



## Nebraskans I Have Known, Part 3: Samuel Clay Bassett

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Full Citation: Addison E Sheldon, "Nebraskans I Have Known, Part 3: Samuel Clay Bassett," *Nebraska History* 20 (1939): 158-168

Article Summary: Samuel Bassett was secretary of the Nebraska Dairymen's Association. In 1897 he appeared before a Nebraska House committee of which Sheldon was a member.

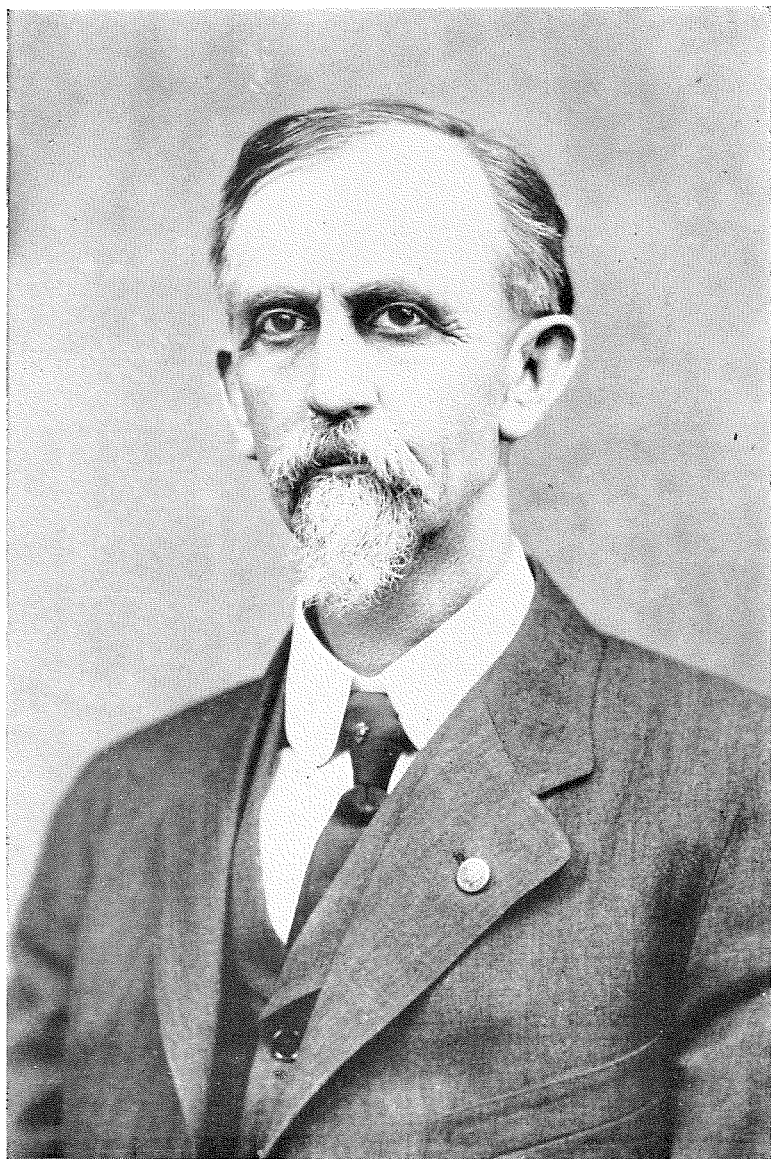
### Cataloging Information:

Names: Samuel Clay Bassett

Nebraska Place Names: Gibbon (Buffalo County)

Keywords: Samuel C Bassett, Echo Farm, Nebraska Dairymen's Association, Nebraska Dairy and Farm School, Nebraska School of Agriculture, Soldiers' Free Homestead Colony, Nebraska House of Representatives, prohibition, Capital removal

Photographs / Images: Samuel Bassett; Bassett at dairy barn, Echo Farm



SAMUEL CLAY BASSETT

# Nebraskans I Have Known

## III. Samuel Clay Bassett

*By* ADDISON E. SHELDON

**M**Y FIRST recollection of Samuel Clay Bassett goes back to a committee room in the old State Capitol, erected in 1885-89, torn down in 1921-31. It was the legislative session of 1897. I was a member of the Finance, Ways and Means Committee of the House. Mr. Bassett was Secretary of the Nebraska Dairymen's Association. He was one of its founders in 1885. He appeared before our committee in connection with two items. The first was an item of \$2,000 for the support of the Dairymen's Association. The second was for \$6,000 for the establishment of a Dairy and Farm School on the Agricultural College campus of the State University.

