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Article Summary: Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, efforts were made to encourage English farmers and farm laborers to settle in Nebraska Territory. The land-grant railroads persuaded many to come, but life on the plains turned out to be more rigorous than some of them had anticipated.

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Photographs / Images: Burlington Emigrant House, Lincoln; Land Office, Columbus, 1874

THE ENGLISH IN NEBRASKA, 1857-1880

BY OSCAR O. WINTHER

WHEN in 1872 land agent Edward Wilson dubbed Nebraska "The English State of the Union"¹ he did so for a reason. Counted among the advance-guard settlers who during the late 1850's crossed the Missouri River and made their homes between the Platte and the Little Nemaha was a substantial number of English birth. And even at this early date special efforts were being made to enlarge their number. Declared an 1857 guidebook circulated in England, Nebraska could be reached from New York City in but six days' time: to Albany by the Hudson River Railroad or by steamboat; thence over the facilities of four different railroads via Canada to Detroit, Chicago, and Davenport; and finally 275 miles by stagecoach to Omaha. But why hurry? This guide recommended a more central, more leisurely, and more comfortable, albeit twelve-day journey from port of disembarkation to the alluvial riches of Nebraska.

¹ *The American Settler*, I (Jan. 1872), 5. (Note: Not until Feb. 1872 did this publication indicate days of the month of publication.)

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In any event, there need be no hesitancy about settling in Nebraska Territory where the immigrant, English or otherwise, would find, in contrast to turbulent Kansas, peace and tranquility, a stable government with a permanent capital at Omaha, several counties surveyed and organized, generous claim and preemption laws, and "large rewards to his honest labor."² By 1857 Nebraska Territory was ready and anxious to receive the expected deluge of settlers from home and from abroad. "We shall have a railroad within a few years, without doubt," reads a handbook for that year. ". . . We have some capital and a good deal of enterprise; particularly at Nebraska City."³

Given to optimistic prophecy though they were, no promoters in 1857 could have predicted that within a quarter-century Nebraska was to share the embroilments of a civil war, endure severe Indian depredations, achieve statehood within a decade, produce the notorious "Wild Bill" Hickok, solve its capital location problem, reap an aggregate 1,384 miles of railroads that included not one but two major land grants, and attain (by 1880) a population of 452,402.⁴ A small but significant, and in a sense unique, segment of this 1880 population, 8,207 in number, were of English birth.

How and what the English learned about Nebraska, when, why, and how they came there, how they reacted to the Cornhusker State, how they fared, and what they

² James W. Woolworth, *Nebraska in 1857* (Omaha City, 1857), 7-8, 19, 39-41. The experiences of a traveler en route from Buffalo, New York to Omaha are also vividly described by the later publisher of the famed Dime Novels: *To Nebraska in '57: A Diary of Erastus F. Beadle* (New York, 1923), 3-23.

³ Nathan H. Parker, *The Kansas and Nebraska Handbook for 1857-8* (Boston, 1857), 116, 177.

⁴ For general coverage of events see James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1955); for antiquarian data contemporary with events discussed, see Harrison Johnson, *Johnson's History of Nebraska* (Omaha, 1880). Population figures are obtainable in *Statistics of Population of the United States at the Tenth Census . . . 1880* (Washington, D. C., 1883), I, 494. There were in addition 624 Welshmen in Nebraska in 1880. The censuses for each of the two preceding decades combined the figures for the English and Welsh.

contributed during this pioneer period is of special concern here.

If before the mid-1850's the word "Nebraska" meant anything to the English public, it would have been associated with the term "Great American Desert," with Indian hostilities, and with "jumping-off" places for Oregon. The English Emigration Board did not, for example, suggest Nebraska as one of its dumping grounds for paupers then cluttering the English parishes (although other parts of the United States were candidates), nor did the English press—not even the informative and erudite London *Times*—appear to be fully aware of the existence of Nebraska Territory. No Nebraska immigrant board or railroad promotional agency was then actively promoting Nebraska land sales abroad. But in spite of this quiescence it is amazing to discover that 27 per cent of this 28,826 population of Nebraska Territory in 1860 was foreign in origin and that in 1882, 23 per cent of this foreign-born population was British (mainly English).⁵

