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Article Summary: Ogallala experienced hectic activity during the trail-driving days from 1875 to 1885. Then the range cattle industry collapsed. A new dependence upon blended stock, fenced pastures, and careful financing characterized this less romantic phase of the history of the cattle industry.

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Ogallala—Nebraska's Cowboy Capital

Norbert R. Mahnken

Gateway to the northern plains—that was Ogallala from 1875 to 1885. At the little village on the Platte, Texas drovers during this decade delivered their trail herds of longhorn cattle by the thousands. Shrewd and calculating Wyoming and Nebraska cattlemen met in Ogallala's hotel and saloons with the Texas cattle kings and haggled over prices to be paid for the longhorns. A quick handshake, a jovial round of backslapping, a quick "nip" at the bar, and bargains were sealed. Gold flowed freely across the tables, liquor across the bar, and occasionally blood across the floor as a smoking gun in the hands of a jealous rival or an angered gambler brought an end to the trail of some unfortunate cowhand on the stained boards of "Tuck's" Saloon. This was Ogallala during its ten years of fame as the point of delivery for the herds of Texas cattle being driven up the Western Trail to stock the northern ranges.

Ogallala's early history was singularly unspectacular. The account of its founding and early development can be related in phrases which could equally well refer to a score of frontier communities. Ogallala was a by-product of the Union Pacific railroad, and for several years after the construction of that road the village on the Platte seemed destined to be little more than a section house and water tank along the thin line of steel threading its way through the hunting grounds of the hostile Indian tribesmen whose name the station bore. In the spring of 1868 there appeared three men whose fortunes are closely interwoven with the early growth of Ogallala, the two Lonergan brothers, Philip and Thomas, and Louis Aufdengarten. The Lonergans came to do construction work for the Union Pacific,¹ but found

¹Lonergan Interview, *Nebraska History*, VII (1936), 219.

the High Plains to their liking, and subsequently became most enthusiastic boosters for the struggling orphan community of the plains.

Louis Aufdengarten drifted in with the U. S. Army, but stayed on to become Ogallala's first merchant.² A regiment of cavalry had pitched its summer camp here during that troublesome July of 1868 when Indian depredations, real and imagined, were striking fear into the hearts of frontier settlers as far east as Nebraska's Blue River Valley. Aufdengarten, in business as a sutler, soon found his trade expanding beyond the mere business of supplying merchandise to the troops. The first wave of professional buffalo hunters reached western Nebraska during that summer. Upward of a hundred hunters made this military post and Aufdengarten's "store"—it appears to have been a combination of dug-out, soddy, and canvas tent—their base of operations. Buffalo were plentiful and hides by the hundred were brought in. Aufdengarten broadened his activities and was soon buying up the hides for shipment east. It proved a profitable venture, and the next year found Aufdengarten back at the same stand, his connection with the army severed, and his interest now centered chiefly on furnishing supplies and equipment for trappers and buffalo hunters.

The foundations of Ogallala had been laid, but for some time there was little building upon them. The section house was enlarged, a few small huts for the section hands added, and a depot built—one wonders at the optimism of these early pioneers—during 1871. Old settlers of the area declare that by 1873 there were perhaps only 25 settlers in the valley, most of them railroaders and traders, along with a few cattlemen. Yet business was comparatively brisk at this outpost on the plains. Aufdengarten's business prospered, and the North Platte *Enterprise* of February 8, 1873, carried the advertisement of his Ogallala emporium, proclaiming to everyone in the area that at the "Drovers Store" could be purchased "Groceries,

²*Keith County News*, October 9, 1885.

Dry Goods, Provisions, Cigars, and Liquors." The Lonergans along with L. M. Stone had opened a "men's store." The new home just lately erected by this Mr. Stone was the marvel of the valley, it being the first sizeable frame house in the area,³ and soon was being used as a rooming house, or a "hotel" as the westerner insisted on calling it.

There was also something out of the ordinary about Ogallala's section house. Trains to the west reached Ogallala about noon, and stopped there for the passengers to eat. Section house doubled as dining hall.⁴ Two cooks imported from North Platte prepared the bill of fare from the meager stocks of edibles available. Steaks, mutton, and the inevitable dried apple pie were spread under the watchful eye of W. P. St. Clair, the newly appointed station master.

It was also during 1873 that the political history of Ogallala and Keith County began. Organization of Keith County was completed in May after Governor Furnas had authorized an election to select county officials. A small frame house which was to serve as the courthouse was moved into Ogallala from Brule and dedicated during the first week of November with a "Grand Ball."⁵ The first county officials were men whose names are familiar to us—Aufdengarten the county clerk, Tom Lonergan the county judge, E. M. Searle, a Union Pacific telegrapher, one of the county commissioners, and A. H. Bradley the sheriff.⁶ The press of county business was not very great, and it was noted during the summer of 1874 that the Keith County records were "floating around" in North Platte, causing the editor of the local journal to speculate about the possibility of the collapse of this premature county organization.⁷

Faith in the future of the area was unbounded among the "old timers." The Lonergans in particular impressed

³Omaha *Weekly Bee*, September 8, 1875.

⁴Interview with Mrs. E. A. Hughes, MS, Nebraska State Historical Society Library.

⁵North Platte *Enterprise*, November 8, 1873.

⁶*Official Atlas of Nebraska*, 1885, p. 177.