### **Founding Nebraska School of Agriculture, 1897**

This second item was a new one in the history of Nebraska. It was, in fact, the foundation—the very first beginning—of the Nebraska School of Agriculture which furnished sound scientific farm education to 7,500 Nebraska boys and girls (of whom 1,321 graduated) in the period from 1897 to 1929, when the school was merged with the College of Agriculture.

There was considerable opposition to every new item in the appropriation bills of 1897. A majority of the legislature was populist. We were elected upon platform and pledges of rigid economy. We were elected by voters living through a severe period of depression, accompanied by financial panic, crop failures, and no A.A.A. or W.P.A. payments from the Federal treasury. There was still abiding a strong prejudice against "book larnin'" on the farm in the minds of thousands of Nebraska farmers. All of us from the farm districts felt the severe stress of social and economic pressure in our homes and in our own pockets. As country editor of a populist newspaper I had special knowledge of these conditions. Our pay as members for the entire session was \$300 each. We met with the state treasury robbed of over half a million dollars by former state treasurers. Over \$261,000 of this was

childrens' school money, which has never been replaced in the state treasury. It required plenty of political courage on the part of a populist member of the legislature to favor establishing a Dairy and Farm School at a cost to the taxpayers of \$6,000 and thereby beginning a real School of Agriculture in Nebraska.

So I remember with a clear vision the appearance before our committee of Chancellor MacLean of the State University and Secretary Bassett of the State Dairymen's Association, a practicing teat-puller on his dairy farm near Gibbon. I recall the strong committee discussion over the new item. Some of us had the vision, even then, of Science in the cornfield and barnyard—coming, and pulling History and Literature with her thru the corral gate. So we fought it out in the Finance Committee and the Nebraska Dairy and Farm School was founded.

It may be added that our total appropriations for the biennum 1897-99 were \$2,335,843. For the biennium 1939-41 they are \$51,029,721.

### **The Soldiers' Homestead Colony**

The next Nebraska picture in my Bassett portrait gallery is dated April 7, 1871. A big empty grassy valley, twelve miles wide from the Platte River north to the high loess bluffs, with a slender thread of trees along a stream winding thru the vacant prairie; a single railroad track laid on cottonwood ties; a cluster of box cars at a siding and a band of men, women and children pouring out of the cars, feeling the soil and gazing at the distance.

It was the Soldiers' Free Homestead Colony from New York, Ohio and nearby states: 129 families, 209 grown-ups; children besides. Most of the men were Union soldiers of the Civil War. They were founding the farm settlement and town of Gibbon in Buffalo County—farthest-west farming community in Nebraska.

In this colony came S. C. Bassett (born July 14, 1844, in Delaware County, New York; member of Company E, 142d New York Infantry) with his wife and two children. He stood at the threshold of his life of fifty-five years as a Nebraska pioneer homesteader; five years as a country school-teacher; of leadership in agriculture, dairying, political and social progress, public library work; future historian of the Soldiers' Colony and of Buffalo County; founder of Echo Farm and of the Nebraska Hall of Agri-

cultural Achievement; life-long creator of inspiring farm literature; champion of good causes unnumbered.

The story of the Soldiers' Free Homestead Colony is forever interwoven with the romantic pioneer history of the Platte River Valley in Nebraska. It was the "farthest-west" outpost of homestead farming in the Valley. It was a homogeneous colony, descendants of the original American colonial stock which had settled the Atlantic seaboard and the Ohio Valley. It was a center of sturdy farm industry and culture, characteristic of the West in this American republic. Those characteristics still abide. And the colony had a historian with a practical poetic imagination; a love of good reading; a passion for experiment and investigation; a high sense of the dignity and destiny of human life. So the Soldiers' Free Homestead Colony — Echo Farm — Samuel Clay Bassett—abide as permanent influences in Nebraska life.

