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Article Title: The History of Agate Springs

Full Citation: R Jay Roberts, "The History of Agate Springs," *Nebraska History* 47 (1966): 265-293

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1966AgateSprings.pdf>

Date: 3/17/2016

Article Summary: Roberts traces the story of Agate Springs from the early nineteenth century, when nomadic Sioux Indians hunted buffalo in the region, through the 1960s, when President Johnson signed legislation authorizing the establishment of Agate Fossils Beds National Monument. Two generations of the Cook family had worked to protect the fossil hills on their property in order to further knowledge of a world that had existed very long before their time.

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Cataloging Information:

Names: William H Harney, G K Warren, F V Hayden, Robert Mitchell, Spotted Tail, James A Sawyers, Edgar Beecher Bronson, E B Graham, James H Cook, Harold Cook, Kate Graham Cook, O C Marsh, Red Cloud, Erwin Barbour

Place Names: Fort William, Fort John and Fort Laramie, Wyoming; Fort Randall and Fort Pierre, South Dakota;, Red Cloud Agency, Fort Robinson, Harrison and Royville, Nebraska

Keywords: American Fur Company, the WS [ranch], the 04 [ranch] ("Agate Springs Ranch"), Agate Fossil Beds National Monument, James H Cook, Harold Cook, O C Marsh, Erwin Barbour

Photographs / Images: Captain Cook, Harold and Margaret Cook in a coach in front of the ranch house built by Captain Cook, 1892; Cook's homestead that included University Hill and Carnegie; Cook speaking sign language to Jack Red Cloud in 1916 during Indians' visit to the ranch; Lieutenant G K Warren's sketch of an 1857 camp site in the fossil hills; Cook at his Agate Springs home; studio photo of Cook

THE HISTORY OF AGATE SPRINGS

BY R. JAY ROBERTS

IN THE early years of the nineteenth century, the land from the Platte River to the Black Hills was the home of nomadic Indians, chiefly the Sioux, who followed immense herds of buffalo as their chief source of economic livelihood. It was a free and good life in those days with just enough uncertainty to make it interesting. A war party, a buffalo chase, a Sun Dance, and other ceremonial affairs were all part of a well-developed culture, albeit a rather primitive one by European standards.

French *coureur de bois* from the East followed the waterways to the West in search of furs; Spanish adventurers penetrated the region from the South; and American mountain men in the early nineteenth century were exploring every western stream for signs of beaver. Records of their journeys are mainly lacking, for they were more adventurous than literate, and their mode of life was not conducive to the transportation of writing materials.

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It seems unlikely that these men found much along the Niobrara¹ to excite their greed, for along its entire upper course not a tree shadowed its fast-flowing waters, and a swift-flowing river with no trees with which to build dams and furnish bark for food was no place for a beaver. The Niobrara rises from springs east of the mountains. There are low sloughs along the river filled with reedy plants; so muskrats were undoubtedly noted, (Harold Cook was trapping muskrats by 1900)² but these animals were not of great interest to the mountain men.

Clear, sparkling water, excellent grazing for their ponies, and level camping places made the Niobrara a favorite stop as the Indians moved from the Black Hills and back again. The mountain men transporting trade goods to the mountains to exchange for furs were viewed more as a curiosity and a source of luxuries than as a threat. Whiskey was used not only as a trade good but also as a lubricant to aid in the bargaining for pelts. Although the Indian was not opposed to adding to his collection of scalps on occasion, the few whites passing to and fro did not seem to present any particular danger to his established way of life.

Fort William, known later as Fort John, and finally as Fort Laramie, was established at the fork of the Laramie and Platte Rivers in 1834.³ Although the fort was established by men associated with the Rocky Mountain Fur Company to tap the local fur market, it was soon absorbed by the American Fur Company, whose complicated organ-

¹ Niobrara is a not too close approximation of its Omaha name, *Niubthatka*, meaning "spreading river," which is descriptive of its lower course where it widens over sandbars. Its Pawnee name, *Kits'kaskis*, means rapid or swift water, and it was in this connotation that the French called it the L'eau qui court, "the water which runs." This name is still frequently heard, and a precinct in the vicinity is designated as Running Water Precinct. Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska, The Land and the People*, The Lewis Publishing Company (Chicago, 1931), p. 12.

² Margaret Crozier Cook (Mrs. Harold Cook), Interviews, Summer, 1965.

³ David L. Hieb, *Fort Laramie*, National Park Service Historical Handbook Series No. 20, (Washington, D. C., 1954), p. 3.

ization is as hard to unravel and understand as its competition at that time was hard to meet.

The transportation of furs down the Platte and on to St. Louis was a tedious, expensive, and, to a considerable extent, dangerous journey of approximately a thousand miles. Attempts were made to use boats, but the Platte River was shallow, changeable, and unpredictable, and such attempts were generally unsuccessful. Water transportation was available at Fort Pierre, however, which was also a part of the American Fur Company Empire. Established in 1832 it lay only 323 miles from Fort Laramie; so a fur trade route was established between the two points.

On leaving Fort Laramie the trail followed down the Platte a few miles and then swung north and east, crossing the Niobrara close to the present headquarters of Agate Springs Ranch, and then continued north and east to Fort Pierre. This trail was used regularly until 1855 when Pierre Chouteau Jr. and Company, the successor of the American Fur Company in that area, sold Fort Pierre to the United States for a military post.⁴ Fort Laramie had already been acquired by the government in 1849 for a similar purpose, and other posts were acquired or built.

The Sioux by this time had become alarmed as white settlement from the East and the continuous stream of westward-moving emigrants along the Platte pushed them ever westward toward the hunting grounds of their traditional enemies, the Crow. Following the massacre of Lt. Grattan and 29 men east of Fort Laramie on August 19, 1854,⁵ there was almost constant friction and warfare between the army and the Sioux until the 1890's. Army units were strengthened at a number of posts; some new posts were proposed; and a punitive expedition was to be sent into Sioux country in the summer of 1855. By delivering a terrifying and sudden blow to the Sioux, the high com-

⁴ J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, Western Publishing and Engraving Company, (Lincoln, 1918), p. 408.