⁷North Platte *Enterprise*, June 13, 1874.

the possibilities of the Platte valley on E. A. Curley, an English correspondent who visited Ogallala in December, 1873. In his frequently detailed but always readable account, which furnishes some of the finest material on the early history of the state, Curley relates finding in Ogallala "half a dozen buildings two eating houses, but no lodging or hotels . . . and . . . two bachelor brothers (the Lonergans) who divided between them the offices of Probate Judge, Postmaster, and general storekeepers. They also owned two or three hundred head of cattle and did a little in the butchering line."⁸ Even Curley left the area keenly conscious of the hopes of the settlers, hopes which more and more were centering about the expansion of the range cattle industry.

During 1874 the step was taken which initiated Ogallala's career as a cowtown. The Union Pacific people in that year constructed a cattle pen and a loading chute just west of town,⁹ in the hope that they might here recapture the profitable trade which they had enjoyed at Schuyler and at Kearney, earlier Nebraska shipping points for Texas longhorns. Phil Lonergan added the duties of supervising the yards to his other multifarious activities.¹⁰

Many of the early settlers of Ogallala had long been convinced that the future of their community depended upon the growth of the cattle trade. They argued that the peculiarly favorable circumstance of geography indicated a bright future for the range cattle industry. Since 1869 the possibilities of the trade had been the subject of much speculation. During that year a number of large herds of longhorns were driven westward along the Platte, ultimately to find their last range in Idaho. At the same time the first Texas cattle were brought into the region between the forks of the Platte. The Lonergan brothers purchased a small herd of longhorns to winter near Ogallala, while Keith and Barton bought a large herd of about

⁸E. A. Curley, *Nebraska; Its Advantages, Resources, and Drawbacks* (London, N. J.), 365.

⁹Lonergan Interview, *loc. cit.*; *Omaha Weekly Bee*, July 28, 1875.

¹⁰*North Platte Republican*, September 30, 1876.

1,000 head which they turned out to graze farther down the river near O'Fallon's Bluff.¹¹ The success of these early attempts at range operations had encouraged many another pioneer cattleman to follow their example in Western Nebraska and Eastern Wyoming. Between 1870 and 1874 ranges in the Nebraska Panhandle were occupied, along the North Platte by the Coad Brothers and the Powers Brothers,¹² along Pumpkin Creek by the Creighton Brothers and H. V. Redington, and north of Sidney on Rush Creek by the Moore Brothers. The largest herds in the area were those of the Bosler Brothers, true cattle capitalists, who held the contracts to supply beef to the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail Indian Agencies in northern Nebraska. Beginning in 1873 they established their base of operation on the North Platte near the mouth of Blue Creek, keeping most of their herds in that area until later in the 1880's when they centered their activities in the area near Broadwater.

The Bosler Brothers annually purchased thousands of cattle, many of them at Ellsworth, on contracts calling for delivery at the forks of the Platte, or at Ogallala. During the months of fall and early winter the herds of these enterprising contractors would consist of eighteen to twenty thousand cattle.¹³ It was the activities (as profitable as they were extensive) of the Boslers more than anything else which convinced the settlers of the valley that a golden future could be expected for the cattle trade.

When Curley, the English correspondent, visited Ogallala late in 1873 his hosts talked only of cattle. The Lonergans at once set out to convince their guest of the possibilities of the range cattle industry in the Keith County area. Carefully compiled statistics, which Curley dutifully listed in his manual, were made available to show the phenomenal profits believed possible in holding

¹¹On these eastern ranches see the author's "Early Nebraska Markets for Texas Cattle," in *Nebraska History*, XXVI (1945), 97.

¹²The Coad Brothers' Ranch was just west of Melbeta, the Powers Ranch near the present Bayard Bridge.

¹³*Testimony, Red Cloud Investigating Committee*, p. 171.

Texas cattle on the range for a year. On long rides over the prairie the hosts pointed out to the correspondent herds of Texans which had been brought up the trail during the previous summer and others which had been wintered in the northern climate. The longhorns were a new and intriguing sight for the Englishman. Those just off the trail he described as "scrawny" and "in seemingly bad condition to stand the rigors of a severe winter." Those, however, that had spent a year on northern grass he considered "in prime condition" though not fat as the term was applied in England. Curley's final decision was that "winter grazing, even in the snow, is a practical, substantial, and important fact . . . and not necessarily another name for slow starvation."¹⁴ It was the very same conviction which nourished the hopes of the pioneer cattlemen along the Platte.

The prospects of the cattle yards under construction at Ogallala in 1874 were improved by two developments which at first might appear only indirectly related to the cattle trade. During the preceding August the troublesome Ogallala and Brule Sioux had been moved from their Platte River agency on the Nebraska-Wyoming border to the new Red Cloud and Whetstone agencies along the White River in northern Nebraska. After the removal of these Indians to more distant reservations the Republican River valley, once the favorite hunting grounds of the tribesmen, was closed to their hunting expeditions and the accompanying depredations against the persons and property of the whites. Cattlemen could now move into that entire area with little fear of being molested by the marauding followers of Red Cloud. Early in the summer of 1874 large herds of longhorns were already reported grazing in the Republican valley west of Orleans.¹⁵ One barrier had been removed from the approaches to Ogallala.

At the same time the westward surge of venturesome farmers along the rivers in Nebraska and Kansas was closing the trail to Abilene, Schuyler, and Kearney. The

¹⁴Curley, *op cit.*, 367.

¹⁵Omaha *Weekly Bee*, May 27, June 10, 1874.

trail drivers were forced to seek new markets. As their eyes moved westward over the map of Nebraska, trail bosses and ranchers began to realize that Ogallala and the valley between the forks of the Platte might be the ideal site for a new cowtown .

