



Pioneering on the Niobrara at Meadville

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Article Summary: In 1870 Merrit Mead and his wife, discouraged by droughts, hailstorms, and grasshoppers at their original Nebraska homestead, moved on. They found a beautiful spot near Ainsworth, where Mead operated a ferry on the Niobrara, ran a tavern, and served as postmaster.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Merrit Mead, Sadie Mead, Blanche Mead, Gertie Mead, Sam Slonecker, Will Slonecker, William Shepherd Moore, Dell Mosley

Nebraska Place Names: Ainsworth, Meadville, Norden, Springview, Lost Lake (Bottomless Lake)

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Photographs / Images: Mead's Tavern and home, about 1886; looking down the Niobrara toward the Mead place, about 1912; the Mastick Mill, 1906; Lost Lake, 1909

PIONEERING ON THE NIOBRARA AT MEADVILLE

BY HARRY B. ROBINSON AND NELLIE B. HULSHIZER

IN THE spring of 1882, Merrit Mead became discouraged and dissatisfied with his home in Thayer County, Nebraska, where he had homesteaded in 1870.¹ Blizzards, droughts, hailstorms, and grasshoppers all had their part in bringing about this feeling. He dreamed of a home somewhere near a timber-lined stream. When he mentioned the subject to his wife Sade, she made no protest, but assured him that she would be happy anywhere that he was satisfied. So they sold their homestead and prepared to journey to the north and west. The destination Merrit had in mind was Yellowstone Valley in Montana.

¹ NW¼, Sec. 14, T4N, R2W. (Records Federal Land Office, Book 131.)

This story was condensed by Mr. Robinson from an original manuscript written by Mrs. Hulshizer in 1951. Mrs. Hulshizer obtained most of the data from the diary of her mother, Mrs. Blanche (Mead) Slonecker, and verbally from her grandmother, Mrs. Merrit Mead. Mr. Robinson, an historian of the National Park Service, Region Two Office, Omaha, became interested in the Meadville area in connection with a study of historic sites within reservoir areas proposed by the Bureau of Reclamation in the Niobrara River Basin. The proposed Meadville Reservoir would inundate the community discussed in this article.

Merrit was as happy as a schoolboy as he set to work placing bows over the top of his sturdy lumber wagon and then stretching canvas over them to make a typical prairie schooner. Into this vehicle was packed their best furniture and most valuable possessions. Over the seat of the light spring wagon was fastened a large umbrella which Sade had brought from Ohio.² In this vehicle were placed the lighter articles and those which the elements would not harm.

The sale of the homestead netted \$3,000, and they still had \$2,500 of it in \$20 gold pieces when they were ready to leave. As protection from possible robbery during the trip, Sade hid the gold coins in a large jar of corn meal, feeling sure that no one would think of looking for them there.

On the morning of August 1, 1882, they said goodbye to relatives and friends, and started on their way. Merrit, driving the big wagon, took the lead. Sade followed in the spring wagon with Gertie, age three, seated beside her, the two of them sheltered from sun and rain by the big umbrella. Blanche, age ten, proudly mounted on her pony, drove the family herd of twenty-five cattle.

Forced to travel slowly because of the cattle, it was August 18 when they reached the newly established town of Ainsworth, Nebraska.³ While purchasing supplies here, Merrit met Jim Hughes who urged him to look over the neighboring country before traveling farther. That night they camped on Bone Creek about a mile north of Ainsworth.

The next day Sade and the girls remained in camp and did the family washing while Merrit went with Jim Hughes to look over the unsettled lands to the north. About sundown Merrit returned, giving a glowing account of the country he had seen, and telling Sade that if she would be satisfied

²Sade had followed Merrit to Thayer County in March, 1871, after he had selected the homestead and built a sod house. Their former home had been North Eaton, Loraine County, Ohio. Before their marriage in 1868 Sade had been Miss Sarah Wight. (Nellie B. Hulshizer, "Pioneering." Unpublished Ms.)

³They had traveled up the Blue River to the Platte, crossing that stream near the present Central City, thence up the Loup to the present site of Burwell, and then through the Sandhills via the Calamus trail.

with the place he had selected, they need travel no farther. Sade's answer being in the affirmative, they decided to stay.

Next morning they went straight north until they reached the bluffs of the Niobrara River. Even with Merrit's enthusiastic description of the previous evening, Sade was amazed at the beauty of the scene that met her eyes as they stopped to gaze down upon the gleaming Niobrara with its green meadows on the north and its picturesque evergreen bluffs on the south. Here was the timber-lined stream that Merrit Mead had been seeking.

The only thing to dampen their ardor was the seemingly impossible feat of descending the wooded bluff to reach the valley below. After some exploring, a place was found where a passageway for the wagons could be cut through the timber and brush. This being accomplished, the horses were unhitched at the very edge of the bluff, and the wagons were lowered by rope and pulleys to the flat bench below. The horses were then led down the slope one at a time, and lastly, the cows, with the aid of the dog Shep, were urged along and were soon grazing upon the lush vegetation below.

About a quarter of a mile west of this spot was an abandoned, one-room log cabin which had been built by a wood-cutter a few years before. The cabin windows were broken, the door was gone, the floor was the bare ground, and the roof consisted of poles and brush covered with dirt. It reminded Sade of the cabin which had been their first home in Thayer County, except that the latter was sod and this one was log.

They erected a tent beside the cabin and put their beds in it. Then they set up the cook stove and table nearby beneath a large tree which actually afforded more shelter from the rain than the roof of the cabin.

Just a few feet north of the cabin was a sheer drop of about sixty feet to a short stretch of level land which extended to the river bank. This piece of land appeared to have little value because of its swampy character. To the south were a few yards of level bench land from which the timber had been cut, leaving stumps so thick one could hardly walk over it. Near the cabin a few stately old trees had been left

standing. Just beyond, was a steep slope covered with evergreens (juniper and ponderosa pine), and broken here and there by short canyon-like ravines.