The first concerted effort at inducing Englishmen to settle in Nebraska appears to be associated with the name of the Reverend Richard Wake, an English Methodist pastor in Illinois. In any event, Wake related in his memoirs that as early as the mid-1850's he wrote a series of promotional letters that were published in the London *Christian World*. He had called particular attention to settlement opportunities in the Middle West, including Nebraska. In particular, Wake encouraged hard-pressed English farmers, and by implication agricultural laborers as well, to emigrate. He urged them to organize as companies or groups, and to establish colonies. Then in 1866 Wake actually went to England where he directed the migration of 115 men, women, and children to Otoe County, Nebraska where they established a settlement known as Palmyra.

⁵ The native population numbered 22,475 and the aggregate foreign was 6,351. See *Population of the United States in 1860 . . . Eighth Census* (Washington, 1864), iv, 560.

The group had made the crossing from Liverpool to New York aboard a single steamer and had used public conveyances as far west as Nebraska City. There they acquired wagons, horses, and supplies and proceeded overland to their settlement site. Reenforcements came later.⁶

Even though Palmyra was probably the first English colony in Nebraska, the pattern of colonization associated with it did not establish a model for subsequent English settlement in this state. While references are made to additional English colonies established later in Cass, Adams, Clay, and Fillmore counties, the English—unlike Germans, Scandinavians, and some other ethnic groups within this state—did not tend to form closely-knit communities. Examination of the census schedules for Nebraska during the period under review reveals no marked clustering of English nationals within given counties.

A clearer picture of the English immigrant in Nebraska was revealed during the decade of the 1870's. The year 1869 marks an important change in the general immigration picture, a change that may be largely attributed to the machinations of railroad companies. Within a brief period of one month there transpired the completion of the Union Pacific-Central Pacific and the formal presidential approval of the incorporation of the Burlington and Missouri River Rail Road Company in Nebraska. On the following July 1 ground-breaking ceremonies at Plattsmouth ushered in Burlington and Missouri construction operations that assured Nebraska of not one but two major land-grant railroads. These two lines, that is the Union Pacific and the Burlington and Missouri, managed to acquire and, before the close of the century, dispose of more than seven and a half million acres of federal lands and, in conjunction

⁶ Richard Wake, "English Settlement in Palmyra," *Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society* (Lincoln, 1911), xvi, 224-26. Newspaper reference concerning this colony appeared in the *Nebraska City News*, March 22, 1867, and is quoted in Addison E. Sheldon, *Land Systems and Land Policies in Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1936), 83.

with other lines, construct 5,685 miles of track within the state.⁷

Late in 1869 both of these major land-grant railroads hastened to form land companies which in close cooperation with the Nebraska State Board of Emigration aimed at promoting the disposal of their respective lands.⁸ It would, however, appear that the company making a highly concerted effort to interest the English in particular opportunities for settlement in Nebraska was the Burlington. Much information on the latter concern has, of course, been presented in formidable publications on the Burlington by Richard C. Overton;⁹ more details may still be gleaned from the stupendous Burlington archives in the Newberry Library, Chicago. It was under the general direction and management of George S. Harris that the Burlington made its first bid for English colonists in July 1870 by launching an extensive advertising campaign in Great Britain and shortly thereafter the establishment of a land agency system in England itself.¹⁰ Neither of the major lines stressed the sales of their lands to the exclusion of homesteading. The *Union Pacific Guide* included a section in its pages on "How to Secure a Homestead," and stressed that alternate-section status of lands within the confines of grants made it possible to take advantage of either a homestead or purchase.¹¹ For its part,

⁷ Relatively small grants were made to other railroad companies. See Olson, *History of Nebraska*, 170. An account of the organization of the Burlington and Missouri River Rail Road Company is presented in Richard C. Overton, *Burlington Route* (New York, 1965), 98-102. Olson, *History of Nebraska*, 170, 267, supplies figures on acreages and mileage within Nebraska.

⁸ A basic pamphlet published by the Union Pacific Land Department and reissued from time to time was the *Guide to the Union Pacific Railroad Lands* (Omaha, 1870).