During 1874 the volume of cattle moved into and through Ogallala did not swell appreciably, for the trail-driving business recovered rather slowly from the effects of the financial panic of 1873. Most of the Texas stock brought into the area still went to the Boslers or the comparatively few cattlemen who were building up their herds farther to the west. The number increased noticeably during 1875 as more ranges were opened up along the North Platte and its tributaries. Business at Ogallala was brisk and it was estimated by observers in the area that between 60,000 and 75,000 Texas cattle were driven to Ogallala that season.¹⁶ But it was not until 1876 that the volume of cattle moving up the trail to Ogallala reached the high level it maintained thereafter and made of Ogallala a bustling and exciting village for six months of the year.

The increasing importance of Ogallala as a cattle market was in part due to the emergence of Dodge City as the leading Kansas cattle mart. A new trail, known as the Western or Texas Trail, was blazed, and gradually supplanted the earlier Chisholm trail. The Western Trail turned northward from a point on the Red River which came to be known as Doan's Crossing, passed through Indian Territory and into western Kansas. For many longhorns and a few of the cowboys the end of the trail came at Dodge City. But for outfits handling younger stock cattle "Dodge" soon became only a stopping point where man and beast could rest for a few days before starting on the long road to Ogallala. From the Arkansas River at Dodge City the trail wound north and slightly west to Buffalo Station on the Kansas Pacific Railroad, about 63 miles west of Hays. Here once again supplies could be replenished at a small settlement, the last before reaching Ogallala.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, September 8, 1875, October 11, 1876.

On the trail through northern Kansas and southwestern Nebraska water became the drover's chief concern, and it soon became common knowledge that watering stops could be found only on the "South and North Solomon, Sappa [near Oberlin], Beaver, Driftwood, Republican, Frenchman [near its mouth], and Stinking Water Creeks."¹⁷ Smaller streams which were to serve as watering stops frequently dried up, leaving thirsty, restless cattle. The last day's drive—some thirty miles from Stinking Water Creek to the South Platte—was one of the worst for the trailweary cowhands, it being the longest and driest of the trip. This lack of water and the hot winds and scorching sun of the prairie were the principal inconveniences endured by the cowhands on the way from Dodge City to Ogallala. No marauding Indians, no flooded river crossings over which to worry, but only occasional thunderstorms which sent the longhorns in a wild stampede over the plains. On the whole the drive from Dodge City to Ogallala caused little fear among the drovers who with increasing frequency found the end of the trail not at the Kansas cowtown but at Ogallala. Contracts signed in Dodge City frequently required delivery of cattle at the Nebraska village. Similarly, an increasing number of drovers who failed to find a buyer on the Arkansas went on up the trail to the forks of the Platte. The Western Trail and Ogallala soon found their way into the plans of an ever-larger number of trail bosses.

After the 1876 season the volume of business at Ogallala increased tremendously. The explanation could be found in one factor alone—increased demand. Previously the only real demand for older stock in this area had come from contractors supplying the Indian agencies in northwestern Nebraska. The sudden development of a new gold field in the Black Hills during 1876 and 1877 unexpectedly added a second market for grass-fed steers. Meat-hungry Dakota prospectors were clamoring for beef, and even steaks off the tough flanks of a Texas longhorn commanded

¹⁷J. Marvin Hunter, *Trail Drivers of Texas*, I, 348.

premium prices. During the first hectic months of this latest gold rush those venturesome cattlemen who drove a few steers to Deadwood soon found that beef would bring whatever the owner chose to ask for it.¹⁸ A few Texas steers were peddled out for \$100 to \$125 to the first miners. This new market for steers and older cows provided a powerful stimulant for the range-cattle industry.

At the same time, the call for younger stock became more insistent. Until 1877 the limits of the cattleman's domain in Nebraska and Wyoming had been marked by the North Platte River. A report by Thomas Kane, president of the Cheyenne County Stock Association, listed about 38,000 head of cattle owned by stock growers in Cheyenne county in August, 1876.¹⁹ Another report early the next year indicated that 57,000 head had been wintered in the county which up till that time was the center of the range industry.²⁰ Only the most venturesome had dared to cross the North Platte into the Sioux country. Though most of the tribesmen had been settled on the Red Cloud and Whetstone agencies by 1874, small bands of murderous marauders were still common along the North Platte. David B. Hinman, foreman for the Bosler Brothers ranch, was killed near the Sidney Crossing of the Platte in June, 1876, by Indians who took his horse, revolver, and clothing, and scattered several thousand dollars worth of checks and bank notes over the prairie.²¹ Even the environs of Ogallala itself were raided by Indian horse thieves during the summer of 1876.²²

The military campaigns carried out by General Crook and Colonel Miles during the fall and winter of 1876 brought an end to these depredations. These operations broke the back of the Sioux hostiles. Followed as they were by the new policy of pacification by starvation, these cam-

¹⁸*South Dakota Historical Collections*, XX (1940), 472.

¹⁹*Omaha Weekly Bee*, August 16, 1876.

²⁰*Ibid.*, June 10, 1877.

²¹*North Platte Western Nebraskan*, June 3, 1876. Redington also lost a herder in September. *North Platte Republican*, September 23, 1876.

