



Nebraska in the Seventies

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Article Summary: Thousands of would-be settlers found the pioneer life too difficult and gave it up. Those who remained laid the foundations for a better life for succeeding generations.

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Photographs / Images: "Grasshoppers stopping a Union Pacific train," legislation to aid Nebraskans made destitute by the ravages of grasshoppers, broadside advertising a grasshopper exterminator

NEBRASKA IN THE SEVENTIES

BY J. R. JOHNSON

JOHN Milton Bennett was a restless soul. He traveled over much of the Middle West in a covered wagon seeking his fortune. While in his twenties, accompanied by his durable wife, Susan Jane, and young daughter, Margaret, he "gee-hawed" his way west from his Indiana home.¹ It was only the beginning. Before his travels ended "John M.," as he was generally known, had made many trips and had squatted in many places. Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, Kansas, and, finally, Oklahoma felt his "magic touch." He wanted to roll on to California, but Susan Jane put on the brakes. His theme song included these lines:

A trip to California, a journey we'll go
And, we'll double our fortunes as other folks do.

Susan Jane's rejoinder was always the same:

Let's stick to our farming and suffer no loss
For the stone that goes rolling doth gather no moss.

She might just as well have acquiesced to the California dream, for she was a "rolling stone" anyway and gathered very little moss.

¹ The writer's mother and maternal grandparents.

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John M. often lamented in his later years: "I could have been rich now if I had only" But his regrets did not necessarily spring from missing out on the California venture. He had his opportunities in the Middle West but muffed them. Like many others of his generation, John M. would start out full of vinegar and high hopes, but just when he appeared to be getting his roots down he would develop "itchy feet." The grass looked greener elsewhere. And sometimes it *was* greener somewhere else, as when he pulled out of Kansas. Nature conspired against him there. Not only did he encounter drouth, but the grasshoppers descended upon his crops and administered the coup de grace. John M., in retrospect, expressed his feelings on the Kansas episode with this lyric:

Oh, the potatoes they grow small in Kansas,
Oh, the potatoes they grow small in Kansas,
Oh, the potatoes they grow small, and they dig 'em in the
fall,
And, they eat the tops and all . . . in Kansas.

John M. would retreat to the Wabash with each misadventure—but not for long. He recuperated quickly, and the covered wagon would roll again. Having utilized his and Susan Jane's homestead rights, he capitalized on those of his ever-growing family, even those of his in-laws. But, after burying Susan Jane on the "lone prairie" in the Oklahoma Panhandle, John M. called it quits.

This is not a story of the frontier trials and tribulations of John Milton Bennett, though his experiences would make interesting reading. This brief account is set down as an example of the thousands who tried their luck but couldn't "take it." When the going got rough they headed back East or elsewhere. How many backtracked we will never know, but it has been estimated that some areas in the prairie states lost two-thirds of their population during the hard times. This sketch will deal, primarily, with those who "stuck it out" through adversity, emerged stronger because of it, and laid the foundations for a better life for succeeding generations. The time is the Seventies, the place, Nebraska.

One writer, in discussing this period, makes this observation relative to the opening of the decade:

The early 1870's witnessed Nebraska's adolescent growth. From a puny little weakling it shot up toward its full development, its clothes were too small and the extra size that it had attained was so unusual that it became awkward; this is evident in every phase of its life.²

The Seventies did open on a note of optimism. Times were relatively good, and more and more homeseekers were streaming in from the East and from foreign lands. Not all, of course, were homeseekers. The inevitable speculators were on hand in abundance. But the new state was off to a good start, and prospects looked promising. The Union Pacific crossed the state, and other roads were being projected rapidly elsewhere, some ahead of population. Each settlement went all out to be on one of these roads. Land was plentiful in most parts and cheap. Homesteaders got it for nothing—in theory at least. Money was scarce, but credit was available—for a price. Letters sent back home encouraged others to come. Advertising by railroads, real estate companies, and various governmental agencies stimulated the exodus to Nebraska.³ Hopes were high among the settlers. How could folks know what lay ahead?

The first jolt came when the firm of Jay Cooke and Company of New York closed its doors, September 18, 1873, and started a chain reaction that was felt throughout the nation. Railroad construction was halted; prices of farm commodities dropped; and money became "tighter" than ever. Merchandise needed by the farmers cost as much or more than ever. The merchants were believed to be in "cahoots" with the railroads and banks. The "middleman" came in for a real verbal lacing. The enraged "sodbusters" were determined to do something about it, and the answer, they felt, was organization and legislation.

Dr. Addison E. Sheldon, a pioneer himself, described the situation in this manner:

² Sister M. Aquinata Martin, *The Catholic Church on the Nebraska Frontier, 1854-1885* (Baltimore: J. H. Furst Co., 1937), p. 131.

³ Addison E. Sheldon, *Semi-Centennial History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1904), pp. 106-107; *Nebraska Blue Book and Historical Register* (Lincoln, 1920), p. 266.

The prosperous times and high hopes which animated the people during the first five years of statehood received a rude blow in the year 1873, which manifested itself in various forms of popular discontent. The Grange organization had already some foothold in Nebraska, but it grew with great rapidity during 1873. What had been chiefly a social organization became very soon, under pressure of hard times, an economic and then a political one. The gist of the farmers' complaint was summed up in one sentence which asserted that "the farmers worked harder and more hours than the artisans, had poorer food and clothing and fewer privileges, —while the men who handled the farmers' products were better off than either farmers or mechanics and were rapidly getting rich."⁴

