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Article Summary: John Edward Bryant recalls his 1872 trip to Nebraska; his return to Indiana to teach, earn money, and marry; and the life he and his wife led in early Nebraska. Much of this article comes from the manuscript Bryant prepared for the sixtieth anniversary of the Bethel Brotherhood in Carleton, Nebraska.

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Reminiscences of A Nebraska Pioneer of the '70's

Edited by Walker D. Wyman

Into the making of this nation has gone the contributions of many peoples. Pulled here by the strong forces of attraction, not the least of which has been economic opportunity, millions came to this hospitable land. These people of many lands and cultures have been examples of the American dream. With the vast wilderness in front of them and an Indian policy that made little provision for a social security system for the natives, many of these people established themselves on the frontier of cheap farms, there helping form the commonwealths that became Ohio and Minnesota and other states of the Mississippi Valley. From these and other older communities went on to other frontiers those thousands of adventurous souls who dared break loose from the economic and spiritual moorings of family, church, and friends. After the Civil War, Nebraska served as the overflow area of the Mississippi and Ohio valleys and beckoned those veterans of that conflict and others to come there to start life anew. There on its rolling lands the homesteader built his sod house and broke the prairie grass. There he faced a future whose first years were hard, but one that offered the promise of the Four Freedoms if he stayed with it.

Of the many people who were starting life anew in Nebraska in the '70's there was one who has left a brief record. He was young then, only twenty-two, and he carried on his six feet frame the good solid name of John Edward Bryant. The product of the emigration into lower Indiana from below the Ohio River, he had grown up on a farm, and being both tall and bright had taught a few terms of school in the winter. After his older brother left the crowd-

ed neighborhood near Martinsville in about 1870, he also made the break, and his reminiscences show glimpses of his trip to Nebraska in 1872, his return to make some money teaching school and to marry the girl of his dreams down the road, and of their life in early Nebraska. He is no more important than were countless other thousands of hopefuls who were flocking to this last farm frontier the last part of last century. He was never elected governor or senator. He never amassed great wealth. Not only that, he even left his adopted state after spending twenty-eight years there and sought his fortune in western Colorado, a frontier community only nineteen years removed from the Indians but one that did give the assurance of water any time man wanted to turn it on. Here he raised apples and other crops, became a well-known figure in the church of his choosing, achieving the distinction of minister, elder, and trustee of the church college at McPherson. He never possessed a great amount of this world's goods but he died as a result of an auto accident at the age of 89, rich in memory and reputation. As the minister said in his funeral oration, "Mr. Bryant gave his children a good name."

This strong personality was more than a sod-house pioneer. He was also identified with that hardy group of people well-known in Nebraska as those of the Dunkard faith. Living the simple life, fearing the evils of personal adornment, wealth, desire for power, and those drives that mould many people, and believing that the church and its religious teaching can give the strength and purpose for significant living, this man became a Dunkard while on the frontier and remained steadfast in his association until his death in 1940. True to his convictions, he refused to accept some of the modern deviations tolerated by the Church of the Brethren there near Grand Junction, Colorado, and with a few others formed their own church more acceptable to their point of view.

Always a student of church literature, western Americana, the Bible, and the dictionary, Mr. Bryant was historically minded. He realized that he had lived in an era

of great events and that he had played a part, though small, in a mighty process. Perhaps it was this that caused him in 1935, upon the occasion of the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of his little church in Nebraska, to write his reminiscences of life there in the early years. It is that manuscript with additions taken from another one left among his personal effects that is reproduced below. Original spelling is retained (Mr. Bryant took great pride in his spelling, having stood to the last many times in the days of the school house "spelling bee"), but occasional commas are inserted to give clarity. When one manuscript adds something that the other one does not include, that part is inserted. Arrangement is changed in a few places, but the main story is as it was written in pencil with an uncertain hand by a strong man still much alive at the age of eighty-five.

In early April 1872, T. H. Shipley and I left Martinsville, Indiana, for Fillmore Co., Neb. He had come out [to Nebraska] the fall before with my brother Bort and family, J. A. Jennings and family. Shipley had taken a homestead which was afterward contested and obtained by Jack Wagers. We left Indianapolis over the I. B. W. R. R. to Burlington, Iowa. There we changed to the B & M to the Missouri River. There was no bridge over the river there, so we crossed in a steam ferry boat named The President. We ran down river about a mile and landed at Plattsmouth. There we took passage over a road the name of which was distinctly stated on the passenger cars "Burlington and Missouri River R.R. in Nebraska." Our passenger car was a single coach attached to the rear of a long heavy freight train, I think that it was between Lincoln and Crete our progress was so slow on a grade, that several of us got out and walked and the "peanut boy" would run up near the engine, walk back on top the cars to the passenger coach, get off, then run up near the engine, climb to the top and again walk back. My brother was at Crete at 3 P. M. and we went and spent the night in Pleasanthill, which was but a small village, but then