²²*North Platte Republican*, June 10, 22, 1876.

paigns made it certain that henceforth the Sioux would be confined to the narrow limits of their individual reservations. Thus a new area above the North Platte River was cleared of a "menace" and thrown open to cattlemen who at once seized the opportunity to extend their domain to the north and west. By 1878 enterprising pioneers such as Creighton,²³ Bronson, Hunter and Evans had appropriated choice sites along the Niobrara in western Nebraska and eastern Wyoming. Dozens of new operators on scores of new ranch sites all demanded stock cattle at Ogallala in volume never before anticipated. The boom had begun, a boom which was to continue through 1884 and bring from 75,000 to 125,000 Texas longhorns to the forks of the Platte each season.

Ogallala itself by 1876 had changed only slightly since its days as a "tank town" on the Union Pacific. Unlike many of the Kansas cowtowns, it never became a populous community. The state census of 1875 revealed that the total population of Keith County consisted of 108 settlers.²⁴ During its early years Ogallala was a squatter community built on government land. It was not until September, 1875, that Hinman and LaMunyon of North Platte purchased the land on which the town was located. The plat was surveyed, divided into lots, and offered for sale—a free lot being offered to anyone who would construct a business establishment upon it.²⁵ The town itself was but a block long. The stores were all south of the tracks, fronting a street—popularly known as "Railroad Street"—which ran parallel to the rails. Louis Aufdengarten's general supply store was to be found on the corner of the intersection of this street and the trail leading south to the Platte river.²⁶ Westward from his store extended the rest of the town—another supply store, the one in which the Lonergan's were formerly interested, but which now was

²³Creighton in July, 1878, put out 2,500 head on the Niobrara. *North Platte Republican*, July 20, 1878.

²⁴*Omaha Daily Bee*, July 21, 1876.

²⁵*Omaha Weekly Bee*, September 8, 1875.

²⁶*Keith County News*, September 16, 1937.

open as a rule only during the busy summer months.²⁷ Next came the saloons and gambling establishments, operated during these years under changing management, but generally carrying the same colorful names, the one the "Cowboy's Rest" and the other, the "Crystal Palace." A small shoe store and the court house were next in line along Ogallala's only thoroughfare. The last building in the row was the newly-constructed hotel, the Ogallala House, operated by S. S. Gast, formerly of North Platte, and subsequently managed by Sam Rooney, who married Gast's daughter. The dining room of the Ogallala House was widely known and eagerly patronized because of its excellent fare, food which seemed even more tasty to cowhands just arriving after three weeks on the trail from Dodge City. One new building of note was constructed during 1875, that being "the most substantial jail west of Omaha."²⁸ Its accommodations were soon to prove as inadequate as those of the local hotel.

On the north side of the tracks were as yet only the station, section house, and the homes of the few families who comprised Ogallala's permanent citizenry. A two-man construction crew made up of W. A. McIntyre and A. E. Wilson was active during the summer of 1876, repairing Aufdengarten's home and constructing new frame residences for M. F. Leech and Phil Lonergan.²⁹ Lonergan, now in charge of the Union Pacific's cattle pens, supervised the expansion and improvement of the yards, repairs made necessary by the increased traffic. These improvements, together with a small school house which was completed for the fall term, marked the extent of Ogallala's expansion during this summer.³⁰ A contemporary observer could hardly believe that this was the community which already was becoming known throughout the nation.

²⁷Operated during the summers of 1876 and 1878 by F. W. Gasman. *Omaha Weekly Bee*, October 11, 1876, April 1878.

²⁸*Ibid.*, February 24, 1875.

²⁹*Omaha Weekly Bee*, October 11, 1876.

³⁰*North Platte Republican*, May 20, 1876, September 23, 1876.

The tempo of living in early Ogallala changed with the seasons. During the months of winter and early spring life was generally a dull and dreary existence in a drab, unpainted, and unpromising little village. But with the coming of spring thoughts turned to the cattle trade, bets were placed as to when the first herds would arrive, and the whole community became tense with an air of expectancy. The Cowboy's Rest and other establishments dispensing liquid refreshments were tidied up and prepared for business. Shortly after the first of June the town began to hum with activity. The round-up conducted by the Nebraska cattlemen of the area between the forks of the Platte generally reached Ogallala about that time, shortly before the arrival of the first longhorns from the south. The first Texas herds of the 1876 season were driven into Ogallala during the second week of June,³¹ and June 10 soon came to be the date on which the first longhorns were expected.

During the three summer months business boomed. Saloonkeeper, storekeeper, and hotelkeeper all shared in the general prosperity. Ten or twelve herds, each of 2,500 head, could usually be located south of the town, a bawling mass carpeting the plains, while waiting for their new owners. The presence of a hundred or more trail hands taxed the facilities of Ogallala. Sleeping rooms were at a premium, and many visitors to Ogallala spent their first night napping on the "soft side of a walnut board."³² The Ogallala House was considerably enlarged during July of 1876, but even so its capacity was not equal to the rush of customers who eagerly sought the luxury of a bath and a night's sleep on a mattress instead of on unyielding prairie sod.

For a brief time during the early summer the white tents of soldiers out after Indians were pitched near the town, adding a note of contrast to the dull monotony of the countryside. On their free nights the troops would

³¹North Platte *Western Nebraskan*, June 17, 1876.

³²*Idem*.

mingle with Texans in the saloons. Many a near-riot started over some differences of opinion between the hard-fisted boys in blue and the lanky, hot-tempered Texas drovers who not too long ago had worn the grey. Loose and disparaging talk about "rebels" or "Yankee bean-eaters" was enough to start a full-scale brawl.