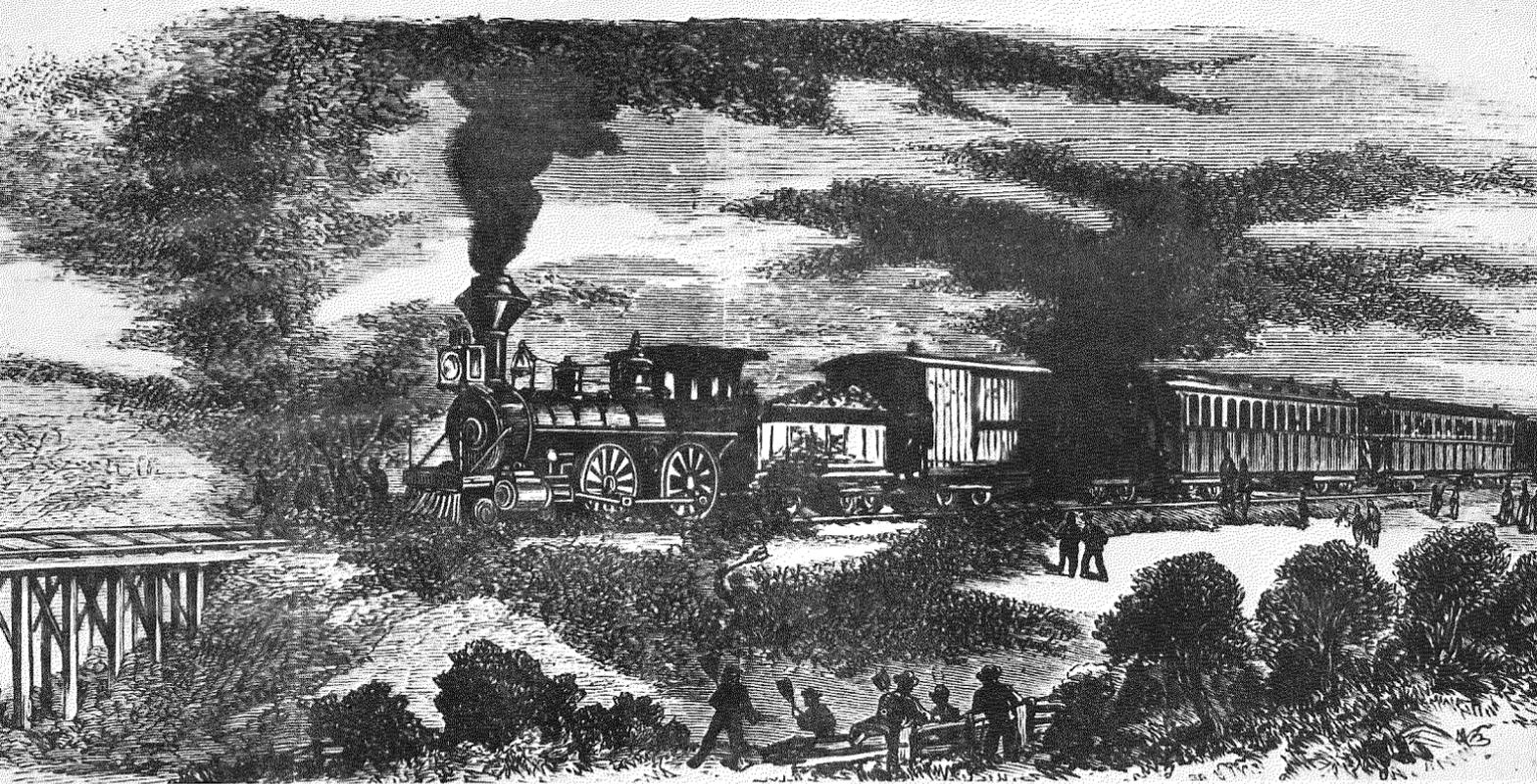
Small wonder, with falling prices, that the "sons of the soil" turned to the Patrons of Husbandry for help. The Grange meetings became political caucuses where the farmers hotly discussed their grievances, adopted resolutions pointing up their problems and took practical steps to secure favorable legislation. On August 15, 1873, a month before the panic hit, there were 265 Granges in Nebraska, and the Order was growing fast.⁵ When that catastrophe came, the movement grew faster. Then with the grasshopper invasion of 1874, the Order made still greater gains.

During the hectic Seventies the *Prairie Farmer*, official organ of the Patrons of Husbandry, published in Chicago, carried many letters from Nebraska pioneers reflecting their moods at various times. This "public pulse" revealed the heartaches, and sometimes, the joys that came their way. These letters were signed, with a few exceptions, only with the initials of the writers.

The correspondence through 1872 and most of 1873 registered few complaints. The weather was agreeable, land available at a fair price or "for free," and crops generally good. The outlook was promising. The chief complaint was over prices—prices the farmers received for what they raised, prices they had to pay for the merchandise they needed. "C. N." wrote from Seward County, December 23, 1872, that there is "no cause to be anything but content with results of our year's work. Wheat 26 bu. to

⁴ Sheldon, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-110.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.



Artist's version of "Grasshoppers stopping a Union Pacific train"

An Act

For the issuing of State Bonds, for the purpose of providing relief for the citizens of counties devastated by grasshoppers during the year 1874.

Be it enacted by the Legislature of the State of Nebraska:

Section I. That the Governor and Secretary of State be and they are hereby authorized and required to issue the Bonds of the State to the amount of Fifty Thousand Dollars, payable ten years after date, with interest at ten per cent per annum, payable semi-annually on the first day of July and January of each year. Principal and interest payable in the city of New York. Said Bonds shall be of the denomination of One Thousand Dollars each.

Section II. Sen. David Kemick, Sen. E. O. G. Ord, Pro. Alois Saunders, Hon. Church Knorr and the State Treasurer are hereby constituted a Board of Relief, to whom the Secretary of State shall deliver said Bonds as soon as the same are issued, and said Board of Relief shall dispose of said Bonds and place the proceeds thereof in the State Treasury, to be drawn out upon proper vouchers as fast as expended, and to be used in the purchase of Sued Grain for distribution among the citizens of this State made destitute by the ravages of the grasshoppers in the year 1874.

Section III. Said Board of Relief shall attend to the purchase and delivery of Sued Grain to the State Aid Societies and to the State Grange Relief Committee for

acre on 20 acres.”⁶ A farmer reported from Gage County a few days later that he had over seven hundred sheep and considered that area the “best sheep country in the west.”⁷ And on January 3, 1873, “C. R.” declared the past season a good one but that “we are still obligated to go slow whenever money is required.”⁸ “N. B. M.” in a letter from Colfax County on January 4 boasted: “Why, I have only owned or lived on my homestead about 15 months, and I wouldn’t take \$1,000 for it now.”⁹ “Epizootic prevalent all over the county,” wrote “S. D.” from Seward County and “best land selling at from \$5-\$20 per acre.”¹⁰ By “epizootic” he probably meant that demand for land was epidemic.