county seat of Saline Co. It was, I think, forty five miles from there to my brother's home. The name of the post-office which afterwards served the people at Carleton, was Coleraine, kept by Mr. Barton, one or two miles east of where Carleton was located during the summer of 1872. Even then, in going from Pleasant hill we traveled many miles without seeing a sign of habitation and fire had swept away every vestige of vegetation for no fire breaks had been plowed. From my brother's house in April 1872 we could count six habitations. Mr. Shields six miles north, Sam Mahaffey's four miles south, the Hamilton's and Sykes on the east. The next Sept. from same point we could count eighty, so rapidly was the settlement made in 1872. I returned to Ind. in Sept. and taught five month's school during the fall and winter. On Christmas eve I married Susan E. Warthen, a sister of my brother's wife, cousin to W. E. and Cal. Warthen whom many of the Carltonites used to know.

On April first, 1873, I left Martinsville, Ind. with my young wife and in due time was met by my brother at Fairmont. We soon went to Beatrice that I might homestead. Five miles west of Beatrice we stopped over night with Dan. Freeman on Cub Creek. He was occupying the land that he homesteaded as soon as the office opened at midnight. Thus he secured Homestead No. 1, the first under the homestead law. He immediately started for the army which was recruiting for the civil war. I homesteaded eighty acres on Sec. 14 southwest of where Shickley was since located. We lived with my brother for two or three months [here a half-page of the manuscript is torn out].

I told my brother who had wintered in Neb. [in] 1871 and 1872 that I should like to see a Neb. snowstorm. Easter Sunday 1873 was Apr. 14 which was proceeded by pleasant weather. Easter was ushered in with cloudy weather but warm. About noon a drizzling rain set in and continued all afternoon. The next morning Bort said "Get up, Eddy, we have a Neb. snowstorm." (The word "Blizzard" was not yet born, but I am informed that

this identical snowstorm was the origin of the word).[1]

Fortunately we had got a load of wood from the Big Sandy on the day before Easter, but we had not made it into stove wood. It was impossible to stay out in the storm for I don't think we could have seen more than ten feet; so one of us would rush out, seize a stick of wood and rush into the house and fit it for the stove. Well this snowstorm continued till Wed. noon without abatement, then cleared up and turned warm so that there were several absentees from S.S. the next Sunday because of so much water from melting snow. The people, thinking that winter was past, had allowed the walls of their stables to go down. These walls were of hay put between small stak[e]s or posts. (As yet there was no straw for no small grain had yet been grown.) Our stable was so, but the hay was still there and we hurriedly made it comfortable. There were then no cattle among us but milk cows and work oxen. Some cattle drifted before the storm and for several days after the storm men could be seen out on the prairie skinning their cows that had perished in the storm. One man, having no stable took his oxen into the house with his family. Since there was no floor this was possible and probably saved the lives of his team with which he afterwards broke his prairie. Looking back now to this time it would seem to be a hard life, but we were really happier then than now, I believe. Many of us went barefoot in warm weather. One man said that on Sunday morning when he wished to dress for Sunday, all he had to do was to wash his feet.

The house in which we lived was the ordinary homesteaders house of the day, sod walls with a ridgepole for

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[1]This may be true in explaining the origin of the word in his part of Nebraska but does not hold for the origin of the word elsewhere. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. I, states that it was used as early as 1834 by Col. Davy Crockett in which it meant to blast a man, that is to give him a blizzard. "As applied to a 'snow squall,' the word became general in American newspapers during the severe winter of 1880-81, but according to the *Milwaukee Republican* 4 Mar. 1881, it had been applied in the *Northern Vindicator*, Estherville, Iowa) between 1860 and 1870. It was apparently in colloquial use in the West much earlier . . . . "

the comb of the house and poles reaching from the wall to the ridgepole. On these poles, which served as rafters, brush was placed and on the brush hay to the depth of two or three inches and on [the] hay, a layer of sod, and on top of all was loose earth. No floor, just the earth. The window, or windows, never more than two, more often only one, was almost sure to be six by eight window panes one half sash; this set in a wall two or three feet thick admitted some light but very little sunshine, but it was storm proof. This must have been discouraging to the women who had left neat comfortable homes in the East, but I dont remember of ever hearing a word of complaint from them. All had come west for homes and bore their hardships patiently. This house inside was perhaps 16 x 24 with 12 foot posts (1½ story).