⁵ Lloyd E. McCann, "The Grattan Massacre," *Nebraska History*, March, 1956) pp. 1-26.

mand hoped to stop the Indians before they could unite and make mass attacks on the settlers moving across the plains. Certain army units were to proceed to Fort Kearny to await General William H. Harney, who was placed in command.⁶

Lt. G. K. Warren as chief topographical officer with the expedition was, as stated in his report to General Harney following the campaign, to lay out a military post at Fort Pierre and examine the river up as far as the mouth of the Cheyenne. He was then to join General Harney at Fort Kearny. It took him until July 16 to complete his work at Fort Pierre, and he was afraid that he might miss Harney's departure from Fort Kearny; so in company with a few mountain men (Harney's report to the assistant adjutant general refers to them as an escort of six men of the country) he set out on August 8 through dangerous Indian country, arriving just two days before Harney moved west.⁷ After administering a stinging defeat on a large band of Brule Sioux under Little Thunder at the Battle of Ash Hollow, the command moved on west to Fort Laramie.

On the 29th of September the expedition left Fort Laramie for Fort Pierre. Since it was thought a military route would be needed between the two posts, Lt. Warren made sketches of their route and kept a log listing distances. Crossing the Platte below the fort they struck out to the northeast across high and rolling prairies to Raw Hide Creek. Continuing easterly, they struck the L'eau qui court (Niobrara) on October 1. The map, as submitted

⁶ William H. Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West, 1803-1863*, (Yale University, 1959) p. 406.

⁷ The author had access to several records and reports of the expedition. An edited version can be found in the *South Dakota Historical Collections*, Volume XI, 1922. In the Wyoming State Library are *Executive Documents of the House of Representatives and the Senate* of the 35th, 36th, and 44th Congresses. Secured from the New York State Library were copies of the *Snowden Journal*, a *G. K. Warren Letter of January, 1858*, and *Sketches of Topography*. Additional information can be found in Lloyd McFarling, *Exploring the Northern Plains, 1804-1876*, Caxton Printers, 1955; and in Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West*.

to the War Department, places the crossing of the river just east of the 104th meridian, the approximate western boundary of the present state of Nebraska. This would place the crossing some 12 miles up the river from present day Agate.

When General Harney arrived at Fort Pierre on October 19, he did not approve of it as a permanent post for a base of operations against the Sioux; so everything portable was moved to a new fort, Fort Randall, near the mouth of the Niobrara over a hundred miles down stream.⁸

The 1850's saw considerable road building activity in the territories, including Nebraska. Connections were necessary between the various forts for faster movement of troops and for better means of supply. In 1857 Lt. G. K. Warren received orders from the Secretary of War to locate a link with the Fort Snelling-Big Sioux Road that would make connection with Sioux City on the Missouri and Fort Laramie and South Pass. He was also to examine the valley of the Loup Fork of the Platte and that of the Niobrara, and make a reconnaissance of the Black Hills about the sources of the "Big Sheyenne [sic]." Attached to his party was the noted scientist, F. V. Hayden, who had been with the 1855 expedition. Moving from Sioux City to the mouth of the Loup, the party followed up the Loup Fork to its source. They then crossed the sand hills, striking the Niobrara between the 102nd and 103rd meridians. Following along on the north side of the river, they camped on the 16th of August a few miles east of present Agate. It was while in this vicinity that Warren sketched what appears to be the bluffs south of the river, and the general outline seems to suggest the hills near the famous quarries. Continuing west on the 17th the party crossed the Niobrara somewhere just east of present day Agate, quite probably at the old crossing of the fur traders on the Fort Laramie-Fort Pierre route. Quite possibly they continued down the trail on their way to Fort Laramie.

⁸ Morton and Watkins, *op. cit.* p. 409.

On arriving at Fort Laramie the command was divided into two groups in order to accomplish their objectives in the short part of the summer that was left. One party moved down the Niobrara, making the required observations. Warren's party, including Dr. Hayden, moved north toward the Black Hills. However, they met such a large body of Sioux, who resented the intrusion into their lands, that the survey party turned southward toward the Niobrara to join the rest. The reunited party then traveled to Fort Randall by way of the Niobrara. Warren had orders to gather information of the character of the country, its adaptability to settlement and cultivation, and to develop "the geography and geology along the routes pursued, nearly all of which were previously unexplored by white men."

Based on his experience with the Sioux Expedition of 1855 and his expedition of 1857, Warren concluded that there was no route surpassing the one up the valley of the Platte. Although considerable less land travel was involved in using a Fort Randall to Fort Laramie road, the increased river transportation that would be necessary and the difficult character of the land between the two forts would make it less practicable. Variations of such a route were all inferior to the Platte route in Warren's opinion. The Secretary of War in his report to Congress concurred with Warren.

On a small map of Nebraska in Lt. Warren's report is sketched a road showing a connection from Sioux City along the Niobrara to the Platte Bridge (present Casper, Wyoming). On this same map appears a road leading from Fort Laramie in an arc to the Niobrara, striking it 12 to 15 miles east of the 104th meridian (close to present Agate). Apparently this was his recommended road from Fort Laramie to Fort Randall if such a road was to be developed.

Other activity along the Niobrara in the days preceding the settlement period included four companies of Fourth Artillery moving from Fort Laramie to Fort Ran-

dall in 1859. Quite likely they used the road just mentioned. Eugene Ware⁹ reports a speech by Spotted Tail to General Robert Mitchell in a big council along the Platte in April 1864 in which the chief complained that "surveyors . . . are going west at this very time on the river Niobrara." A member of the council confirmed the report. Spotted Tail then said that the Niobrara River went through their good country and they would resist the white man putting a road through. Unless the work stopped they were going to wipe out the expedition. By Ware's account there was considerable bluffing by both General Mitchell and Spotted Tail. The General finally promised to stop the Niobrara expedition and get "permission from the Great Father in Washington to make a new treaty" concerning the cession of the Platte.

Promoters in Sioux City, wishing to cash in on traffic to the gold fields, secured passage by Congress of a bill authorizing a road-building expedition in 1865 from Sioux City to the new gold fields in Virginia City, Nevada. The promoters argued that such a road would cut off 500 miles of travel and would be as good a route as one along the Platte. After several delays the expedition, commanded by James A. Sawyers, moved westward along the Niobrara, veering, according to Sawyers' map, toward the White River some 75 miles east of present Agate. However, Sawyers' table of distances would seem to place the point a little further west. Albert M. Holman, who accompanied the expedition, says they left the Running Water 325 miles from its mouth.¹⁰ This would be some 70 miles farther up the river than Sawyers' account and would bring the expedition close to Agate before turning off for the White River.