The winter of 1872-1873 was a mild one according to several letters. “A. D. W.” reported little snow in Adams County and said that “cattle could have lived all winter, thus far, on the short nutritious prairie grass where it was not consumed by prairie fires.”¹¹ This hazard was only too frequent according to the correspondents. “S. T. W.” from Buffalo County injects the most common complaint in his letter of February 11, 1873: “Plenty of room for enterprising emigrants, but we have to pay well for all we buy, with a few exceptions.” He then quoted market prices: “Spring wheat flour, \$3.50; meal, \$1.50 cwt.; pork, \$6 cwt.; corn, 30c; oats, 35c; potatoes, 40c; hay, wild grass, \$3-\$5 T.; milch cows, \$50-\$60.”¹² “J” from Cass County commented: “Stock generally in fine order and abundant cribs of corn and oats to feed the hundreds of horses, cattle, swine, etc.”¹³ “M. L. L.” in a letter of February 16 complained that “taxes and freight are high.”¹⁴

“R. E. H.” of Saline County summarized his feelings in one short paragraph:

⁶ *The Prairie Farmer* (Chicago), January 11, 1873.

⁷ *Ibid.* January 18, 1873.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, February 1, 1873.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, February 15, 1873.

¹² *Ibid.*, February 22, 1873.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, March 1, 1873.

Our county is fast improving. Two railroads now in the county, and *no railroad bonds to pay yet*. New settlers coming in every day and room for more. Every kind of produce cheap and plenty but wheat. And now we are getting anxious to start a Grange.¹⁵

And from Johnson County "A. A. C." gave a similar report: "The county is settling fast. Climate mild and healthy."¹⁶ "W" in Jefferson County wrote: "Plenty of railroad land on 10 years time. No homesteads." "T. R. E." on March 18 predicted that "double as much wheat will be sowed as last year" in Lancaster County. He also commented that "Farmers are all on the 'organize.'"¹⁷

Nebraska farmers, generally, were in high spirits as the spring of 1873 approached, except for the sour note of low prices. "A. D. R." reported from Juniata in Adams County that "Building is going on at a rapid rate and immigration is pouring in at a fearful rate. The hotels here are not sufficient to accommodate half that come. Plenty of government land in the county for homesteads." He remarked that though most of the immigration was via the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad, considerable traffic was also by covered wagon. "No less than twelve 'prairie schooners' have today passed here, with their families, household goods, stock, etc. wending their way to homes in this beautiful fertile land. What a comment on the accuracy of the geographers, who used to call this a part of 'the Great American Desert.'"¹⁸

The crops in 1873, though relatively good, were not up to expectations. Grasshoppers and drouth cut the yield of corn to about one-half the normal yield. In spite of this shortage the price remained low, averaging twenty-eight cents per bushel. Wheat held up well and sold for about seventy-five cents.¹⁹ Some farmers held up well and found it more profitable to feed their corn to cattle and hogs than to sell it to the elevators.²⁰ However, considering their

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, March 8, 1873.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, March 15, 1873.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, March 29, 1873.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, April 12, 19, 26, 1873.

¹⁹ *Nebraska Blue Book* (Lincoln, 1915), pp. 767-776. Taken from Reports of the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

²⁰ *The Prairie Farmer*, April 26, 1873.

labor and the high freight rates on livestock, the gain was slight. Besides, most farmers could ill afford to wait long for their money, and loans bore heavy interest.

Railroads loomed as the principal ogres to be dealt with. A Grange in Washington County passed the following resolutions "with great unanimity" on October 4, 1873:

Resolved, That we join all good Patrons in disapproving railroad monopolies. Especially do we denounce their refusal to pay taxes, watering their stock, and their extortionate and unjustly discriminating tariffs.

Resolved, That we strongly condemn ex-judge Crouse in his decision favoring the issuing of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in bonds of Washington County to the Omaha and N. W. railroad, thus nullifying or perverting the organic law of our state, insulting the common sense of our citizens and imposing upon us hitherto a tax grievous to be borne.²¹

The attitude toward the railroads was changing rapidly. Earlier, in an effort to spur on construction to satisfy their fast-growing traffic needs, the people's generosity was unbounded, with little thought of how their commitments would affect them in the future. The Federal Government was generous with land distribution to the roads, and the state likewise. Sheldon commented:

Five hundred thousand acres of land had been given to the state by the federal government for internal improvements. An act was passed offering to any railroad that should build track in Nebraska during the next five years, 20,000 acres of land for each ten miles of road built and equipped, not more than 100,000 acres to be acquired by any one road.²²

The Legislature of 1869 further stimulated construction by passing an act permitting towns, precincts, and counties to vote bonds to the amount of 10 per cent of their assessed valuation in aid of railroads and their projects.²³ Too late the people awakened to find themselves "suckers." They trusted the honesty and integrity of the railroads too far, and their own eagerness had put them behind the proverbial "eight-ball."²⁴

²¹ *Ibid.*, October 25, 1873. Reported by Grange Secretary O. Colby.

²² Sheldon, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-106.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ William Huse, *History of Dixon County Nebraska* (Norfolk, 1896), pp. 73-78. Huse writes a chapter here on "Story of a Rascally Little Railroad."

On top of this, the politicians in the legislature had organized too many counties and of course each of these had to have a courthouse, necessitating more bond issues. Retiring bonds became a bitter obligation and railroad companies, on their part, seemed to find ways of escaping the payment of heavy taxes. Hence taxes rose for the general public and increased the ever-growing financial burdens of the distressed farmers. By 1875 railroad bonds totaled \$3,098,037.50 in the state. Court House bonds reached \$260,950, bridge bonds \$166,979.50, school house bonds \$386,185, and other bonded or floating indebtedness \$530,121.41. The total bonded indebtedness added up to \$4,442,273.41.²⁵ It is quite understandable that tax collections were slow. Again Sheldon remarks:

The *Omaha Herald* of August 22, 1873, declared that for four years one-third of all the property owners in the state had refused to pay taxes. More than half the Otoe county real estate was delinquent for taxes prior to 1873. Single individuals owed from \$2,000 to \$3,000 for taxes. The county and municipal bonds which had been so lavishly voted to aid railroad and other schemes were now an intolerable burden.²⁶

While the disgruntled farmers were airing their grievances which stemmed from Nature's unkindness, the railroads' heartless operations and politicians' errors, the panic made itself felt. Aaron Around of Falls City wrote on October 25, 1873, as follows:

In the midst of an unusually active traffic in shipping grain and produce from this point, and receiving supplies of groceries and fall merchandise, came the panic in finances. The effect was felt in shipments principally. The markets for grain were depressed so that from six to ten cars daily, but one in two or three days were shipped.

