Pioneer School Days in Southwest Nebraska

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PIONEER SCHOOL DAYS IN SOUTHWEST NEBRASKA

--A REMINISCENCE--

BY W. H. HOTZE

All explorers had marked southwestern Nebraska, "unfit for human habitation." Maps of the region described it with one word, "Desert." But the urge to secure free land under the homestead act of 1862 spurred by Horace Greeley's admonition to "go west" led many to risk the venture.

Pressing appeals following Civil War days caused the Government to clear out the Indians and make a sketchy survey dividing the land into sections. Stationing a troop of cavalry and a company of infantry at the mouth of Red Willow Creek one hundred miles east of the Colorado line in 1872 it threw the gate open to homesteaders.

Two lumber-wagon exploring parties came from Nebraska City the following year. The first in August led by Royal Buck staked claims on Red Willow Creek; the other in November marked claims on Coon Creek, four miles east. They returned within a few days to bring their families out next year. Also came three families in covered wagons to settle before the close of 1872. The Russell Loomis family in

August, four miles up the Red Willow, followed by the William Reddick family south of the Republican River and three miles east of where Indianola was later located, and the John Longnecker family, one mile up the Red Willow. The Longneckers arrived in November too late to build a house and lived through the winter in a tent. Sixteen miles south on Beaver Creek was William Burger, a bachelor. Fourteen miles down river was John S. King, veteran buffalo hunter, living in a neat log cabin with his dog, Bruno, and trusty rifle, with a span of ponies picketed near-by. He was Red Willow County's original settler, coming early in 1871.

The Charles A. Hotze family arrived April 5, 1873, camping on Coon Creek until they located a claim one mile north. A brother, Fred Hotze, and William Byfield, a young man, accompanied them on horse back. Other settlers followed until in May there were enough to organize Red Willow County and lay out Indianola townsite.

Most of the early settlers came from nearby states east, a few from as far as Ohio and Kentucky. With few exceptions all were under forty years of age; many had served in the Civil War. They came in covered wagons drawn by horses or oxen, bringing complete household outfits, several months provisions, a cow or two, a coop of chickens, some farming equipment and tools. The nearest supply points were Plum Creek Station and North Platte on the Union Pacific railroad, eighty and ninety miles distant. There, also, was the nearest medical aid.

They felt the need for school and church but shelter for themselves and livestock must first be provided, ground broken and crops planted for sustenance. This done, they organized the county and elected officers, including a superintendent of schools. With necessary foundations of security established the settlers could turn their attention to schools. However, there were but one or two children of school age per family, not enough in the community for a school. Some taught their children at home.

In the fall of 1874 the settlers took up the problem in earnest. Teen age boys were becoming mischievous; something had to be done. So, Oliver Cobb was hired to teach

a three-month term in the courthouse. This was a fourteen by twenty foot frame building just south of Mack Lord's present hardware store. It had been built by D. H. Smith and used as his law office and residence until he returned east in August when he deeded it to Red Willow County for a court house. It was the first building in Indianola, the lumber having been hauled from Plum Creek station. Two rows of cottonwood slab benches from Wash Hindman's saw mill on the river, two chairs and a table comprised the furniture for the school room.

On the opening day a motley group of eligibles straggled in, lugging a variety of books—whatever their parents had brought from different sections of the country. Some had slates and dinner pails, a few came on horseback. Girls wore their hair in single or double braids or wound in a topnot; all had sunbonnets. Boys wore hair of various lengths and different styles of home barbering; some were shod in red-topped, copper-toed shoes while others were barefoot. Such was the material with which Mr. Cobb began to organize a school. Neither books nor supplies could be obtained in the locality. Restlessness developed among pupils unaccustomed to study or restraint. Mr. Cobb had held out for two weeks when rebellious rough necks arose and dumped him outdoors.

Things couldn't end that way, of course. There was but one man in the community capable of assuming the task, Ike Starbuck, for whose home town in Iowa Indianola was named. He had finished his law course at the State University of Iowa and had come to Nebraska to "hang out his shingle." Ike had what was required but didn't fancy the job. Two of the rascals, Oscar Shaw and Theodore Ferguson, were his cousins; besides, it was not the kind of adventure Ike was seeking. Perhaps he considered the little extra cash offered, but Ike was known to be good at cards and horse racing. Anyhow it was to his credit that he accepted the responsibility and finished the term successfully. It didn't hurt his law practice.

