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Article Summary: Lincoln struggled to provide city services in post frontier days. Its government was no more inefficient than those of other urban communities of the Plains at that time, however. People untrained for public service were running cities throughout the region.

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Problems of the Post Frontier Prairie City As Portrayed by Lincoln, Nebraska, 1880-1890

Everett N. Dick

Not a few prairie cities have a skeleton or two in the closet in the form of a county-seat quarrel. Some even have fought for the state capital, but few have been brought into being by pure fiat. Such is the history of Lincoln, capital and second largest city in Nebraska. It was born of a struggle between Omaha and Nebraska City for the capital. Finally as a compromise three commissioners were appointed to locate the new capital, the name of which was to be Lincoln.¹

The new city was marked off on the prairie a short distance east of a flat salt marsh where settlers for years had come from miles around to boil salt which was obtainable there. The capital locators had the insight of the typical frontier town builder and possessed, in the name of the state, a large tract which they laid off in lots and sold to the settlers. The first state-house was built at a cost of \$75,817.59 from the proceeds of the sale of lots at auction.²

By 1870 all the homesteads in Lancaster County, in which Lincoln is located, had been possessed by settlers. In the decade of the Seventies the village busied itself in attracting railroads to it and in general trying to grow up.

¹"Report of the Commissioners to Locate the Seat of Government of the State of Nebraska," in Andrew J. Sawyer, Ed., *Lincoln and Lancaster County* (Chicago, 1916), 2 volumes, I, 80-82.

²E. P. Brown, *The Prairie Capital* (Lincoln, 1930), p. 91.

By 1880 Lincoln was emerging from the cocoon of its pioneer days. At that time it claimed a population of 13,003. We cannot be too sure how this figure was secured but we do know that on May 19, 1876, the city council in secret session resolved that inasmuch as the last census of Lincoln showed a decrease of 2,600 the committee on finance be authorized to employ a competent person to take a new census. And we do get an idea of the ingenuity of Lincoln citizens along this line when we observe that whereas the census of 1880 indicated a population of 13,003 that of 1890 gave the figure 55,159, or an increase of over four hundred per cent in ten years' time. The council must have seen that a competent man indeed and in truth secured the job of census taker for Uncle Sam that year. Even with a healthy steady growth it was forty years before the United States census figures ever exceeded that of the padded census of 1890.³

In 1880 Lincoln had none of the characteristics of a city. In the center of town there was a clump of store buildings, few more than two stories in height, and many camouflaging their lowly status by means of false fronts two stories high. The wide streets were unpaved. In spring and winter they were deep in mud and in summer they were a welter of dust. These streets were unpoliced, unlighted, and in some places even ungraded. Travel was not restricted to the ground laid out for streets but because of the scarcity of houses, and consequent wide open spaces, traffic flowed diagonally across blocks wherever the current of travel might direct. Nearly every family had a cow and a horse. Adjacent haystacks and manure piles adorned the landscape. Pig pens frequently added to the farmyard appearance, to say nothing of the smell. On the back of every occupied lot was olfactory evidence that there was no sewage system. Homes were heated by a stove and lighted by kerosene lamps. Water was obtained from wells and the family wash tub did double duty, functioning for

³C. H. Rudge, a well-informed citizen of Lincoln who was in a position to speak with authority, estimated the population of Lincoln in 1890 at 29,000.

both bath and laundry.⁴ In the Seventies a gas company had established a plant, but the system could hardly be called a success. In the winter the wooden mains froze and burst or became unjointed, often causing the gas to be shut off during a long search for the difficulty.

A definite step in the progress of the city was taken in January, 1883, when a contract was signed by which the Lincoln Gas Light Company agreed to keep the street lamps clean, supply the gas, and to "light and keep said lamps burning from early dusk until twelve o'clock midnight . . . during the dark of the moon, and when it shall be too dark to pass along the streets with safety by reason of cloudiness."

An electric light plant was established in 1884 and the city tried out arc lights. The many entries on the council minutes indicate street lighting to have been one of the major problems of the city. The cost was evidently the chief problem, judging from the swift changes which were made from oil to gas, to gasoline, to electricity, and back to gas. This problem seems to have been quite largely solved by 1888 when the city had three hundred and fifty-five gas and gasoline lights.

The flat terrain, coupled with the fact that three sluggish streams carried the water from the surrounding country onto the townsite, brought drainage difficulties. After a rain the water stood in puddles about the streets, vacant lots, and back yards.⁵ A hard, pouring rain brought the water into the town faster than it could be carried away, sometimes causing a flood in the west part of the city. Petition after petition was presented to the city government asking for changes in grades of the various streets along which the petitioners lived or had business houses.

The numbering of the houses came about through the insistence of the postmaster when mail delivery was to be established in 1882.