A second trip was made over this road in 1866, but no trains traveled the route thereafter. Sawyers was rather

⁹ Captain Eugene F. Ware, *The Indian War of 1864*, Crane and Company, 1911. pp. 160.

¹⁰ Albert M. Holman, *Pioneering in the Northwest: Niobrara-Virginia City Wagon Road*, Deitch and Larmar Company, (Sioux City, 1925) p. 14.

bitter that funds were not provided for him to make a return trip in 1865. He felt that interests along the Platte route had sabotaged the venture. A stage company, he insisted, could coin money on the Niobrara route at one-third the Platte route fare. At any rate, the proposed road became unnecessary when the Union Pacific Railroad was completed in 1869.

More military action was to be seen in the vicinity of what was to be called Agate Springs in 1874 when the Sioux expedition from Fort Laramie to the Red Cloud Agency on the new White River site made its cold journey. Some 547 cavalry left Fort Laramie on March 2, 1874 and 402 infantry the next day. Realizing the futility of keeping such a large movement of troops a secret, the "troops took the obvious route, following the well-known Fort Laramie to Fort Pierre trade trail."¹¹ Apparently the old fur trail was still in evidence if not in actual use. Later the Fort Laramie-Fort Robinson military road took a route bearing slightly farther south until reaching a point near present Agate when it joined the old trail, crossing just east of Agate.¹²

A freighting route between Fort Laramie and Fort Robinson struck more directly north from the former toward Raw Hide Creek and then veered east. It crossed the Niobrara quite close to Warren's 1855 crossing some 12 miles up the river from Agate. Troops were also at times moved over this route. Early settlers can still remember not only the lumbering freight wagons but also soldiers riding over the trail.¹³ That the trail was well located is attested to by the fact that during the winter's bad snows, the ranchers desert the graded highway and travel along the high ridges where ran the old trail.

¹¹ Roger T. Grange, Jr., *Fort Robinson: Outpost on the Plains*, reprinted from *Nebraska History*, (September, 1958) p. 198.

¹² The maps of Paul Henderson, who has made a life study of western trails, were of great value. Surveyors' notes commenting on where the old trails crossed the survey lines can be found in the Records of the County Clerk in Harrison.

¹³ Albert Adams, Interview, August, 1965.

Tradition says that a whisky ranch was located in a dug-out where the trail crossed the river.¹⁴ Such an establishment would likely have been patronized by freighters, soldiers, incoming ranchmen and homesteaders, and Indians.

In 1875 Captain W. S. Stanton surveyed a mail road from Cheyenne City to the Red Cloud Agency, but this road crossed the Niobrara several miles east of Agate, as did a stage coach and freight line developed about the same time.¹⁵

With all this exploration, movement of goods and troops, and even the setting up of establishments of one kind or another, it is not surprising that persons passing through the area saw the nature of the grasslands and became aware of the possibility of setting up ranches with headquarters on the little streams of clear-flowing water.

In the early spring of 1878, Edgar Beecher Bronson by his own account was the first man "to carry a herd of cattle into the heart of Sioux Country and there locate and permanently maintain a ranch."¹⁶ He had purchased his cattle the previous fall and had wintered them in the vicinity of Fort Laramie. In January and February of 1878 in company of two men he scouted north and east down the Niobrara, finally deciding to headquarter on Deadman's Creek, and he took up and occupied the area between the White River from its source to Fort Robinson on the north to the Niobrara about 14 miles to the south.

About the same time Dr. E. B. Graham established a cattle ranch on the upper Niobrara, his range adjoining that of Bronson's. Dr. Graham, a homeopathic physician, had had a successful practice in Three Rivers, Michigan, but nerves and ill health caused him to trade practices

¹⁴ Margaret Crozier Cook, Interviews.

¹⁵ Captain W. S. Stanton, *Annual Report*, Corps of Engineers for Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1876, Government Printing Office, Washington, 1877.

¹⁶ Edgar Beecher Bronson, *Reminiscences of a Ranchman*, (a Bison Book), University of Nebraska Press, (Lincoln, 1962) p. VIII.

with a Cheyenne doctor. On the advice of Mayor Hugh Orr of Cheyenne and Portugee Phillips, Graham selected a site on the Niobrara and purchased 5,000 head of Texas cattle from a trail herd in Ogallala. The cattle were driven to his new ranch which he called the 04. Here Graham built a log house near the river not far from the crossing of the Fort Laramie-Fort Robinson military road. Although the Grahams still lived in Cheyenne, they spent the summers on the 04 until the doctor decided to sell the ranch and try his luck in California. The purchaser was his new son-in-law, Captain James H. Cook, who had led a most interesting and varied life before deciding to settle down as a ranchman.¹⁷

Cook, a descendant of the Captain Cook who discovered the Hawaiian Islands, was born in Michigan on August 26, 1857. His mother died when he was but two. His father was a seafaring man who could hardly rear James and his brother who was two years older. Consequently, they were placed in foster homes. But the spirit of adventure was too much for young Cook; so while still a boy he and a chum ran away. Cook, after a brief stop in Kansas, reached Texas with some returning cowboys who had brought a herd of cattle up the trail to the railroad. There he secured employment on a ranch, and during the next few years he became an expert cowboy under the tutelage of able Mexican vaqueros.

Here, as in many later situations, Cook made good use of his time. Although his formal education was rather limited, it is apparent that his quick mind turned every experience into an education. Not only did he learn the art of handling cattle, but he picked up a workable knowledge of Spanish from his companions. Perhaps the Spanish thus learned was not accurate in all elements of grammar and rhetoric, but it was vivid and expressive. Capturing wild cattle for grouping into herds for the Kansas markets, breaking horses to ride, hunting and shooting, and even lending a little help to the army by showing them

¹⁷ Margaret Crozier Cook, "Mary Eliza Graham," a manuscript.



The ranchhouse was built by Captain Cook, 1892. The coach was used to take guests about the ranch. The driver is Tom Powell, an old time driver of the Yellowstone Stage. In the coach are the Captain, Harold and Margaret Cook.



To safeguard the "fossil hills," Harold Cook filed on a homestead which included University Hill to the left and Carnegie to the right. He proved up on his homestead in 1914, and this picture was probably taken not long thereafter.



Indians often came to the ranch to visit Captain James Cook. This picture, taken about 1916, shows the Captain talking sign language to Jack Red Cloud, son of the famous Chief Red Cloud.