The Ogallala House became the center of social activities for the townspeople of Ogallala and the big cattlemen. Parties and dances were held regularly in its halls. These gatherings were comparatively sedate, more restful certainly than the parties in the Cowboy's Rest. Frequently, so a participant tells us, the dancing lagged until "Old Number Seven" would chug in from the east, bringing Ed Hepner, a trainman with considerable finesse in handling the fiddle.³³ His music "soon raised the enthusiasm to a high degree." An evening of dancing to "The Irish Washer Woman," "Pop Goes the Weasel," and "Hell Among the Yearlings" topped off by a midnight supper spread by the hotelkeeper caused even the traveler who never ventured beyond the parlors of the hotel to agree that Ogallala was one "of the livest [*sic*] if not the finest town along the line of the Union Pacific."³⁴

Activity in Ogallala continued at fever pitch until the end of August. By then the drives for the season were ending and the drovers who had brought the herds up the trail were gradually drifting to their native Texas. Business revived briefly during the fall months, especially in October, when the cattlemen of the area began to bring their steers in off the grass for shipment east. By November, however, Ogallala settled back in quiet and peaceful repose. The floaters, gamblers, tradespeople, and dance-hall hostesses, who made up a large portion of Ogallala's mobile population drifted off to Omaha or Cheyenne to spend the winter. Only the hotel, one supply store, and a single saloon remained open for the winter. The community sank back into a state of suspended animation

³³*Ibid.*, August 26, 1876.

³⁴*Idem.*

until the first thaws of the next spring set everyone to speculating about the extent of the year's drives.

Except for her sparse population, Ogallala differed only slightly from the other cowtowns of the prairies. In her two saloons, subsequently to be increased in number during the summer months, liquor was dispensed in ample quantity, and the clinking of glasses mingled discordantly with the shrill screech of the violin in the hands of the dancing master. Try as he would this one-man orchestra—it was a great day when the first piano arrived—could hardly make himself heard above the stamping feet of booted cowmen and their enthusiastic painted ladies.

Money changed hands quickly and in sizeable sums. Gold carefully counted out went into the pockets of these cautious Texas drovers who had not yet accustomed themselves to using the "Yankee" greenbacks or bank notes. By 1877, however, drafts on the more widely known banks, especially the First National of Omaha, came more and more to be the accepted method of payment.

A casual visitor spending several weeks in Ogallala during the late seventies would eventually have met all the "big names" of the trail driving business. By 1876 trail driving had been expanded into a big business and was coming increasingly under the control of a few well-known individuals. The Bosler Brothers, who at the time were considered Nebraska's "cattle barons" contracted for the delivery at Ogallala of the thousands of Texas cattle they annually required for their Indian contracts. Many another of the early cattlemen of the northern plains would settle their accounts with southern drovers in Ogallala's hotel and saloons, among them John Coad, H. V. Redington, George Sheidley, Joseph Carey, and Hiram Kelley. Across the table from them sat the Texas drovers whose fortunes were being built in the trade—Seth Mabry, Jim Ellison, Dillard R. Fant, W. G. Butler, and others.

During its first few years as a major cattle market Ogallala experienced little of the vicious lawlessness which brought fame of a sort to its southern counterparts, Wichita and Dodge City. Some of the rowdy Texans had a good

deal of fun, noisy but harmless, and frequently the troubled quiet of the prairie night was shattered by the sharp crack of a Colt in the hand of a cowboy whose enthusiasm had been stimulated a little too freely at the Crystal Palace. Horse racing on the plains outside the town was a popular diversion by day,³⁵ and that, together with a great deal of cowboy sport at the expense of "tenderfeet" and visitors occupied many daytime hours.

Crime came to Ogallala in 1877. It came with a nervous and acquisitive Texan, Joel Collins, who had delivered a herd of Texas cattle to purchasers in Nebraska. Hearing of the gold strikes in the Black Hills, Collins and his sidekick Sam Bass appropriated the money due the Texas cattlemen and started for Dakota to make their fortunes.³⁶ But gambling losses and investments in unproductive mines soon left the pair with empty pockets. Gathering a crew of likeminded lawless individuals such as abounded on the frontier of that day, Collins and Bass next turned to the exciting but generally profitless business of stage robbery. The appearance of federal troops hastened the departure of the desperados from the hills, and about September 1 they drifted back into Ogallala. They pitched their tents on the west edge of town and set their fertile minds to work hatching a new scheme to get easy money. Over a corner table in the Crystal Palace they worked out the details of their next venture, a bold and daring plot to rob the pay coach of the Union Pacific.

In the early morning hours of September 19 word came that the eastbound Union Pacific had been held up 20 miles west of Ogallala, at Big Springs station. A posse was hastily formed and rode out to trail the bandit crew, but found no tangible trace of the robbers. Meanwhile the robbery was creating a furor throughout the midwest. Not only was it the first time a Union Pacific train had been robbed, but the loot totalled \$60,000 all in twenty-dollar gold pieces. The wildest guesses were tossed about as to the

³⁵North Platte *Western Nebraskan*, June 10, 1876.

³⁶Wayne Gard, *Sam Bass* (Boston, 1936), p. 65.

identity of the robbers. Omahans in general were convinced that either Jesse James and his gang or the remnants of the Younger gang were the guilty culprits.³⁷

The Union Pacific officials posted a reward of \$10,000 for the arrest of the bandits and the recovery of the gold. This was enough to send a host of amateur sleuths on the trail. Within a day or two it was known that Collins was one of the bandits. He was an acquaintance of one of the passengers on the train, Andy Riley of Omaha, who identified him positively for the railroad detectives. So the "wanted" call went out for Collins at once, especially to peace officials farther south.