In the same year the council felt it necessary to reg-

⁴Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

⁵*Daily State Journal* (Lincoln, Nebraska), February 8, 1881.

ulate the use of velocipedes on the sidewalks, requiring them to carry a bell in the daytime and a lantern at night.⁶ Fast driving was apparently a problem in the Eighties and an ordinance forbade riding or driving a horse faster than six miles an hour, on penalty of a maximum fine of twenty dollars for each offense. One can not help wondering how the officers were to measure the speed of the vehicles. For the benefit of young bloods who wished to indulge in horse racing, one street was set apart for fast driving.

The first paving contracts were let in 1887 but when the contractors were ready to lay the blocks, the city fathers, who were inexperienced at this new business, discovered that the gas pipes, water mains, sewer pipes, and street-car tracks all should be put down before the paving could proceed. This necessitated extensive planning, much work, and expense. Delay after delay occurred until the patience of the public was worn threadbare. Criticism of the city council, the board of public works, and the contractors burst forth from the newspapers. For months the streets presented the appearance of an embattled city with deep trenches, ridges of earth, and heaps of building material. The places of business for blocks were barricaded for weeks at a time with no outlet but the sidewalk. Finally in 1888 the work was completed and the citizens were agreed that the results were worth the months of agony.⁷ During the early Eighties cedar blocks were used for paving.

The wet and dry struggle has been the leading issue in the political life of the city. As early as 1880 the city council seriously debated the proposal of prohibiting the sale of liquor. This proposal resulted in a tie vote of three to three with the mayor throwing his vote with the wets. By 1888 the ordinance concerning liquor had been amended so many times that one in beholding the ordinance in

⁶*Minutes of the Lincoln City Council, MS., August 21, 28, 1882.*

⁷A. B. Hayes and Sam D. Cox, *History of the City of Lincoln* (Lincoln, 1889), p. 172; Sawyer, *op. cit.*, I, 144.

force could not tell the original garment from the innumerable patches.

A compromise was reached between the wets and dries in the early Eighties which took shape in a regulation requiring the saloons to remove all blinds, screens, frosted windows, or other means which would conceal the drinker at the bar. This device was designed to strip the saloon of all privacy and allow the public to see the Sunday school superintendent taking his potion of tanglefoot. An ordinance requiring all saloons to close at ten in the evening except during fair week was the source of no end of difficulty. Finally the discrepancy between the saloon-keepers' clocks and those of the law enforcement officers became so obvious that police officials were ordered to regulate the timepieces of the saloon-keepers each evening at six.

In 1885 when Mayor W. E. Hardy took a firm stand on the liquor question he received a ghastly warning. A coffin was left at his door. Nothing daunted by this unique gift, the doughty magistrate promptly sold it for thirteen dollars and gave the money to the treasury of the local temperance society.⁸

By 1880 the people were aroused to the need of a better water supply. The board of trade corresponded with a number of cities over the East to find out how they operated their waterworks, the cost of water, and whether they were privately or city owned. In December, 1881, the people voted a \$10,000 bond issue for the purpose of digging a city well. This well was fifty feet in diameter, sixty feet deep, and is said to have produced a million gallons a day. There was much discussion as to the best scheme of building and paying for waterworks. One plan provided for the city to finance the waterworks by donation. Each donor was to receive water script which was to be redeemable in the purchase of water.⁹ Finally on July 11, 1884, a city-owned waterworks and the issue of \$90,000 in bonds to

⁸Federal Writers' Project, *Lincoln City Guide* (Lincoln, 1937), pp. 72-73.

⁹*Minutes of the Board of Trade*, MS. in possession of the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce, March 14, 1881, I, 84.

finance it were authorized. A stand-pipe seventy-five feet high was built and the first water sent through the mains on April 28, 1885.

In the meantime the mammoth well had not proved as effective as had been anticipated and a contractor was engaged to drill a hole in the bottom of it. Unfortunately the vein of water which was tapped at this time was salty and contaminated the entire well. Another large well was dug, efforts were made to exclude the salt from the original well, and a large number of wells were driven, or drilled. On the fourth day of June, 1888, there were eighty wells, but the report of a special inspector showed that twenty-seven produced salt water in decided quantity.¹⁰ Water crisis followed crisis. The use of water was limited to bare necessities and meters were installed to prevent waste. In November, 1889, the *Lincoln Call* remarked: "The drive-well system after spending \$20,000, is reported a complete failure, not over 150 still being used." The same paper the same year commented: It is the opinion of a very large number that the only solution to the water problem is tapping the Platte River. The council men should be very cautious before depleting the treasury for nothing — and these salt pits being dug come as near being nothing as anything imaginable.¹¹

The *Call* was a call indeed. Here was the voice of one crying in the wilderness. It was not until forty years later, however, after innumerable trials with wells, that the city laid a main to the Platte River twenty-five miles away, and this, said to be the longest thirty-six-inch underground main in the United States, furnishes an abundance of water for a growing city. The coming of the waterworks brought other problems. The first sanitary sewer was laid two years later.