L'eani qui Court Aug 16 at evening camp

had this all dark with a light day and you have its appearance at sunset

Lieutenant G. K. Warren made this sketch of his camp site of August 16, 1857. His log indicates that he was in the vicinity of the fossil hills. The bluffs sketched here represent those of which the fossil hills are a part.



Captain James H. Cook at his Agate Springs Ranch home.



Harold Cook, rancher and paleontologist.

through sections of the country with which he had become familiar occupied his time and energy.

In 1874, when not yet 17, Cook helped drive a herd of cattle to the railroads in Kansas. Instead of going directly back to Texas, he made a trip with some cowboys and hunters up into Wyoming and northwestern Nebraska. "I visited," he says in recalling his experiences, "Fort Laramie and the Red Cloud Agency, as well as some of the other old military posts in that part of the country." Although he does not specify the route he took in going between Fort Laramie and Fort Robinson, he might well have traversed the Fort Laramie-Fort Robinson Military Road for at least a part of its length, and so may have passed through the area that in a few years was to be his ranch.

While on this trip Captain Cook met Professor O. C. Marsh at the Red Cloud Agency. Professor Marsh was the first of a number of paleontologists that, as Cook expressed it, it was his privilege to know, and his eager mind absorbed much about the stories to be told in fossil bones imbedded in the rocks. Little did Cook realize that one day his ranch would be headquarters for scientists from all over the world digging for these scraps of knowledge from the milleniums gone by.

The next year Cook again rode into the Red Cloud Agency, and it was at this time that his life-long friendship with the great Oglala chief, Red Cloud, began. Professor Marsh was again collecting fossil bones, much to the consternation of the Indians who thought he was looking for gold. Cook was able to convince the Indians that Sissaca Pahi Huhu, Man-That-Picks-Up-Bones, was really looking for bones and not for gold; so the professor and his field parties were allowed to prospect for fossils without molestation.

The Indians themselves had some theories and stories about the origin of such bones. Cook was shown a gigantic jawbone with a molar three inches in diameter. American

Horse explained that it had belonged to a "thunder horse" that had one time saved the Sioux people from starvation by coming to earth in a thunderstorm and driving a herd of buffalo into the Sioux camp where a large number was slaughtered by the hungry Indians. This was, of course, "a long time ago."

In the fall of 1874, Cook tried his hand briefly at railroading, first as a brakeman and then as a fireman on the Missouri, Kansas & Texas Railroad. It did not appeal to him, and he terminated his employment without ever bothering to collect his wages.

Succeeding years saw Cook on the trail to the cow towns of Kansas and Nebraska. In 1876 he participated in driving what he believed was the first great herd of cattle through western Nebraska and on into Dakota when 2,500 head of Texas steers were delivered under contract to a number of Indian agencies along the Missouri. Crossing the Platte rivers east of Ogallala, the herders trailed the cattle through the sandhill country where the Sioux and Cheyenne bands were still resisting the incoming white settler.

Gold seekers and other adventurers, encouraged by the Camp Clark Bridge across the North Platte, were flocking into the Black Hills, and the Indians felt that their rights under the Treaty of 1868 promising them all of what is now South Dakota west of the Missouri were being violated. However, few Indians were seen on the northward trip, and after disposing of the cattle and dropping the guide and wagon, the cowboys with only their saddle horses and pack ponies made the return trip "flying light." As they were camped on the Niobrara one noon, they were confronted by a line of warriors, "beautifully painted and nearly naked." Again Cook's facile and inquisitive mind proved to be his salvation. He had learned the Sioux tongue and the Indian sign language, and he allayed their fears by giving an explanation of the cowboys' mission. Perhaps impressed because a white man had shown enough interest in them to learn their language and further im-

pressed by the character of the young man, the Indians allowed the cowboys to continue their journey.

"After the drive over the cattle trail in 1876," writes Cook in his *Fifty Years on the Old Frontier*, "I again went to Fort Laramie, Wyoming. From there I went northward into Montana with some hunters whom I met at the fort. . . We planned to look over the country south of the Yellowstone River and along the base of the Big Horn Mountains." They had thought of doing some trapping, but the Sioux were causing considerable trouble that summer (Custer's command had been wiped out at the Battle of the Little Big Horn on June 25 of that year) making trapping too uncertain and dangerous. "We went back to Fort Laramie," he said, "and then I went south again, traveling by the Old Santa Fe Trail." However, while they were in Montana and in northwestern Wyoming, they had "chances to be useful more than once to parties of United States troops who needed information about the country or who needed dispatches carried from one command to another in the field."¹⁸

When the first of March came along, he was ready again for the trail; so he again followed the cattle into Kansas where branch trails led to such towns as Newton, Abilene, Ellsworth, and Great Bend. "We found the cow towns ready to receive us," he said. He doesn't state whether he meant the cows or the cowboys, but his description of the towns which follows would seem to indicate that both were included. Although he again went back to Texas, he had decided that he wanted to become a hunter and trapper, but he stuck to the trail work until after the drive of 1878.

After his last drive up the trail, Cook went into Cheyenne, Wyoming with one of his trail comrades. Finding a ready market for wild game, Cook formed a partnership with a man known as "Wild Horse Charley," later taking in another partner. James Cook was an excellent shot.

¹⁸ James H. Cook, *Fifty Years on the Old Frontier*, Yale University Press, 1923 p. 105.

Newspaper accounts¹⁹ of a little later period indicate that in scheduled matches he won first or was at least among the top marksmen even when pitted against such reputed marksmen as W. F. Cody. Cook now bought himself a coveted Sharps 40-90 rifle for which he paid the extravagant sum of \$125.00. Evidence of his financial success is recorded in his statement, "During my experiences as a hunter I made and saved a little over \$10,000." This again is an indication of the character of this man. The average cowboy or hunter of that period usually was quick to gamble, drink, and lose his entire season's wages or profits in a short, riotous spree whenever he struck town. Cook refrained from such activities and thus was able to purchase a ranch when the opportunity presented itself.

Cook kept up his hunting activities from 1878 to 1882. During this time he guided a number of parties on big game hunts, including wealthy persons from the East and from England. By his own account these were very profitable to the partners. While engaged in his hunting activities, Cook met a Cheyenne physician, Dr. E. B. Graham, aforementioned, who had established a cattle ranch in northwestern Nebraska. Although the doctor continued to live in Cheyenne, each summer he drove his family to his ranch for a vacation. Cook became enamoured with the doctor's younger daughter and found numerous excuses to be in the general vicinity and to visit the Graham family.