Meanwhile, one of Ogallala's citizens had been building up his own case against Collins and Bass. M. F. Leech, the proprietor of one of the supply stores, had identified the robbers. At the scene of the robbery he had picked up a piece of brilliantly-colored red, white, and black cloth which apparently had been used as a mask by one of the bandits. Not only did Leech recognize it as material sold in his store, but he also remembered that he had very recently sold a strip of this cloth to one of Collin's crew of Texans. Determined to obtain the reward offered by the Union Pacific officials, Leech saddled his best horse and started to trail the Texans. Always he was on the heels of the bandits, but never lucky enough to participate in the capture of any of the thieves.

After camping on the Republican river for a day, the gang split into three groups, two in each group. Collins and his partner, Bill Heffridge, were trapped and both killed while resisting arrest at Buffalo Station, Kansas. Jim Berry, who was being closely trailed by Leech, met a like fate in Mexico, Missouri,³⁸ at the hands of officers who wanted to question him about the gold which he had carelessly deposited in banks in the area. Sam Bass and his crony Tom Nixon safely brought their share of the loot back to Texas by travelling in the guise of land-seeking

³⁷Omaha *Daily Bee*, September 19, 1877.

³⁸Omaha *Weekly Bee*, July 31, 1878.

grangers. Ten months of notoriety were still ahead of Sam Bass. Then he too would be cut down by the bullets of Texas Rangers, but his fame would live on in the most celebrated of all cowboy ballads.

For Leech it had been a discouraging pursuit. Always he would catch up with his quarry, only to find them dead or in the hands of peace officers. The amateur detective returned to Ogallala a dejected victim of fate. Yet when he returned, he received a warm welcome home. His search was not entirely unrewarded, for shortly after his return the citizenry elected Leech to the office of sheriff of Keith County.

To be sheriff of Keith County in 1878 called for considerable determination and fearlessness. Since the office had been created five years earlier the turnover among holders of this job had been very high. Six men had served at various times as sheriff, but none had relished the task of keeping the boisterous trail hands in line during the summer months. Nor did Leech seem to enjoy his new honor too well, for a few months later he resigned, to be succeeded for a brief time by J. C. Hughes. Hughes was a fearless old buffalo hunter who could always be relied upon to take over temporarily after the elected officials "threwed up the job." He served for half a dozen years either as sheriff or deputy and participated in some of the town's wildest gun fights. In the course of one busy evening during the summer of 1879 he furnished three rowdy cowboys with tickets providing permanent entry into Ogallala's Boot Hill cemetery.³⁹ Only two of the five strangers who had announced they were going to "clean out the town" managed to find safe refuge in flight.

Until the election of 1879 law and order rested on rather unstable foundations in Ogallala. The low point of law-enforcement came during the summer of 1878 when Barney Gillan was appointed sheriff. Himself a Texan, Gillan considered it his duty to protect the cowmen rather than preserve law and order. He became involved in the

³⁹Platte Valley *Independent*, July 19, 1879.

Custer County "war" between homesteaders and cattlemen. A brother of I. P. Olive, the kingpin of the Texas cattlemen claiming the range in Custer county had been shot and killed by a couple of "nesters." Gillan participated in the arrest of the two homesteaders, Mitchell and Ketchum, collected part of the reward offered by Olive for their arrest, and then permitted Olive's henchmen to seize the two and lynch and burn them. For his part in the unsavory episode Gillan was later arrested, indicted for complicity in the murder of Mitchell and Ketchum, and eventually brought to trial along with other defendants in this most notorious trial in Nebraska's early history. Yet before the end of the trial Gillan escaped from the Kearney jail,⁴⁰ and disappeared from Nebraska and off the pages of history.

When finally true law and order came to Ogallala, it was ushered in by three individuals. Judge William Gaslin, who in 1876 had been elected District Judge for southern and western Nebraska, did as much as anyone to bring respect for the law into this stormy and rough frontier area. Judge Gaslin, who [so went the stories anyway] at times mounted the bench armed with a Winchester as well as with the legal documents soon acquired an enviable reputation as a fearless and ruthless judge. Ten years was his standard sentence for horse-stealing.⁴¹ Those guilty of homicide could expect little sympathy in his court, and in many a westerner's heart a new respect for law—at least as personified by Judge Gaslin—appeared. In April, 1878, Gaslin held court in Ogallala for the first time, with "every man in the county on the jury,"⁴² and thereafter his periodic visits, generally at Kearney, were something to be feared by law-breakers.

A second major step in effective law enforcement came in 1879 when Martin DePriest was elected sheriff of Keith County. He continued to hold the office until 1888

⁴⁰*Omaha Daily Bee*, June 27, 1879.

⁴¹*Ogallala Keith County News*, October 9, 1885.