The correspondent, however, added a note of optimism. He commented: "Times are looking up again now, and grain is being shipped once more as fast as it is threshed."²⁷

An abundant wheat crop in 1873 was "good medicine" for the farmers, but the sag in price was most disheartening. As the year neared its end the reports carried more

²⁵ *Nebraska Senate Journal*, 1875, p. 65.

²⁶ Sheldon, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

²⁷ *Atchison (Kansas) Daily Champion*, October 28, 1873.

undertones. "D. H. F." of Cuming County wrote on November 6 that wheat had averaged eleven bushels per acre and was selling for only fifty-eight cents. The corn crop was very light, oats "none to speak of" and potatoes had been "harvested by bugs and hoppers." Then he added: "Granges are organizing in this part of the country as everywhere else."²⁸

The story ran much the same in other areas. "X" wrote from Jefferson County on November 10 that they had had "no rain of consequence since July 1st" and that two Granges were lately organized in the county.²⁹ "S. T. W." of Buffalo County put more hope in his letter of November 22: "Money matters are a little close, but still produce commands a pretty good price. The county is improving fast, two flour mills on Wood river. Churches and schoolhouses being built. Timber belts planted out and we think it will not be long till we have a splendid county."³⁰ "J. M. B." summarized the situation in Richardson County in his letter of November 24:

Like all new farming communities, we have been badly in debt, but with the aid of our splendid wheat crop this season, we are beginning to see the dawn of a brighter day. Some of our farmers are building good, comfortable dwellings, who have roughed it through the pioneer life in Nebraska and by industry and longevity, have secured a home. We have about 30 Granges in this county in good working order. Our merchants refused to make any reduction to us, and we are now buying our goods and farming supplies in St. Joseph, Mo., and are being paid for so doing.³¹

But "industry and longevity" were not enough to save the day in most areas, though the severity of the panic was not apparent in Nebraska until early in 1874.

Letters which expressed mixed emotions continued to reach the *Prairie Farmer*. "C. R." wrote from Washington County on December 8: "Crops are middling good with exception of oats, barley and potatoes, the latter nearly a total failure. Plenty prairie hay . . . no money value. Money

²⁸ *The Prairie Farmer*, November 22, 1873.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, December 6, 1873.

³¹ *Ibid.*

scarce, health good and plenty to eat and feed.”³² “R” from Nuckolls County commented on December 5: “Patrons of Husbandry in full blast. Granges are being formed rapidly.”³³ “Wm. C. Jr.” wrote from Clay County on December 21 giving a description of the town of Edgar, which is typical of other letters describing the growing communities. Edgar, on the St. Joseph and Denver Railroad, had railroad buildings, three stores, a “large elegant” schoolhouse, blacksmith shop, livery barn and “corresponding number of good dwellings.” Edgar Grange No. 346, organized in November with twenty-seven charter members, was reported working well. “Government land is scarce and so are greenbacks,” he added.³⁴

Edward Landgraf in his master’s thesis, “An Early History of Norfolk,” makes this summary on the effects of the panic in the Middle West and particularly how it affected the Norfolk community:

The financial panic of '73 began showing its effect on the great Middlewest early in 1874. The population and production in this area had more than trebled during the past decade. With the decreased world market farm prices continued to drop. Factories in the East now demanded cash payment for the new, high-priced type of farm machinery which the farmers found indispensable. Many had mortgaged their farms to acquire these. Several Norfolk merchants built corn cribs and took corn on account at fifteen cents a bushel. Mr. A. A. Pilger carried his customers for more than a hundred thousand dollars and pleaded with machine companies not to foreclose. In appreciation of his intercession all but three claims were paid. To add to these difficulties, the railroads discriminated against the small hauler by charging high rates and granting rebates to big shippers.³⁵

³² *Ibid.*, December 20, 1873.

³³ *Ibid.*, January, 3, 1874.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Edward Albert Landgraf, “An Early History of Norfolk” (M. A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1938), pp. 28-29. Dr. Addison E. Sheldon makes this comment on the effect of the panic of 1873 on the farmer: “Hard times, called the panic of 1873, came to the whole country. Nearly all the Nebraskans were farmers. The prices of everything the farmers had to sell went down very low, so low that it would hardly pay to haul to market. As railroads were very few and far between most of the Nebraska farmers had to haul their produce a long distance, some of them fifty to a hundred miles, to reach a market at a railroad town. Wheat sold as low as forty cents a bushel, corn as low as eight cents a bushel, cattle and hogs two cents a pound. For several years the settlers burned twisted hay and corn for fuel. Some grew discouraged and moved back east, but

The year 1874 opened on a cautious note though there was a feeling that times were going to get better, and many put their faith in the Patrons of Husbandry toward achieving that end. "G. W. H." wrote from Madison County on January 7:

Times have been dull and money scarce but we are getting better on account of our great staple wheat. Farmers are beginning to see the effects of the credit system and the exorbitant price demanded for agricultural implements and are rallying to the standard of the Patrons. Last week four Granges were organized in this and an adjoining county. One here at Buffalo Creek with thirty members.³⁶

Landgraf comments that Norfolk joined the nation wide movement and organized a Grange in January 1874, and that six other groups were organized within the county. He further points out that on February 16 representatives from various Granges in Madison County met and organized a county council for the Patrons of Husbandry. After selecting officers they drew up these resolutions:

Whereas, many of these combinations are working directly against the best interests of the farmer, therefore in order to form a more perfect union, secure our rights, and protect our interests against the encroachments of such combinations, we the representatives of the subordinate Granges of the Patrons of Husbandry of Madison County, acting under the State Grange of Nebraska, do hereby form ourselves into mutual cooperation.

Resolved, that it is our privilege and true policy to buy where we can buy the cheapest, and sell where we can sell the dearest. Resolved that it is our duty to encourage and support home manufacturers.³⁷

"G. N. G." reported from Red Willow County on January 20 that there was plenty of timber along Beaver Creek

others stayed, worked harder, saved, and kept their homes." (*History and Stories of Nebraska* [Chicago and Lincoln: University Publishing Co., 1913], p. 264.) The panic, likewise, profoundly affected the growth of Omaha. An early account gives this description: "This panic unquestionably produced effects upon Omaha's growth and progress that were visible for years afterwards . . . This experience was prolonged far into 1878. During this period, improvements were limited to those erected by capitalists whose resources had become to a certain extent unproductive, and were thus employed in the hope that profits would accrue sufficient to resolve them into other than dead capital." (Alfred T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* [Chicago: Western Historical Publishing Co., 1882], p. 705.)