⁹ A detailed account of the Burlington Land Department is to be found in Richard C. Overton, *Burlington West: A Colonization History of the Burlington Railroad* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1941), ch. 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* See also Oscar Osburn Winther, "Promoting the American West in England, 1865-1890," *Journal of Economic History*, XVI (Dec. 1956), 506-08.

¹¹ *Guide to the Union Pacific Railroad Lands*, 6, 39-44.

a Burlington leaflet issued by its London representative, William H. Hayward, indicated that this company was as eager to push homesteading as it was to sell company lands.¹² Not only did the promotional literature indicate seemingly generous terms on which land might be procured and reveal the undoubted Eden-like qualities of Nebraska land and climate, but it alluded to ways by which the Company would aid and assist prospective emigrants to make the long trek from Liverpool to Omaha, or more appropriately to Plattsmouth or to Lincoln.¹³

The intending Nebraska-bound English emigrants were urged (contrary to their individualistic propensities) to avail themselves of a loose form of "associated colonization" which would help to eliminate many of the "privations and discomforts" identified with individual efforts. As represented before the English public the term colonization was entirely devoid of any Utopian connotations or of any individual commitment to a corporate entity. The colony idea as presented in pamphlets by the Burlington and Missouri simply meant that English emigrant families already known to each other should travel as groups, and as an antidote to extreme loneliness on the prairies settle in close proximity to one another. ". . . mutual help, comfort, security, and economy would thereby be secured. . . ." A colony "bound together by a community of interest will . . . grow in strength."¹⁴ For its part the Burlington and Missouri would not only offer farm lands for sale but would offer townsites within which it would make lots available to would-be businessmen and city dwellers generally.

¹² Leaflet, Foreign Letters, 1870-71, Burlington Railroad Archives. Hereafter cited as B.R.A. The Archives refer to William H. Hayward, *Emigration to Nebraska, United States of America: Emigrants' Guide*, but the present author was unable to locate a copy.

¹³ An analysis of this material, presently a part of the B.R.A., appears in Winther, "Promoting the American West in England," 509-10. For a comprehensive coverage see Overton, *Burlington West*, ch. 13.

¹⁴ "Emigration to Nebraska," a Burlington leaflet. See also Wakefield *Free Press*, Nov. 27, 1871, clipping, both items in B.R.A.

Edwin A. Curley, who identified himself as a British special commissioner to the "Emigrant Fields of North America," further described this colony idea. He alluded to British resistance to cooperative action, and stated that the most successful English colonies were those whose participants unwittingly went through a process of coalescence. Curley believed that for Englishmen the most that could be expected was a small amount of cooperation—but that a small amount which involved no sacrifice was better than none at all.¹⁵

The roseate prospect in Nebraska as presented by transportation agencies and by the Nebraska Immigration Bureau did not go entirely unchallenged in England. The preface to Curley's rather impressive book points to propaganda mills at work in England. Said he: "This is the hour of heterogeneous handbooks, crude concoctions of petty local officials who have studied no standards, and cannot correctly compare with other lands that which they unwisely attempt to describe; it is the time of trashy travels, consisting of the tittle-tattle of the train, the table, and the tap. . . ."¹⁶ He leaves no doubt that for all its many virtues Nebraska in the 1870's was very much a wild frontier area, referring to the men of Omaha as "Omahawks" and "Omahogs" and the ladies as "Omahens," some as "Omahussies." There is a chapter entitled "The Hateful Locust," and the book warns of the bad seasons for which settlers seldom lay plans.¹⁷

Many immigrant letters reflected a hopeful, encouraging note about Nebraska, but a large number of letters finding their way into the English newspapers were also extremely critical. One summary statement appearing in the London *Times* August 13, 1872 commented that the literature circulated throughout England failed to mention the drawbacks of Nebraska: droughts, losses, low prices,

¹⁵ Edwin A. Curley, *Nebraska: Its Advantages, Resources, and Drawbacks* (London, 1875), 396-99.