In the fall of 1882 after guiding a big-game hunt in the Big Horn Mountains for a number of English gentlemen whom he had guided on previous hunts, Cook went south with them to New Mexico where they were setting up a ranch. Cook assisted in the purchase and management of a ranch that took as its brand the WS. It was during this time that the Apache were terrorizing the country. During the summer of 1885 the famed Geronimo led a vicious outbreak. Cook was attached to the 8th United States Cavalry as a scout, and although he never joined

¹⁹ Kate Graham Cook, (Mrs. James H. Cook), Scrapbook, through courtesy of Margaret Crozier Cook.

the armed forces, he ever afterward carried the honorary and well-earned title of Captain. The back of the outbreak was eventually broken, and the ranchers and settlers could settle down to a more peaceful life. On one of his visits to Cheyenne a local newspaper published an interview with the Captain concerning the outbreak, his activities as a scout, and his views of the Apaches in general.²⁰

Storybook experiences seemed to follow Cook wherever he went, and another such experience occurred during his days at the WS. A man by the name of Cook was prospecting in the vicinity of the ranch one day when a cowboy noted a similarity in looks to the Captain, but everyone was surprised when it was learned that the stranger was really the brother of James Cook. They had not seen each other since they had run away as boys from their separate foster homes. The reunion which took place was not to be broken for any length of time in the ensuing years, for Jack, the brother, worked on the WS until the Captain removed to western Nebraska, and here the brothers had neighboring ranch lands.²¹

It was while Cook was employed on the WS that he helped organize a stockmen's association with a system of roundups similar to that employed on the northern cattle ranges. One such roundup was the great roundup at the Camp Clark Bridge in the spring of 1882. W. E. Guthrie of Bridgeport wrote an account of it for *Nebraska History* in 1923. The big cattle outfits that controlled the panhandle region were operating highly profitable businesses. On June 1, 1881 about 300 cowboys started from the Camp Clark Bridge and covered the entire range from the Union Pacific on the south to the Niobrara on the north in one great roundup.

Not only did young Cook keep contact with the Graham family while hunting in Wyoming, but he found numerous business reasons to travel from New Mexico to Cheyenne. If the family were at the 04 on the Niobrara,

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Margaret Crozier Cook, Interviews.

he rode over to see them. Numerous items in Cheyenne newspapers mention these visits. A newspaper item in Kate Graham's scrapbook dated July, 1886 ran as follows:

"A picknicking party with Kate Graham and J. H. Cook spent the 5th of July in a romantic spot called Gearcy's canyon, not far from Chalk Bluffs. They left the city early in the forenoon in several conveyances which were gaily bedecked with the national colors. . . . Mr. J. H. Cook, who is scout for the Eighth Cavalry, acted as guide. One of the principal amusements of the day was rifle shooting, the Misses Graham and Crook making some excellent shots, while Mr. Cook showed he was a fine marksman."

Apparently Cook was as adept with Cupid's bow and arrow as he was with his rifle, for newspapers of the city were soon extravagant and flowery in their tributes to the Captain and his bride, who were married on September 28, 1886 in Cheyenne. "Very soon after the conclusion of the ceremony," one account ran, "the newly married couple were driven to the depot where they took the train for Denver. They will spend a short time at Colorado Springs and then go to their home in New Mexico (the WS ranch) where they will hereafter live."

Apparently the "hereafter" was of short duration, for a local paper before the end of the year contained the following item:

"James H. Cook, who has been manager and part owner of the WS ranch, near Alma, has retired and disposed of his entire interest in the property to H. C. Wilson, now the sole owner. Mr. Cook and his wife left last Tuesday for Oakland, California where they will make their home."

Their stay in California was also rather brief. By the summer of 1887 they were back in Cheyenne, and newspapers were reporting the birth of a son, Harold James, on July 31, 1887. The newspapers also announced the birth of a son to Kate's sister, Clara Heath, on August 1st. With the little cousins' birthdays so close together one paper suggested branding or ear-marking them to tell them apart.

Cook by this time had purchased his father-in-law's interests in the ranch on the Niobrara. Like other ranch-

ers of the period, Graham had selected a ranch site where there was good grass and an ample supply of water; in this case, the cool, pure, spring-fed waters of the Niobrara. The acquisition of water holes, springs, and other natural sources of supply was all-important, for as yet no one thought of supplying stock from wells or by impounding large bodies of water. Thus a man who had possession of a water site controlled the land for six or seven miles around. The bluffs along the Niobrara furnished another requisite for an ideal ranch, protection for the cattle from the blizzards that all too often swept the high plains.

After choosing his water monopoly, the ranchman took possession of it and proceeded to erect a headquarters camp. This Dr. Graham had done by building a log cabin not far from the river. Since the land surveys were not made until 1881, Graham, like many another rancher or settler, merely "squatted," expecting to homestead or buy the land at the minimum price when it was surveyed. It is interesting to note that although Graham gave possession of the quarter section containing the ranch house in 1887, his patent on a homestead (Certificate #24, Application #4870) was not granted until October of 1890.²² Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the doctor spent some time at the ranch after selling it to Cook—so that he could get in the requisite residence to prove up on the homestead.

Upon the purchase of the 04, Cook changed the name to the Agate Springs Ranch for the outcroppings of layers of beautiful agates on the bluffs along the river. In September of 1887 the Captain brought his young wife, his infant son Harold, and his wife's mother, Mary Eliza Graham, to the ranch. Kate's mother was to spend a goodly portion of the remainder of her life at the ranch.

Ranch life was lonely, even though from the very first the Cooks did considerable entertaining. The women particularly felt the isolation, for they seldom left the ranch,

²² Records, Office of the County Clerk, Sioux County, Harrison, Nebraska.

and the passers by, other than the Indians, seldom included women.