³⁶ *The Prairie Farmer*, January 24, 1874.

³⁷ Landgraf, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.

Valley; school houses were being built and towns springing up. Crops there had been good, and buffaloes close by furnished a good meat supply.³⁸ This section appears to have been in better shape than some others. A correspondent from Nuckolls County listed five Granges in that county. "S. T. W." gave this run-down on Buffalo County in his letter of February 21:

County is improving very fast, being settled by eastern folk of an enterprising character but we need more men of capital in the way of manufactures. Farmers are getting awake to their condition in respect to their being imposed on. Granges and Farm Clubs are being organized which indicates a better time coming.³⁹

"D. H. F." of Cuming County again commented, February 23, on that section's position: "We have the general complaint of the West, corn scarce and horses plenty. Granges are flourishing with nine in the county. They have built an elevator at West Point and one will be built at Wisner the coming season. The company at West Point is handling farm machinery and intends to handle coal and lumber."⁴⁰

Eight Granges were reported in Colfax County.⁴¹ "Patrons well organized," wrote "Subscriber" from Nemaha County.⁴² A letter from Valley County said the county was new but being settled fast and that government land was nearly all gone. However, the B. and M. Railroad had land for sale at \$2.00 to \$7.50 an acre on ten years' credit at 6 per cent.⁴³ Mrs. Mary B. Finch of Butler County seems to have been a rugged soul. A frequent contributor to the "Pulse" of the *Prairie Farmer*, she had no qualms about signing her name and she spoke her "piece" boldly. Her letter of May 30 carried these observations:

The Patrons of Husbandry are gaining strength and are showing a practical demonstration of the same, by uniting

³⁸ *The Prairie Farmer*, February 7, 1874.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, March 14, 1874.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, March 21, 1874. The State Grange had a shop at Fremont for the manufacture of harvesters, and one in Plattsmouth for cultivators according to the *Nebraska Blue Book* of 1915, p. 79.

⁴¹ *The Prairie Farmer*, March 21, 1874.

⁴² *Ibid.*, April 11, 1874.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, May 30, 1874.

their forces and buying goods and farming implements which they sell to farmers on better terms than they have ever before been able to make. The merchants and grocers wear visible smiles on their faces which they present to the farmer when he arrives at their places of business, and offer their wares at lower prices than they have heretofore done, but they can't compete with Grange prices.⁴⁴

"I. J. S." of Red Willow County made the following comment in his letter of May 3: "This county is yet new, it being less than one year since it organized and there are yet large tracts of government land subject to homestead and preemption. There is a Grange in Indianola, the county seat. . . . A county agricultural society has been formed here and a fair is to be held next fall."⁴⁵ Mrs. Finch of Butler County in her "message" of June 26 told of the fine school houses and the demand for good teachers. "Some of ye pedagogues in the East would do well to come hither," she said. "They could hold a homestead and teach at one and the same time. Could also gather health and strength from the broad prairies and bracing atmosphere of Nebraska."⁴⁶ Her suggestion was followed by a considerable number of teachers. It seemed a good way to "kill two birds with one stone" though, undoubtedly, many had their misgivings after having tried it.

A harbinger of rough days ahead came in June when a dry spell set in. "E. T. T." reported from Howard County on July 19 that there was only a light crop of wheat and oats due to the drought. They had had no rain there between June 15 and July 8, crucial days for the maturing of small grain. Then the pesky grasshoppers delivered the fatal blow. "Corn and potatoes were doing well," said this correspondent, "until recently when the grasshoppers put in an appearance and the result undoubtedly is at the present writing that there is not 10% of the corn and potatoes, also late oats, left in Howard, Greeley and Valley counties. . . . The result must be almost certain starvation for the newcomers."⁴⁷ The grasshopper attacks varied in time and intensity. A similar account of the drought came from

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, June 13, 1874.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, May 16, 1874.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, July 11, 1874.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, August 1, 1874.

Furnas County. They had received no rain for six weeks, and wheat in that and Red Willow County was estimated as making about ten bushels per acre. The corn crop was burned out entirely. "Most of the settlers will have to move out or fare very hard this fall and winter as they have used up their money in seed and provisions. They are too poor to raise a crop this year," said this writer.⁴⁸

Landgraf gives this description of the invasion of grasshoppers in Madison County:

The grasshoppers came at noon, July 4, 1874. By five o'clock not a head of wheat was left. They ate the bark off the trees after the tender leaves were gone. They took all the corn. They ate the potatoes and onions by following the stalks into the ground. The only green crops left were sorghum and cane. Even the wild grass on the unbroken prairie was taken.⁴⁹

Mrs. Finch of Butler County lost no time in mailing in her observations. She gave a vivid account of the plague there:

About noon today (July 23), we discovered what appeared to be thousands of detached portions of clouds from the northeast and going toward the southwest. As they passed, however, we found them to be grasshoppers. They made a buzzing sound as bees do when swarming, and traveled in perpendicular columns instead of horizontal lines. For hours and hours they came whirling through the heated air. Look in what direction we would, there they were to be seen, marching steadily on like myriad hosts. Only a few, comparatively speaking, stopped with us but enough to destroy the corn I very much fear, though we will hope for the best till the worst comes.⁵⁰

Other descriptions of the onslaught rolled in from various parts of the state. "W. C." wrote from Clay County on July 27:

Thursday, the 23rd, the grasshoppers came down upon us in countless millions, and in a few short hours the work and care of weeks and months were gone, a sacrifice to the disgusting pests. The naked cornstalks present a sorry sight; stripped of leaf, tassel and silk; and with the leafless young trees and devastated gardens, mutely tell of the greed of the late invaders, who departed yesterday for pastures new toward the South. As to the extent of the devastated region,

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, August 8, 1874.

⁴⁹ Landgraf, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.