Any Gallup ballot to choose the most representative Nebraska farmer of her first fifty years of statehood would place S. C. Bassett high in the topmost group. He would have many rivals for the honor. What an exalted throng of noble faces and memories rise before me! The glorious heroes of Nebraska homesteads I have known in seventy years! The men who broke the sod and dug the wells and built the cabins and fought for human rights and better homes and higher living all the way from the Nemaha to the Niobrara, from Frenchman's Fork to the Logan Valley. High up on that scroll of fame, the name of Samuel Clay Bassett!

### **In the Legislature**

Mr. Bassett served two terms in the Nebraska house of representatives—1885 and 1911. He was a republican all his life — one of the quiet, determined kind, voting with his own conscience and speaking with his own freedom. Many times he told me of his first trip as delegate to a republican state convention — where all the delegates were provided with free railroad passes and were expected to vote as indicated by the railroad authority. The history of Nebraska politics is filled with incidents like this in the control of the government by special interests.

But the severest test of the quality of S. C. Bassett was in the legislative session of 1911. It was on a bill for removal of the State Capital.

The City of Lincoln voted out the saloons May 4, 1910. Many of her leading business men had supported woman suffrage, county option, state prohibition. The liquor power in Nebraska resolved to give Lincoln a trimming that would properly punish her and be a warning to all other business communities not to hurt the capitalized liquor business.

In 1875 the voters of Nebraska had adopted a constitution with this section upon removal of the State Capital:

Sec. 12. The seat of government of the state shall not be removed or relocated without the assent of a majority of the electors of the state voting thereupon, at a general election or elections, under such rules and regulations as to the number of elections and manner of voting and places to be voted for, as may be prescribed by law. Provided the question of removal may be submitted at such other general elections as may be provided by law.

Charles H. Gere, editor of the *Nebraska State Journal*, was a member of the 1875 constitutional convention and drafted this section. It was designed to hold the capital at Lincoln so long as Lincoln could secure more voters than any other one aspirant against her at a general election on the question. It was a reasonably sure bet that any one city running against Lincoln could not get a majority. The business rivals of any such city would vote to keep the capital at Lincoln rather than to build up a new trade competitor at the cost of the taxpayers. So Lincoln rested secure as permanent State Capital from 1875 to 1911.

The attorneys for the liquor interest devised a shrewd scheme to punish Lincoln and beat the intention of the constitution-framers of 1875. A bill was drawn and introduced providing for an election on the State Capital issue. The bill provided that the question of capital removal should be submitted to the voters at a general election. The names of all the towns which wished to enter the race should appear on the ballot. If Lincoln failed to get a majority of all the votes cast, then it would be held that a majority of the voters desired the capital removed. Further elections would then determine which of the rival cities would get the capital, but Lincoln would be out of the race.

Grand Island, Kearney, Columbus and other cities were centers of active propaganda for this bill. Each of them would like the State Capital. The "wet" element in the legislature was regi-

mented in support. Real estate promoters with plans for new capitol buildings and platted additions to sell appeared on the scene. Lobbyists and vote-traders with schemes to put over joined the procession.

Kearney in Buffalo County was one of the active candidates for the State Capital. The promoters, political prophets and election-calculators of Kearney had it all figured how Kearney was sure to win in the field of candidates when Lincoln had been shaken out at the first election.

But Representative Bassett, farmer-historian at Echo Farm, did not fall for the plan. He considered it bad public policy for the state to engage in a new real-estate-promotion scheme. He saw that the lines of travel and trade in Nebraska had been built upon the permanent location of the capital at Lincoln. He did not believe Kearney would get the capital on the deal. And he knew the motives which prompted the "wet" element to try to "get Lincoln."