No attempt was made to hold school the following year, but William Rammel, a young man with teaching experience,

was engaged for a term in 1876. A fourteen by twenty foot cottonwood frame schoolhouse was built at the northwest edge of town. It was constructed of rough boards and batten strips, with roof of the same material and a floor of pine boards hauled from Plum Creek. Two rows of adult height, carpenter-made, double desks with straight backs stood unanchored on the floor. There was a chair and a table for the teacher, also a blackboard. A "box stove" large enough for cord-wood furnished heat, its stovepipe punched through the roof. There was a door at each end and two windows on each side. A four-foot board fence ran across the yard at the rear and part way up each side; an outhouse leaning against it at the rear and north side, completed the job.

Mr. Rammel proved competent, but one thing marred the session: teacher's bell disappeared. He kept it on a two-by-four running across the wall back of his desk and a careless fellow, hired to line the interior with ceiling for protection against the approaching winter, boarded it in. Nothing could be done till a later year when the boards had warped sufficiently to permit recovery.

With school thus established on a permanent basis, Katie Dunning was employed to teach in 1877. Nineteen years of age, she was the youngest of four children who came with their widowed mother and settled a mile northwest of town. She had attended school at Rulo, Nebraska, and her mother, a former teacher, was able to give her any needed coaching; so everything went fine although some pupils were older than she. There were no free lunches or free textbooks then. McGuffy's reader, Warren's speller, and Mac Vicar's arithmetic, together with slates, constituted our equipment. Spencerian "copy books" with a line of tall slanting letters atop each page, came later.

It was my first year in school; mother had taught me some at home, letters, numbers and simple words, an hour each morning. This was an arduous task for me and no doubt trying for my mother as she often had to threaten a switch. Father led me into the school room one morning carrying my dinner pail and introduced me to the teacher with instructions to use the whip if necessary which was rather

embarrassing to me. Too timid to ask for my dinner pail at noon, I went home squalling hungry.

School was to close just before Christmas with a program of exercises. Dolly Welborn, another six year old, and I were rehearsing for a dialogue in which she was acting as mother and as doctor of a sick doll. Suddenly the black diphtheria plague of 1877 struck, claiming eight victims in the community, four from our school including Daisy and her brother. One by one their graves appeared in the cemetery. School was closed and parents guarded their children close for two months.

Miss Dunning continued teaching the next year; she enjoyed watching us play at recess, especially our imitation of current happenings. We acted out the murder of Mr. Scott, a sheep man killed by Ackerson, a cattleman on the Red Willow; the latter's arrest and incarceration in the local jail.

The cottonwood building was used until "boom days" when the Burlington railroad reached west to Indianola, stopping for two years before moving on to Denver. From the playground we observed the construction work approaching, grading, track laying, and then the tooting, wheezing, smoke-belching locomotives drawing cars of material—scenes all new to us, more interesting than school books—perhaps as educational.

Increased population demanded schoolroom expansion. Among others, came Reverend Allen Bartley to shepherd the Methodists. They needed a church, we needed a school house. Reverend Bartley had a vision: a building to be used by Methodists, Congregationalists and school on an equal basis. Assuming charge, he pushed the work of raising funds. To any who demurred, he shouted: "Well, what are you going to do for a church? What are you going to do for a school?" Allen persisted till he raised the last shekel. Then, when the building was completed and dedicated, a deed was recorded conveying the property to Mr. Bartley's church organization. Later came legal notice from the Bishop—the building could be used only for his denomination's purposes. Perhaps some who joined Reverend Bartley's church

at a later revival did so to obtain returns on their investment, but it is doubtful that backsliders received their money's worth.