⁵⁰ *The Prairie Farmer*, August 8, 1874.

we are not informed; but from what we hear the mischief extends throughout Clay, Adams, Nuckolls and perhaps Fillmore counties. Hamilton county suffered also.⁵¹

"A. C. C." of Dodge County, after describing the avalanche of grasshoppers, made this comment: "There will be great suffering unless relief comes from abroad. Homesteaders should have immediate title to their land, so that they could go where they could get something to live on. Those coming west had better wait awhile."⁵² A correspondent from Polk County reported on August 13: "Some have the 'blues'; others are courageous, and say they will stand the storm."⁵³

More than two months after the grasshoppers struck, Mrs. Finch made her appraisal of the situation:

Trade is dull, and some people are blue, and are almost giving away the land that has been given to them, thereby proving the old adage 'come easy, go easy.' In the coming years their children will not be able to say: 'Our folks were in Nebraska in the year 1874, when the grasshoppers ate the corn, and the country was destitution itself; but they stayed, and the next year the wheat and other crops were so good, and the land so cheap, that our fathers bought all the farms next to theirs of the people who were so chicken-hearted they couldn't stay, and those same men have never owned any land from that day to this.'

She noted in her letter specific examples of land disposal: "160 acres within the limits of the U. P. railroad was lately sold for \$250, and only part of the pay down. Some farms with beautiful groves, and other improvements have been sold for \$500."⁵⁴

The exodus from Nebraska picked up momentum as hard times continued to bear down on the pioneers. Thousands did not have the hardiness, or stubbornness, of Mrs. Finch. A Clay County writer reported on October 6: "Prices

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, August 15, 1874.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, August 29, 1874.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, October 17, 1874. Four days earlier, Mrs. Finch had written: "Everybody and his wife are seen to be wearing the clothes they had left, and consider themselves in luck to have those . . . We still say thanks, many thanks and ever thanks for the bread we have, knowing that tonight there may be many in our own state who will go supperless to bed, and to whom, perhaps, there will be no relief on the morrow."

of grain are low, everything we have to buy is higher than it ought to be. Money is very scarce, times hard, many settlers leaving for the East, some for the winter, some for good."⁵⁵ "S. H." of Lancaster County wrote on October 20: "We are generally hard up, as the grasshoppers cleaned out our crop . . . It is estimated that a third of the population of some counties have left the state . . . You can get no truth from the local papers, as the railroad companies and land speculators create a dishonest public opinion for fear the truth will keep out settlers."⁵⁶ And from the same county, "M. L. T." said that less than a bushel of corn per acre had been grown that season. "Two years ago," he reflected, "we burnt corn, this year we will have to burn coal. Farmers are expecting harder times this winter than any winter in the past."⁵⁷ "Money is scarce," commented "S. T. W." in a letter from Buffalo County written on the last day of 1874, "Anything to make money out of is still more scarce. In consequence of the devastation of the 'hoppers, many families through this county are rendered destitute and greatly in need of aid."⁵⁸

Aid was forthcoming, but the efforts to that end were not too well co-ordinated. Governor Furnas in his message to the Legislature in January 1875, gave this summary of action taken to date and pointed up future possibilities:

1. Nebraska Relief and Aid Society formed September 18, 1874.
 - a. Collections to January 1, 1875

(1) Cash	\$37,279.73
(2) Donations in kind	30,800.73
2. Assistance by the Regular Army.
3. Organization of a state association by the Patrons of Husbandry for aiding the needy.
4. Extension of time given homesteaders by Congress.
5. \$30,000 appropriated by Congress to buy seed.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, October 23, 1874.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, October 31, 1874.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, November 7, 1874.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, January 9, 1875.

To all whom it may Concern:

We, the undersigned, who reside in and around Syracuse, in the County of Otee, State of Nebraska, do hereby certify, that we are well acquainted with L. B. CANFIELD, the inventor of CANFIELD'S GRASSHOPPER EXTERMINATOR. That we have seen said machine in use and that it will effectually destroy the Hoppers as fully and absolutely as can reasonably be expected, and we would most respectfully recommend it to any and all persons who are liable to be troubled by these pests.

L. E. Sinsebaugh,
V. C. Utley,
G. P. West,
M. Dennis,
Jonn M. Parry,
William Waldorf,
W. W. Lowe,
N. N. Duff,
Alphonso Cook,
Isaac LeDioyt,
H. M. Hurd,
J. Lisk,
R. I. Beers,
S. Ingham,
L. A. Brandhoefer,
John E. Kehler,
W. C. Slosson,
C. L. Kehler,
L. Price,
H. G. Still,
C. W. Bray,
A. H. Johnson.

Jas. W. Eaton,
Allan McCloud,
S. C. Case,
John Thomas,
A. Howell,
H. Price,
William Brown,
P. F. Fowler,
William Wakelin,
W. C. Dudley,
A. T. Coddington,
L. F. Renne,
J. Lewis,
A. Vancleave,
M. Langly,
A. Beamun,
George Breakbill,
T. H. Ashton,
John Ornbun,
James H. Green,
Jonathan Cope.

6. Bill pending in Congress to appropriate \$100,000 more.
7. Railroads gave the State Relief Committee free transportation.⁵⁹

In spite of the varied efforts made to help distressed farmers, many complaints came in about the tardiness of the measures, as well as criticism on the costs for administration. It was felt in some quarters that certain individuals were making political capital out of the relief program.

Pearl Louise Erickson, in her master's thesis, "Destitution and Relief in Nebraska, 1874-1875," sums up the period of hard times as follows:

The State of Nebraska was in great distress during the years 1874-75. The greatest amount of destitution was found in the Republican Valley counties where the percentage of people requiring aid ranged from approximately 20 to 92%. These bad conditions were reflected in the immigration to this state during those years, and continued until about 1879. The self-sufficiency characteristic of the frontier at that time probably was a great help during this distress.

The federal and state governments assumed their social responsibility quite rapidly. The counties were unwilling to go into debt for such purpose, and therefore remained in the background upon any county appropriation measures.

The types of relief may be divided into two classes, the organized and unorganized. Under the organized may be listed the State and County Aid Societies, the Grange, and the Federal Relief organizations, which spent hundreds of thousands of dollars upon relief. The unorganized relief cannot be estimated but no doubt in the aggregate reached quite a high mark. Due to the suddenness with which the emergency arose there was some difficulty in organizing new agencies which could work effectively, immediately. The Grange here had the advantage over other Relief Societies; it was well organized and could act more promptly and efficiently. In general, there was quite a bit of inefficiency manifested in the relief work. It was also evident that a few men were attempting to strengthen their political careers at the expense of the Grange, or other Relief Societies.⁶⁰

Spring seems to possess magic that raises the hopes of the "sons of the soil." Letters coming to the *Prairie*

⁵⁹ *Nebraska Senate Journal*, 1875, pp. 55-56; Sheldon, *op. cit.*, p. 111; *Laws of Nebraska*, 1875, 1877 Sessions, p. 334.