¹⁶ Curley, *Nebraska*, viii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56, 57, ch. 22.

high taxes, and the like; to come to Nebraska, this "wild country of the West," was folly. "Land is worth nothing if the markets are not there."¹⁸ And in January, 1875 the *Times* referred to subscriptions being collected in large cities "for sufferers" from the grasshopper plague in Kansas and Nebraska.¹⁹ Anyway, wrote an English traveler exposed to the flood of American West pamphlet literature: "How in the world is one to choose between them, out of a half-dozen States, each as big as England, with twelve or fourteen feet of virgin soil . . . and minerals lying about on every hillside, only asking to be carted away," and added to this at least four great railroads, including the Burlington, are "all tugging away at the old mother of nations—like the litter in some deep-strawed farm-yard at the mother of pigs."²⁰

To whom in English society did this traveler refer? Clearly the appeal from Nebraska was not to the professional or upper strata of English society nor, to quote a Burlington agent in London, did Nebraska want paupers, or "the idle, the dissolute, or the drunken." Their appeal was for farmers (a class hard hit in Victorian England) and for industrious, albeit penniless, farm laborers.²¹ And if one can judge from the occupational listings for English residents as revealed in the census schedules, this is probably what Nebraska got.

In any event the bulk of English immigrants either acquired railroad or homestead lands and became independent farmers, or they became (at least began life in Nebraska as) tenant farmers or farm laborers. The first group declared real estate holdings ranging between one and two thousand dollars; tenant farmers declared a net worth of around two to three hundred dollars; whereas

¹⁸ London *Times*, August 13, 1872.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, January 5, 1875.

²⁰ "From a Vagabond's Note-book," *Macmillan's Magazine*, XXIV (Aug. 1871), 246, 248.

²¹ J. S. Abington, clipping simply dated 1872, B.R.A.

the fortunes of common farm- or day-laborers approximated about a hundred dollars per capita. With the exception of Douglas County, the professions and trades were poorly represented during the 1870's.²² Englishmen from the professional classes and skilled workers were actively interested in the American West, and in particular in urban areas. It therefore comes as no surprise to discover that Douglas County, the home of thriving Omaha, was host even as early as 1870 to a small number of Englishmen representing medicine, law, teaching, the clergy, book-keeping, merchandising, and the building trades. Included in this list of rarities was the occasional carpenter, plasterer, blacksmith, tailor, hotel keeper, and grocer, who may or may not have learned their trades in England.

An examination of census figures for both 1870 and 1880 reveals, moreover, that while Englishmen mainly followed the railroads they nevertheless dispersed themselves widely throughout the state. The census for 1870 disclosed that out of a total of 1,880 Englishmen, at least one and as many as 951 Englishmen were located in each of the 52 organized counties, the unorganized territory, and on Indian reservations. The figures for 1880 revealed a spread into 69 counties then organized and the unorganized territory in Nebraska. The range then was again from one but this time to a top figure of 1,132. In this year, 1880, Lancaster County, the home of the capital city of Lincoln, registered 222 Englishmen; ten years later, 777. Otoe County, on the other hand, showed a decline of English residents from 951 to 515 during this same decade.²³ This wide dispersal also reveals that no one railroad company monopolized the English; also, that in addition to settling within the land-grant areas, many English nationals apparently took advantage of homesteading or other opportuni-

²² The 1860 and 1870 Census Schedules: Nebraska. Microfilm copy, Newberry Library.

²³ *The Statistics of the Population of the United States . . . Ninth Census* (Washington, 1872), I, 364. *Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census . . . 1880* (Washington, 1883), I, 519.

ties available to them in counties outside the land-grant areas.

The pattern of English transit from, say, stone, tree-shrouded ancestral homes in the Midlands via Liverpool and New York City to lonely desolate homesteads on the Little Blue is not unique in the story of European immigration. The English, like their German, Irish, and Scandinavian counterparts, embarked from Liverpool steerage; most of them landed in New York and, after 1869, took one of several rail lines leading to Nebraska. They put up with the extreme physical discomforts of ocean and overland travel and were subjected to many of the same indignities endured alike by all immigrants who traveled steerage and in immigrant cars. The English had one major advantage over other ethnic groups, namely language.²⁴ But for all the vicissitudes of travel, most Nebraskan immigrants found a sort of hospitality or so-called "Emigrant House," or "Emigrant Home," a welcome though temporary haven.