Merrit set to work at once putting up a winter hay supply for the stock. In the meantime he discovered a road about a mile to the west by which access to the land above the bluffs could be gained. As soon as the haying was completed, he made a trip via this road to Ainsworth. Here he purchased window glass, a door, and lumber for roofing and flooring the little cabin. Also, at the first opportunity he filed papers on 131 acres of land as a pre-emption.⁴ As soon as the little cabin was repaired and the stove and table were moved into it, Merrit began to cut logs for another room.

Sade and the girls spent time gathering and drying or preserving the wild fruit which grew in abundance nearby. They found many interesting things on and about their new ranch. Not far from the house was a steep, narrow canyon which was covered by a dense growth of cedars.⁵ They promptly designated it as "Cedar Canyon." Every day or so some member of the family would discover a spring gushing out of the hillside and bubbling down to the swamp along the river. They found seventeen of these on their own property.

One evening when it was Sade's turn to help the dog Shep bring in the cows, she started early, hoping to look for fruit. She located several plum trees loaded with fruit and a number of grape vines clustered with their purple fruit. She marked their location in her mind and was walking leisurely along, when to her dismay she noticed it was growing dark, and looking up she could see the stars shining brightly overhead. For a moment she was a little frightened, for she knew the sun had been several hours high when she left the house and she felt certain that she had not been gone more than an hour. Looking about, she discovered that the canyon into which she had wandered was so narrow and deep that the sun could not penetrate it except for a few

⁴ Lots 2 and 3, SE & NW, Sec. 13, T32N, R22W. (The present home of the John Adams family.)

⁵ Locally called cedar but actually juniper. Here *Juniperus virginiana* and *Juniperus scopulorum* intermingle.

minutes just at noon. As a result, stars might be seen in broad daylight. The family decided to call this new discovery "Starlit Canyon." Thereafter, many were the tales Merrit told of happenings in this canyon.

One day while exploring to the east of their property, they discovered a beautiful little lake high up in the bluffs many feet above the river bed. It lay in a little basin surrounded by evergreen-covered slopes. To the north one could climb the slope and find himself on a level, grass-covered promontory from which he had a magnificent view in any direction. Beyond this was a straight drop to the river bed. This bank was always called the "Clay Bluff," as it was composed of yellow clay, and no trees or grass grew on it. On the little flat which afforded this view were four mounds thought to be Indian graves. A slab at the head of each bore a queer inscription most of which had been erased by weathering.⁶

After looking about them at all the beauty, the Meads began to consider a name for the little lake they had found in this unexpected place. At last the name "Lost Lake" was decided upon. As the country was settled the lake came to be known far and wide as "Bottomless Lake," and many were the stories circulated about the lake in which no bottom had ever been found. Of course, most of these stories could be traced back to Merrit Mead. Until 1900, or later, it was not unusual for a stranger coming through to ask for a guide to show him "Bottomless Lake."⁷

⁶ This flat is between the river and the present highway where the road turns to the west about halfway down the hill. It is east of the Meadville school. The portion of the flat on which the graves were located has slumped about six feet, and no trace of the graves remains.

⁷ "Bottomless Lake" occupied a slump basin resulting from the slippage or gravity faulting of a section of the bluff. "The reason for the lake being dry most of the time now is that the Highway Department has run part of their ditch drainage into it and filled it with sand." (Letter, Morris F. Skinner to Harry B. Robinson, February 16, 1953.) The lake became dry for the first time subsequent to an earthquake which occurred in 1911. Apparently, gravity faulting had opened up deeper cracks permitting the water to drain out. In the "Meadville Notes" of the *Brown County Democrat*, Ainsworth, Friday, June 9, 1911, appears the following: "An earthquake shock was felt here very distinctly last Friday afternoon, June 2. Everything seemed to be on the move for a few seconds."

As soon as her share of the work was completed each morning, Blanche devoted a few hours to study, and in the evening recited her studies to Sade, for as yet there had been no school established north of Ainsworth. In fact, there was not a house between Ainsworth and the river for some miles east or west.⁸

Before the first snow fell Merrit had completed the additional room to the original cabin. He built a large fireplace in one end of it, so they had a cozy, comfortable home in which to spend the long winter months. For Christmas, Merrit ordered a Mason and Hamlin organ as a surprise for his family. It was the first to be shipped into Ainsworth on the railroad.⁹

On December 31, which was Blanche's eleventh birthday, they gave a dance that was attended by all the neighboring settlers they knew and by others from several miles away. This was the first of the New Year's dances which became annual affairs at the Mead's. The music was furnished by what was known as the Hulshizer band. Most of the musicians were from a family by that name who lived on the river ten miles east of Mead's.¹⁰

The spring of 1883 brought many new settlers, and a means of crossing the river became a real problem. At last, the business men of Ainsworth hired men to cut logs for a crib bridge. The logs were donated by Merrit. Prior to the completion of the bridge, a cable was stretched across the

⁸ Their nearest neighbors on the south side of the river for that first autumn were the Swatmans about a half mile to the west, and the Bill Hughes, Bill Roe, and James Hughes families on the east. They knew little about the land across the river as yet, for their only means of crossing the river was to swim. Merrit had crossed this way several times, and had made the acquaintance of a bachelor by the name of Finland, who lived north and east of them. He also learned that the Steve Jewett family lived five miles east, and the Dutch Hassed family to the east of them. As soon as the river froze over solid enough to hold up a team and wagon, they were able to make friends with all of the families north of the river.

⁹ Mrs. Hulshizer, co-author of this article, is now in possession of the organ, also a cupboard which was made by her grandfather, Merrit Mead, from the box in which it was shipped.

