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#### Article Title: "Where Rolls the Dark Missouri Down"

Full Citation: Howard P Chudacoff, "'Where Rolls the Dark Missouri Down,'" *Nebraska History* 52 (1971): 1-30.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1971Missouri.pdf>

Date: 3/04/2011

Article Summary: When Omaha was founded by promoters in 1854, it was a frontier city. Railroads, agriculture, and commerce contributed to a series of booms and busts in eastern Nebraska. By 1920 Omaha had become a regional center threatened by heated politics and social upheaval.

#### Cataloging Information:

Names: Grenville Dodge, James E Boyd, William Jennings Bryan, Gurdon W Wattles, Tom Dennison, James C Dahlman, Victor Rosewater, George T Morton, Ed P Smith, Will Brown

Place Names: Omaha, Nebraska; Lincoln, Nebraska; South Omaha, Nebraska

Railroads: Union Pacific; Chicago and Northwestern; Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific; St. Joseph and Council Bluffs; Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy; Illinois Central; Chicago Great Western; Wabash and Chicago

Keywords: Council Bluffs and Nebraska Ferry Company; "Gate City to the West," transcontinental railroad, Union Pacific railroad, *Credit Mobilier*, Pacific Railroad Act, Union Pacific Bridge, prohibition, liquor interests, Union Stock Yards Company, Fowler Brothers, Armour-Cudahy, Swift, Populist Party, Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, Omaha Grain Exchange, American Water Company, Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees Union, Omaha Business Men's Association, strikebreakers, City Planning Commission, Grenville Dodge, James E Boyd, William Jennings Bryan, Gurdon W Wattles, Tom Dennison, James C Dahlman, Ed P Smith, Will Brown

Photographs / Images: "Edison Wargraph" at the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition in 1898; original building of Creighton University, erected in 1878 in a pasture on the outskirts of Omaha; James C Dahlman, mayor of Omaha 1906-1918 and 1921-1930; destruction caused by the Omaha tornado of Easter Sunday, March 23, 1913, which killed 185 residents



*"Edison Wargraph" at the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition in 1898 depicted the U. S. naval bombardment of Fort Matanzas, Cuba, during an engagement in the Spanish-American War.*

## “WHERE ROLLS THE DARK MISSOURI DOWN”

By HOWARD P. CHUDACOFF

Hast thou ever been in Omaha,  
Where rolls the dark Missouri down,  
And four strong horses scarce can draw  
An empty wagon thru the town?

*Harper's Magazine*, XXIX  
(September, 1869) 623

ON JUNE 24, 1854, only one month after the organization of Nebraska as a territory, President Franklin Pierce announced the ratification of a treaty with the Omaha Indians. This treaty formally opened land on the western side of the Missouri River across from central Iowa for settlement. Immediately several enterprising businessmen from Council Bluffs, the Iowa town across the river, chose and surveyed a proposed site on the west bank. They had already combed the area for a choice location well before the land was legally opened, so their official survey was completed by July 4. Now organized under the Council Bluffs and Nebraska Ferry Company, they were prepared to promote the town of “Omaha.” One map proclaimed:

Lots will be given away to persons who will improve them—private sale will be made on the premises. A newspaper, the *Omaha Arrow*, is printed weekly at this place; a brick building, suitable for the Territorial Legislature, is in process of construction, and a steam mill and brick hotel will be completed in a few weeks.<sup>1</sup>

As people began crossing the river to settle the new city, promoters struggled to secure officially the territorial capital of Nebraska. Acting governor Thomas B. Cuming had originally chosen Omaha as the site for

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the capital. Representatives from southern counties of the territory, however, favored towns of their own promotion and bitterly contested Cuming's decision.

For the next four years schemes to relocate the capital flavored sessions of the Territorial Legislature. Led by Andrew Jackson Poppleton, a lawyer from Detroit, and Andrew Jackson Hanscom, the first Speaker of the Territorial House, the Omaha contingent used persuasion and parliamentary craft to ward off repeated attacks. Hanscom was particularly active, distributing both dollars and punches in effective doses. In 1858 the friends of removal adjourned to Florence north of Omaha and formed a rump legislature, but the Omaha forces, although in the minority, prevailed.<sup>2</sup>

The issue faded but revived with the admission of Nebraska as a state in 1867. By this time the southern counties contained twice as many people as the northern ones, and with increased representation in the legislature, they could not be stopped. They voted to build a new capital upon a site to be called Lincoln. This time Omahans did not resist. Thirteen years as capital had fixed the city's primacy. Now her boosters were too busy with railroads and commerce to care about the location of the State Legislature.<sup>3</sup>

During those first thirteen years Omaha's position as "Gate City to the West" bolstered early growth. The discovery of gold in Colorado in 1859 boosted retail trade as the city became the major supplier and launching place for adventurers headed toward Pike's Peak.<sup>4</sup> It also prospered as the head of the Missouri River steamboat trade. By the mid sixties local merchants exchanged cargoes with St. Joseph and St. Louis several times a week.

On December 2, 1863, Peter A. Dey, chief engineer for construction of the Union Pacific Railroad, received a telegram from headquarters in New York. The President of the United States, the telegram read, had fixed the initial point of the transcontinental railroad and construction could begin. Although there was some confusion over whether that initial point was on the eastern or western side of the Missouri River, first ground was broken in Omaha that very day.<sup>5</sup>

After the initial flurry of activity, the pace slowed considerably. In 1864 Dey abandoned his originally planned route out of Omaha because of the hills. Unable to affirm a new route or to push ahead with construction, Dey resigned early in 1868. At about the same time, a

three-man survey reported that the road could be built at lower costs from a point seven miles south of Omaha. When President Andrew Johnson approved the change, Omahans vigorously protested. Johnson then dropped the southern route in favor of the "ox-bow" route leading south then west and northwest out of Omaha.<sup>6</sup>

Still, construction delays related to *Credit Mobilier* haggling threatened the entire project. The charter of the Union Pacific required it to build one hundred miles of track by June of 1866. The Pacific Railroad Act stated that the federal government would grant subsidies to the first company that built a railroad out to the one hundredth meridian. But by the beginning of 1866, the U. P. had laid only half the required track, and another road was stretching out of Kansas City toward the one hundredth meridian.<sup>7</sup>

At this point the U. P. promoters appointed General Grenville Dodge chief engineer. Dodge, who had originally shown Abraham Lincoln the possibilities of beginning the transcontinental railroad near Omaha, swiftly put his house in order. By the end of the summer his crews were laying three miles of track a day and were well on their way toward that famous meeting with the crews of the Central Pacific at Promontory Point, Utah, on May 10, 1869.<sup>8</sup>

Now the marriage between Omaha and the Union Pacific began to pay off. As the great jumping-off place, the little city on the Missouri became a devoted bride. Her men, big and little, linked their fortunes to the railroad. They freighted its materials, assembled and repaired its locomotives, sold it fuel and dry goods, published newspapers with its money, and satisfied its appetites with restaurants and bawdy houses. They even named their streets after its promoters: Douglas, Dodge, Farnam.

In return the railroad provided ample rewards. It pumped money into the city through the *Credit Mobilier*. Strangers recruited by the U. P. agents to people the land passed through Omaha, and many settled there. In sum, the U. P. made Omaha an attraction, and each beneficial result of that attraction led to further growth. In 1867 the Chicago and Northwestern railroad reached Omaha, followed the next year by the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific; the St. Joseph and Council Bluffs; and the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy. In 1868 Omaha and Council Bluffs together pledged \$450,000 and secured the location of the Union Pacific bridge across the Missouri. The bridge, completed in 1873, replaced the impractical ferry system and insured Omaha's boom.<sup>9</sup>

In spite of their prominence, the role of the railroads in Omaha's growth can be over-emphasized. Founded by entrepreneurs seeking profits from city building, Omaha existed as a regional center before the advent of the railroad. As a wagon and steamboat depot and as a springboard for western expansion, the city's location provided it with potential for growth. Just as important were the promoters' early successes in making Omaha the most prominent town in the territory over a number of competitors. Without the railroads Omaha would never have grown into the hub that it became; yet, when the time arrived for the construction of a railroad across the Nebraska Territory to the Pacific, Omaha was already the logical place for the eastern terminus.

As he rode across the new bridge in the 1870's, a young man seeking his fortune in the West had three prospects before him. First, he could work for the railroad. Skilled or not, plenty of jobs were available. Car repairers, baggagemen, firemen, engineers, conductors, clerks, and many more collected wages from the railroads. Many young men worked for the railroads for a few years to orient themselves before moving on—either to another town or to another type of employment.