The Burlington and Missouri maintained one such home at Lincoln—an elongated two-story frame structure located beside the tracks near the depot, and the Union Pacific maintained similar ones at Omaha and at other points along its line. Here immigrant families could live rent-free while the head of the household found his desired acreage and completed purchase arrangements.²⁵ One occupant has left this account of the Burlington and Missouri homes in Lincoln and at Burlington, Iowa: "These buildings were erected especially for the protection of emigrants against sharpers and land sharks . . . Here [in Lincoln] I took up my quarters for three or four days until I started prospecting, as land hunting is called here,

²⁴ Most pieces of travel literature carried advertisements of railroad and steamship lines indicating routes, schedules, rates, and accommodations. By 1870 the travel time from New York to Omaha had been reduced to sixty hours, roughly one half the time required in 1857.

²⁵ Overton, *Burlington West*, 336-37; Kelso (Nebr.) *Courier*, July 26, 1872, clipping, B.R.A.

without any charge being made."²⁶ The Union Pacific Company refers to its Emigrant Houses as "commodious," and "attractively landscaped" places where immigrant families received accommodations but paid cost prices for food, fuel, and bedding.²⁷

Those filing for homesteads obtained the usual minimal equipment and supplies at Missouri River ports—some as far east as Chicago—and moved directly onto location. Once on their much-touted plot of land the English, not unlike other contemporary pioneers, proceeded to turn the matted grasses and to erect either a soddy or frame shanty. Not all English arrived in Nebraska fresh from England. Some had previously tried their luck on other frontiers; some moved from Canada to Nebraska, and such people usually brought with them wagons, livestock, household goods, implements, and seed.²⁸ Many emigrating farm laborers arrived in Nebraska, to quote one English settler, "without a pound in their pockets."²⁹

The experiences of one rather typical English settler might serve to illustrate some of the problems and trials associated with the settlement process. The John Turner family, consisting of the husband (a piano tuner by trade), wife, and three children, reached Nebraska in 1871. From London the Turners had gone to Liverpool, and from there they embarked for New York City. After seven days' travel out of New York they reached St. Louis where they remained for a few days' rest. Their objective was Columbus, Platte County, Nebraska, to which place, as a result of correspondence with I. N. Taylor, president of the State Board of Immigration, the Turners decided to settle. The trip there was "hot and dusty. . . . Who could imagine our surprise and utter disgust when we alighted from the train!" Turner described Columbus as a place of a

²⁶ *The American Settler*, Feb. 1, 1872.

²⁷ Union Pacific, "Immigration to the Western United States," Union Pacific Public Relations Release, Omaha [1967], 4.

²⁸ B.R.A. clipping.

²⁹ J. W. Bennett, agent for the Burlington and Missouri, to *The American Settler*, I (Jan. 1872), 5.

few scattered wooden buildings—an “outlandish and wild-looking little place.” There, too, was an Emigrant House but not one that could be described as either “commodious” or as “attractively landscaped.” Turner described it as a dilapidated, mosquito-ridden, store building furnished with a large “broken-down” stove. There were no cooking utensils but somehow the Turners made out with their tin plates and cups, knives, and spoons used on the ocean voyage.³⁰

Shortly the enterprising Turner obtained a job managing a store near the Pawnee Indian Reservation twenty miles to the west of Columbus, but the Pawnees proved too frightening for the family to remain. It was at this juncture that Turner declared his intent to become a United States citizen (something the English did with great reluctance) and filed for a homestead.

Faint wagon tracks led across the prairie to their future home near what became St. Edward in Boone County, the next one west. Here Turner first helped a neighbor build a dugout in exchange for use of a mule team and wagon with which he brought his family belongings from the Columbus railroad depot to the claim. He also used the team for cutting some sod.