⁴²*North Platte Western Nebraskian*, April 13, 1878.

when he moved to Perkins County. For the remaining years of Ogallala's career as a cowtown, DePriest was the law, as many a cowboy discovered to his regret. DePriest was a Texan who had come up the trail in 1877. Instead of returning he had settled in Ogallala and opened a livery stable in connection with the hotel.⁴³ His fearless courage and ability to get along with everyone recommended him as the ideal candidate for the office of sheriff in 1879. Short, but stocky and wiry, DePriest had few equals in a rough-and-tumble fight. It was this ability, plus his deliberate coolness in the face of danger, rather than any unusual proficiency as a gunman which gained him the respect of troublemakers. Since he was himself a Texan, DePriest understood the longing of the trail hand for some good rowdy fun at the end of the drive, and his attitude could never have been called puritanical. Drinking, gambling, consorting with the "soiled doves" was all "good fun" to Mart, and even the firing of pistols into the air was dismissed as "harmless sport." Cowmen knew that the "cowman who's on the square had nothing to fear in that town."⁴⁴ But when some drink-crazed or trigger-happy cowhand began to use the water tower as a target or endangering life in the community, DePriest would take down and buckle on his Colts, call to his deputy, Joe Hughes, to grab up his shotgun or buffalo gun, and together they would start for the scene of trouble. The word that this duo was on the prowl would generally be enough to cause the trouble-maker to subside. Not always was this true, however. Many took a shot at DePriest, and several times he was wounded. But the cowboy was rare who ever successfully defied the law as represented by DePriest and Hughes.

Unexpected support for order—if not for law—came from Bill Tucker, the long-time proprietor of the Cowboy's Rest. Tucker, a lusty, boisterous character, had drifted over from North Platte as early as 1876. The Cow-

⁴³Ogallala, *Keith County News*, October 7, 1887.

⁴⁴Andy Adams, *The Outlet* (Boston, 1905), p. 74.

boy's Rest, over which he presided with lordly mien, soon became known as the leading fun spot of the Platte Valley. Its gaming tables were never empty, its bar never dry, and its ladies never too preoccupied but what the newly-arrived cowhand found a welcome. Yet Bill Tucker disliked the sight and noise of guns, except for the shotgun he kept under the counter as the final arbiter in any dispute. On several occasions Tucker rallied the support of Ogallala's citizenry and formed a posse to meet the threat of trail crews who were promising to shoot up the town.

Respect for Tucker mounted tremendously after 1880. In the summer of that year Bill came out on top in an encounter with Billy Thompson, the younger of the two Texas gunmen of that family. Billy Thompson, who had been stirring up trouble in Ogallala, and had been riled by some comment of Tucker's stepped inside the door of Tuck's Saloon and levelled a quick snap shot at Tucker. The bullet tore off the tips of several of Tuck's fingers, sent the blood spurting, and flipped the saloonkeeper to the floor behind the bar. Thompson, judging the affair ended, turned and stalked out of the saloon. But Tuck soon came up—this time with his shotgun—and levelled it at Thompson walking down the street. The charge of buckshot found Billy and dropped him like a sack of flour. While Tucker returned to his bar, some of Thompson's friends dragged him, considerably perforated, off the street. When the next eastbound Union Pacific train came through the Texans loaded the wounded Billy thereon, taking him to North Platte, where he eventually was patched up at Buffalo Bill Cody's ranch. Billy Thompson had enough of Tucker, directed his footsteps toward Texas, and seems never again to have disturbed the peace of Ogallala.

In spite of the efforts of Gaslin, DePriest, and Tucker, Ogallala remained during its years as a cowtown a stormy and troubled locality. During its ten years of fame seventeen violent deaths were recorded, a not inconsiderable number for a community whose permanent population numbered about one hundred.⁴⁵ In Ogallala's Boot Hill

⁴⁵The census of 1880 lists 114 residents of Ogallala. *10th Census*, 1880, II, 253.

cemetery were laid the bodies of cowhands who had lost a debate with gamblers, who had re-fought the Civil War, or who had found DePriest too much for them. The most troublesome gang was made up of Hunter and Evans boys from up on the Niobrara. In an early shooting scrape with DePriest and his deputies several of the crew had been killed. Thereafter there was continual trouble whenever old one-eyed John Graham and his Hunter outfit came down from the north country to pick up a trail herd or bring in some fattened beeves.

The cattle trade at Ogallala continued at a brisk pace from 1879 to 1884. By this time the stories of profits, real and imagined, to be made in the range cattle business were spreading throughout the eastern United States and to the British Isles as well. After 1879 eager cattlemen who hoped to share in the profits seized every suitable ranch site along the Wyoming and Nebraska creeks. During the next few years eastern and English capital began to move into the area and stimulated the incorporation of several great cattle companies capitalized at from \$500,000 to a million dollars. Purchasing land sites, hiring expensive range managers, buying cattle at inflated prices and on the book count, these companies introduced a new speculative fever into the area. Their constant quest for young stock cattle kept the herds moving up from the south, in spite of mounting costs and the increasing difficulties of trail driving. In the five year period between 1879 and 1884 between 100,000 and 125,000 cattle each year made their way through the Nebraska cowtown. In Ogallala itself a new hotel, the Spofford House, was built north of the tracks, and it soon became the center of activity for the big drovers and the northern buyers.

As the years passed, the herds from the south tended to pass more and more into the hands of a few purchasers. Consolidation and largescale organization characterized the industry during the early eighties. Many of the wise old pioneers of the range, looking into the future, decided to sell their holdings during 1882 and 1883. So they disposed of their stock, at inflated prices which brought \$30 to \$35

a head for mixed range stock, yearlings included, which as late as 1880 would have brought only \$20 or less per head. The Ogallala Land and Cattle Company began to buy up all the ranches along the North Platte. By 1884 it controlled the former holdings in the area of William Paxton, Dennis Sheedy, Tussler Brothers, Sheidley Brothers, and the Bosler Brothers, and its herds, at least by the book count, numbered almost 100,000 head.⁴⁶ In the Cheyenne county area the Bay State Cattle Company was at the same time consolidating at tremendous cost the herds of Creighton and McShane, Adas and Redington, the Coad Brothers, and several other smaller operators.⁴⁷ Many weather-wise old cowmen decided to cash in their holdings in the boom market.