According to Captain Cook's own personal narrative²³ there was no postoffice in the Niobrara area in the winter of 1887-1888. In the days that Graham owned the ranch, the mail came to Fort Robinson, and Kate and her sister rode over there periodically to pick it up. By the winter of 1887-1888 the Fremont, Elkhorn, and Missouri Valley Railroad had extended the rails to the Wyoming line, and Harrison had been established. During that winter, the Captain and his father-in-law, Dr. Graham, who was staying at the ranch, decided to make a trip to Harrison, 22 miles north. The weather had been most inclement for some time, there had been no mail, and supplies were running low. Although the thermometer registered 16 degrees below zero when they started, it fell steadily as they drove north carefully keeping to the higher ridges that were free of drifts. The horses broke away from the sleigh during a stop for Cook and Graham to try to restore circulation in their hands and feet. Cook followed the path of the horses until they came to the railroad a couple of miles east of Harrison, caught them, rode one of them into town, and hired someone to go back after the sleigh and the doctor who was almost frozen. After an uncomfortable night in the hotel in a room that had been fouled by the drunken previous occupant, they journeyed home, where they found the women folks much worried about their long absence in such bad weather. Here again was one of the ordeals of frontier women—the dread, anxiety, and loneliness during such absences of their menfolk.

Apparently there was no postal service in the Niobrara Valley until the establishment of a postoffice in March of 1890 at Royville, several miles to the southeast of Agate Springs Ranch. Characteristic of many small rural postoffices, the mail was sorted and distributed in the ranch house that served as the postoffice. Royville was

²³ James H. Cook, "Anecdote," unpublished manuscript in the Captain's own handwriting; courtesy of Margaret Crozier Cook.

established on the homestead of John Green and was named in honor of his son. Mrs. Green was postmaster until 1894 when Mrs. Graham received the appointment.²⁴ Mail was brought over from Marsland on the Burlington Railroad which had been extended from Alliance to Cambria, Wyoming in late 1889. Mrs. Graham then sorted the mail and returned to Agate Springs bringing the ranch mail with her. Very likely she also brought mail for other folks along the river. In 1899 the name of the postoffice was changed to Agate and the location changed to Agate Springs Ranch.

Because of the confusion attendant to sorting and delivering the mail, a small building was erected near the ranch house. This building, which served for a number of years as the postoffice, still stands. Mrs. Graham was succeeded as postmaster in 1902 by John F. Cook, the Captain's brother, but she again became the postmaster in 1906, holding it until 1909. In that year, John again became the postmaster, holding the position until 1942. Old age and ill health brought about his retirement, and for a short time Mrs. Mary Helen Anderson, the wife of a ranch employee, served. In 1942 Mrs. Margaret Cook became the postmaster, a position she still holds. During the passing years a little larger postoffice was built nearer the road, and for a time a small stock of essentials, including gasoline, was available to the ranchers.

From the very instant that Cook took over the ranch he began to develop it. Accounts in the newspapers (Kate's scrapbook) tell of his purchase of stock for the ranch. He contemplated turning the place into a horse ranch. In August of 1887 he purchased 40 head of good mares as a nucleus of a breeding herd. He soon acquired some fine trotting stock, and at the Crawford District Fair in September of 1889 his horse Gopher won first place in the race of three-year-old trotters. His Hambletonian stallion, Mendonian, was valued at over \$5,000. Apparently horses

²⁴ Information on the postoffice is available in the National Archives and Records Service and the Post Office Department, Washington, D. C. Margaret Crozier Cook was also a source of information.

did not pay off as well as he had hoped, for he soon ceased to concentrate on them and added polled cattle to the enterprise. A newspaper ad of these early years includes a silhouette of a horse and bull, each with a C brand on the left jaw. The caption reads:

J. H. Cook, Agate Springs Ranch, Breeder of Roadsters, draft and saddle horses; also red and black Polled cattle. Range on the Running Water. Postoffice, Harrison, Nebraska.

Many of the ranchers of the high plains went broke during the drought and blizzard years of the 1880's. Bronson had seen the handwriting on the wall and sold his ranch in 1882. He felt that the coming in of the homesteaders, bringing about the end of the open range, would make the operation of a ranch unprofitable. Cook, who bought his ranch five years later, was to prove that ranching could be adapted to new conditions. By 1888 an article about the Agate Springs Ranch, found in Kate's scrapbook, spoke of the excellent situation of the ranch since it had the advantage of an unlimited supply of both hay land and pasture, pure running water that never freezes, and the natural shelter of the hills that surround it. Also noted were store rooms for buggies, a large barn with a hay loft, and sheds for stock. Near the barn the largest of several springs on the ranch (the volume of the Niobrara doubles as it passes through the ranch) had its waters carried through a trough to the corral area and was used for watering stock. The stock corrals with their runways and chutes were described in detail, and the writer concludes that the plan, original with Captain Cook, approached perfection for its purpose.

Although the Running Water was devoid of trees when the Cooks moved there, he was soon to purchase willow trees from a Canadian firm, and he also made long trips to the Platte to secure cottonwood seedlings to plant for shade. Much of this had been done by the summer of 1888 as the above cited article speaks of several thousand fruit and forest trees that had been planted and were doing well. The Captain often spoke of his "bucket trees," for

he was so determined to have shade that he spent many weary hours carrying water to them until irrigation ditches from the Niobrara could be developed.

A further improvement was made in 1892 when the proprietor built a commodious ranch house to replace the old one which was moved and converted into housing for the ranch hands. Kate's scrapbook contains a clipping with a picture of the new house, which is still the ranch home of today. The Cooks selected their rugs, curtains, glassware, silver, and other furnishings while on a visit to the World's Fair in Chicago. These were shipped by freight to Marsland and hauled to the ranch.

Included among the many visitors at the ranch in these early years was Dr. R. E. Field, one of the ministers who officiated at the wedding of James and Kate. In a letter dated June 25, 1889 he tells of his visit to Agate Springs Ranch.

Where three years ago the country was not taken up for 100 miles, now eastward every quarter section is taken, and the granger is building his cabin or sod house, and plowing the ground, trusting to nature to provide the needed moisture. Indeed the same development is seen westward.

Field describes the river, the ranching activities, and the fine cattle and horses.

Twenty-six hundred acres with Cook's pastures, on either side of the stream, secure him against those losses, incident to the old method (open range). Commanding four miles of direct course of the stream, gives him practically unlimited range for stock, always under the eye of the herder.

Cook, like other ranchers of the period, bought surrounding land as the homesteaders found out that 160 acres was not adequate land on which to make a living in the high plains country. Other land he purchased from the government under the various land laws of the United States. But no matter how busy James Cook might be with his ranching activities, he always found time to include other interests and pursuits.