This much accomplished, Turner proceeded to build his soddy, or what settlers called their “Nebraska marble” house. Since at first the Turners had no team of their own they carried their twenty-four-inch strips of sod from the field by hand and placed them into position. Thanks to a ridgepole brought in by neighbors, their soddy was completed within a period of three weeks. Gradually the Turners acquired livestock and necessary equipment, tilled their lands, and got on with the business of surviving on a government claim.³¹ If one were to believe the Burlington agent in England, one should not feel sorry for people like the Turners whose abode was to be a soddy. These so-called Nebraska marble dwellings—“gopher holes” to many—

³⁰ John Turner, *Pioneers of the West* (Cincinnati, 1903), 26-39.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 39-70.

were cool in summer, warm in winter, but were at best only temporary residences for the poor who could not afford permanent buildings at the outset. By the 1870's lumber was readily available at reasonable prices in regions served by railroads.³²

Not all Englishmen succeeded. Some drifted on to other areas; still others who came to Nebraska returned in disgust to their mother country. It was a rigorous life, and in the opinion of one English settler: "If any man has plenty of money, nerves of steel, a constitution warranted to withstand all climates, and last, but not least, 'an India rubber conscience', he may do well out here. Any one not possessing these qualities had better stay away."³³

Those who followed this advice—even that of the promoters—to work with their own hands and to be sober and frugal, appear to have done well. English "gentlemen farmers" did not thrive.³⁴

About this time *Punch* published a cartoon representing English lords and ladies on an American homestead. It depicts Lady Marie and Lady Emily dressed as kitchen maids, preparing dinner, and Lords John and Harry coming in from the field with shovels in hand. Lady Emily says: "How late you are boys. Time to dress for dinner."

It would be pertinent, if such were possible, to distinguish between the responses of the English to their Nebraska frontier, or physical, environment and the responses of other ethnic groups—much as Ray A. Billington does in his new book, *America's Frontier Heritage*.³⁵ But essential data are not extant. Diaries, journals, and reminiscences of busy English farmers are, unfortunately, extremely scarce. Yet one that is as richly informative as it

³² Letter by C. R. Schaller to *People's Journal* [ca. 1872], clipping, B.R.A.

³³ *The American Settler*, May 1, 1872.

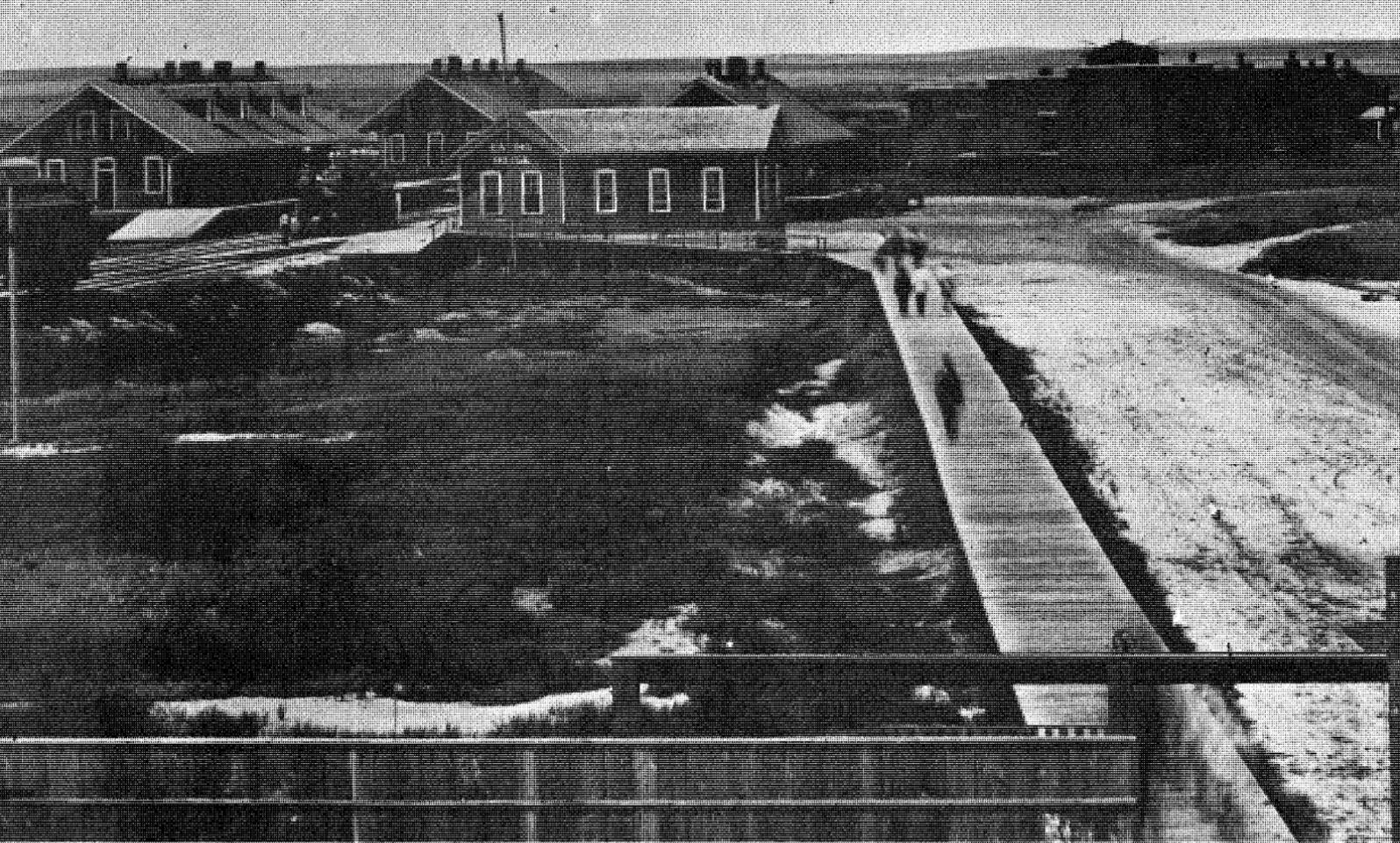
³⁴ *Ibid.*, Aug. 22, 1874.