As the city emerged from the frontier period, the fire regulations and organizations were simple indeed. A regulation designated a certain area in the city as the fire

¹⁰"Report of I. L. Lyman, Special Inspector of Water Wells," *Minutes of the Council*, June 4, 1888.

¹¹*The Call*, Lincoln, Nebraska, June 4, 1889.

zone and required any one erecting buildings therein to construct them of fireproof material. However, brick veneer and even buildings covered with corrugated iron apparently were classed as fireproof. This zone was enlarged from time to time by vote of the council. The usual regulations regarding fire escapes and aisle room in theaters came with the growth of the city.

In 1880 the fire-fighting organization consisted of volunteer fire companies with hose carts and mud-sucker hand pumps. There were about one hundred cisterns, each of five hundred barrel capacity, located at the principal street intersections, and the fire company threw their hose into the nearest cistern and pumped the water. These fire companies with their splendid uniforms, glittering hose carts, and golden speaking trumpets offered a sporting outlet for the community also. Long before the mighty Cornhuskers of gridiron fame appeared, these hose companies aroused more enthusiasm than a Big Six game today. Indeed the Fitzgeralds, so called from their patron, an early railroad builder and Lincoln Croesus, were much more famous for their athletic prowess than for their fire-fighting ability. The sport was for the contestants to simulate a fire. Each had to run a given distance and see who could get into action the quickest. The Fitzgeralds once won the national championship at New Orleans and when they came back home, the mayor, the council, and the whole town met them with the band.¹²

In 1881 a new steam fire engine was purchased. With the exception of the engineer, who performed the double duty of engineer and jailer, the fire department was still on a volunteer basis. A contract was drawn up, with a man with a team, to haul the fire engine for twenty-five dollars a month. He agreed to keep the team within the city limits during the day and within two hundred feet of the fire house at night. The driver thus used his team at dray work, garbage collection, or other tasks about town,

¹²*Minutes of the Council*, March 15, 1886; Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 55, 56.

and was ready on call to transform his horses into noble fire steeds hauling the snorting fire engine to the scene of a conflagration.¹³ In 1886 the fire department was reorganized and placed on a salaried basis.

The telephone came to Lincoln in January, 1880. Twenty-one months later the council voted a telephone for the chief of the fire department but the chief of police was denied an installation and instructed to go to the headquarters of the fire chief and use his phone.¹⁴

Until about the beginning of the Eighties the police force consisted simply of a city marshal. He also held the office of street commissioner and might be seen with a shovel on his shoulder draining a mud puddle or repairing a street. The escape of prisoners from the city jail in 1885 caused a complete reorganization of the police force with three day police and five on the night force. To fit these eight police, eight ranks or grades were created. The police were placed in uniform and were ordered to drill in the use of the club thirty minutes a day.¹⁵

In 1880 the mayor and the council constituted the board of health. The main work of this board was that of removing nuisances. As late as January 29, 1883, Issac George complained of a hog pen kept in the main part of town. The board investigated and declared there was no immediate necessity for asking the owner to remove it.¹⁶ A dumping ground was selected, mud puddles were ordered drained, slaughter houses were ordered to move out of the city, and were regulated, and live stock and meat were inspected. Even the ice harvested for sale in the city was inspected and the place of harvest supervised. Scavengers were licensed to remove animal and human excrement from the back lots. The latter was required to be removed at

¹³Ruth T. Dodge, "A History of Municipal Organization of Lincoln, 1867-1887," MS., Nebraska State Historical Society Library, pages unnumbered.

¹⁴*Minutes of the Council*, October 3, 1881; Alfred Theodore Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago, 1882), 2 volumes, I, 1044.

¹⁵*Minutes of the Council*, September 28, 1885.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, January 29, 1883.

night. As early as 1882 all school children were required to be vaccinated. A pest house for the care of smallpox cases was established. A city hospital was also established for the care of transients and all other persons who had no home where they could receive care while ill.

A library had been started in an early day for the purpose of furnishing young men with wholesome diversion and keeping them out of places of questionable amusement. When it was proposed that the city take over support of the library, considerable opposition developed. Mayor Hardy, however, declared that if necessary they should do away with the street lights and use the money for the library, for lanterns could be carried as a substitute for street lights but there was no substitute for a good library.