While still courting Kate Graham on her father's ranch, young Cook and his sweetheart on one of their rides stopped to examine two hills some miles from the ranch house, and Cook's alert mind became aware that the bones they found were not the remains of some Indian encampment but were fossil bones of animals that had lived long, long ago. One will remember that he had made the acquaintance of one of the leading paleontologists of that time, Dr. O. C. Marsh, about a decade earlier.

Evidence of ancient life in the Badlands to the northeast of Agate and in the White and Niobrara Valleys had been noted long before. Included in Warren's report to the Congress on his 1855-57 expeditions is an extended statement by Dr. F. V. Hayden who accompanied him. A drawing is shown of a vertical section of the White and Niobrara Rivers. Then follows a long list of mineral and geological specimens, animals, birds, fishes, reptiles, and botany items. He notes that the White and Niobrara Rivers contain no fossil plants, but that the extinct fauna of the Niobrara is especially rich in remains of ruminating and equine animals.

Among the former are several peculiar genera of which two are closely allied to *Oreodon* and *Leptaucenia*, of the Miocene deposits. . . . ; one is allied to the musk-deer and another closely approaches the camel. Besides the remains of a true species of *Equus*, the collection contains . . . several peculiar genera of the equine family. There are also remains of several species of canine and feline animals (and) of a small species of beaver.²⁵

Dr. Field, whose first letter was previously cited, wrote another letter in which he describes the ancient flora and fauna as he understood it. He thought the Devil's Corkscrews, or *Daimonelices*, were vegetable and that they were the roots of trees. He was partially right, for scientists today generally believe that they are the casts of burrows of a small beaver-like animal and that they are

²⁵ Lieut. G. K. Warren, *Preliminary Report of Explorations in Nebraska and Dakota in the years 1855-'56-'57*. Engineer Department, United States Army, (Washington, D. C., 1875) p. 77.

the fossilized remains of vegetable tissue and earth materials.

In 1891 Professor Erwin Barbour of the University of Nebraska stopped at Agate while looking for bones. Since he had no funds, there was no digging at that time. Considerable collecting was done in 1904 by Dr. O. A. Peterson who was collecting for the Carnegie Institute at Pittsburgh. Captain Cook's son, Harold, assisted. In 1905 Professor Barbour opened the northern of the two hills, which he called University Hill; the other he gave the name of Carnegie Hill. Many other universities and institutes were to collect from these and nearby sites, and many of the field parties made their headquarters at Agate Springs Ranch. It is no wonder that Harold became intensely interested in paleontology. In 1906-1908 he studied under Professor Barbour at the University of Nebraska. In 1909 and 1910 he studied at Columbia University Post-Graduate School and did laboratory research at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and became one of the leading authorities on paleontology.

In order to guarantee the safety of the deposits at the quarries from wasteful and ignorant exploitation, Harold filed on the land containing the quarries, and in 1914 secured title to 640 acres, for the Kinkaid law permitting homesteads of 640 acres had become operative a decade before. Although Harold later relinquished ownership of the surface rights, he never gave up his rights to the fossil quarries and access to them, and these rights were willed to his widow.²⁶

In 1910 Harold married Eleanor Barbour, the daughter of Professor Barbour, and to this union were born four daughters: Margaret, Dorothy, Winifred, and Eleanor. After proving up on his homestead, Harold moved to the ranchhouse at Agate Springs to help his father manage the ranch. Tragedy had struck in the meantime, for his mother, Kate Graham Cook, had been afflicted with an in-

²⁶ Records, Office of the County Judge, Sioux County, Harrison, Nebraska.

curable malady necessitating her confinement to a sanitarium for the rest of her life. Tragedy struck a second time when Harold's brother, his junior by nearly 12 years, died during the flu epidemic in 1919 while attending the University of Nebraska.

Schools were few and far between in the ranch country of those days; so Harold's young daughters were taught by their mother.²⁷ The dining room table at the ranch house became the school room, and Mrs. Cook, herself a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Nebraska, gave the girls a thoroughly solid educational foundation. As there were usually no other children to play with, the girls became self-sufficient. All were omnivorous readers, and the ranchhouse had a much better library than was usually the case for such establishments. Each girl had her own horse or pony; so no part of the ranch was unknown to them. Dr. Barbour was a frequent visitor at the ranch, spending a number of seasons with his work at University Hill, and during one of these summers he built a diminutive log cabin near the ranch house, the Kiddies Cabin. Among non-relative geologists, paleontologists, and other scientists who visited the ranch during the youth of the girls, Albert Thomson was the most enjoyed. Perhaps many of the others were too interested in their absorbing task to be bothered with four little girls. Interestingly enough, two of the girls married geologists.

Medical services in the new ranch country were always inadequate and at times non-existent. Mrs. S. C. D. Bassett, a Baptist Home Missionary who lived in Harrison, frequently stayed at the ranch. A letter written by Mrs. Bassett was printed in *Nebraska History* for July-September, 1921. In it she tells of a rancher finding a young mother in pitiful condition. A daughter had been born recently, but the woman's breasts became infected, and the baby died of starvation because no milk could be found for it. There being no doctor in Harrison at the time, the

²⁷ Mrs. George Hoffman (nee Margaret Cook), Interview, Summer, 1965.

mother's condition had become worse. The sympathetic rancher said that he had a brother who was a doctor and that he would send the doctor to her. This he did. The doctor was none other than the rancher, Dr. E. B. Graham. The woman was certain that the doctor saved her life. Mrs. Bassett, who recounts this story, was a kindly woman, and she took care of everybody whose need she discovered. The same was true of Mrs. Graham, for she delivered babies and nursed the sick and distressed wherever they were found.

Medical attention was still somewhat uncertain in the years preceding World War I. Mrs. Harold Cook would go to her parents in Lincoln well in advance of the arrival of a new baby. Here she stayed in proximity to doctors and hospitals until the baby arrived. After the baby was old enough to travel, she went back to the ranch. Besides insuring a greater degree of safety for the mother and baby, the arrangement gave Dr. and Mrs. Barbour an opportunity for better acquaintance with their granddaughters.

After Harold and Eleanor were divorced in the late 1920's, she became an instructor at the college at Chadron, and all of the girls graduated from high school in Chadron. All the girls attended the University of Nebraska and while in Lincoln stayed with their grandparents, the Barbours.