When the trail-driving business collapsed after 1884 its sudden end surprised everyone except these old timers. The last great drives of Texas cattle over the Western Trail into Nebraska came in 1884. This was the last season of this colorful business. Western Nebraska was no longer the cattlemen's exclusive paradise. A succession of years in the early 1880's during which the rainfall in western Kansas and Nebraska was unusually heavy convinced the venturesome granger that farming was profitable in these western areas. Along the Republican river in Nebraska and the Smoky Hill and Arkansas rivers in Kansas numerous new areas of settlement mushroomed. By cooperating with one another the frontier farmers in these areas were generally able to turn aside the herds which might be driven over their lands, or could at least exact a sizeable cash payment for such passage. In June, 1881, Frontier county settlers constructed a corral near Stow postoffice, where cattle trespassing on land claims of the settlers were to be held until ransomed by their owners.⁴⁸ As the despised "nesters" became more numerous the drovers found it ever more difficult and more expensive to attempt to force their way through the settlements and on to Ogallala.

⁴⁶Omaha *Herald*, February 4, 1884.

⁴⁷A. B. Wood, "The Coad Brothers," *Nebraska History*, XIV (1938), 10.

⁴⁸Omaha *Daily Bee*, June 8, 1881.

The state legislature of Kansas under pressure from western settlers enacted a steady stream of laws designed to push the quarantine line against Texas cattle farther west. The law of 1884 moved the quarantine line west of Dodge City, while a more stringent measure of the next year closed the entire state to Texas cattle from March to December of each year.⁴⁹ This law, backed as it was by public opinion, forced those few cattlemen who sought to continue trail driving to move northward through eastern Colorado.

A serious epidemic of Texas fever swept over Nebraska during the summer of 1884. The disease first appeared near Ogallala in July, apparently being brought in by Texas cattle that had been shipped in from the south over the Union Pacific lines. With amazing rapidity the disease spread over much of western Nebraska's range, causing heavy losses among the cattle. Many smaller cattlemen running native stock which fell victim to the fever instituted lawsuits against the big cattlemen, especially the Rankin Live Stock Company.⁵⁰ This big outfit of the Sandhills country had shipped in some of the Texas cattle suspected of having spread the disease. Those cattlemen who had begun to introduce expensive blooded bulls into their herds began to join in the demand that Texas cattle should be excluded to protect the northern herds. It was another damaging blow for the trail-driving business, a blow from which the trade never recovered.

Ogallala's career as a cowtown thus ended with the year 1884. A few herds still made their way to the Platte in spite of settlers and quarantine laws, but their number was not large. An unnatural quiet settled over the community during the summer months. Instead of cracking pistols and boisterous oaths of cowboys only the noisy clatter of construction crews filled the Nebraska air. For the

⁴⁹Kansas *Laws*, 1885, ch. 191.

⁵⁰*American Cattle Producer*, December, 1939, p. 26.

advance guard of the farming frontier reached Keith county in the summer of 1884, and was followed by a great wave of settlers in 1885. The Union Pacific railroad at this time began to push the sale of its lands along the South Platte, and this further stimulated the migration. Within a few short months Ogallala underwent a metamorphosis from cowtown to farmer shopping center. The population of the county, which in 1880 had been only 181 had jumped to 700 at the end of 1884, while Ogallala itself, to judge by the columns of the local press, was approaching the 500 figure.⁵¹ During the latter year numerous new business houses were added to the half-dozen business establishments that had served the cowmen during the past years. Two newspapers, the *News* and the *Reflector*, McWilliam's Bank, McConnaughey's Lumber Company, Norstrom's Hardware Store, Stone Bros. General Store, the O'Brien and Boile Millinery Shop, and two land offices were among the new establishments. Only three saloons were still operating, and they under the handicap of an \$800 license fee which went into the school fund.

Many of the new buildings were constructed north of the tracks where the new town was to be located. A fire broke out in one of the stores south of the tracks on August 6, 1884, and a good portion of the old business section burned down. A few days later Ed Whorley was killed in the Crystal Palace by a gambler named Lank Keyes. It was the last murder of the trail-driving days, and it might well have marked the last days of Ogallala as a cowtown. In October the Congregational church was organized, further evidence of a new and different area of interest on the part of Ogallala's citizenry.

The old days were gone, and with them many of the old personalities of the trail-driving days. The Lonergans were gone—Tom killed on a round-up down on Red Willow Creek, Phil to Colorado. DePriest sold out his livery stable in 1887 and in the next year was relieved of his position of sheriff after he had moved to Perkins County. Tucker

⁵¹Ogallala, *Keith County News*, October 16, 1885.

sold his saloon after the 1885 season, went back to North Platte, and later drifted down into New Mexico in search of new wealth and excitement. The old faces were thinning out.

Soon after Ogallala's demise as a cowtown the range cattle industry itself collapsed. Nesters, adverse weather, overcrowding of the range, and inflationary and unwise financing brought an end to the most romantic phase of the cattle industry. Yet the industry was to emerge again in modified form, based on the firmer foundations of blooded stock, fenced pastures, and careful financing. Once again Ogallala was to become the center of the cattle industry in the Platte valley, but never again was it the lurid, hectic cowtown it had been from 1875 to 1885.