¹⁰ Father, aunt, and uncles of Roy Hulshizer, the late husband of the co-author, Nellie B. Hulshizer.

river, and attached thereto was a small boat in which crossings were made by using the cable hand over hand.

When the bridge was completed, it consisted of cribs and stringers with planks laid across. The cracks between the planks were covered with hay so that a team of horses could be induced to walk across the bridge. It had no railings or top, and it would tip first one way and then the other. It was the only bridge west of Carns, hence the settlers for miles up and down the river, as well as the newcomers, came here to cross. Most of them stopped at Mead's over night or at least for a meal, and soon the place was known far and wide as Mead's Tavern, and the bridge was called Mead's Bridge. The tavern became a profitable business although the price for a meal was only twenty-five cents and the same for a bed. The charge for putting a team in the barn and feeding it was fifteen cents for a noonday stop and twenty-five cents for overnight.

As yet the nearest post office was Ainsworth, and whenever anyone in the area went to town, he brought back mail for the entire community. Even then it was sometimes a week or more between opportunities to send or receive mail. At last a community meeting was held at which a decision was made to apply for a post office. By common consent it was decided that Mead's was the most favorable location. The application was made, and the post office was duly established with Merrit Mead as postmaster and with the office bearing the name Meadville.¹¹ The mail came from Ainsworth twice a week—Monday and Friday. The first mail carrier was Went Conway. Succeeding carriers were Corwin Campbell, Dave Hackler, Gene Olstrum, and Cale Worley.

With completion of the bridge and establishment of the post office, it was necessary to have a road with a more direct approach to them than the one a mile west of Mead's. Appli-

¹¹ Meadville postmasters and their dates of appointment are as follows: Merrit I. Mead, October 29, 1883; William S. Moore, September 15, 1884; Frederick F. Snyder, March 15, 1886; Samuel Taylor, April 6, 1891; Samuel J. Boyd, January 20, 1896 (actually never served); William P. Slonecker, February 18, 1904; Elmer N. Skillman, June 20, 1934; Mrs. Stella Mae Strange, June 18, 1936; Mrs. Mary B. Clark (incumbent), July 20, 1944. (National Archives, Records of Post Office Department.)

cation was made for a new road, and it was soon constructed. The survey was made by Henry Dayton. The new roadway was cut through the bluff at a point not more than a hundred yards west of the tavern.

The Meads were quite crowded, now that their house must serve as post office and tavern as well as living quarters, so Merrit again decided to construct another room. When the logs were cut, he notified his neighbors, and they came for a house raising. Soon the logs were in place for a room sixteen by twenty-six feet just west of the room formerly added. The two rooms were joined by a covered runway which permitted the family's living quarters to be separate from where they served the public. They announced a house-warming dance for the Fourth of July, expecting to have the building completed by then, but when the time came, only half of the roof was on. About midnight a thunder shower rained them out.

Although there was not much level land on his ranch, Merrit broke all there was, and planted it in some sort of crop. He also placed a fence around the house, extending it to the road on the south. In this enclosure he set out several cedar trees and planted a variety of flowers. By autumn it was really a beautiful spot.

Throughout the summer new settlers came in great numbers, and much of the land about Meadville was taken. Ruben Barton located a mile west of the bridge on the north side of the river. William Shepherd Moore, locally known as "Shep," took the land which had first been occupied by Finland (See footnote 8), who had left the country without filing on it. Soon after his arrival, Moore opened a store in his home.¹²

¹² The Moore house is the existing home of Maynard Jones, located two-tenths of a mile east of the present store. Its original location was on the hillside immediately across the road to the north of the present location. The post office was moved there in 1884. Also, G. W. Lambley, the first doctor in Meadville, opened an office there in January 1885. The young doctor and Miss Abbie Hyde, the local schoolteacher, who had been schoolmates in Conway, Iowa, were married in February and soon thereafter moved the office to their new home.

The Fred Snyder family settled at the site of the existing Meadville store and post office near the close of the year 1883.



Above: Mead's Tavern and home, south bank of the Niobrara River,
about 1886.

Below: Looking down the Niobrara toward the Mead place,
about 1912.



It was during this summer of 1883 that the settlers on the uplands north of the river began to have trouble with cattle rustlers. They were so far away from the county seat at Ainsworth that it was difficult to get law enforcement. At last the cattlemen got together and organized a "Vigilance Committee." If a man was caught stealing livestock, he was shot on the spot. If not caught in the act but enough evidence

They erected a two story log building, one-half of which was used for living quarters. In the other half a store was opened in competition with Mr. Moore.

In the summer of 1885, Leslie Williams operated a sawmill just west of Swatman's on the south side of Plum Creek. Because of the demand for building materials, this operation was profitable although it ended in tragedy for the owner. Early in the autumn an accident occurred which severed his right arm at the shoulder and resulted in his death. That summer Hank Greenslit and Garret Dixon utilized some of the lumber from the Williams mill to construct a saloon a few yards north and east of the Snyder store. Just south of the store another building was erected in which Jim Reed operated a blacksmith shop.

On March 15, 1886, Mr. Snyder was appointed postmaster, and the post office was moved to his store. On March 16, 1888, while the family was attending a dance at Carl Brown's, a few miles east of the bridge on the south side of the river, the building and all its contents were destroyed by fire. A granary was soon converted into temporary living quarters and post office. Then, as the saloon had gone out of business, Mr. Snyder bought the building, and moved it to the spot where the log store had stood. Another room was added and it became the new living quarters, store, and post-office. This building is a part of the existing frame dwelling just north of the present store.

On the 24th of February 1886, Meadville was surveyed and laid out in town lots.

Early in the spring of 1887, Mr. Snyder hired Will Slonecker to build a bowery just north of the bridge. Dances were held there all summer, also a Fourth of July celebration.