All the lobby and promotion experts were set upon Bassett. All the persuasions of political friends and supporters in his home county were centered upon him. On the day when capital removal bill reached third reading a large imposing package was placed in Mr. Bassett's hands. When he opened it at his desk he saw that it was a petition from his home county demanding that he vote for the bill. It was signed by twelve hundred voters. He recognized their signatures. Names were there of men who had been his friends for forty years.

In a few minutes the roll was called, his name among the first. Representative Bassett rose and, in a voice that was heard across the hall, said "No!" He had met the test of good citizenship, as he did through his entire life.

### **Mr. Bassett a Founder**

The Nebraska years of S. C. Bassett were years of "founding" in the region west of the Missouri River. We were taking over a wilderness twice as large as Western Europe, adding it to the area of the American Republic and creating its institutions, its occupations and its future destiny. Mr. Bassett was a leader among founders of Nebraska. First of all, he was one of the founders of the community where he lived. He had a natural gift for the



Photo by A. E. Sheldon

MR. BASSETT AT DAIRY BARN, ECHO FARM



organization of useful elements in human society and putting them at work.

A partial list of institutions founded by S. C. Bassett finds proper place here:

He was one of the founders and first officers of the Buffalo County Agricultural Society in 1875, and in the 1911 legislature he introduced and secured the passage of the first act for teaching agriculture in Nebraska's rural schools.

He was secretary of the first Republican County Convention in 1871.

In 1885 the Nebraska Dairymen's Association was founded at Lincoln with S. C. Bassett as its first president. In 1887 he became its secretary and continued in that office until 1899. Organization of this association was part of a farming revolution in Nebraska, making over the grain-farming districts into a "Cow Country," as Mencken satirically called Nebraska years later. The cow, the hen and the creamery eventually saved thousands of Nebraska farm families from migration. The address of President S. C. Bassett at the first annual convention of this Dairymen's Association held at Fremont on December 9, 1885, hits a high mark in Nebraska farm literature and led the way to great changes.

Since 1885, when President Bassett's address outlined the future "cow business" of Nebraska, the number of cows in our state has risen from 286,000 to 648,000 in 1939. The annual cow income has grown from about two million to over thirty million dollars. The old home churn and hand-skimmer, in common use upon all Nebraska farms for many years, since the founding of the Soldier's Homestead Colony at Gibbon, have been superseded by the cream separator, the motor milk trucks, and the centralized creamery. No other element of the farm revolution in Nebraska has held together so many Nebraska farm homes. And no one has had a more important place in this achievement than S. C. Bassett.

"The Farmers' Congress," founded at Lincoln October 7, 1910, with S. C. Bassett as one of its leaders, became, for a period of years, one of the most useful and important associations for the discussion of living farm questions. It was a forum where

men of radical and men of conservative minds clashed in friendly forensic combats and helped pave the way for great changes in farm society.

Mr. Bassett was the original dreamer and founder of the Nebraska Hall of Agricultural Achievement, organized in 1916 with himself as president and Addison E. Sheldon as secretary. The whole conception of this institution is expressed by Mr. Bassett in his address of that day. Its objects, as expressed in its constitution and the address of its founder, are "To gather and compile the history of achievements in agriculture in the territory and state of Nebraska; to preserve and exhibit, in a permanent hall, the records of these achievements and the portraits of the men and women who achieved them."

This institution is still living. Its portrait gallery of noted Nebraskans who have achieved things in agriculture is one of the attractions in the hall of the Nebraska Agricultural College.

### **Mr. Bassett as a Scientist**

In the fields of special farming, forestry, social science, government, Mr. Bassett was a true scientist. He was a natural observer of facts, a recorder of them, a reasoner upon their meaning. He was so quiet, modest, self-effacing, that he gained a hearing for his scientific observations and reasoning from people far more brilliant and publicity-seeking than he. Some of these had the shrewdness to take over Mr. Bassett's work, adopt it as their own and proclaim it with great advertising. That, the writer observes, is a very common phenomenon in life. Some discoverers resent such uncredited appropriation of their ideas. Mr. Bassett never did. He was pleased when an Echo Farm fact or theory was "taken over" by some promoter. He had the fine, common, contented spirit of wishing to share his best work with the good world in which he lived, without credit or patent right.