Ousted from the church during the fall term, school moved into a rented building one block east. Next year we occupied Shaw's Hall, a larger building, one block east of Main Street and two blocks north of the railroad. Here Miss H. F. Kneff took charge with one assistant, Miss Dunning having resigned to marry Robert Thomas, a building contractor. All were sorry to lose Miss Dunning but she retained her interest in us throughout life; having no children, she regarded us as her own. Miss Kneff re-graded the school and the school year was extended to three terms. Thoroughly devoted to her work, she often surprised us with her observations. Noticing Flora Quick's excelling penmanship, she said, "Flora, I should not spend more time improving it, better give your attention to other work." Someone brought in a few pollywogs. "Let's put the jar on my desk where we can all observe them change into frogs," she suggested. After the railroad moved on in 1882, McCook sprang up as a division town twelve miles west, developing rapidly. Father took me with him to see the town one Saturday. Next Monday Miss Kneff called me to her desk saying: "I hear you went to McCook Saturday." "Yes," I replied. "Is it larger than Indianola?" she asked. "No," I responded faintly. 'Yes, but it is!" she said emphatically—a lesson in honesty that I have always remembered.

To meet needs for further expansion, a large, two-story, frame building was erected near Coon Creek in 1882. There were two rooms downstairs for grades, and one up for higher classes under the Superintendent. On top in the cupola hung a large bell. There were single desks and plenty of blackboard. Great, pot bellied, coal eating, smoke belching stoves furnished varying degrees of heat, but the hallways in front where we hung wraps and left lunchpails were unheated so we often ate a frozen snack at noon. On a platform in the front yard was a pump and two tin cups, an innovation. Previously, drinking water was carried from neighboring houses, a sort of "Jack and Jill" stunt; two boys

were sent for water and two girls chosen to pass up the aisle with pail and dipper. "Teacher, please may I pass the water?" was a frequent request.

Mr. Henry C. Paddock took charge of the intermediate room our second year in the new building. He was a Civil War veteran who had had two molars shot out at Shiloh, was of good appearance, wearing a heavy sandy beard concealing a scar, and he was capable. It was Oscar Crabtree's job to tend the fire and Mr. Paddock had to remind him occasionally. One day Oscar refused; Mr. Paddock yanked him out of his desk. Rolling on the floor Oscar grabbed a whisker hold, then Mr. Paddock secured a throat hold and Oscar gave up. One day, after an altercation with the school board, he hurriedly announced that he was suddenly called back to his family at Kankakee, Illinois, expressed his regrets, and gave each of us his card autographed in beautiful Spencerian. Mrs. S. H. Colvin, a local ex-teacher, replaced him; competent and understanding, we all liked Mrs. Colvin. She was said to be part Indian.

Because of unruly boys it seemed advisable to have a man as superintendent in 1884, so Miss Kneff retired and married a rancher near McCook. The board hired Mr. M. H. Cavenagh, a successful school man of Danbury, Nebraska, who handled the situation admirably at Indianola. With proceeds of an entertainment held under his direction, we purchased a twenty-six volume set of Chambers' *Encyclopedia,* our first reference books.

On Friday afternoons we chose sides and "spelled down," Mr. Cavenagh giving out words from Warren's speller. Once an eleven year old was the last one standing, surprising everyone as there were many nearly twice his age. Some wanted to continue the ordeal but Mr. Cavenagh came to his rescue: "No, that would hardly be fair. He is a small chief with great honors. We had better let it stand at that."

Charles M. Charles, a graduate of Emory and Henry college, Virginia, took charge the next year when Mr. Cavenagh became postmaster. The upper room was divided and Walter Rowland was employed as assistant a year later. Under Mr. Charles' direction we organized a literary society meeting

Friday evenings; debating became the main feature. School spirit developed; later we challenged Mallalieu University located at Bartley; two debates followed with honors about equally divided.

This town and school sprang up on Mr. Bartley's homestead five miles east of Indianola. The school was named for a temperance crusader killed by thugs in Minneapolis. Widely advertised, the town spurted and the school sprouted; lots sold readily, buildings went up; school donations came; teachers followed, conducting classes in quarters over a store building. A foundation for a building was started and the cornerstone laid, but a cog slipped—Mr. Bartley failed in his effort to have his University chosen as the Methodist state school. There were four contestants—Nebraska Wesleyan won. Exit Mr. Bartley leaving school and teachers stranded.