Harold was associated with his father's ranch activities until death claimed the latter in 1942 and Harold fell heir to the property and traditions. The Captain had been reluctant to have Harold go to Columbia for study for fear he would not return to the ranch, and he had refused to finance the venture. Harold, however, was not to be denied the excellent opportunity to study with Dr. O. A. Peterson. He had saved up some money from trapping muskrats, and by diligence and extra work while there was able to finance his study at Columbia. For part of his graduate work he identified the Snake Creek Collection, a truly colossal task for one so young and inexperienced.

Harold held many positions following his work at Columbia, many of them on a temporary or honorary basis. Curator of Paleontology at the Colorado Museum of Natural History in Denver, special lecturer at Chadron State College and Colorado Western State College, and leader of expeditions to open archeological sites, kept him fully occupied.

Harold was connected with the investigation of several now classic sites: Folsom, New Mexico where for the first time points of early man were recorded in association with fossil bones; and the Yuma sites in Colorado. He also did preliminary work on the now famous Eden Valley site in southwestern Wyoming in association with the Philadelphia Academy of Science. In spite of these numerous activities, Harold was primarily a rancher and although he frequently acted in the capacity of a consultant in oil geology, he gradually gave up most of his other jobs, continuing however his memberships in a large number of scientific societies.

Harold married a second time in 1930 to Margaret Crozier, a talented and accomplished musician, an educator, and a naturalist. The Captain had opened his ranch home to all sorts of persons who were working, studying, or visiting in the area, and Harold and his wife continued the practice.

From the very first, Indians often stopped at the ranch when on little pilgrimages from the reservation or when they wanted advice or counsel on some of the many problems that beset them on the reservation. Tipis set up under the shade of the trees were a common sight at Agate. Shortly after James took over the ranch on the Niobrara, the Ghost Shirt Dance affair and the Wounded Knee Battle occurred. The Indians had always considered Cook as their friend, and after considerable disappointment and disillusionment with the agents, many of whom had no interest in the Indians save as a means of lining their own pockets, asked if he would become the Indian agent at Pine Ridge. The Indians sent a petition to Washington, and a

number of prominent people added their request that Cook be made the agent at the reservation. Although the Captain felt that it would mean a considerable financial sacrifice, his sense of responsibility and duty caused him to assent, if the job were offered to him. However, politics being what they are, he did not receive the appointment, much to the disappointment of the Indians.

Captain Cook was the recipient of many tokens of the Indians' affection for him, and the ranch house still contains much to remind one of these early years. Many of the gifts, however, have been placed in vaults for safe-keeping until such time as a suitable display can be developed. The collection contains hundreds of items. Practically every item has an historical or sentimental value—relics of their old-time life. Some of these articles date back to a time, as Captain Cook expressed it, "when a man with a white skin was as scarce in the Sioux country as a white beaver." One valued memento is a cow hide on which the Indian version of the Custer fight is painted in pictographic language. This was done by two warriors who had participated in the fight 33 years earlier. They spent a goodly portion of one summer working on it while staying at the Agate Springs Ranch. Many articles are decorated with materials used by the Indians long before the white man brought in trade beads—porcupine quills, elk's teeth, bones of small birds, small stones, and dried berries.

Chief Red Cloud came to the ranch many times. Not many months before his death, he expressed a desire to see his old friend again, and his son brought him to the ranch. A picture at the ranch house shows him on this last trip before the great chief took his long last journey to the Happy Hunting Grounds. The great chief's gift of his ceremonial jacket to the Captain is testimony of his affection and esteem.

Neither the Captain nor his son Harold ever tried to make money out of the fossil quarries. They were quite content that they could have a part in furthering the knowledge of the world that existed so long ago. Tons of

bones have been taken from the hills to be set up in museums all over the world. Harold spent much of his time showing school and other educational groups the quarries and explaining their significance. Their interest and appreciation were compensation enough for him. His widow is carrying on the tradition and attempts to comply with the numerous requests that she conduct groups to the quarries and give talks on the story that they tell.

Harold had long dreamed of turning the area into a National Monument, and his father before him had considered ways that the fossil hills might be protected for the benefit of future generations. Harold died rather suddenly in 1962, and Mrs. Cook along with various other persons formed an association, the Agate Fossils Beds National Monument Association, to promote the project. Working through Nebraska's Senators and Representatives, the association succeeded in getting bills introduced into both the House and the Senate to set aside the area as a National Monument, and on June 5, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed legislation authorizing the establishment of Agate Fossil Beds National Monument.²⁸

A seasonal park ranger was stationed at Agate during the summer of 1965 to assist visitors, and a temporary visitor center was set up in the summer of 1966 with a few exhibits and a short slide program. However, there is little to see at the fossil hills. Some digging was done at Carnegie Hill during the summer of 1966 by a paleontologist and archaeological team to determine the extent of the deposits preparatory to planning their development. Further development, however, awaits the purchase of certain lands and surface rights from the owners. Decision has been made as to the location of headquarters, picnic areas, and some of the other facilities. Further decisions will be made regarding the development of the quarries so that visitors can view the exposed bones in the position in which they were deposited so many years ago, thus serving

²⁸ File of Newspaper Clippings concerning Agate, Scotts Bluff National Monument.

as an open book on paleontology. General supervision of the development of the area is in charge of the superintendent at Scotts Bluff National Monument, and a management assistant has been added to his staff to expedite the work.

Although the primary purpose of the Monument is to tell the story of the rocks, the scenery itself is beautiful along the Niobrara, and one would have little trouble imagining an Indian encampment close to the river, a pack train of fur-laden animals with scouts ranging far out on all sides hurrying a fortune in beaver hides to water transportation at Fort Pierre, a government survey party picking its way carefully along with its instruments and notebooks, or a company of cavalry with rattling sabers splashing through the ford on its mission to the Red Cloud Agency. Nor would it be too difficult in fancy to see a handsome young man and a beautiful girl examining together some strange bones sticking out of a bluff overlooking the river. Much still remains unchanged. The Running Water still hurries along as its clear sparkling waters seek the easiest path to the sea; the coyote may still be seen and heard vocally pointing his nose to the moon from some hilltop; antelope quietly graze or bound swiftly away flashing their white rumps; and the virgin prairie is still the setting for myriads of colorful flowers and the nests and homes of birds and animals. With the advent of the National Park Service all this will be retained and preserved for generations still unborn to see, enjoy, and ponder.

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills," cried the Psalmist. And here among the quiet hills along the Running Water is a parable of the Creator's infinite patience in fashioning a universe.