Well I took my homestead on Sec. 14, S. W. of where Shickley now stands. My first habitation was a dugout 10 12 on level ground, hence to reach the floor which was three feet below the level we had to go down three or four steps. We built and occupied it in July, I think, for Bort and I were to[o] busy breaking out our land to stop to make a house during breaking season, which closed July 1. The first years on a homestead we could raise a satisfactory crop, from five to fifteen bushels per acre on the sod by planting the corn in the crevices between the furrows which lay much like 12 inch plank beside each other, possibly lapping on each other an inch. Pumpkins, melons and squashes did well. So while our bill of fare was not great we did not have to go hungry. The second year we sowed small grain on the ground which we broke the preceding year. When the grasshoppers came, I think it was in 1874, our small grain was ripe and they did no injury to it, but I don't think there was a roasting ear in Fillmore Co. or perhaps in Thayer [Co.].

These people had all come west for homes and they were good neighbors and crime was almost unknown among us. Soon small frame school houses were built in every school district. In these religious services and S. S. were held, so that every community could attend such

service if they desired. When I arrived in 1873 Sunday school had been organized in the home of Stewart Orr, one mile east of where the Allen school house was afterwards built. Here at this S. S. I first met Levi Beanblossom. A friendship was there formed, which I think never waned. He was just six months my senior, and he will be eighty five years old June 6, 1935. Mr. Hamilton, a Presbyterian minister, was the pioneer preacher among us. His homestead was a mile east of Stewart Orrs place. It was in his honor Hamilton Township [in] Fillmore Co. was named. He was a fine old gentleman and had enough religion to last him seven days in the week. He preached without compensation. The next, as I remember, was George H. Wehr. He was a Methodist. There were more of that denomination among us than any other. Chris. Forney was the first Dunkard preacher that I ever saw. He was called from Falls City to preach the funeral sermon of Levi Holsinger's wife. The only Dunkard that I ever heard of was a Dunkard preacher killed by the Indians in Northern Ills. I read the story in an old history which said that the "Indians cut off his head and stuck it up on a pole and it presented a peculiar appearance as his beard was about three feet long." So far is I knew this exterminated the Dunkards until I heard the Mileses and the Teeters tell about them; they lived among them in Ill. After Forney had preached the funeral sermon for which he came, he remained several days and preached several sermons, all doctrinal, one of which was on trine immersion. I was reared by Methodist parents and thus imbibed the doctrine, though had never united with the church. I fought the Dunkard doctrine with all my might. During this visit thirteen people told Forney that if a series of meetings were held in Apr. following they would be baptized. John Forney of Falls City and Allen Ives of Burroak, Kan. came to hold the meetings. After some meetings thirteen were baptized on Sunday. The meetings continued. T. D. Van Buren who had been a Methodist classleader attended these meetings regularly. The meetings were held in the sod house vacated by Levi Holsinger after the death of his

wife. On Monday evening one day after the baptizing or one week and a day I have forgotten which, after the audience was dismissed, and the members were visiting among themselves I asked T. D. if he thought that he would ever join these people. He said that he might. I said I think I shall. If you will join tonight, I will. He said "all right." Some one went and told Forney. The next day T. D. and his wife and myself and wife and Samuel Teeter were baptized by Allen Ives, not in the limpid stream of which the poets write but in a stream formed by the melting snow flowing through a prairie draw about ¼ mile south east of the home of Samuel Teeter, but it was water just as truly the water of Jordan. The water was scarcely deep enough for convenience, but we were immersed by trine immersion and I have never doubted in the least that it was apostolic baptism, the trine immersion of which Monulus A. D. 256 said "hath always been with us" meaning since founding of the Church. After we were baptized we repaired to the home of S. R. Holsinger where we were partially organized by electing Simon R. Holsinger and Thomas Van Buren to the deacon's office. In June we held our first lovefeast. At that time Thomas Van Buren and B. F. Stump were elected to the first degree of the ministry. As yet we had not chosen a name for our congregation which we now decided to do. Some suggested Carleton Bro. [therhood]. Forney suggested that Carleton might become a town notorious for its sinfulness. Where upon Carrill Holsinger suggested Bethel which was readily adopted. We were taught the philosophy of the whole system of the Christian religion as the Dunkards then understood [it] and which I have never doubted is absolutely safe. Faith and baptism constituted conversion and adoption into the family of God, and we were taught that the only way was to observe the "all things" of Matthew 28:20. Then every one who in the water had "convenanted to be faithful unto death" was expected to do so. I wish I could say of all those who were present at the organization "These all died in faith" but I fear there were exceptions.

I have covered a period in which we had hardship but in the main we were happy. In 1874 we had the grasshoppers because of which we had not a roasting ear of corn. Aside from that we had not a partial failure of crops for seventeen years, the last eleven of which I lived in Gage Co. In the 70's we had no stoves but the cook stoves, no vehicles but our farm wagons, and in these we went to church, some of them drawn by oxen. Buggies were unknown among us, and after the headers came, the headers boxes were a common sight at church. But all of this did not hinder spirituality and we were full of religious zeal, ready to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints.