



## The Story of Hay Burners and Balers

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Article Summary: William Watts reports on his experience at a Beatrice factory that produced balers for hay and alfalfa. The bales served as fuel for stoves.

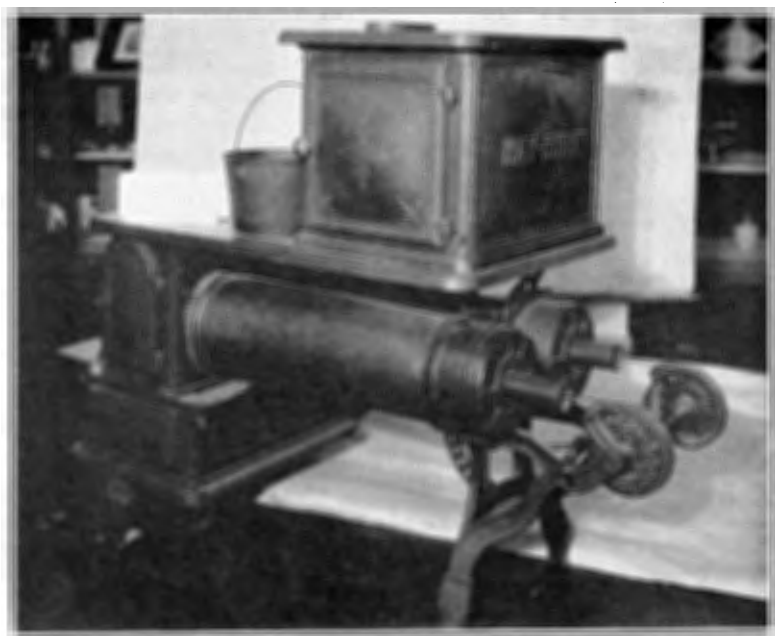
### Cataloging Information:

Names: William Watts

Nebraska Place Names: Nuckolls County

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A HAY BURNER STOVE  
In Historical Museum

## The Story of Hay Burners and Balers

In the Historical Society Museum is a hay-burner stove purchased by E. H. Bush of Tecumseh in 1868, and by him presented to this collection—a rare gift.

In earliest pioneer days many settlers had nothing to burn but dried slough grass. They twisted it into a rope, cut the rope into bundles of proper length and fed them into the fire-box by means of a pair of cylinders, operated by hand. Only three such stoves were used in Johnson County, and this is one of them. You can see evidence of the heat produced by looking at the ash-pan with the bottom almost completely burned out. Bits of hay still cling to its rusty sides where they fell when the stove was moved. Under the front end of the cylinders is a shallow tray, evidently designed to catch drippings—for they had to dip the bundles into a pail of water to keep them from burning too fast. There is a small high oven at the back of the stove, and a large iron kettle takes the place of one griddle.

Some time ago we saw in the *Lincoln State Journal* a most interesting story about William Watts, a homesteader in Nuckolls County in 1874. There it was stated that he, with a friend, had established at Beatrice "a factory for making hay burners;" also, that they had perfected "a project for baling hay in small blocks." In response to a letter asking details, Mr. Watts pleaded "Not guilty" to the first charge and made the following explanation:

"Years ago we were short of fuel. The buffalo chips were gone, coal was not to be had, and our prairie was devoid of wood. But we were raising lots of wheat and, as straw had to be burned after threshing, many farmers were going to the stacks with a forked stick and twisting the straw roughly into the shape of a rope which could then be rolled into a ball and burned in a trash-burner stove.

"Observing this, a Sutton banker of ingenious mind took it as his cue and thought up a device which, when attached at the back of a threshing machine, shaped the straw into round bales as fast as it was threshed. He had one of these made and induced a man to use it in place of the old slat straw-carrier. It was a nuisance in threshing, as it kept getting out of order and made altogether too many stops in the work. This is what was known as the Luebben straw baler, and I must say that it was a failure. I was a party to this venture, and our baler went to the junk pile so far as a threshing-machine attachment was concerned.



Courtesy of William Watts

### THE LUEBBEN HAY BALER

"Then Mr. Luebben fitted it up on a separate base, with an engine to run it, and tried to bale straw from the stack. This cost too much to make and operate, but we did go ahead with it as a baler for hay and alfalfa, and it reached a maximum speed of ten tons per hour. It was really a fine machine and a factory for its manufacture was established at Beatrice where I worked. It cost a lot of money to get out patterns, patents, and special dies and plates to produce the parts, but we had a good run on it. We sold it all the way from Pennsylvania to Wyoming and down to the Gulf Coast, and would have built up a splendid business had it not been for difficulties in the financing that took the company into court and finally broke it up. I could tell you of many laughable incidents that occurred during our experiments with that machine. I think of them sometimes.

"In the days when we were working on our contraption to tie up straw for burning we had never heard of a hay burner such as you have in your museum."