With no provision in the Indianola school for athletics the boys played shinny, crack-the-whip, pullaway, baseball, or marbles. Down by the railroad bridge was the "old swimming hole" and flat bottom boat. Here Arthur Thorp led in aquatic stunts. Mr. Charles took an interest in activities, chipping in to buy ball and bat. Girls played by themselves in such games as crack-the-whip, tag, jump-the-rope, and dolls. In winter we coasted, slid down creek banks astride sticks, and snow-balled. Later we procured skates and had night skating parties in which a few teachers joined.

Morning sessions opened with singing hymns or patriotic songs, scripture reading, and remarks by the Superintendent who commented upon current events and held up high ideals. Yes, it was possible for any boy to become President. "Garfield, a poor boy, made it." The soldier was lauded as an example of bravery. An idea popped in one lad's head: how brave was our professor?

Mr. Charles was a southerner, rather large, of good appearance, wearing a well trimmed beard. It was his custom to enter the room as soon as the pupils were seated and drop into a pivoted swivel chair at the end of his desk before calling classes. The old sulphur match had just been replaced by one with a large explosive head. Our inquisitive lad came in one noon just before Mr. Charles had finished

ringing the last bell, slipped a match head under the chair's front pivot stop, slid into his front-row seat and became absorbed in his arithmetic. Soon, a loud bang, the professor bounced up, sat dazed for a moment; then, springing to his feet he let loose a barrage of invective against whoever would stoop to such a trick, his eyes searching to spot the culprit; but to no avail. Anger gave place to disappointment —he had often boasted of his ability to detect a guilty conscience. Pausing, he delivered a final shot, "The fellow who did that will doubtless become president of the United States some day!" That "spilled the beans," the guilty lad raised a blushing face to meet the Professor's accusing gaze. Everybody laughed. Work resumed as usual.

At that time there were but two high schools in the county and many came from a distance for better school advantages. Families moved from Stockville and other parts of the range country north, also from Kansas. Among them a young man from Danbury, Nebraska, who balked on grammar: "No, I never studied grammar, don't like it and don't want it; just want bookkeeping, arithmetic and such, so I can help dad run the bank." Mr. Charles informed him that everyone had to follow the prescribed course. He dropped out in a few weeks.

In 1887 we moved into a larger brick building one block southwest; this building, constructed by Robert Thomas, was trimmed with an elaborate galvanized cornice and topped with a cupola. It had hot-air heat and a dry toilet system. Neither proved satisfactory—burning contents of refuse pans in the furnace was unendurable. The Kansas City furnace company sent an "expert" who looked the system over and gave us a talk on proper class room temperatures: "It should not be above 65 degrees for best results." Defects being uncorrected, outdoor toilets came back into use. I don't recall whether that part of the equipment was moved from the old building but the bell and desks were. Stripped of its crowning bell and deserted, the building of 1882 stood like a deposed monarch viewing us sadly from across the way.

With the school settled in the brick building, the school board provided a Webster's unabridged dictionary. Latin, rhetoric, civil government, higher mathematics, and sciences were added in an effort to meet college entrance requirements. High school students chipped in to subscribe for the daily Lincoln *Journal* which we were allowed to read during school hours. Mr. Charles said, "One should learn to get the gist of the news in five minutes."

On January 12, 1888, came the famous blizzard. A south wind lulled; large feathery flakes began floating down, becoming smaller and thicker. A chill northwest wind set in, increasing to a gale driving an impenetrable sheet of icy particles shutting out all view; the thermometer plunged. All life was in the grip of a merciless tempest. We were at afternoon recess when the large flakes came and were hurrying inside at the close when I heard rapid hoof beats, the rattle of a lumber wagon, and finally my father's voice: "Willie! There's a blizzard coming; hurry get May, Tilla and Elba. Tell the teachers to send everyone home." All paled at the startling news. By that time Edgar Hill had come for Lena and George and other parents soon arrived. There was no storm warning system then, but old settlers knew blizzards and had sensed this one's stealthy approach. Cuddled in a straw covered wagon bed with plenty of wraps we reached home before the storm broke. Mother helped with chores and sheltering the livestock; we all carried in wood and water against the impending siege. Next day the storm subsided, leaving yards and roads blocked with huge drifts. There was no school for several days.