### **Mr. Bassett as a Literary Character**

All his life long S. C. Bassett was a writer. He filled the minor places in writing during his early Nebraska years: brief letters in the local newspaper; brief addresses on public occasions. As the years passed Mr. Bassett constantly grew in the range of his information, in his power to put information into written

words. So he wrote a two-volume History of Buffalo County. He wrote numerous reports and addresses in connection with dairying and farming. He wrote many articles for the State Historical Society. He wrote occasional letters for the daily press.

About the year 1914 Mr Bassett took up a definite role as a writer upon topics of public interest. The first of those writings appeared in the *Nebraska State Journal* of March 2, 1914. He gave them the title "Echo Farm Musings." Each article was about a column in length—generally appearing on the editorial page Monday morning. "Echo Farm Musings" was a continuous feature of the Monday morning *Journal* until March 19, 1923, when the last appeared. This is a period of about nine years or 460 weeks, and Mr. Bassett missed very few Monday mornings. The total number of words in these articles is about 600,000, and it was all live stuff of current interest to the people of Nebraska. The articles were non-controversial in spirit, altho sometimes on controversial subjects. Their appeal was to reason and reflection, never to passion or prejudice. They were among the best read and most truly educational of all Nebraska writings.

### Imagination and Humor

Leading traits in Mr. Bassett's nature were the gifts of imagination and humor. He liked to surprise his friends. Among these surprises was an ingenious device of putting adhesive plaster in the form of the initials of dear friends upon Jonathan apples in his orchard. When the apple was ripe the initials came out in strong relief against the red cheek of the apple. It was a real surprise when his friends received apples with their initials upon them.

It was while engaged in this pursuit that Mr. Bassett fell from an apple tree and received a spinal injury which made him a prisoner at Echo Farm for the rest of his life—a period of several years. One result of this imprisonment was to turn his life inward. He spent a great part of his time reading favorite literature. He continued to write. He had time to reflect upon the deep universal questions which surround human life. His religious view was what you might expect from a man of his cast of mind. Essentially it was Nature-religion—free from the creeds and conventions of ordinary denominational type. It was

a religion which accepted the world and man as essentially good and which had no time for controversy over unimportant questions.

In these later years of Mr. Bassett's life, Echo Farm became more and more a favorite resting place for his many friends scattered over the state. Mr. Bassett was hungry for the visits of these people and many of us have sat up past midnight within its enchanted, simple surroundings. It was one of the most inspiring homes in all Nebraska. Mr. Bassett's family consisted of his wife and seven children. After the death of Mrs. Bassett on February 9, 1907, the younger children maintained the home and gave rare welcome to their father's friends in their frequent sojourn.

### **Service to Agriculture**

Mr. Bassett became a member of the Nebraska State Board of Agriculture in 1894 and continued in membership for fourteen years. He was president in 1899 and 1900. His service upon the board was characterized by the same qualities that distinguished his service elsewhere—modest, painstaking, attentive and progressive.

### **Bassett Portrait in Agricultural Hall**

After the death of Mr. Bassett on March 4, 1926, his friends planned the next annual meeting of the Nebraska Hall of Agricultural Achievement in his honor. At this meeting (January 6, 1927) the speakers included Dean Burnett of the College of Agriculture; Rev. Harmon Bross of the Grand Army of the Republic; J. D. Ream of Broken Bow as a fellow homesteader; H. G. Taylor as a fellow legislator; Will Owen Jones, editor of the *State Journal*; A. L. Haecker, of the Dairy Department; W. R. Mellor, of the State Board of Agriculture; G. A. Marshall of Arlington as a fellow horticulturist; E. C. Folsom of Lincoln on Mr. Bassett as a homemaker; Addison E. Sheldon on Mr. Bassett as a historian. The portrait of Mr. Bassett was unveiled by his granddaughter, Miss Barbara Prouty of Shelton. Very fitly the founder and first president of so many important Nebraska associations was given a place of honor in the state toward which he had given so much in fifty-five years of active service.