Or, he could farm. When homesteaders failed to fill up the land fast enough, the railroads sent agents to the East and to Europe to recruit settlers. These immigrants, uprooted but devoted to the sacredness of the earth, would grow the products which the roads transported for profit. Many of these farms provided raw materials for Omaha industry. By 1884 the city boasted the largest linseed oil mill in the country and the third largest distillery.<sup>10</sup> In 1880 local brewers, largely German immigrants, produced 31,755 barrels of beer and challenged Milwaukee and Cincinnati as the nation's beer capital.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, with varying proportions of capital and luck, a man could become a merchant in money or goods. The opportunities lay in commerce, and in an age of *laissez faire* Omaha provided an example of how commerce rather than industry spurred urban growth. With a wide and rapidly-developing hinterland, the city's wholesale trade blossomed from \$12.1 million in 1880 to \$44.2 million in 1887.<sup>12</sup> Bank clearings passed the \$100 million mark in 1884 and \$250 million by 1890.<sup>13</sup>

These three factors—railroads, agriculture, and commerce—boosted Omaha to genuine boom conditions by the 1880's. "It is the Keystone City," heralded one enthusiast,

...between the Atlantic and Pacific States, — its geographical position affording advantages which no amount of competition can wrest from it.<sup>14</sup>

The trains that rolled into town let off many foreign immigrants who remained and added diversity. In 1880 the young city was one-third foreign-born, including 3,600 Germans, 2,900 Scandinavians, and 2,000 Irishmen.<sup>15</sup> Omaha had grown from 16,083 in 1870 to 30,518 in 1880 and continued to increase even more rapidly. A well-developed public transportation system speeded the physical expansion of the city. Begun in 1867, the horse railway preceded sewers, pavements, street lights, and water works and was intended to answer popular taunts which reminded residents of the primitive streets and transportation which once had embarrassed the city. To overcome the hills and mud, the boosters copied railroad methods of construction and even aided the city in paving its streets.<sup>16</sup> By the 1880's several different railway lines stretched to the northwest, west, and south three miles and more from the center of downtown. A city ordinance insured good service by requiring cars to run every ten minutes from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m.<sup>17</sup>

With the young but promising transportation system, Omahans were able to push outward from the compact "walking city" by 1880. The real estate boom of the next decade was a spectacular feature of the town's growth. The 1880 census counted 5,110 dwellings in the city. Nearly 1,000 more were built in the next two years.<sup>18</sup> In 1884 alone Omahans erected 1,174 new homes, and in the banner year of 1887 they put up 2,179.<sup>19</sup> Building values rose from less than one million dollars in 1880 to nearly eight million by the end of the decade. By 1890 real estate transfers averaged \$18 million per year after jumping from \$4 million to \$15 million between 1885 and 1886 and peaking at \$31 million in 1887.<sup>20</sup>

Speculators who gobbled up cheap land now offered it at profitable margins although still relatively cheap. One firm, Bemis and Bowers, advertised 200 houses and 1,000 lots for sale among its 1,000,000 acres of property.<sup>21</sup> Another dealer reputedly furnished his salesmen with fast horses and light buggies to whisk prospective buyers to far-outlying property, thereby making the distance seem but a few minutes from the center of town.<sup>22</sup> The boom ebbed as the decade closed, but the building of the eighties filled in vacant areas and enabled the city to sprawl.

For Omahans 1890 appeared to be an auspicious year. The U. S. Census Bureau announced that the "Gate City" now contained 140,452 residents, an increase of 367 per cent over 1880, making it the twentieth largest city in the country. Recently a student has suggested

that Omaha's 1890 population total was inflated and that school district censuses indicated that the correct 1890 figure would be 102,430.<sup>23</sup> The 1890 census does seem overblown, especially compared with the 1900 figure which lists Omaha at only 102,555. Furthermore, with a population of 140,000 in 1890, Omaha would have enough with some margin to surpass St. Paul and Kansas City to attain the prestigious position of second place among trans-Mississippi cities behind Minneapolis. Yet even the lower figure for 1890 demonstrates an increase of 233 per cent in one decade.

As the biggest city in the state, Omaha used its weight at election time. In November of 1890 Omahans helped to elect their own James E. Boyd—opera house proprietor, railroad man, and former mayor—as governor of Nebraska. The election not only enhanced local pride but also unleashed charges of a vote fraud and rekindled the long-standing friction between the city and the rest of the state.

In 1890 reformers put before the voters a state amendment prohibiting the production and sale of alcoholic beverages. The amendment naturally aroused the big liquor interests in Omaha as well as other businessmen such as the grain dealers. Boyd, who was the Democratic gubernatorial nominee, was a member of the Board of Trade and a wet. As the Omaha forces threw their support to Boyd and the Democrats, the campaign was further heated by the entrance of a young, captivating dry who had won the Democratic nomination for Congress. This upstart, William Jennings Bryan, stuck to the party lines by frequenting Omaha saloons with anti-prohibition forces to solicit votes, though he reputedly drank only sarsaparilla.<sup>24</sup>

On election day Nebraska voters rejected prohibition by 111,729 to 82,292 with Omahans voting 19,217 to 1,109 against it. Boyd won the gubernatorial race by only 1,144 votes; the entrance of a Populist candidate split the opposition enabling Boyd to win 34 per cent of the total state vote while his Populist and Republican opponents won 33 per cent apiece. But in Omaha Boyd gathered 70 per cent of the vote, the Populist less than 3 per cent. Boyd carried every precinct in every ward in beating his nearest opponent by over 9,500 votes. Furthermore, the total vote cast in Omaha swelled considerably over totals of preceding and succeeding elections. Bryan also benefited, carrying every Omaha ward but one — which he lost by one vote.

"A gigantic conspiracy," cried the anti-Boyd forces, complaining that "large sums of money were raised for the purpose of defeating the will



of the people," that 2,800 foreigners were quickly naturalized and paid to vote the "right way," and that the City Council of Omaha and the County Commissioners were parties to the fraud.<sup>25</sup> "We have been unfairly beaten," the rural prohibitionists charged.<sup>26</sup> And from distant New York came the lamentation that all of Omaha "is given over entirely to the whiskey mob."<sup>27</sup> A prohibitionist organ, the *New York Christian Advocate* even accused the Omaha liquor interests of bribing the census enumerators to pad the rolls in order to cover up fraudulent voting on the prohibition amendment.<sup>28</sup> The Omaha *World Herald* retorted that such accusations were falsely perpetrated by Nebraska drys "and their paid Hessians in the east."<sup>29</sup> Aside from this Boyd's forces paid little attention to the protests. Boyd was the first Democrat to be elected governor of Nebraska, and his jubilant supporters paraded through the streets of Omaha with the aid of the Union Pacific band and "forty thousand small boys with large horns."<sup>30</sup>

As in the issue over the territorial capital thirty-five years before, Omaha's opponents attempted to deprive her of a cunningly won prize — the state house and the open bottle. Getting nowhere with the fraud issue, they claimed that Boyd was ineligible because he was not a United States citizen. His father had taken out his first citizenship papers upon arriving in Ohio from Ireland but had not completed naturalization until after his son's election. On these grounds the current governor, Republican John M. Thayer, refused to yield his office. The recognition of Boyd's election by other state officials, however, forced the outgoing governor to surrender after an eight-day holdout. But in May of 1891 the state supreme court decided against the Democrats and reinstated Thayer. A year later the U. S. Supreme Court reversed the decision, stating that since new states were admitted on an equal footing with older states, Boyd, who had been a resident of Territorial Nebraska, became a citizen by adoption when Nebraska was admitted to the Union.<sup>31</sup> The new governor then served out his term, incurring more outstate wrath by vetoing a bill to limit railroad freight rates.