In 1890, Fred Snyder sold his interests to Samuel Taylor, who then became postmaster. In 1896, Mr. Taylor sold his interests and left Meadville. As no one else would assume the responsibility of the post office, it was discontinued; and then the only place of business in the community was Mead's Tavern. The mail was left at Mead's for awhile and later at the Will Slonecker home (the former Snyder dwelling).

In 1899 an application was made for re-establishment of the post office, but it was rejected. The office was re-established in 1904 with Will Slonecker as postmaster. The Sloneckers had moved to the former Snyder home in 1899. They converted one room of their home into a post office and store. That fall a central office was established there. The first telephone line from Ainsworth to Meadville had been constructed in 1902, and a telephone had been installed in the Slonecker home on April 19.

In the fall of 1904, Bi Mastick, who now owned the former Swatman place, built a dam across Plum Creek and erected a grist mill and sawmill nearby, on the south side of the creek.

was found against him, he was dragged from his home and hanged to the nearest tree. This organization was started for a just cause, but before it finally disbanded, innocent men were threatened and some killed, if not by the "Vigilantes" themselves by men who claimed to be members.¹³

Merrit did not believe in the organization from the start, and was not slow in saying so; hence, Sade and the girls lived in constant dread lest he, too, fall a victim of their wrath.

During the summer of 1905 Herbert Overstreet set up a tent on the site formerly occupied by the Greenslit and Dixon saloon, and operated a photograph gallery.

In 1906, the Sloneckers built the present north addition to the old saloon building in which they had been living, and converted all of the original saloon portion of the house into a store, post office, and central office. In 1910, they constructed the existing store building, and operated the store and post office there until Mr. Slonecker's death in 1933.

Elmer Skillman rented the store from Mrs. Slonecker, and was postmaster in 1934-1936. He was succeeded as postmaster by Mrs. Stella Mae Strange, who with her husband operated the store until 1943, when the property was sold to J. W. Clark, the present owner.

¹³ The "Vigilantes" were very active in the summer of 1885. Fifteen miles north of the river a man (Murphy) was dragged from his bed, and hanged to the ridge pole of his house without an opportunity to answer to the charge of cattle stealing. A little later a man (Moppin) was arrested, and placed in the Springview jail to await trial. The "Vigilantes" took matters into their own hands and broke into the jail. The prisoner crawled under his bunk, and was there shot to death. Over near the Keya Paha River they entered a man's home and shot him to death. In the eastern part of the county they hanged a man from a bridge. It was indeed a time of terror, and it took a great deal of courage to stand the tests with which the pioneers were faced.

The "Vigilantes" were again very active during the summer of 1889. Rarely a night passed that their signal lights did not flash from one hill top to another, sometimes across many miles of lowland between. Blanche Mead and Sam Slonecker had been married in January, and were living in what was called the "halfway" house, about three miles south of the Mead's, and a mile south of where Sam's family was living at that time. Sam had been quite outspoken against the "Vigilantes," so Blanche lived in constant dread of trouble. One evening Sam's younger brother warned him that he had overheard some men talking and that they planned to take Sam that night. It happened to be dark and cloudy that night, so when darkness fell they lit no lamp, but slipped quietly out of the house, and joined the rest of Sam's family in a corn field some distance from either house. There they lay quietly the rest of the night. Later, a neighbor who had passed their house that night told them that he had seen several men prowling about the premises. No damage was done, however, and though Blanche thereafter dreaded each nightfall, and gave a sigh of relief at the break of dawn, they were never molested.

But Merrit tended strictly to his own affairs, and kept anyone who wished to stay at the tavern. He always said he never asked a man his name, his business, or his destination, as long as he minded his own business and paid his bill.

During the early autumn of 1883, a severe rain storm swelled the waters of the river rather suddenly, and the new bridge was destroyed. The settlers north of the river now were forced to cross the stream in a small row boat to get their mail, and those on the south side had to cross in like manner to get supplies from the store on the north side. The duration of this inconvenience was shortened by an early freezeover of the river, which permitted crossing on the ice.

It was this autumn that School District No. 12 was organized and the first school in the community was held. John Boyd was director; Merrit Mead, moderator; and James Hughes, treasurer. Miss Lena Carnyhan, who later became the wife of young Steve Jewett, was hired as teacher at \$20 per month. The school was held in the second story of Snyder's log store.¹⁴

When the ice began to break up, the principal topic of conversation among the settlers was the problem of crossing the river. On February 28, 1884, the county set aside \$300 for the construction of a bridge. The balance of the cost was raised by subscription, and the site was donated. To provide a means of crossing while the bridge was under construction, the county bought a ferry boat from Mrs. Nannie Osborn of Ainsworth for the sum of \$96.70. They, in turn, sold it to Merrit Mead and Ed Stokes, who operated it until the bridge was completed on December 9.

The charge for crossing on the ferry was twenty-five cents whether it be team and wagon or a man on foot. One day a man came to the ferry riding a mule, and he said to Merrit:

¹⁴ The census report now on file in the office of the county superintendent of Keya Paha County says that school was held for 60 days. There were 31 pupils—10 boys and 21 girls. The value of the building was \$300, and the lot \$10. The district had debts amounting to \$296.75. Taxpayers were: Thomas Walker, J. M. Reed, S. E. Rosseter, J. Boyd, W. S. Moore, F. F. Snyder, Henry Swatman, M. I. Mead, Christian Bechsel, James Hughes John Swim, James Wright, W. M. James, O. Hyde.

"What will be the charge for hauling my mule across the river?" "Twenty-five cents," replied Merrit. Whereupon the man paid the fee, drove the mule onto the ferry, and was about to step on, himself, when Merrit grabbed him by the arm, exclaiming, "Here you! I didn't say I would haul two jackasses for a quarter." Merrit would have his fun wherever he might be or whatever he might be doing.