In 1889, J. A. Smith from the Beaver City school replaced Mr. Charles, who resigned to homestead near Benkleman. Mr. Smith was an Oberlin College graduate who had specialized in English literature; he helped us start a high school library. He also led us on a "sneak day" before such came into practice. At opening exercises he announced: "This is Arbor Day. How would you like to take the afternoon off and plant trees?" Everyone voiced approval. But, "had the board given permission?"—if not, "what would they say?"

we inquired. "I haven't asked. It's a holiday and I'll assume the risk," he assured. "No trees? We'll find trees along the creek. Just wear ordinary clothes and be ready to start right after noon." Armed with spades we went to our place a mile north, returning with two elms and a hackberry which we planted in front of the schoolhouse. Two of them are still standing in the beautiful grove reaching south to the highway.

There were three years in the high school course; many dropped out, leaving few to graduate. Lilly Welborn (Machechnie) stood alone on the commencement platform in 1891, the school's first graduate. Leonard Goddard of that class had moved to Tennessee where he entered Maryville College; later, he served in the Philippine occupation army and became Judge Advocate General for the Islands. Another who rose to distinction was genial Floyd Welborn who dropped out earlier in the course to take a bank position; Floyd became president of the Colorado Iron and Fuel Company, one of the largest industrial organizations in the West.

It was my turn to graduate in 1892 but being the only one in the class I decided to work on the farm for two years then go to Doane College or the State University, later deciding upon Doane. There were five in the 1893 class, Lena Hill, Jennie Holland, Tilla Hotze, Flora Quick, and Sam Pinkerton. Flora and Tilla quit to graduate from Franklin in 1894, both entering Doane later. Sam decided to teach two years before entering the University. This left Jennie and Lena to finish in 1893.

Teachers had stressed the value of higher education. "Anyone willing to work can obtain a college education; I had only a pair of overalls and fifty cents in my pocket when I enrolled in Emory and Henry," said Professor Charles. Public school courses and teaching of that period led to the development of intelligent citizenship and character building; they were free from fads that swept through later. Emphasis was upon fundamentals; pupils were drilled

in phonetics and articulation. Attention was given to spelling, reading, grammatical construction and intelligible speaking. Using Townsend's *Civil Government of Nebraska,* we learned the basic principles of government—how the three departments functioned; duties of officers from justice-of-peace to governor. We were shown the responsibilities of citizenship, the need for taking intelligent interest in politics and our duty to vote, warned that, "eternal vigilance is the price of all good government." We learned the names of all officers, state and national, including members of supreme courts, keeping up to date on any changes. A strong feeling of patriotism developed, further stimulated by influence of Civil War veterans' organizations. Our constitution was guarded, our laws honored, our American form of government considered the best in the world. With citizens rooted in such a faith our country stood immune from the siren voice of alien "isms."

Our picture would be incomplete without mentioning one or two instructors who came after the turn of the century. One of these was Guy Chambers who graduated from the State University law school in 1916, and later became a prominent lawyer in Lincoln. He came to Indianola in 1910 to teach for a year. Taking charge of athletics Guy developed the school's first football team, a good one sweeping all contenders. This innovation stirred the community. "That game is too rough and risky for our boys, someone will get killed," they said. "We hired Mr. Chambers to teach—not to take the boys chasing all over the country playing that fool game. Takes their minds off their class work; it ought to be stopped." They still play football at Indianola.

A few years later Charles F. McAdams arrived fresh from a University pre-medical course. Finding sanitary conditions intolerable, he asked the board to remedy the situation. The members refused. He took the matter up with Dr. Wm. Machechnie, local member of the State Board of Health. "Clean up the building or close the school," ordered the State Board of Health. School continued; so did Mr. McAdams.

There were all kinds of teachers, most of them excellent. Out of small scattered schools with limited facilities has developed our modern school system. A substantial structure has replaced the one of 1887; torn down, only its memory remains. The old bell sits silent on the ground. Old teachers and pupils have passed beyond the sound of its call. Pioneer school days have gone.