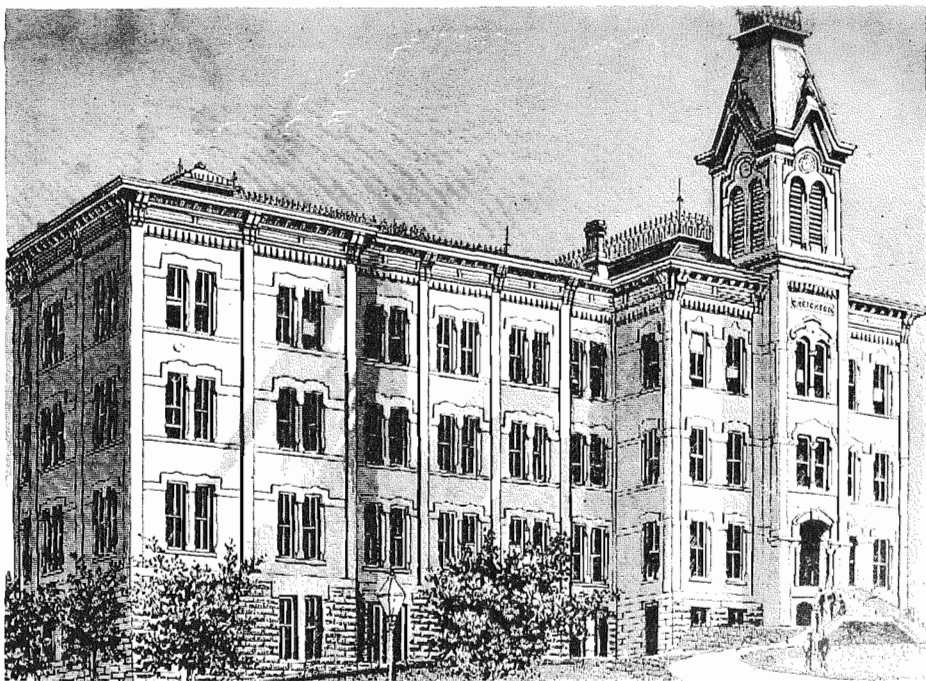
If the census and election returns of 1890 enhanced an Omahan's pride and optimism, other reasons existed for looking to the new decade with great expectations. The city possessed many of the features that induced feelings of excellence: Creighton College, founded in 1878 by one of the most prominent families in the West; an art gallery built in 1888; a newly acquired site for the public library; and a brand new opera house built in 1891 by James Boyd to replace his old one destroyed by fire.

One booster publication, assembled by the Omaha Board of Trade in 1891, listed the advantages which prepared the city for further progress. By 1890 Omaha could boast ninety miles of street railway, fifty-four schools, ninety-nine churches, the "largest smelting and refining works in the world," the "largest white lead works in the country," one hundred and fifty-five miles of water pipe, and a park system planned by landscaper H. W. S. Cleveland. The Board of Trade was particularly anxious to emphasize the industrial sector. At the beginning of the book was a large drawing of the city in which the artist drew numerous billows of smoke shooting skyward from all over the city to signify industrial activity. In this era pollution was prestigious.<sup>32</sup> The book also extolled the healthfulness of the city.<sup>33</sup> In 1890 Omaha had a death rate of only 994.65 per 100,000 inhabitants, lowest of the thirty-seven largest cities and nearly half the rate of any other city.<sup>34</sup> It should be noted however, that the Census Bureau showed that death reports for Omaha were incomplete.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the inflated population total of 1890 lowered the death rate considerably. Yet it is important that no matter what the facts, Omahans believed their city was big, healthy, prosperous, and influential. One publication confidently declared:

No city in the Union offers such splendid inducement for the investment of capital. It is in fact the "young Giant of the West," a rapidly growing, prosperous, handsome city—the future great commercial rival of Chicago.<sup>36</sup>

One industry which particularly raised hopes for the future was the livestock industry. In 1883 Wyoming cattle baron Alexander Swan had come to Omaha to impress businessmen with the advantages of Omaha as a livestock center between Chicago and the West. With the help of local tycoon William Paxton, Swan and his friends organized the Union Stock Yards Company on land bought from the Union Pacific just south of the city.

Several small firms had been slaughtering livestock in or near Omaha for nearly a decade. James Boyd himself owned a plant which killed over 100,000 hogs a year by 1881 and made him famous locally for his sugar-cured hams. But the Union Stockyards opened the way for large-scale operations. Under the vigorous efforts of Swan and president John A. McShane, the company offered bonuses totaling \$750,000 and lured the Fowler Brothers, Armour-Cudahy, and Swift to set up plants at the yards by 1887.<sup>37</sup>



*Creighton University started in this building erected in 1878 in a pasture on the outskirts of Omaha.*

By 1890 the town of South Omaha, which had grown up around the stockyards, was the third largest packing center in the country, slaughtering nearly two million animals a year.<sup>38</sup> The new industry brought more men and money to Omaha, as well as to the “Magic City” on its southern border, whose population grew from 8,000 in 1890 to 26,000 by 1900. This burst led the local press to propose half jokingly and half jealously that if South Omaha “continues at the present rate, she may turn the tables and propose to annex Omaha.”<sup>39</sup>

Throughout the nineties the stockyards continued to expand. In 1892 the yards received 2.6 million head of livestock. Meatpacking accounted for nearly two-thirds of Omaha’s \$80 million industrial output that year.<sup>40</sup> By 1898 the Cudahy and Armour plants, now separated, employed 4,100 men, and fourteen other firms had entered the field.<sup>41</sup> But in other sectors hard times punctured the boom. The depression that rocked both agriculture and business nationally during the decade blanketed most of the Omaha economy. Business began to slump in 1891. It recovered slightly in 1892 but then collapsed and did not recover fully until 1898.

In 1890 serious crop failures resulting from dry summers and hard winters had crippled many Nebraska farmers, and in 1891 the withholding and withdrawal of eastern capital strained conditions in farming towns tributary to Omaha.<sup>42</sup> The effects reached Omaha that same year as building, real estate, jobbing, and manufacturing all suffered declines.<sup>43</sup> The tailspin halted momentarily in 1892, and several local merchants reaped profits from the largest and most famous convention yet assembled in the city. The Populist Party, representing in part those who felt oppressed by railroads, big money, and big business, gathered in Omaha. They listened to Hamlin Garland read "Under the Lion's Paw" and shouted "Amen" to Mary Elizabeth Lease's harangues against the times. They also nominated General James B. Weaver for President and adopted a broad reform platform that took Omaha's name. Local residents, however, paid less attention to the Populist crusade. Though they gave General Weaver 35 per cent of their vote, Cyrus Van Wyck, Populist candidate for governor, ran a poor third in Omaha, and the Populist candidate for Congress received less than 10 per cent of the local vote.<sup>44</sup>

By 1893 a general stagnation settled down on Omaha. For the next four years businessmen retrenched and struggled to recoup. Property prices and sales hit their lowest marks in 1894 and 1895; local banks were still closing their doors as late as 1897.<sup>45</sup> The phenomenal rate of population growth which Omaha had experienced in previous years halted completely. Even the city directories, the most enthusiastic of statistical reviews, confessed a decline of nearly 7,000 souls between 1892 and 1896. A substantial, but not extraordinary, number of people left the city during this period. A sampling of 1,133 persons from the 1891 population revealed that over 60 per cent had not lived in Omaha five years earlier and that 37.5 per cent were gone by 1894. Lack of immigration was a major factor in the failure of population growth. In past years the number of newcomers had more than made up for high rates of emigration, but the differential disappeared in the mid nineties. In 1895 the *Omaha World Herald* sent a questionnaire to local wholesalers asking what was needed to revive commerce. Most of the replies stressed the need for more capital and more immigration.<sup>46</sup>

By 1898 business swung upward once more. The real estate market felt a strong revival, and the jobbing trade rose 14 per cent. Bank clearances totaled \$212.5 million, putting Omaha in the same class with Detroit, New Orleans, and Cleveland.<sup>47</sup> A new Union Pacific Depot

opened in 1899, and the Illinois Central completed its track to Omaha that year. Some businesses were still shaky in the aftermath of depression. The real estate market lacked the vigorous activity of former years and consequently felt the effects of a slowdown. The construction industry began to rumble with labor discontent which prevented a stronger rejuvenation. The general climate by the end of the century, however, was one of cautious optimism.

As they welcomed better times, Omahans also prepared to show their city to the world by hosting the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition of 1898. Conceived by a few western capitalists during the dark days of the depression, the exposition was intended to revive trade and advertise returning prosperity. At the second Trans-Mississippi Congress, assembled in Omaha in 1895, William Jennings Bryan had presented a resolution to exhibit "all the products, industries, and civilization of the states west of the Mississippi River" at Omaha during the summer of 1898.<sup>48</sup> The resolution passed, and several Omahans organized the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition Association with a capital stock of one million dollars, over half of which was subscribed by 6,000 local businessmen.<sup>49</sup>

The Association chose a young banker, Gurdon W. Wattles, as its president. Wattles, a lawyer and former schoolteacher, was then president of the Union National Bank and had come to Omaha after accumulating several banks in Iowa.<sup>50</sup> He executed his newest responsibility with a go-getter enthusiasm that made him one of Omaha's most powerful forces by the beginning of the twentieth century. Wattles enlisted generous contributions from many local businesses and capped the fund-raising with a \$30,000 pledge from tightfisted George Holdrege in the name of the Burlington Railroad. Wattles sent influential citizens around the country and solicited money from twenty-one states. The federal government balked at a request for a half million but delivered a \$250,000 appropriation.<sup>51</sup> The State of Nebraska and Douglas County were especially eager to exhibit the results of the return of high agricultural production, and together they subscribed \$200,000.<sup>52</sup>

The fair grounds covered 184 acres located one mile north of downtown on land that had reverted to cornfields after the real estate collapse in the nineties. Here gaudy white buildings of plaster of Paris were erected around a lagoon. The style of the fair, patterned after the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago five years earlier, in no way resembled life in the Midwest, but nobody cared. It was a fantasy-land

of domes and columns, with architecture "freely inspired by the classic and renaissance." One building was topped by a huge plaster warrior in a chariot drawn by four lions and inscribed "Omaha." The fair opened at noon on June 1, 1898, with exhibits from nearly every state, including Arizona Territory, and from eleven foreign countries.<sup>53</sup>

Between June and the end of October over two and a half million people visited the fair. Many returned several times to fulfill their dreams among the exotic displays. There was the Moorish Palace, the Chinese Village, the Streets of Cairo, a pyramid housing a golden staircase leading to "the joys of heaven" and an elevator to "the terrors of Hades"—with cafes at both destinations—the Hagenbeck Trained Animal Show, an exhibit of optical illusions and a huge camp of Indians including Geronimo himself.<sup>54</sup> Besides these attractions there were more serious exhibits in buildings devoted to mining, agriculture, industry, transportation, and horticulture. Several days contained special themes and events, which climaxed October 12 with a visit and speech by President William McKinley.

As Wattles remarked in his speech on closing day, "To this city the exposition has been like a rain in a drouth."<sup>55</sup> The fair had attracted thousands of visitors to Omaha, including conventions of nearly a hundred organizations. Receipts from all sources totaled nearly \$2 million, and the net profit was \$356,011. This was one of the few expositions of the day to give stockholders a return on their investments and the first to be unencumbered by mortgages or commitments.<sup>56</sup> The Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition erased the gloom of the recent past and beckoned Omahans to look to the coming century with renewed optimism.

The new century dawned, and the city entered another period of growth. Population had not increased, but the city remained big. The proportion of immigrants from foreign lands had declined to about one-fourth, but the combined totals of foreign born plus natives of foreign parents comprised over half of the population. The Irish community had not increased, so the largest nationalities were now the Germans and Scandinavians. The "new" immigrants were beginning to arrive, however, as the city showed notable gains among Russians, Italians, and Bohemians. The religious composition accentuated the city's diversity. The 1900 city directory listed several churches for all of the major Protestant denominations, and no sect had a predominance. Catholic parishes numbered only twelve, but as Eastern Europeans

arrived, the total expanded to twenty-nine by 1920. Three synagogues served the small but growing Jewish population.

The horse railway and later the cable and trolley lines had extended service in the late eighties, enabling people to spread out to the north, south, and west.<sup>57</sup> The early sprawl and the real estate boom had helped to prevent the crowding that plagued other cities. Suburbs like Benson Place and Dundee built their own trolley lines which connected with the city's lines.<sup>58</sup> The notorious dumbbell tenement and other such structures did not spread in Omaha; most dwellings housed only one, two, or three families. Lots tended to be large, and although two small frame dwellings often occupied one lot, there was much open space. Only in the most inner circle of the city among rooming houses and resident hotels did buildings touch each other, but this section comprised a small portion of the city.<sup>59</sup> In 1890 there were only 1.29 dwellings per acre, and in 1900 there was nearly one dwelling for every family.<sup>60</sup>

The city experienced growing pains in the first decade of the twentieth century, but conditions were more stable than during the previous two decades. Strikes among construction workers and inflated rents curbed building and real estate business during the first years of the decade, but by 1905 a small boom was underway. Many choice lots suitable for small and medium-sized dwellings were still available, and much of the construction was devoted to single family dwellings in the \$1,500 to \$3,000 range. Nearly 4,600 new homes went up between 1905 and 1909. In 1907 the city issued \$7.2 million worth of building permits, and real estate transfers totaled \$12.3 million—figures of magnitude almost comparable with those of the late eighties.<sup>61</sup>

The conditions which slowed economic progress nationally during 1907 and 1908 partially affected Omaha. Bank clearings continued to climb, passing the half billion mark in 1906 and reaching \$824 million in 1910.<sup>62</sup> But in 1908 both manufacturing and jobbing houses felt declines. Wholesale business dropped 15 per cent between 1907 and 1908. Industrial output, which had risen from \$178.3 million to nearly a quarter of a billion between 1903 and 1906, fell back to \$180 million in 1908. Still some manufacturing experienced sharp rises, particularly those in the cigar, meat packing, soap, and dairy industries.<sup>63</sup>

In spite of a few delays in the general economic growth the prosperity which kept farmers satisfied for two decades provided Omahans with welcome business. By 1905 the press could proclaim

Omaha as the largest single butter-producing center in the country.<sup>64</sup> Local dairies churned 10.3 million pounds of butter that year and almost doubled their output by 1908. Production slackened in 1909, and the city soon lost its title, but boosters had other achievements to satisfy their pride. Yearly receipts at the stock yards, for example, rose from two million head at the turn of the century to six million by 1908.<sup>65</sup> Omahans were particularly proud of their educational progress. Nearly 98 per cent of the population over ten years of age could read in 1900, and rates remained above those of comparable cities through 1920.<sup>66</sup> By 1905 Creighton College had grown into a diversified university, and in 1908 a group of citizens incorporated the University of Omaha. The new institution opened in 1909 with the purpose of promoting "the highest type of Christian character and citizenship, with the Bible as supreme authority."<sup>67</sup>

Brewers and distillers were still utilizing Nebraska grain in producing 250,000 barrels of beer and 1,750,000 gallons of spirits a year by 1905. At this time, however, other men attempted to make further use of nearby harvests by creating a a major grain market. Omaha had been a grain depot since the 1870's; by the turn of the century local merchants handled 11 million bushels of grain annually. But this volume was still smaller than Omaha's share of the hinterland's yield. The problem was that the city lacked a centralized agency to promote the grain trade.

In 1903 Alpheus B. Stickney extended his Chicago Great Western Railroad to Omaha. As the line neared completion, Stickney spoke before the local Commercial Club. He promised businessmen the influence of his railroad if they would take steps toward building their city into a major grain center.<sup>68</sup> As a result seventy-five merchants subscribed seventy-five dollars apiece to establish the Omaha Grain Exchange, the exchange elected Gurdon W. Wattles as its first president. Displaying the same energy with which he had forwarded the 1898 exposition, Wattles recruited eighty more subscriptions by November of 1903 and persuaded four firms to build elevators of over three million bushels capacity, thereby increasing Omaha's storage facilities by 300 per cent. He boosted receipts to 16.5 million bushels, and by lobbying for advantageous railroad rates he made Omaha a major exporter to the Gulf ports.<sup>69</sup>

Stickney's Chicago Great Western granted favorable rates and forced other roads to reduce their rates to Chicago, St. Louis, and Minneapolis, as well as to Gulf and Atlantic ports, by as much as 20 per cent.



Inequities still existed, however, for Kansas City received the same rate as Omaha in shipping to Minneapolis, while Omahans paid five and one-half cents more per hundred weight than Kansas City in shipping to Texarkana and Shreveport. Nevertheless, the exchange enjoyed an encouraging first year.<sup>70</sup>

During the next two years grain receipts almost tripled, as Omaha became the sixth largest grain center in the country and third largest corn market. The battle over freight rates continued as local shippers found themselves less favored than their Kansas City counterparts. The Wabash and Chicago and the Chicago Great Western kept Omaha competitive on shipments to Chicago and points east, but disadvantageous rates to the north and south lingered. Furthermore, several dealers began to by-pass the exchange and buy directly from the producers. As a result of these conditions and of crop fluctuations, total receipts did not grow through 1906, 1907, and 1908.<sup>71</sup> In 1910 Wattles moved on to other fields and surrendered the exchange presidency to F. S. Cowgill. After a few false starts, the market began to grow again as the World War upset European supplies. Receipts reached an all-time high of 91 million bushels in 1918, but price slumps, poor crops, and freight car shortages soon pushed totals back down to prewar levels.<sup>72</sup> Omaha had succeeded in becoming a primary livestock market but could never quite overcome her rivals for precedence in the grain trade.