Operating the ferry was a thriving and profitable business because settlers were now coming in large numbers.¹⁵ Occasionally the shifting current would leave a sand bar in the path of the boat, and it would be grounded for a while. On these occasions sometimes there would be as many as a hundred vehicles of various kinds lined up on each side of the river awaiting their turn to cross.

During the summer Merrit's time was devoted to the ferry, so it fell to the lot of Sade, with the help of Blanche, to act as postmistress, serve meals to hundreds of people, do most of the garden work, and look after the finances of the inn. The strain was beginning to affect her health, so Merrit persuaded Mr. Moore to take the post office to his store. It was moved at once, and Mr. Moore was sworn in as acting postmaster until his appointment came from Washington, D. C.

One evening Merrit came in very excited, telling Sade that a youth of not more than eighteen from near Springview had been arrested for cattle stealing, and had been taken to Ainsworth to await trial. Merrit was sure that the boy was innocent, but the "Vigilance Committee" had declared that if the law didn't handle him, they would. If he were cleared they would be waiting for him. It was the talk of the

¹⁵ Among the settlers who came during the summer of 1884 were many who played a prominent part in community life down through the years. A widow, Ann Slonecker, and four of her children located just to the west of Mead's and south of Swatman's. William Lampitt and family located north of the river about four miles northeast of Mead's. The coming of Mrs. Lampitt meant much to the community, for it was her business to assist the stork, and during her lifetime she assisted with the birth of a great number of children. Charles Huddle and his wife took a homestead four miles west and a little to the north of the Snyder store. He made a dugout in which they lived until he could cut logs for a house.

country until the day of the trial. The boy's friends for miles around were on hand for the trial, as were the "Vigilantes" and their friends. As no real evidence was produced against the boy, the case was thrown out of court, and he was released. About sundown that evening, he and an armed guard of about twenty rode into the yard at Mead's, and asked for lodging. Merrit told them they were welcome to stay, and Sade and Blanche prepared their supper. While they were eating, there was a knock on the door, and Merrit opened it to find himself confronted by about twenty of the "Vigilantes." They also asked to be put up for the night, and were told they could stay. The large west room was turned over to them, and the first group remained in the private quarters. Naturally there was little sleeping done by anyone, but the night passed peacefully, and at break of day both parties were up and gone. The boy was escorted to his home, but soon thereafter was sent East to his grandparents until law and order were established.¹⁶

Up until this time the territory north of the river to the state line was in Brown County, but in the November election a majority of the voters favored the county division which designated that part north of the center of the channel of the Niobrara as Keya Paha County.¹⁷

¹⁶ The boy was Horace Stewart. He had previously been captured and hanged by the "Vigilantes," but the last of them to ride by had felt sorry for the boy and had cut the rope, thus saving his life.

¹⁷ Lillian Jones, *Days of Yore, Early History of Brown County, Nebraska* (Ainsworth, 1937), pp. 18, 28.

Regardless of county lines, school for the entire community in the fall of 1884 was conducted in a little log building a mile east of the Moore place.¹⁸ The teacher was Miss

¹⁸ This 14'x20' building was so low that it was often referred to as the "Sheep Shed." The roof consisted of poles and rushes covered with dirt. If the teacher happened to be of average height or above she could not work at the blackboard without her head touching the roof, thereby causing the dirt to sift down into her hair.

On October 23, 1885, school began in a hillside dugout which was located east of the Slonecker place on the south side of the river. The house had been abandoned by the Wm. R. Morton family. It was heated by a four-hole cook stove with two missing lids which were replaced by pancake griddles. The teacher was Ed Stiles, of Ainsworth.

In 1886, the old school District 12 was divided, and that part which was south of the river, in Brown County, became Districts

Abbie Hyde, who, with her family, had located two miles east of Moore's during the summer. The children from the south side of the river crossed on the ferry until the new bridge was completed.

The new bridge was an improvement over the older one. Piling was driven every sixteen feet. Stringers were laid on these, and then plank was placed on the stringers. The bridge also had a railing and a very pretty top.

As the year drew to a close, great preparations were made for the annual New Year's dance at Mead's. Neighbors for miles around gathered to dance the old year out and the New Year in. They began coming before dark and stayed until daylight. Whole families came, no one was too old

15 and 57. The part north of the river, in Keya Paha County, became District 59. In the last district, school was held again in the log building east of the Moore place. The county census for 1886 lists the following families in District 57 who had children in school: C. A. Blood, W. F. Roe, Eric Erickson, J. R. Irvine, W. Bechsel, F. M. Evans, Hans Peterson, Joshua Hartley, E. L. Beeman. Taxpayers without children were: G. W. Cheeseman, Andrew Peterson, Rosil Horton, Carl Brown, F. S. Carpenter.

The census for District 15 is not on record for years prior to 1893, but Blanche (Mead) Slonecker's diary for 1886 states that "School began the 6th of December in the Hart house with Nellie Bruner as teacher, and it was a large school with many young people as well as the children." The term closed on February 25.

The Keya Paha County census records for 1886 list the following as taxpayers in District 59: William Snyder, Nicholas Preisel, James Hughes, John Krape, John Wilson, Martin Hull, William Sarby. There were 22 pupils.

In the winter of 1888, District 8, known as the Huddle School, was organized north of the river, and a log schoolhouse was erected. The school census for that year lists the following residents of the district: J. V. Lou, John Petty, N. F. Cormany, G. L. Finlen, O. B. Tisue, Jim Foster, C. S. Huddle, John Marks, S. Atkinson, John Mock, C. J. Goodwin Phillip L. Goodwin A. S. Watson John S. Hartman.

On September 2, 1895, Blanche Mead began teaching a four months' term of school in District 59. The district was so large and had so many pupils that another schoolhouse was built in the west half near Moore's. The old "Sheep Shed" served the east half. Two months of the term were taught in each schoolhouse, the first two months being in the "Sheep Shed." A Sunday School was held in the schoolhouse each Sunday.