The problem of housing the schools was often acute. In 1880 a Lincoln paper reported that although three school-houses had been built within the past year or two, yet the cry was, "Give us more room!" The Superintendent was driven to despair in an attempt to find a place for his young charges.¹⁷ Even the state-house was used for a school building on occasion. Time after time the citizens were called upon to vote bonds for school buildings and although there often was much grumbling, the bonds seldom failed to carry.

The young prairie city early paid attention to the interests of the working man. In 1888 in response to a complaint that the street railway company was compelling its employees to work sixteen to nineteen hours a day, the council ordered an investigation and forbade such practice. The city set the pace by limiting to eight hours its working day and that of any contractor performing work for the city.¹⁸

The city government was influenced by local mercantilism. Again and again the city council was pestered by the merchants seeking legislation against peddlers, out-

¹⁷*Daily State Journal*, October 15, 1880.

¹⁸L. W. Billingsley and R. J. Greene, Compilers, *Revised Ordinances of the City of Lincoln, Nebraska, 1895* (Lincoln, 1895), p. 211.

of-town vendors, and others who might cut in on their business. In response a system of licenses was established. On this schedule were: auctioneer, \$100 a year; clairvoyant, \$50 a year; corn doctor, \$10 a year; any one who shall cry goods at a stand or on the streets, \$10 a day.¹⁹

The young city wanted railroads, industries, and colleges—anything to build a permanent city. A number of railroads had been secured in the Seventies by voting bonds to them. In the Eighties two more were secured. During a campaign for another a newspaper cried, "If the Santa Fe can't come to Lincoln, then let Lincoln go to the Santa Fe." The board of trade took a leading part in this attempt to build up the town. Three denominational colleges were secured by offers of land for building purposes.

A paint manufacturing company was induced to come to the city on payment of \$5,000 raised by popular subscription. The board of trade in 1887 established a freight bureau, hired a railroad man to operate it, and succeeded in abolishing the discriminatory freight rates against Lincoln as compared to Missouri River points. In 1888 among other achievements the board reported having secured a cracker manufacturing concern, a woolen mill, a watch factory, and was dickering with the Beat 'em All Barb Wire Company of Cedar Rapids, Iowa.²⁰

The city put its best foot forward. In preparation for the fair, the mayor proclaimed a clean-up day. All the weeds about town were cut, the streets fixed up, the streets to the fairgrounds lighted, and barrels of ice water and tin cups placed on the streets. When the city was host to 145 members of the Editorial Association of Kansas, the city council voted to pay the \$768.18 entertainment expenses which included the charges for liquor, for this parched delegation from our dry sister state.

The city had the usual run of difficulty with the street-car lines. First came horse cars, then steam street-cars, then cable cars, and finally the electric car. A number of

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 300-303.

²⁰*Minutes of the Board of Trade*, April 28, 1887, June 21, 1887, May 1, 1888.

independent lines were run by as many companies. There was some difficulty when a new company sought a franchise. On one occasion one of Lincoln's citizens, afterward a national figure, stood guard with a shot-gun while his company built a certain section at night. In the morning he presented a completed line to the astounded city council, which was not able to dislodge the interlopers by judicial procedure.²¹

The government of the city was the old familiar mayor-council type. It was inefficient and allowed no small amount of shifting of responsibility. Often two or three members of the council would band together and by log-rolling, vote civic improvements to their sections of the town to the exclusion of the minority council members. Nothing could be done about it since councilmen were elected by wards and the wards profiting by this favoritism naturally were inclined to vote for their man who was delivering the goods. There were many charges of prodigality, waste, and misrule. It was charged and with considerable justification that councilmen were representing street railways, the merchants, the gas company, or other interests instead of the people. The Lincoln *Call* in an address to the new council at one time read a charge to the newly-elected council members: "See that you work for the city and not for yourselves."

On one occasion the police judge set up a racket all his own. He arranged with the proprietor of a gambling hall, that the latter should pay a monthly fine of ten dollars and costs for himself and a five dollar fine for each of his employees. The obliging police judge even went so far as to go to the gambling hall and collect the fines, much as the landlord does his rent. The judge had a similar arrangement with the houses of prostitution.²²

The struggles of Lincoln to provide adequate water supply, fire, police, and health protection, street surfacing,

²¹Personal Interview with Ex-Governor C. W. Bryan, April 19, 1940.

²²*Minutes of the Council*, September 19, 28, 1887.

sanitary facilities, street lighting, drainage, liquor control, schooling, transportation, and an efficient government, were those common to the average prairie city during the decade following its emergence from the strictly frontier epoch. The weakness and inefficiency attending the government of such a city, run as it was by representatives of the people, untrained for public service, is a natural characteristic of democracies.

The struggles of this healthy prairie city are typical of the urban communities of the plains in the latter part of the nineteenth century.