The grain and livestock markets, the wholesale trade, and scattered manufacturing gave Omaha a big city atmosphere in the early twentieth century; a genuine political machine completed the image. The boss was Tom Dennison, and from the back of the Old Budweiser Saloon on Douglas Street he ran the Third Ward in Omaha's downtown, a lucrative vice syndicate, the local Democratic party, and most of the rest of the city. Dennison arrived in 1890 from the gambling towns of the Rockies and found an open town still unexposed to big time vice organization. He quickly "invested" money in the right places, forced rival gambling houses out of business, and by 1900 had extended his influence throughout the town. A true boss, he never smoked or drank, always kept his word, contributed to charities, inspired devotion among his friends, and terrorized his enemies.<sup>73</sup>

Dennison's most visible concern was entertainment—drinking, gambling, and prostitution. He combined these amusements into a multi-million dollar business. By 1911 hundreds of reputed prostitutes

served the town. Even when reformers closed the red light districts that year, the organization moved the girls into hotels and rooming-houses, and the revenue continued to pour in.<sup>74</sup>

Between 1905 and 1915 Omaha showed the greatest increase in the number of establishments selling liquor by the drink—103.8 per cent—of any city in the country.<sup>75</sup> While the organization encouraged segregation by race and nationality, it tried to serve all people. Among the most trusted lieutenants were a Negro and a Jew, who directed the vice business for their individual minority groups. Near the Sheely Brothers Packinghouse, Nicodemus Dargaczewski, the “Mayor of Sheelytown,” cashed checks in his saloon for the Polish meat packers and endeared them to the machine.<sup>76</sup> Dennison collected tolls from his gamblers, saloonkeepers, and prostitutes as well as from the physicians who attended his girls and the lawyers who represented his employees. He spent some of his profits for police protection—about three hundred dollars a month for an eight-girl house. He spent even more in selected department and furniture stores, wholesale liquor houses, breweries, groceries, and coal yards. With the money Dennison had to distribute, it is no wonder that businessmen sought his friendship. Besides supplying the entertainment spas, favored businesses were given paving, building, and printing contracts and the furnishing of city supplies in general. Furthermore, Dennison’s broad influence made him the natural broker between the business interests and the city government.

Dennison directed the show while his mayor, James C. Dahlman, did the performing. Originally a Texas cowpuncher, Dahlman moved to Omaha in 1898. Capitalizing on his background and his friendship with William Jennings Bryan, Dahlman rose through the ranks of the local Democratic party and ran for Mayor in 1906 on a moderate reform platform. “Just Plain Jim” was elected and immediately proceeded to New York where he welcomed Bryan back from an Asian tour and displayed his prowess with a lariat by roping unsuspecting city slickers in the streets of downtown Manhattan.<sup>77</sup> Such antics kept Dahlman in office for every term but one (1918-1921) from 1906 to 1930. He ran the routine administrative functions and never exploited his office. In fact, he died broke. A natural ham, he continually stole the spotlight while Dennison maneuvered in the shadows.<sup>78</sup> Even when a reform movement succeeded in establishing a commission form of government in 1912, Dahlman was elected to the commission by the people and chosen mayor by the other commissioners although he had originally opposed adoption of the system.<sup>79</sup>

*"Cowboy Mayor"  
James C. Dahlman served  
continuously from 1906  
until 1930 with the  
exception of one term  
(1918-1921)  
when a reform  
ticket replaced him.*



What kinds of services did the Dennison-Dahlman regime provide for Omahans? In 1906 Dahlman had run on a platform favoring municipal ownership of utilities and the practice of economy in government. Once in office, he executed his promises in varying degrees, according to the situation at hand and the will of Tom Dennison.

As early as 1893 the city had been trying to purchase the municipal water works, but squabbles over the appraised value had prevented a transaction. In 1906 Dahlman supported public purchase and had the backing of the local press.<sup>80</sup> Still, the American Water Company, which owned the plant, and the Water Board, which was the state agency created to manage the plant once it changed hands, could not agree on an official appraisal. The dispute went to the courts, and litigation extended through Dahlman's re-election in 1909. That year the U. S. Supreme Court decided that the city had to pay the higher of the disputed appraisal prices, but now other factors were entering the fray. Victor Rosewater, editor of the *Omaha Bee* and friend of big business, had been building opposition to public purchase on the grounds that it would overburden the public debt. When the Water Board proposed bonds of over \$8 million in 1911 to cover the purchase, Rosewater, whose *Bee* Building coincidentally rented offices to the American Water

Company, vigorously objected. He apparently enlisted the aid of Tom Dennison in defeating the bonds. On election day the measure lost, with Dennison's Third Ward voting 751 to 94 against the bonds. After another special election, the bonds passed; and after several more months of delay, the city finally took possession of the plant early in 1912.<sup>81</sup>

Even before the water issue rose, the city had been working for lower gas rates. In his 1906 campaign Dahlman urged a 20 per cent reduction in rates to one dollar per 1,000 cubic feet of gas. The United Gas Improvement Company of Philadelphia which owned the gas works said it would reduce rates only if the City Council would grant a new thirty-year franchise. Neither the U.G.I.C. nor the Council would agree to the other's demands. Dahlman then threatened to take over the gas plant and introduced an ordinance to fine the company if it sold gas for more than one dollar per thousand cubic feet.<sup>82</sup> The City Council would not go as far as the mayor, but did threaten to raise the spectre of municipal ownership. Little was done until well after the 1909 elections, during which Dahlman and the Democrats again promised to reduce rates and won the support of the *World Herald*, the main competitor of the *Bee*.<sup>83</sup> In 1912 the U.G.I.C. again offered dollar gas in return for a twenty-five year franchise to be guaranteed by the state legislature. Several civil organizations opposed the proposition, but Rosewater's *Bee* praised it as good business.<sup>84</sup> In a sudden about face Dahlman also supported the deal, possibly under the influence of Dennison. On election day, however, the proposed franchise was soundly defeated. In 1918 the old franchise expired, and a new, anti-Dahlman reform administration moved for public ownership. After another court fight the city took possession in 1920.<sup>85</sup> Dennison's brokerage between business and government could help line pockets and delay unwanted action, but it would not prevent municipal ownership.

Dahlman kept his promises for economy in government and low taxes, but his parsimony helped to create deficiencies which left the city behind the times during the first years of the Progressive Era. In 1907 Omaha was the thirty-second largest city in the United States. Its per capita expenditures on urban services, however, ranked much lower. In police department expenditures, it ranked one hundred and thirty-sixth; on the fire department, one hundred and fourth; on health conservation, eighty-ninth; on sanitation, one hundred and forty-third; on highways, one hundred and fifth; and on schools, seventy-ninth. Per capita expenditures on charities totaled \$0.07; on libraries, \$0.13; and on

recreation, \$0.19.<sup>86</sup> Taxes were also low; the rates on general property were only \$12.68 per thousand dollars of reported true valuation.<sup>87</sup> At the same time the 1907 report on cities compiled by the Census Bureau illustrated the accomplishments of earlier administrations, as Omaha ranked very high in the accumulated value of public improvements, especially sewers and pavements.<sup>88</sup>

By 1915, however, some of the Progressive sentiment had reached Omaha, and the government began to realize the need for expanded services. The purchase and updating of the water plant provided an efficient, though somewhat costly, water system.<sup>89</sup> The city had also increased police personnel by 52 per cent between 1907 and 1915 and had raised expenditures on other services to levels almost comparable with cities of equal size. Only in expenditures for more sewers and refuse collection was it still deficient, although much of the sewer construction had been completed during an earlier era. The fire department received special consideration. Between 1907 and 1910 annual appropriations had risen from \$176,000 to \$442,000.<sup>90</sup> Most of this added money went for motorized equipment and for additional personnel after Omaha became the first city to prohibit the employment of firemen for more than twelve hours a day.<sup>91</sup> At first property tax rates remained low as the city borrowed heavily to pay for service improvements. In 1915 Omaha's per capita debt was the fourteenth highest among the one hundred and fifty largest cities.<sup>92</sup> By 1919, however, the city had raised taxes 65 per cent in four years.<sup>93</sup>

As Omaha's economic development reached a new peak in the prewar years, the city again felt the need to express its pride. In 1912 the Mayor and City Council commissioned a work entitled *Omaha's Financial, Commercial, and Manufacturing Resources Epitomized* to be distributed nationally. Keeping abreast with booster rhetoric, the pamphlet was subtitled "Omaha, the Diamond Stick Pin on the Bosom of the West." George W. Craig, the city engineer and author of the work, admitted that Omaha had no beautiful scenery to attract investors but extolled the "limitless opportunities" to be found there.<sup>94</sup> He emphasized the achievements in public services: the water works and its 240 miles of pipe, 240 miles of gas mains, 166 miles of motor railway track, 210 miles of sewers, 340 miles of sidewalk, and 145 miles of paved streets.<sup>95</sup>

Craig had concluded his tome by stressing the great opportunities that Omaha offered and by proclaiming that the "prosperity of the

individual means enrichment of the whole city.”<sup>96</sup> Gurdon W. Wattles was one of those individuals who believed his prosperity enriched the whole city, and he meant to keep things that way. Along with his other interests, Wattles was a principal investor in the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company. When the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees attempted to organize in Omaha in 1902, he acted promptly to protect his investment, and the men who had joined the union quickly found themselves out of work. The next year Wattles and his friends formed the Omaha Business Men’s Association, with the avowed purpose of keeping Omaha an open shop town.