By petition a joint school district was formed in the winter of 1907-08, with part in each county. The schoolhouse was moved from the upland south of the bridge to its present location near the south end of the bridge. School began January 19, 1908, for a three months term with Mrs. Ona Patterson as teacher. In the fall, a three months' term was taught by Myrtle Crabtree.

and no one too young. On this occasion twenty-two small babies slept on one bed while their parents enjoyed the dance. There were many other social events this winter as there was no problem in crossing the river.

Spring came early that year (1885), and by the middle of March the ice was starting to break up in the river. Merrit and Sade went with the Moores over to Bob Woods' on the Keya Paha River to a dance, leaving Went Conway and the girls to look after the tavern. Early the next morning Went called the girls and told them if they wanted to see a spectacular sight to come and watch the ice breaking up on the river. They proceeded at once to the bridge, and had been there only a brief time when there was a snapping and cracking, and to their dismay they saw the center piling snapped from under the bridge like toothpicks. Soon thereafter the other pilings broke and the bridge fell into the flood waters. By the time Sade and Merrit reached the river on their return, nothing remained to show where the bridge had been except the road to the river bank on either side. They were compelled to go up the river nearly to Norden to obtain a boat in which to cross. It was three days before they reached home.

Merrit and Ed Stokes placed the ferry in operation again as soon as possible. There were now enough settlers on both sides of the river to make the crossing a vital problem. Bids were soon solicited by the two counties for the building of a new bridge which would be jointly owned and maintained. By the middle of the summer a contract was let to the King Iron Bridge Company of Toledo, Ohio. They sent a crew to begin work at once, and before the ice in the river stopped the ferry in the fall, they had completed a bridge which weathered the storms and floods for twenty-five years.¹⁹

¹⁹ In November 1900, the bridge was strengthened by replacement of the old piling. It was declared unsafe in 1909, and was replaced that year by a new all steel bridge. In 1911, the new bridge was pushed almost off its abutments as a result of gravity faulting. (See footnote 7.) It was pulled back in place by use of a stump puller. Mr. Morris F. Skinner, geologist at Ainsworth, states that there is a constant northward movement of slump blocks from the bluff, and that the bridge will continue to be endangered by this

In the spring of 1886, Merrit decided to enlarge his dwelling again. He hired Will Slonecker to help him, and they began work on March 1. They raised the large log room and made it two stories high. The upper story was divided into two bedrooms and a parlor, and the lower story was made into one large waiting room for guests. A porch supported by large log pillars was built across the north side of the upper story. Access to it was gained by way of an outside stairway which led from the breezeway between the two parts of the house. This second-story porch was an ideal place for one to spend a summer evening. The view alone, overlooking the river, was restful to the nerves.

The winter of 1887 was so cold that Lost Lake froze to a depth of two feet. Merrit decided to salvage some of the ice for summer use. He built an ice house by digging back into the bluff opposite the house. Then, with the aid of several neighbors, he proceeded to fill it with ice from the lake. In the process of sawing ice Will Slonecker slipped into the water, and went completely under. When he rose to the surface, he was dragged to the shore, having suffered no more than a thorough soaking in the cold water. His first words were, "I always thought that lake had a bottom, and now I know it does." He had apparently touched the bottom of "Bottomless Lake."

Though the country was now quite thickly settled, and there were no longer so many new people coming in,²⁰ the tavern still did a thriving business. Since there was no railroad in Keya Paha County, the settlers there were compelled to market their products in Ainsworth. The round trip could not be made in a day, so many of them would stop over night at Mead's. Also, the traveling salesmen who made regular trips to Norden and Springview would often stop for meals or lodging.

movement. The bridge abutments have, as recently as 1952-53, been pushed northward by this pressure. (Letter, Skinner to Robinson, February 16, 1953.)

²⁰Mrs. Eunice Mutz Heard saw the Niobrara River from Mead's hill in 1887, as her family was on its way to settle in the Keya Paha River basin to the northeast. Apparently some land was still available there. (*Nebraska History*, XVII [April-June, 1936], 91.)



Above: The Mastick Mill, south side of Plum Creek near its junction with the Niobrara, about 1906.

Below: Lost Lake, about 200 yards south of the Meadville bridge, 1909. (This lake no longer exists, having been drained as a result of faulting.)



Dell Mosely, who operated a livery barn in Ainsworth, had a profitable business hauling salesmen to Springview and back. It was not unusual for him to leave Ainsworth with a load of men about daybreak, and to drive to Mead's for breakfast. Often they would order fried chicken, and seldom did they have to wait long for it. Merrit used to say that Sade could kill a chicken, dress it, and have it in the skillet before it stopped kicking. The men usually would play cards in the big waiting room before and after a meal. As a matter of fact it was not unusual to find a card game in progress any hour of the day. Sade used to say that the cards never had a chance to get cold.²¹

One day Dell Mosely brought a stranger out for breakfast, and after finishing their meal the man went into the lounging room to pay his bill. Merrit was playing cards, and the man handed him a ten dollar bill which he pocketed with thanks. The man looked at him a minute and then asked: "What do you charge for meals here?"

Merritt didn't even bother to look up as he replied, "We don't make any special charge. Some pay us and some don't. If they do, we take what they give us and ask no questions."

"Well, I think ten dollars is quite a high price for two breakfasts and feed for one team," the man declared.

Then Merrit, who among other things was noted for his profanity, turned on him and let loose such a flow of words that the stranger walked out of the room. Merrit waited until Dell had the team hitched and was ready to go, then he went out and gave the man his change and invited him to come back again.

On another occasion Dell Mosley stopped for dinner with a load of men, among whom was a young man from New York who was making the trip for the first time. He was very important in his own estimation and anxious to impress others with a sense of his superiority. Now of all classes of people, those held in greatest contempt by Merrit were those belonging to the dude or tenderfoot class. This man was a

²¹Chaplain C. H. Frady gives a characterization of Merrit Mead, and refers to card playing at the tavern in his story published in *Nebraska History*, X. (October-December 1927), 281-293.

combination of the two. He knew nothing of the West or its people, but his manner plainly indicated that he considered them far beneath him in every respect. The other members of the party were men who stopped there regularly and who admired Merrit despite his rough exterior. While they were eating they all had a jolly time, but the dude kept his distance, desiring to take no part in the conversation, yet bestowing a haughty stare on the other members of the party. He was very careful of his manners and drank his coffee as he would have done at a city banquet. Merrit stood this as long as he could, then jumping to his feet, he pulled a revolver from his pocket and aiming it straight at the man's head, he said: "Take that cup of coffee and drink it like a man or I will blow your brains out!"

The man, white as a sheet, lifted the cup with shaking hand and drained it with a few swallows though it was so hot it must have burned all the way to his stomach. Of course he had no way of knowing that the gun was loaded with blank cartridges which Merrit always carried for his own amusement. Nor did he realize that had he thrown the cup of coffee in Merrit's face instead of drinking it, he would have won his esteem and friendship for life.

Nothing pleased Merrit more than to do something to strike terror to the heart of a tenderfoot. To have heard him at such times one would have judged him a terrible monster instead of the friend he was to anyone in need.

The annual dance at the tavern for the beginning of the New Year, 1888, was one long remembered by all who attended. The night was stormy, so the crowd was smaller than usual. Nevertheless, most of the neighbors were there, as were friends from a greater distance. As the dance was breaking up, one man took another's coat by mistake, and unconscious of his error he came out to say the usual farewell. The owner of the coat saw an opportunity for some fun. He promptly appointed someone in the crowd as sheriff and ordered the arrest of the thief. The newly appointed sheriff insisted that he could not arrest the man without a warrant, so a county attorney was appointed to issue the warrant. The morning was stormy, and no one was in a hurry to go

home, so when Merrit proposed that they stay and have a trial to determine the man's guilt, most of them consented to remain.

They proceeded to elect the required officers, and by unanimous vote Merrit was selected as judge. Lawyers were chosen, a jury selected, and witnesses subpoenaed. Then the trial began. By night the storm was so bad that no one could have gone home had he wished, so court was adjourned, the musicians took over, and the dance was on again. At midnight everybody bedded down somewhere, most of them on the floor. In the morning when breakfast was over, court re-convened, and, you may be sure, it was anything but a solemn occasion. The examining of witnesses took three days. Then came the lawyers' pleas, which were masterpieces, indeed. At last the case was given to the jury, which, after due consideration, brought in a verdict of guilty, and Judge Mead sentenced the defendant to a lifetime of hard labor in the interest of community building. There had been five days of court and a dance every night.

The morning of January 12, 1888, dawned bright and fair. The air was so balmy that one felt as if spring was almost there. Gertie was preparing to go to school when Merrit came in and said: "You are not going to school this morning. There is a great wall of cloud rising out of the northwest, and if I am not mistaken, we will have a real blizzard long before time for school to let out." His prediction came true, and fifteen minutes after he had spoken, the snowflakes were falling so fast that it was impossible to see more than a few feet away. The snow was accompanied by a terrific wind, and the next three days brought one of the worst storms in history. The Mead place was so sheltered that the storm could not strike there with the fury it did in many places, so Merrit was able to care for his stock without great difficulty. Others, in less sheltered locations, were not so fortunate.²²

²² North of the river and a few miles east of the bridge a widow, Mrs. Heineman, with two small children, was holding down a homestead. When the snow began to fall, she became concerned about her two milk cows, lest they wander away in the storm, and her children thereby be deprived of their source of milk. She started

Blanche Mead and Sam Slonecker were married in January 1889, and left for the State of Washington later in the year. With the loss of Blanche from the home, extra work fell to Sade. One of the hardest tasks was the carrying of water from the spring, which was several yards from the house. The cream and butter also had to be carried to and from the milk house, which was located at the spring. Merrit saved Sade from much of this drudgery by piping water from the spring to the house, and by moving the milk house closer and extending the pipeline to it. Just beyond the milk house the pipeline was extended to a water tank which soon became famous the country over as a watering place. It was almost impossible to drive a team by the tank without allowing them to stop and drink. The same water pipes laid by Merrit Mead carried the cold spring water down the hill for the next fifty years.

In 1890, the Battle of Wounded Knee was fought, and as the Rosebud Reservation bounded Keya Paha County on the north, it was feared by many in the Meadville area that the Indians would overrun the country. Some of the settlers left their homes, seeking places of safety elsewhere. Trains leaving for the east were loaded to capacity, while those coming from the west were almost empty. Merrit and Sade did all they could to allay the fears of their neighbors, for they felt that the Government troops would be able to handle the situation. But every few days new rumors were brought in, and then more people would leave. When the excitement was over most of them returned, but some did not, and their homesteads reverted back to the Government.

Early in January, 1891, Sam Slonecker died in Washington as the result of an infected thumb, and immediately thereafter Blanche returned to Meadville. That autumn Cora Gillette of Ainsworth taught the District 15 school, and she boarded at Mead's. Under her influence Blanche was encour-

out to find the cows, but soon realized that if she did not turn back she might not be able to reach home again. Hence, she gave up the search and returned to her children. When the storm was over, a neighbor found the cows in a canyon some distance away. They were covered with a blanket of snow and ice, and Mrs. Heineman was compelled to pour hot water over their backs to melt it.

aged to review her studies and to prepare for teaching. She taught in the local and neighboring districts until 1896 when she married Will Slonecker.²³

The spring of 1893 was the beginning of a three year period of drought commonly referred to by the pioneers as "The Hard Years in the Nineties." Scarcely any crops were grown in the whole community from 1893 through 1895 because of the lack of rainfall. Fortunately for the settlers the winters were mild and relatively free of snow, so that the livestock were able to rustle their own feed, and thereby survive the ordinarily severe seasons. The greatest dread of all during the dry summers was fire, which could spread so rapidly in the tinder dry vegetation.

