Some of the Tall Tales of Nebraska

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: Mari Sandoz wrote these recollections of stories about Barada and Stocking for Louise Pound, who had requested information about Nebraska's "Strong Men."

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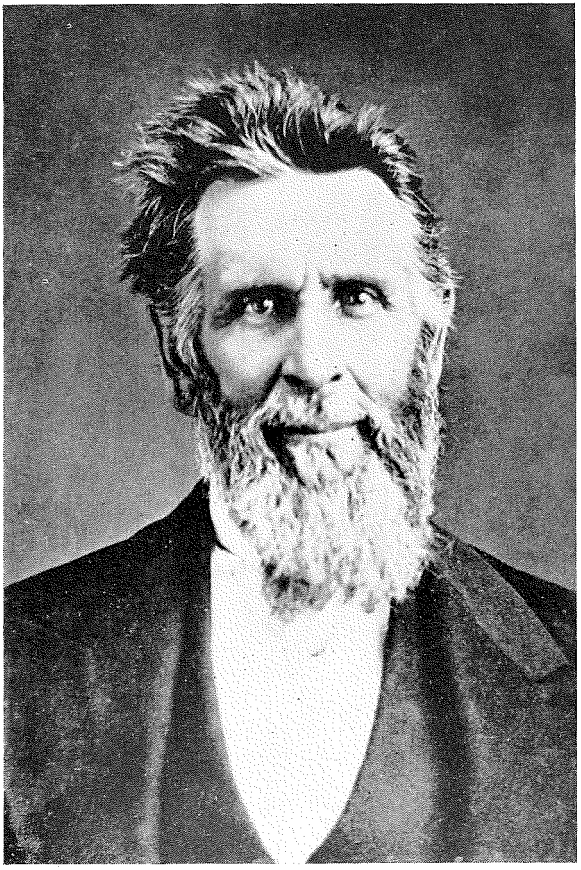

MOSES STOCKING

Folklore Hero of Saunders County
Founder of Nebraska Sheep Industry

Some of the Tall Tales of Nebraska

Dr. Louise Pound of the University of Nebraska wrote to Mari Sandoz, now writing and researching in New York libraries, asking for information about Nebraska's "Strong Men." Miss Sandoz sent a copy of her reply to this her old office thinking it would be useful in the files. We think it would interest our readers. So here it is, in substance:

I grew up on the Barada stories as told by the breeds from around Pine Ridge: brought up there, I suspect, by the Ruleaus and others who used to live on what was called "the Breed Strip" in southeastern Nebraska; and still with relatives to visit down there in the early 1900's.

Antoine Barada seems to have been a breed (Spanish and Omaha), the son of Michael Barada after whom the town of that name in Richardson County was named. I'm told there was also a Michael Barada in the Custer County region. . .

About the stories: I've tried for two days to reconstruct some of them for you, but can recall only one in any semblance of entirety. (I wish I had something of the Pound memory!) This one comes to me as a picture: a hook-nosed breed, French but not further identifiable, sitting on our wood block and telling the story over his pipe something like this:

> Antoine Barada was a hurry-up man, always rushing, rushing, can't wait for anything. One time he got tired of watching a pile-driver working along the Missouri with the hammer making up-down, up-down, the driver yelling, "Git up! Git up! Whoa! Back! Back! Whoa!!" And then all of it over again, and the piling going down maybe half an inch. So Antoine he picks up the damned thing in his bare hand and, swinging back, throws it high and far so it lights clear over the Missouri where it bounce and bounce, leaving ground tore up bad for miles and making what the greenhorns call "Breaks of the Missouri." But at last it stop, and if you dig down on them high ridges you find it is the damned pile-driver with grass growing over him a little — poor soil, you understand, but it seem to satisfy them that ain't never cross the Missouri and don't know better.
>
> When Antoine have disposed of the Johnny Jumper hammer, he see that the piling that is left stands a mile higher that the rest. So he give it a lick with his fist and it pop down into ground so deep it strike buried lake, the water flying out like from a bung-hole fifty feet and like to drown out whole country if Antoine did not sit on hole fast.

A rather neglected group of strong-man stories where mind rules over mere brawn and nature too, are those of Moses Stocking. They were floating around western Nebraska in my childhood — always about a man in eastern Nebraska who ran sheep. Later I discovered there really was a Moses Stocking and, as I recall now, he lived somewhere between Lincoln and Omaha. I don't remember many of these and know of no place where they reached print. All the great plant and animal stories were attributed to him, such as the squash vines that grew so fast they wore the squashes out dragging them over the ground. And the corn that grew so tall a boy was sent up the stalk to measure it and was never heard from again except that they know he's still alive because they sell a train-load of corn cobs every year from around the foot of the Stocking cornstalk, thrown down by the boy — who must be a gray-haired man now because

the birds' nests found among the corn leaves are made with gray hair. And so forth!

There was also the story of how Moses Stocking went into sheep. He had an acre of bottom land broke (he never did any of the work himself, you understand!) but, because it was late, he couldn't sow anything except turnips. The seed was bad and only five plants came up, one in each corner and one in the middle. But they grew pretty well. The corner ones were squashed and flattened, of course, being so close together, and too puny for any real use — although they hauled one of them to the top of a hill somewhere along the Platte, and when it was hollowed out and the wind dried it, it was used for a military academy and did very well for years to house the boys.

Another turnip that grew in a corner was used for the railroad depot at Omaha, since there would be only temporary use for a depot there. The other two corner turnips were wasted, as I recall; but the one in the center was worth saving and from it grew the Stocking fortune. After walking around it once and coming back footsore and with cockleburs in his beard, old Moses took the train for Chicago and bought up all the sheep at the stock-market and for the next month there was a stream "as wide as the Missouri" of sheep coming across Iowa to the Stocking place. They started eating at the turnip where Moses blasted a hole, and they lived there all winter, fat and snug, not having to go into the blizzard cold at all but just eating out the pulp; and the shell made a shelter for the sheep — enough of them to keep Jay Cooke* afloat for a whole year after he really was broke, only the public didn't know it.

That's all I can recall at the moment. I hope you will forgive the rough, unrevised versions. . .

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* Through his banking and railroad interests Jay Cooke came to represent to the western farmer all that was ruthless and rapacious; and when the House of Cooke, after much propping up, finally crashed in September 1873, precipitating a great panic, his name became the symbol of the graft and skullduggery that had impoverished the country.

"70 Years Ago Today"

Moses Stocking of Eldred was the most extensive wool grower in the state. He had 1,600 head of sheep.

— from *Lincoln Evening Journal*
July 22, 1943.