³⁵ Ray A. Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (New York, 1966), 56-58.

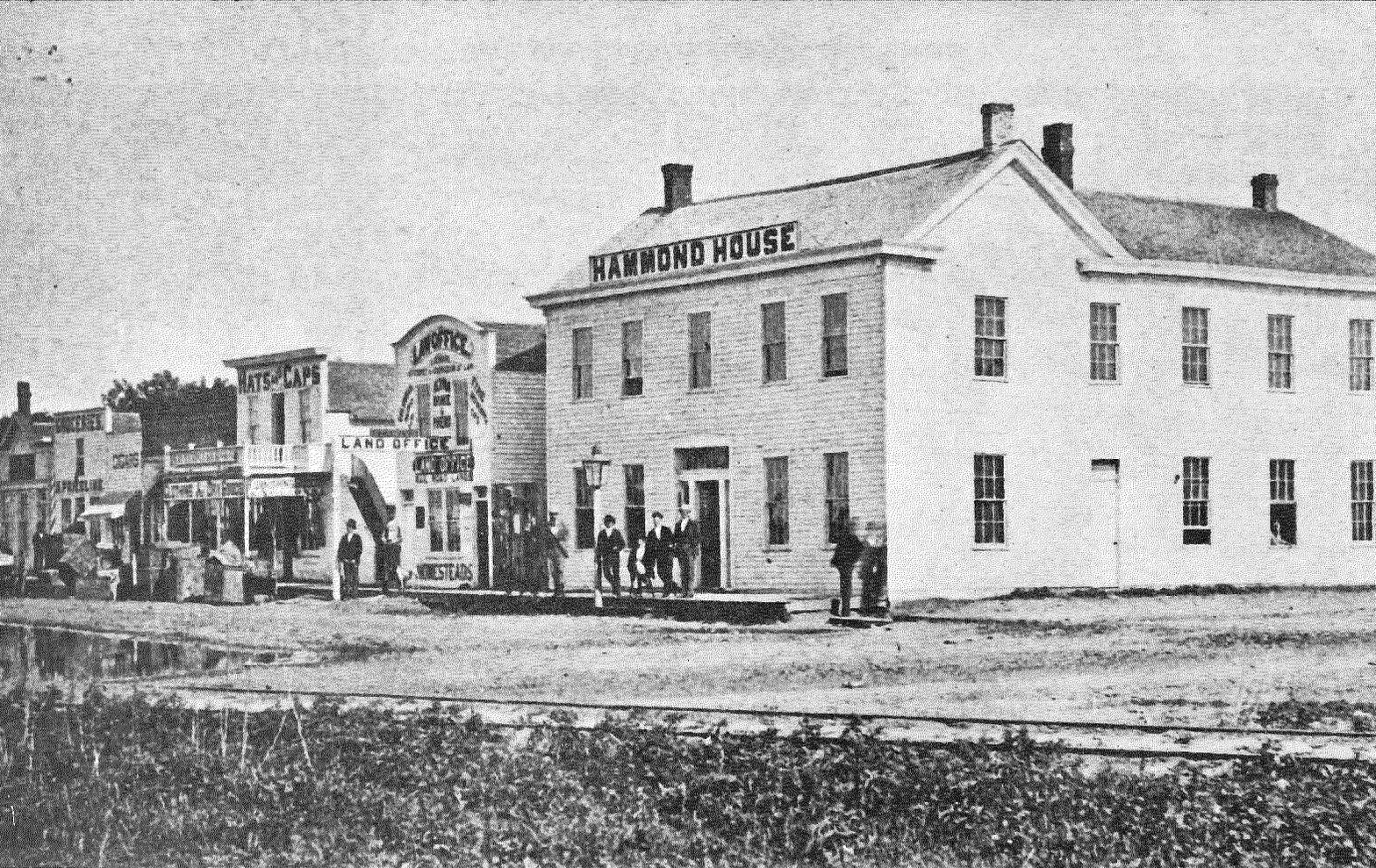
is cryptic in style calls for attention here. It is the 1876-1877 pocket diary (actually two) of Edward Hawkes, a Kentish settler on the Little Blue in Jefferson County. Hawkes' diary contains terse but complete day-to-day entries that illuminate the life of a lonely bachelor on a Nebraska homestead. Hawkes came to Nebraska in 1866 and filed for a homestead not far south of the Oregon Trail in the county where he lived out his days of toil and rheumatic pain. It reveals that while life on a Nebraska homestead was indeed arduous and frustrating (entries for 1877, for example, relate a losing fight against the grasshoppers), this man's labors were not altogether unremitting. Clearly, Hawkes enjoyed his vices: eating candy, smoking, and drinking. He fished, hunted, and trapped, played billiards, visited with neighbors, danced, and loafed. And bachelor that he was, Hawkes also did some courting which so far as the record reveals never reached the matrimonial stage.³⁶