⁶⁰ Pearl Louise Erickson, "Destitution and Relief in Nebraska, 1874-1875," (M. A. Thesis, University of Nebraska, 1937), pp. 81-82.

Farmer in the spring of 1875, though reflecting on the combination of forces that had brought hard times, usually carried a few grains of optimism. Here are a few excerpts: "Emigration coming in and business is looking up." "Shortage of seed, feed scarce . . . also teams . . . Hope for better times." "Hard winter on destitute. Aid came from the East. Shortage of seed for planting. Large emigration going through. People in good spirits generally." "Cold, long, dreary winter." "Government aid stopped . . . tough on farmers. Seed insufficient."⁶¹

Loan sharks had themselves a field day during 1875. Destitute farmers were willing to take most any steps to secure loans to carry them through another season. "P. O. A." wrote from Richardson County, December 16, explaining how the money lenders operated:

There are several Eastern capitalists that have agencies in this county, loaning money on real estate, charging from 10 to 12 per cent interest. The commission is taken out before the borrower gets it, or rather he don't get it at all, but has to give his obligation for it, and pay interest on it all the same, and give a cut-throat mortgage. And a good many farmers are borrowing money through these agencies and mortgaging their farms and unless we have extraordinarily good times for the next five years, many of their farms will go to pay off the mortgage.⁶²

Twice the acreage of 1874 was planted to corn in 1875, and eight times the yield was harvested. Yet, because the price dropped from seventy-three cents to twenty cents per bushel, the cash value of the 1875 crop was only slightly more than double that of 1874. It required very little figuring by the farmer to discover that a good corn crop did not necessarily spell prosperity. He was told that the laws of supply and demand fixed prices, but he had other ideas. The "middleman," he contended, was taking too much profit. This enemy, which appeared in various garments, was just as destructive as grasshoppers or the drought. Yet, it was more encouraging to have corn in the crib than bare stalks in the field. Wheat prices remained more stable

⁶¹ *The Prairie Farmer*, March 27, 1875; April 3, 17, 1875; May 22, 1875.

⁶² *Ibid.*, December 25, 1875.

than corn through the Seventies, but drastic drops in 1876 and 1878 marred the overall picture.⁶³

Conditions generally began to improve after 1875 though the going was rough for several years. The grasshoppers came again but not in such great numbers. Immigration picked up momentum and, by and large, these newcomers from abroad had more "staying" qualities than native Americans. Of course most of them had no alternative; it was the end of the line for them. However, they sensed opportunities where native Americans did not. They were accustomed to less, and adversity was nothing new to them. Here in America they could become landholders, a privilege denied most of them in the "Old Country." In 1870 there were 30,748 foreign born in Nebraska as against 92,245 native born. In 1880 there were 97,414 foreign born as compared to 354,988 native born. It must be remembered in this connection that many persons listed as native born settlers had foreign born parents.⁶⁴ Settlers of European origin definitely played a leading role in the making of Nebraska.

One hard year in Nebraska was a staggering blow to a settler, two almost fatal, unless he could secure credit. But interest rates continued high, and repayment of loans was difficult. Farmers and ranchers too often fell victim to their creditors. However, by 1878 it looked as though better times were definitely on the way. A letter in the *Prairie Farmer*, December 28 of that year, struck an optimistic note:

In Nebraska, the movement of crops has been very large this season, the state is improved, and farmers have made more money the past year than during any one of the three years previous. There is a prospect of increased crops next year. Quite a breadth of new ground will be cropped for the first time next year. There is an improvement apparent in the disposition of people to invest capital in farming and in business generally. A very large amount of money has this

⁶³ *Nebraska Blue Book*, 1915, pp. 767-776.

⁶⁴ *Ninth Census of the United States*, Volume on *Population*, p. 519. D. H. Wheeler, Secretary of the Nebraska Board of Agriculture, reported to the *Prairie Farmer*, April 30, 1878, that immigration to the southern part of the state was 800 per cent greater than in any previous year.

season been invested by residents as well as new-comers and non-residents in farming lands, improvements and stock.⁶⁵

The tone of a letter from "G. U. V." of Ponca in Dixon County, January 7, 1879, would indicate that "investments" came more from newcomers and nonresidents than resident farmers. "Times are hard here," he said, "and money wonderfully close. Farmers cannot pay their obligations and there is no avenue left open for them but prospects of better crops and prices. Taxes are just as high as they were five years ago."⁶⁶ The bond issues to assist railroad construction and build courthouses made tax reduction extremely difficult. The people regretted their earlier generosity, and it required little persuasion to convince the taxpayers that they had been "taken for a ride." The financial burdens of the distressed farmers seemed to multiply.

National banks and the Chicago Board of Trade were the targets of "G. B." in a letter from Beatrice, January 7, 1879. He wished the people would demand gold, silver or greenbacks for produce or labor "as they are the only real money." He thought such action would break up national banks and the Board of Trade. "Bank notes are not good," he said. "We cannot demand gold on a bank note for it does not agree to pay any."⁶⁷

Though the correspondence of 1879 and 1880 carried many sour notes, the outlook was much better than it had been for years. "S. T. W." writing from Gibbon in Buffalo County on January 9, 1879, made this report:

This part of the country is improving fast. New settlers are coming in and older ones are busily engaged in improving their farms and buildings and expecting to put in a large crop the coming season. The farmers in the county, at least many of them, went in debt heavily for machinery to save their abundant harvests the past season, and wheat commanding such low figures places them in rather an uncomfortable position. We need more machine shops and factories of various descriptions in our state. Men of capital would do well here in many ways.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ *The Prairie Farmer*, December 28, 1878.

⁶⁶ *Rapalee's Greenbacker* (Rochelle, Illinois), January 10, 1879.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *The Prairie Farmer*, January 18, 1879.

