that it just could not be done and that it did not pay to lift water that distance. There were a lot of people who thought I did not use very good judgment in trying it, and of course some felt sorry for me for throwing my money away.

"Nevertheless in March, 1938, we had 210 foot depth and thought we would try to see how much water we could pump. So after we put the pump in, a good sized crowd of people gathered around and we started the pump. But it only pumped five minutes and pumped it dry. Of course, that did not make me feel very good—having a crowd out there to see what happened.

"I did not give up, though. I pulled the pump up and went on down in the ground with the hole, and on July 20, 1938, we set the pump in again and started it. This time, within a week it developed so as to pump about 850 gallons per minute. It held that stream day and night during the summer. Although it was getting late and the potatoes (my main crop) were needing water badly, I managed to raise 175 bushels per acre on land which I irrigated that year, while my dry-land potatoes on summer-fallow ground made only 75 bushels per acre—and after a light irrigation on part of them. I also irrigated, that summer, 40 acres of beans and realized a fairly good crop.

"Of course, the second year was something else. I did much better, and I knew I had the water then and planted my crops accordingly. The result was an average of 270 bushels of potatoes per acre on 120 acres, besides a good bean crop and some corn.

"In the third year, which is 1940, my potatoes (of which I have 120 acres again) are going on an average of 400 bushels per acre. I have also irrigated, this year, 70 acres of barley and sweet clover and seven acres of alfalfa of which I cut 40 tons—three cuttings.

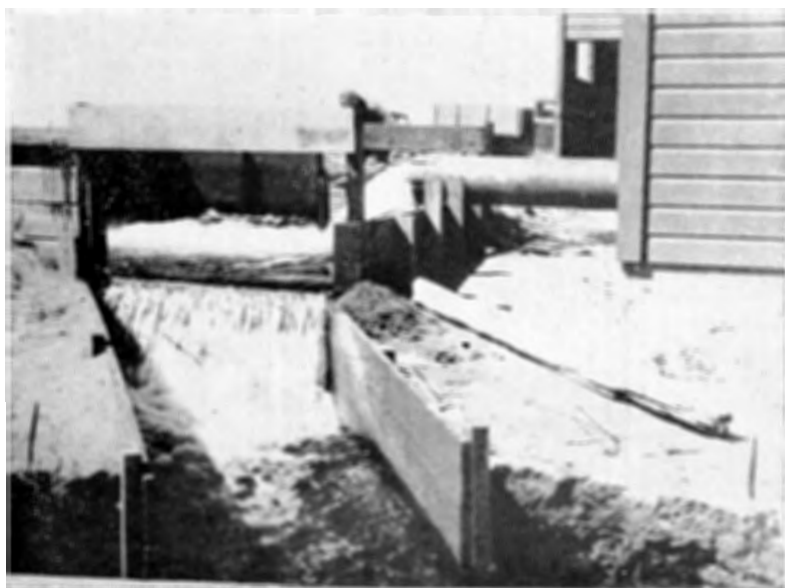
"So I think an irrigation well has paid out for me in very good shape, so far, and it will do the same for others if they are willing to work and use common sense. It is up to the man entirely whether he makes good or fails.

"My well is 250 feet deep. I have a lift of 175 feet (average) and it pumps 1,100 to 1,150 gallons per minute, continually, day and night. I am using an eighty horse-power Diesel engine with gear head and direct-drive eight-inch pump."

The next well is on the border of Sioux County, some thirty miles from the location I have last mentioned. It was bored by two young sons of the farmer above quoted, using a borrowed outfit. The altitude of the farm is 4,078 feet. It is a twenty-inch well, with a twenty-inch casing. They go in for truck farming, and they say they have raised one thousand bushels of tomatoes from a little over half an acre of ground. They counted the tomatoes from one hill and had 165 by actual count. They are now experimenting with an alfalfa which is suitable for the Dakotas. I think that opens up another line of thought—to try to find suitable crops for that country.

There are now in Box Butte County twenty-six irrigation wells, operated on twenty-four farms. The first person who had a well drilled has three pumping on his place at the present time. The College of Agriculture experts and the Washington experts differed in their opinion about the water below ground, but now they have formed a sort of compromise, and results seem to be entirely up to the farmer and the faith he has in his system and in his well. As Senator Gantz said, it takes more than pumping water on the ground to make an irrigation well operate.

And so, from these haphazard remarks, I should like to have you remember that we realize we are writing another chapter of history in Box Butte County—a happy chapter, we hope.



1,200 Gallons per Minute gushing from pipe of irrigation well on Nels Peterson farm near Alliance, 1939.