One need not be surfeited with documentary evidence in order to sense the overall loneliness of the prairie. Robert Louis Stevenson caught and expressed the prevailing mood from a Union Pacific emigrant car window when passing through Nebraska in 1879. Stevenson's heart was filled not only with love for Fanny Van de Grift whom he was traveling six thousand miles to be with, but also with deep compassion for his fellow passengers destined for lonely spots on the open plains. "It is the settlers, after all, at whom we have a right to marvel," wrote Stevenson. ". . . What livelihood can repay a human creature for a life spent in this huge sameness? He is cut off from books, from news, from company, from all that can relieve existence but the prosecution of his affairs. A sky full of stars is the most varied spectacle that he can hope for." The eyes of a Nebraska settler "must embrace at every glance the whole seeming concave of the visible world

³⁶ Clarence S. Paine, ed., "The Diaries of a Nebraska Farmer, 1876-1877," *Agricultural History*, XXII (Jan. 1948), 1-31.



Burlington Emigrant House to left, Lincoln.



Land Office left of Hammond House, Columbus, 1874.

Yet perhaps with sunflowers and cicadae, summer and winter, cattle, wife and family, the settler may create a full and various existence."³⁷

³⁷ Robert Louis Stevenson, "Across the Plains," in *From Scotland to Silverado*, ed. by James D. Hart (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), 124-25.