Lack of capital was the eternal cry, and the plea was not unheeded. However, not too much of it went into "machine shops and factories." A letter from Hastings, August 19, 1879, included this statement: "Our streets are crowded with teams daily and business in all branches is lively. Scores of Eastern men are here seeking homes and the sales of real estate this fall will be numerous." He reported an "immense crop of wheat, oats and barley and corn prospects wonderful."⁶⁹

Landgraf makes the following comments on the growing prosperity in the Norfolk area:

Financial conditions showed improvement in the late 1870's. During 1878, \$55,745 worth of farm machinery was sold in Norfolk. By the middle of July the implement dealers reported the sale of more than three hundred harvesters and reapers. A. P. Pilger sold in 1879 alone, one-hundred twenty self-binders, eighty-three grass mowers and twenty-seven threshing machines complete with power. Farmers in the region were quite prosperous through the early '80's due to plenty of moisture.⁷⁰

Norfolk was, perhaps, typical of the "larger" communities. Landgraf summarizes the situation there as of 1879:

In 1879 Norfolk had a population of five hundred inhabitants. The business directory included: a grist mill, the land office, five general stores, two hotels, two drug stores, two hardware stores, one photograph gallery, one shoe shop, two saloons, three merchant tailor shops, one millinery store, three blacksmith and wagon shops, one lumber yard, and three livery stables. In professions they had two attorneys, two doctors, a number of real estate men and insurance agents. The church denominations included German Lutheran, Congregational, and Methodist. The public school, not yet graded, had an average attendance of seventy-five pupils.⁷¹

The opening of a new decade found the general outlook quite promising. A new era, it was hoped, would bring a better life for the pioneers of the state. Dr. Sheldon makes this observation:

The decade of Nebraska life which began with 1880 marks the restoration of hopeful and prosperous conditions in the state. . . . The people were struggling out of the dugout and sod houses. The unfortunates who had been closed out dur-

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, August 30, 1879.

⁷⁰ Landgraf, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

ing the hard times had generally moved toward the setting sun to begin over again while the homesteads were eagerly purchased at prevailing prices by enterprising emigrants from the middle west who at once began an era of improvement.⁷²

The Seventies had, indeed, been a strenuous decade. The settlers were beset by enough problems to shake the faith of even the most stout-hearted. Low farm prices, high costs of consumer goods, transportation "bottlenecks," burdensome taxes, high interest rates, drought, the panic, and grasshoppers had all been endured. But there were other problems, too. Prairie fires, blizzards and windstorms had to be reckoned with. Fears of Indian depredations still haunted some sections.⁷³

The pioneer woman, especially, had to be ingenious and made of tough fibre to meet the hardships of the frontier. The problems attendant to "keeping house" were legion. Everyday needs like water, fuel, soap, clothing, shoes and lighting for the home often challenged her efforts. Feeding a large, frontier family under adversity called for near miracles. Preservation of food in every conceivable manner was a "must." Wild game was usually abundant but not always available at the right time. Fruits and vegetables had to be stowed away for the long winter months. The health problem was mostly the woman's responsibility, and she met it with courage, often playing the part of both doctor and nurse. Much use was made of simple homely remedies. Epidemics were frequent and the death rate high. The mother was often the teacher of her children until such time as a school could be provided.

Dreariness and loneliness were often the lot of women on the frontier. The monotony of the windswept and treeless prairies was hard to bear. With her husband away at work much of the time, the wife had to stand guard over the soddy and be ready for any emergency. Lack of contact with the outside world made life depressing.

Yet it would be in error to assume that there was no social life. The pioneers were adept at making their own

⁷² Sheldon, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

⁷³ Martin, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-142.

pleasures. "House-raisings," "house-warmings," Sunday visits with neighbors, weddings, charivaris, parties, dances, spelling bees, singing schools, literary societies and Grange meetings brought folks together in social activity. Church and Sunday School gatherings were social as well as religious in nature. Even funerals furnished an opportunity for neighbors to get together. Special occasions like Fourth of July observances, fairs, lyceums and perhaps a traveling show or circus provided outlets a bit out of the ordinary. Most families had some sort of musical instrument, more often a fiddle, to break the monotony. Simple pleasures like popping corn, pulling taffy, and playing "parlor" games brightened up many evenings. Hunting was a necessity but a most "pleasurable" pursuit for the men and boys. It was not all dreariness on the frontier.

Frontier women definitely deserve more credit for holding the line during the pioneer days than they have been accorded. They faced up to their problems and displayed a fearlessness beyond that of the menfolk. Their philosophy of acceptance of life was magnificent. Their adjustability was remarkable. Usually deeply religious, they seemed to have the necessary reserve power to cope with any situation. The frontier idealized the thrifty, frugal, hard-working housewife and her daughters, and most women tried hard to measure up to these qualities. But of course there were exceptions. Valeda Wood in her master's thesis, "Life of the Pioneer Woman on the Kansas-Nebraska Frontier," makes these observations:

To state that all pioneer women possessed this quality or that quality is absolutely ungrounded . . . There were those who were intelligent and those who were ignorant; those who were tidy, cultured and refined, and those slatternly, coarse and dirty; those who were satisfied with their lot and those who were miserably unhappy; those who met conditions with a spirit of adventure and those who were driven to the verge of insanity; those to whom the challenge of life appealed and others to whom life was dull and prosaic; those who did their utmost to build a real home and those who merely existed.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Valeda Katharine Wood, "Life of the Pioneer Woman on the Kansas-Nebraska Frontier" (M. A. Thesis, University of Nebraska, 1940), pp. 102-103.

However, Miss Wood makes it clear that pioneer women on the debit side of the ledger were a small minority. "With practically one accord," she states, "the women who lived under and survived pioneer conditions affirmed: 'When I look back on those early struggles I regard them as the happiest days of my life;' 'We were getting our start;' 'We had an opportunity to acquire good land;' 'Happy as could be even in our little dugout.'" Then she makes this characterization of the typical pioneer woman:

These women do represent a type who stood by herself. She usually put great trust in God and this faith enabled her to face so courageously and so fearlessly the vicissitudes, sacrifices and dangers. She had no thought of direction except that it was God's will to guide her footsteps into a land rich in opportunities for herself and loved ones. She had vision which foresaw opportunities that were seized. She had faith in the land and confidence in her family. She directed her children along the trail that led to the very summit of useful citizenship. In her old age she felt the security of economic independence.⁷⁵

And what about those who gave up the conquest of the prairie sod? More than likely many of them found their "gold" elsewhere. But, undoubtedly, there were a much larger number who, like John Milton Bennett, reflected in their later years: "I could have been wealthy today if I had only . . ." Nebraskans today can well be proud of the "Sodbusters" of the Seventies. These pioneers came through the fiery furnace of those uneven years and laid the foundations of a civilization that serves us so well today.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), pp. 161-190.