On April 7, 1893, Merrit and Sade made a trip to Norden, leaving Fanny Taylor and Gertie in charge of the tavern. About noon the girls became alarmed by the symptoms of a fire that was apparently approaching from the southwest. As the day wore on, the smoke became heavier, and ashes began to fall like rain. The girls frantically packed valuables and clothing in two trunks, and by the time Merrit and Sade returned, they had carried these to the lumber wagon and were about to leave for the north side of the river.

Merrit and Sade had seen the smoke from Norden, and knowing it was traveling in the direction of their home, they had started immediately for home. But as Norden was some twenty miles away, and the roads were none too good, it seemed to them that they would never get there. Merrit used to say: "There are sixteen roads to and from Norden, but whichever one you take, you will wish before reaching your destination that you had taken some other." So, on that day, as they could see the fire across the river making fast headway, he began to say that if they had just taken another road they might have been able to keep farther ahead of the fire.

²³ Blanche had previously homesteaded eighty acres on the bluff immediately south of the Mead home. She had called her small homestead cabin "Rest Cottage." Her father had said it was appropriately named, because by the time one had climbed the bluff to reach it, he needed rest. Will Slonecker and Blanche started housekeeping in this little cabin. In 1900, they moved it to the rear of the existing Meadville store, where it remains today as a chicken house.

Soon after their arrival home Merrit left to help fight the fire, saying that he would send word if the danger was great enough to warrant abandonment of the house. The fire had not yet crossed Plum Creek, and it appeared likely that with so many fighters they could prevent it gaining any headway on the east side. All through the night the men worked and the women watched and waited. When the worst was over, the men left, a few at a time, long enough to go to Mead's for hot coffee and food. By morning the last blaze was extinguished, but desolation reigned where the fire had raged. Miles of blackened prairie remained on the upland where the fire had gotten its start, and on the west slopes of Plum Creek only naked trunks and branches stood as bleak reminders of a previously beautiful, wooded scene.

As spring progressed there was no rainfall, and the prospects for a crop were very discouraging; so Merrit decided to drain the swampy lowland between the house and the river, and to plant a garden there. This proved to be a wise move, for although upland crops were "burned up" by the drought, the Meads not only had sufficient vegetables for themselves but also enough to divide among their less fortunate neighbors.

The success of this garden venture and the continuation of the drought prompted Merrit to try to change the course of Plum Creek so that it would flow into the Niobrara above the island. The object was to make the island and the creek bed adjacent to it available for cultivation. Merrit and several of his neighbors spent a great deal of time and much hard labor on this project, but were unsuccessful in turning the course of the stream.

A source of food which the drought did not affect was the catfish in the river. Fishermen came from Ainsworth and from miles about. There was no law against seining, so it was not uncommon for them to catch fish by the tubsfull. Many times parties of from fifteen to twenty-five people would bring their fish to the tavern to be fried.

Merrit was a great lover of music. He and some of his neighbors fitted out a band wagon in which to attend Fourth of July celebrations, old soldiers' reunions, and chautauquas.

They had their own fife and drum corps. Merrit played the bass drum; Enos Moore, the fife; and George Cole, the snare drums. The Fourth of July, 1893, was celebrated at Long Pine. Fourteen people rode there in the band wagon, which was drawn by four horses bedecked with small flags. The members of the band used to meet twice a week at Mead's for practice, and on these occasions many of the neighbors would come to hear the music and to dance when the practice was over.

On Merritt's birthday, September 15 1893, he was treated to a surprise party which was attended by the whole community. In the afternoon they all marched down to the bridge, and danced right and left, six squares at a time, to the tune of the fife. That night the dancing was continued at the Mead's.

In the fall of 1899 Merrit developed an illness which plagued him until his death. His condition became gradually worse, and he passed away on October 13, 1905, at the age of 58.²⁴

Sade was now alone, but she continued to operate the tavern. She was assisted for over two years by Gertie,²⁵ but after that she became adjusted to life without Merrit, and took upon her shoulders the full burden of the work until 1912, when she rented the inn to Jerry Clark. Thereafter she lived with Gertie and her family until her death on March 23, 1929.

In 1915, Sade sold the property to Will Slonecker, her son-in-law, who, in turn, rented the inn to his son-in-law and daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Roy Hulshizer. They were the last to operate the tavern in the old quarters. The house now existing on the old Mead property was built in 1917, and the business was continued in it. The inn ceased to operate in

²⁴ The next edition of the *Ainsworth Star Journal* carried the following item under the heading "A Pioneer Gone": "Died at his home on the Niobrara River, Friday, October 13, 1905, of a complication of asthma and dropsy, Merrit I. Mead, aged 58 years and 28 days. Mr. Mead was born in Portage County, Ohio, September 15, 1842, and joined the Army May 2, 1864, to serve 100 days. He re-enlisted as a private in Co. B., 198th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, March 28, 1865, to serve one year or for the duration of the war. . . ."

²⁵ Gertie had married Zack Foster in April 1896.

1925 when the present highway was completed and the main road no longer passed its doors.²⁶

²⁶ In 1929, the top story of the old log tavern was moved to the junction of the old road and the new State Highway No. 7, on the west side of the road, opposite the existing Meadville School. It was converted into living quarters for young Bill Slonecker and his family, who operated (in connection with a tourist park) a lunch room added to the old structure. The building was destroyed by fire in 1936.