The Association successfully intimidated construction and street railway workers for several years, but in 1909 a national official of the Amalgamated came to Omaha and prodded the workers to unite. In September the reorganized street railway union sought official recognition, but Wattles refused.<sup>97</sup> The workers struck, and Wattles hired 500 strikebreakers from the New York firm of Waddell and Mahon. Wattles ignored attempts at arbitration, and in less than a month the strike was broken. He wrecked the union and assured stockholders that all future employees must agree to join no union.<sup>98</sup>

The street railway union was down and out, but the construction workers had still not felt the power of the Business Men’s Association. Several unions had organized the various building trades during 1916, and in 1917 they presented their employers with a list of demands. First, they requested shorter hours and higher wages. Pay scales ranged from twenty cents an hour for teamsters to fifty-two cents for electricians. Because they worked for only eight months of the year, the men believed their wages should have been higher.<sup>99</sup> The major demand, however, was the right to organize and bargain collectively.

When the B.M.A. refused negotiation, the workers struck. The Association then adopted the usual strikebreaking tactics. Those smaller firms that were willing to negotiate were prohibited from doing so unless the employees signed contracts guaranteeing the open shop.<sup>100</sup> After the two sides deadlocked, the governor appointed a committee to investigate and mediate. The committee met at City Hall and heard testimony from scores of witnesses. But it received only one side of the dispute; on orders from the B.M.A. every employer refused to testify. Those employers who were subpoenaed took the Fifth Amendment. The B.M.A. snubbed compromise, saying it would not fire the men hired to

replace the strikers and that it would not negotiate without a guarantee of open shop. After six weeks and fifteen hundred pages, the committee submitted its report without recommendation. Another strike had failed. In the next three years the B.M.A. crushed additional strikes among teamsters and stockyard workers and broke the spirit of labor.<sup>101</sup> For the workingman the Omaha of 1920 was a place where you were content with what was given you.

While some Omahans were enriching the city by protecting their personal fortunes, others were thinking about what the city should look like and how it should function in the twentieth century. In 1911 the enthusiastic city engineer, George W. Craig, submitted a plan for a civic center to cover four square blocks of the downtown area. Inspired by the City Beautiful movement, his proposal included grassy squares with tree-lined walks, a theater, the new county courthouse then under construction, and other government buildings adorned with domes and spires.<sup>102</sup> The center never materialized. The next year the Ad Club, a social and political organization, proposed the establishment of the commission form of government. With the support of the three major newspapers, the measure was approved by both the State Legislature and by Omaha voters.<sup>103</sup>

Other events caused residents to think about preparations for the future. On Easter Sunday, March 23, 1913, a violent tornado ripped through the city leveling a path four miles long. The storm killed 185 persons and injured hundreds more. Moreover, it destroyed 600 homes and damaged 1,600 houses, eleven churches, and three schools. Property losses, mostly on the near north side of town, topped \$6 million.<sup>104</sup> The city had never prepared for a disaster of this magnitude. Less than 8 per cent of the property loss was covered by insurance. Quickly formed relief organizations donated and loaned money to hundreds of home owners for rebuilding.<sup>105</sup> The city recovered in a very short time, and natives became a little wiser about preparing for future attacks by the weather.

Two years later the city annexed South Omaha and Dundee, a fashionable suburb on the western border of town. In 1917 it annexed Benson, the northwestern suburb, and Florence, the old Mormon settlement to the north. These additions contained over 35,000 people and increased Omaha's area by over 50 per cent. The city government now had to think about extending municipal authority over a much larger city.<sup>106</sup>

The year of 1915 marked the beginning of one of Omaha's major achievements during the Progressive Era. The steep hills which rose in every section of the city had always posed a problem. Beginning around 1890 the city, as well as private concerns, had graded down several of the sharpest inclines, but by the early 1900's no uniform pattern existed. The owner of one lot may have graded his property, while his neighbor left his undisturbed, thereby creating what was often a ludicrous disparity in the heights of adjacent lots.<sup>107</sup> This practice disturbed real estate values: a choice piece of property may have had a deflated value because it was ungraded or because it adjoined a lot containing a cliff which might slide during a heavy rain.

The irregularities annoyed developers in general and George T. Morton in particular.<sup>108</sup> Morton, a young real estate agent, organized his colleagues in the early 1900's and began pressing the state legislature for a law to create a planning commission which could regulate the grading of property, as well as propose physical improvements for the city. The efforts evolved into a movement to design a comprehensive plan for the city in accordance with other city plans which were being formed at that time.

Morton attained his goal in 1915 when the Nebraska Legislature authorized a City Planning Commission for each city of metropolitan class in the state. Each commission was to propose a plan and carry it out after approval by the mayor and council.<sup>109</sup> The next year Morton was elected Chairman of Omaha's City Planning Commission, and he hired three eastern experts to survey the needs of the city. The consultants, an architect and a transportation engineer from New York plus a street and park planner from Rochester, prepared a set of eighteen maps to aid the survey. The maps described the city in practically every dimension, including land use, population density, property values, street lighting, and the locations of sewers, parks, schools, transit lines, and unsanitary dwellings.<sup>110</sup>

As the consultants formulated their recommendations, the City Council drastically cut the budget for 1917, so the commission decided to stress only three areas: zoning, street widening, and a study of possible scenic drives.<sup>111</sup> In the first concern, the commission won only limited objectives. The State Senate defeated a bill to provide the commission with comprehensive zoning powers, but it did grant control over the platting of new additions and the right to regrade in areas where citizens requested it.<sup>112</sup> The commission later drew up a plan





*The tornado of Easter Sunday, March 23, 1913, killed 185 Omahans and destroyed hundreds of buildings.*

for the widening of several streets and proposed an “inner belt” traffic way and a scenic drive along the Missouri River.<sup>113</sup>

City planning was one of the strongest restraints ever placed on private enterprise, and Morton made it a reality in Omaha. He continued to preside over the planning commission until the 1940's, but by 1920 the commission faced bleak days on the heels of its successful start. In 1916 the legislature restricted the amount which the commission could spend on improvements to \$100,000, but in 1919 alone Morton submitted recommendations totaling over \$4 million.<sup>114</sup> Projects running more than \$100,000 had to be submitted to public election, and with the city deep in debt and with postwar prices and taxes rising, the commission had to postpone large-scale planning.<sup>115</sup>

After its heyday between 1905 and 1915 the Dennison machine fell upon hard times. In 1916 the farm voters capped a three-decade crusade by carrying a state prohibition law. During World War I the army made Omaha brothels off limits for servicemen stationed at nearby forts. Moreover, several of his henchmen squabbled, and Dennison momentarily lost control of his organization. In May of 1918 Cowboy Jim Dahlman went down to defeat in his bid for a fifth consecutive term.

The forces of reform, consisting of a melange of businessmen, prohibitionists, preachers, and educators, elected lawyer Ed P. Smith as mayor.<sup>116</sup>

The new administration galvanized the morals squad, but vice raids solved only the most minor of the problems that confronted the righteous mayor. Labor difficulties had not yet quieted, and Smith had no influence over the B.M.A. After a record year in several sectors during 1918, business slowed over the next two years of demobilization.<sup>117</sup> In 1919 soldiers came home from the war and found no jobs waiting for them. Finally, the residents were becoming more aware and more alarmed by the increasing postwar migration of Negroes to the city.

Annexation and immigration had swelled the population from 124,096 in 1910 to 186,135 in 1919.<sup>118</sup> Czechs, Russian Jews, Italians, and Poles had flocked to the city in large numbers, but the total proportion of foreign born had shrunk to 18.5 per cent.<sup>119</sup> At the same time the black population more than doubled: 5,143 in 1910 to 10,315 in 1920.<sup>120</sup> Until the war blacks had never comprised a very large segment of the population. Most had been domestics, barbers, and restaurant employees. They had been granted free access to most of the city, as well as equal treatment under the law. In fact one account relates this unusual case:

In May, 1872, Albert Jones, a negro, invaded the house of one Kate McNamara and in a fight that ensued the woman fatally stabbed him. For this murder she was sentenced to five years in the penitentiary.<sup>121</sup>

By 1919, however, 10,000 blacks constituted a visible entity. As in other cities around the country, the local economy could not provide enough jobs, and competition for work strained relations between the races.<sup>122</sup> Tension began to simmer in Omaha as rumors of assaults on white women multiplied. Investigation proved most reports to be unfounded, but by the end of the summer the whole city was jittery.

On the night of September 26 police arrested a black packinghouse worker named Will Brown and charged him with the rape of a white girl the night before. Even as Brown was being locked in his cell at the top of the county courthouse, many citizens were talking about meting out their own brand of justice. By the afternoon of the 28th, a sweltering Sunday, a noisy crowd began to mill about the courthouse. As the sun went down, the mob moved in. Some had arms, others carried cans of gasoline. On the fringe thousands of onlookers gazed at the spectacle.

The impatient began firing into the air demanding the prisoner. Around eight o'clock they crashed through the doors onto the ground floor dousing file cabinets with gasoline, and set them afire. When the fire department arrived, the mob cut the hose away from the hydrants.<sup>123</sup>

The crowd was still unable to reach the jail until someone seized a fire ladder and raised it to the windows. The quaking guards now surrendered their prisoner who protested his innocence.<sup>124</sup> Suddenly Mayor Smith appeared before the throng. He stood alone on the courthouse steps and ordered the people to disperse. Before he had finished speaking a rope encircled him and dragged him across the pavement. As he was being hoisted off the ground, three detectives rescued the unconscious mayor and sped him away to a hospital where he lay in serious condition for several days.<sup>125</sup>

The mob now returned its attention to the Negro. He was hanged from a telephone pole, shot by bystanders, and burned in the street. When all was nearly over, an intense thunderstorm broke, and the rain accomplished what the righteous mayor and the reluctant police force had not; it scattered the crowd. At 3 a.m. troops from nearby Fort Omaha arrived to clean up.<sup>126</sup> During the fury of the riot an old man and a boy had also lost their lives, and the courthouse suffered over \$100,000 in damages.

The soldiers stayed another day to prevent further disorder, but the people had already spent their venom. Lynch law had momentarily prevailed, and a man was murdered without a trial. A lawyer who had interviewed Brown in jail had found him so crippled with rheumatism that his ability to assault anyone was questionable. In its September 30 editorial which won the Pulitzer Prize, the *World Herald* said, "It is over now. Thank God! . . . May the lesson of Sunday night sink deep!"

In 1854 Omaha was the vanguard of the frontier. Her promoters were among the first to settle across the Missouri, and when homesteaders and pioneers recruited by the railroads came to settle the Plains, they found Omaha a bustling little city. By 1920 Omaha was a thriving regional center beset by modern problems. Constant change had filled its brief history — sixty-five years of booms and busts, achievements and frustrations, heated politics and social upheaval. The era climaxed with a horrible lynching and anticlimaxed with the next city election. In 1921 Jim Dahlman again sat in City Hall, and Tom Dennison held the throttle for another decade.

## NOTES

1. "Map of Omaha," lithographed in St. Louis, Sept. 1, 1854.
2. James W. Savage and John T. Bell, *History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska* (New York and Chicago: Munsell & Co., 1891), 53-63; Arthur Cooper Wakeley, *Omaha, the Gate City and Douglas County, Nebraska* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1917), I, 67-71; and Alfred Sorenson, *The Story of Omaha from the Pioneer Days to the Present Time* (2nd ed.; Omaha: National Printing Company, 1923), 78-92, 97-113.
3. Wakeley, I, 71; Sorenson, 111-112; Andrew J. Sawyer, ed., *Lincoln, The Capital City and Lancaster County, Nebraska* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1916), 153-154.
4. *Omaha Weekly Herald*, May 25, 1868.
5. Quoted in Sorenson, 279. Apparently President Lincoln issued an earlier order, subsequently lost, fixing the eastern terminus at Omaha. His second order, of December 2, put the terminus on the Iowa side of the river, but the U. P. had already settled on Omaha. When the Supreme Court recognized Lincoln's second order as valid several years later, the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy and the Chicago and Northwestern had already reached Omaha. Consequently, the issue of the Union Pacific's official terminus became meaningless. See Francis Joseph Burkley, *The Faded Frontier* (Omaha: Burkley Envelope and Printing Company, 1935), 196-210.
6. Sorenson, 287-89; Wakeley, I, 248-49.
7. Sorenson, 288-91; George R. Leighton, *Five Cities, The Story of Their Youth and Old Age* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1939), 150-53.
8. Sorenson, 292-98; Wakeley, I, 250.
9. Sorenson, 307-14.
10. *Omaha Daily Bee*, Jan. 1, 1885.
11. *Ibid.*, Jan. 1, 1881; Frank B. Ober and G. W. Day, *The Commerce of Two Cities, The Present and Future of Omaha and Council Bluffs* (Omaha: Omaha Daily Republican, 1880), 17.
12. *Daily Bee*, Jan. 1, 1881, Jan. 1, 1888. Throughout this section references will be made to the annual reviews which appeared in the local newspapers at the beginning of each year. These reviews were compiled from statistical reports, including those from city departments, trade associations, federal and state reports, and others. With but a few exceptions the reviews are reliable.
13. *Ibid.*, Jan. 1, 1885, Jan. 1, 1891.
14. Ober and Day, I.
15. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States 1880, Population* (Washington; D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1883), I, 519.
16. Dennis Thavenet, "History of Omaha Public Transportation" (unpublished Master's thesis, Dept. of History, Municipal University of Omaha, 1960), 20.
17. City of Omaha, *Ordinance No. 816*, Oct. 7, 1884.
18. *Daily Bee*, Jan. 1, 1881, Jan. 1, 1882.
19. *Ibid.*, Jan. 1, 1885, Jan. 1, 1888.
20. Omaha Board of Trade, *Omaha: The Western Metropolis* (Omaha: H. N. Blood, 1891), 30.

21. Ober and Day, opp. 16.
22. Sorenson, 408.
23. Edgar Z. Palmer, "Correctness of the 1890 Census of Population for Nebraska Cities," *Nebraska History*, XXXII (December, 1951), 259-268. Palmer compared school district censuses and voting totals of sixty-two Nebraska counties with the federal censuses of 1880, 1890, and 1900. He found that population fluctuations were normal for all counties but seven. Those seven, including Douglas County where Omaha is located, contained the largest cities and towns in the state. Allowing for an error of up to 6 per cent, Palmer estimated what he thought were more correct 1890 population totals.
24. Paolo Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan, Political Evangelist* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 46.
25. *New York Times*, Nov. 21, 1890.
26. *Daily Bee*, Nov. 7, 1890.
27. *New York Voice*, Nov. 5, 1890.
28. *New York Christian Advocate*, Nov. 13, 1890.
29. *Morning World Herald*, Nov. 17, 1890.
30. *Daily Bee*, Nov. 12, 1890.
31. Boyd, *State of Nebraska ex rel. Thayer*, Feb. 1, 1892. See Julius Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska from the Earliest Explorations of the Trans-Mississippi Region* (Lincoln: Western Publishing and Engraving Co., 1819), III, 230-237; and Wakeley, II, 871-872.
32. Omaha Board of Trade, *op. cit.*, *passim*.
33. *Ibid.*, 21.
34. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890: Vital Statistics*, II (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1896), 402.
35. *Ibid.*, 203.
36. *Omaha Illustrated*, unnumbered page.
37. Wakeley, I, 235-240; Sorenson, 600-607; Leighton, 171-73.
38. Omaha Board of Trade, 21; *Daily Bee*, Jan. 1, 1891.
39. *Morning World Herald*, Oct. 9, 1892.
40. *Daily Bee*, Jan. 1, 1893.
41. *Morning World Herald*, Jan. 1, 1899; Sorenson, 609.
42. *Polk's City Directory*, 1892, 6.
43. *Daily Bee*, Jan. 1, 1892.
44. Redistricting of the state had moved Omaha out of William Jennings Bryan's district in 1892, and Omaha's new district returned a Republican to the House.
45. *Morning World Herald*, Jan. 1, 1895, Jan. 1, 1896, Jan. 2, 1897.
46. *Morning World Herald*, Jan. 1, 1896.
47. *Ibid.*, Jan. 1, 1899.
48. James B. Haynes, *History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition of 1898* (Omaha: Committee on History, 1910), 3; Wakeley, I, 269.
49. *The World Almanac* (New York: Press Publishing Co., 1898), 251; *The Daily News Almanac* (Chicago: Chicago Daily News, 1898), 240.
50. *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: J. T. White and Co., 1904), XII, 380.
51. *The World Almanac*, 1898, 251; *The Daily News Almanac*, 1898, 240; Wakeley, I, 270-271.

52. Nebraska Commission for the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, *Report*, 1898, 3-8; *The Daily News Almanac*, 1898, 240.

53. Haynes, *passim*; *The World Almanac*, 1898, 251; *Weekly Bee*, May 11, 1898; Wakeley, I, 272-277.

54. *The World Almanac*, 1898, 251; *Weekly Bee*, May 11, 1898; and Wakeley, I, 276.

55. *Morning World Herald*, Nov. 1, 1898.

56. Statement by John A. Wakefield, Secretary of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition Association, *Morning World Herald*, Nov. 1, 1898.

57. Thavenet, 27-55.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

59. G. William Baist, *Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Surveys of Omaha* (Philadelphia: G. William Baist, 1910).

60. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Eleventh Census of the United States: 1890, Vital Statistics* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1896), II, 293; U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920, Population* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), II, 1271. The figure for 1900 includes South Omaha.

61. *Morning World Herald*, Jan. 1, 1905, Jan. 1, 1906, Jan. 1, 1907, Jan. 1, 1908, Jan. 1, 1909, Jan. 1, 1910.

62. *Ibid.*, Jan. 1, 1911.

63. *Ibid.*, Jan. 1, 1904, Jan. 1, 1907, Jan. 1, 1908, Jan. 1, 1909.

64. *Morning World Herald*, Jan. 1, 1906.

65. *Ibid.*, Jan. 1, 1909.

66. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census . . . 1920, Population*, II, 1182-1184.

67. University of Omaha, *Catalogue, 1915-1916*, 3.

68. Alpheus Beede Stickney, *Omaha as a Market Town* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Co., 1903).

69. Omaha Grain Exchange, *Annual Report*, 1904, 3-4; *Illustrated Bee*, Feb. 7, 1904; Wakeley, I, 232.

70. Omaha Grain Exchange, *Annual Report*, 1904, 6-8, 19-20.

71. *Ibid.*, 1907, 1908, 1909.

72. *Morning World Herald*, Jan. 1, 1919, Jan. 1, 1920, Jan. 1, 1921.

73. *Morning World Herald*, Feb. 15, 1934; *Evening World Herald*, Feb. 15, 1934. Tom Dennison is probably the best-remembered yet most elusive character in Omaha's history. Like most bosses he left almost no record of his career, and what has survived is exceptionally colored. Two booster histories written during his rule, Wakeley's and Sorenson's, do not mention his name. Dennison evaded all public documents, and even the newspapers avoided him. Most of what is known survives in hearsay and reminiscences. George Leighton's *Five Cities* contains a brief account of Dennison, filling only a few pages, but it is derived mainly from interviews. I have also used interviews: with George T. Morton, Aug. 12, 1966; Howard Thomas, Aug. 18, 1966; H. F. Becker, Aug. 23, 1966, Jan. 23, 1969.

74. Leighton, 197-198.

75. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Report on the Financial Statistics of Cities Having a Population of Over 30,000: 1915* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1916), 37.

76. *Sunday World Herald*, Oct. 22, 1961.

77. Fred Carey, *Mayor Jim* (Omaha: Omaha Printing Co., 1930), 8, 25, 63, 87, 95-103.
78. *Ibid.*, 165; Leighton, 196.
79. William F. Schmidt, "Municipal Reform in Omaha from 1906 to 1914 as Seen Through the Eyes of the Omaha Press" (unpublished Master's thesis, Department of History, Municipal University of Omaha, 1963), 47-51.
80. *Ibid.*, 9-10.
81. *Ibid.*, 24-36.
82. *Ibid.*, 64-65.
83. Evening *World Herald*, April 19, 1909.
84. *Daily Bee*, July 9, 1913.
85. Schmidt, 81-83.
86. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Report on the Statistics of Cities Having a Population of Over 30,000: 1907* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1910), 354-357.
87. *Ibid.*, 334.
88. *Ibid.*, 342-344.
89. Omaha's water system could provide water to 90 per cent of the city, as well as to a large proportion of the surrounding population. Compared with other cities, however, Omaha's rates were quite high, largely because of the four dollars per million gallons spent on purification. Chicago paid only four cents per million gallons for purification. See U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Report on the Financial Statistics of Cities Having a Population of Over 30,000: 1915* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1916), 144-156.
90. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Report . . . , 1907*, 434-435; and U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Report . . . , 1910*, 136-137.
91. Harry Edward Dice, "History of the Omaha Fire Department, 1860-1960" (unpublished Master's thesis, Department of History, Municipal University of Omaha, 1961), 41-52.
92. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Report . . . , 1915*, 296.
93. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Report on the Financial Statistics of Cities Having a Population of Over 30,000: 1919* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1921), 334-335.
94. George W. Craig, *Omaha's Financial, Commercial, and Manufacturing Resources Epitomized* (Omaha: The Omaha City Council, 1912), 3.
95. *Ibid.*, *passim*.
96. *Ibid.*, 19.
97. Evening *World Herald*, Sept. 2 and 14, 1909.
98. Gurdon W. Wattles, *A Crime Against Labor: A Brief History of the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Strike, 1909* (privately printed, n. d.); Leighton, 200-204.
99. Nebraska Board of Mediation, *Partial Report of the Labor Troubles in Omaha*, June 18-Aug. 1, 1919.
100. *Ibid.*
101. Leighton, 210.
102. George W. Craig to George E. Hooker, civic secretary, City Club of Chicago, June 21, 1911. The letter included a detailed drawing.
103. Schmidt, 47-51.

104. *Morning Bee*, March 25, 26, 1913; Wakeley, I, 448-451; Sorenson, 644-645; Carol Gendler, "The Jews of Omaha, The First Sixty Years" (unpublished Master's thesis, Department of History, Municipal University of Omaha, 1968), 132-133.
105. Sorenson, 645.
106. Wakeley, I, 453, 471.
107. Wakeley's book contains photographs depicting this situation. See I, opposite 218 and 224.
108. Much of the information of this section was provided in an interview with George T. Morton, Aug. 12, 1966.
109. Omaha City Planning Commission, *Preliminary Studies for a City Plan for Omaha, 1917* (Omaha: City Planning Commission, 1917), 4.
110. *Ibid.*, 13019. 13-19. ?
111. *Ibid.*, 20-21.
112. *Ibid.*, 21-22.
113. Omaha City Planning Commission, *City Planning Needs of Omaha* (Omaha: City Planning Commission, 1919).
114. Omaha City Planning Commission, *Preliminary Studies . . . , 1917*, 21; and Omaha City Planning Commission, *City Planning Needs . . . 1919*, 12.
115. Omaha City Planning Commission, *City Planning Needs . . . 1919*, 12.
116. *Morning World Herald*, May 8, 1918; *Daily Bee*, May 10, 1918; Leighton, 208-209.
117. *Evening World Herald*, Jan. 1, 1919, Jan. 1, 1920, Jan. 1, 1921.
118. U. S. Bureau of the *Census, Report . . . , 1919*, 79.
119. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census . . . , 1920. Population*, II, 750.
120. *Ibid.*, 56.
121. Sorenson, 153.
122. John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom, A History of American Negroes* (2nd ed., New York: Knopf, 1956), 472-473.
123. *Morning World Herald*, Sept. 29, 1919; Leighton, 213-214.
124. *Morning World Herald*, Sept. 29, 1919.
125. *Ibid.*; and Sorenson, 646-647.
126. *Evening World Herald*, Sept. 29, 1919; Sorenson, 646-47; Leighton, 214-215.