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Article Title: The Reverend Harmon Bross and Nebraska Congregationalism, 1873-1928

Full Citation: Annadora F Gregory, "The Reverend Harmon Bross and Nebraska Congregationalism, 1873-1928," *Nebraska History* 54 (1973): 444-474

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1973HBross.pdf>

Date: 1/06/2015

Article Summary: Bross served as a Congregational preacher, "home missionary" and administrator during the years of the church's expansion. He organized churches in several Nebraska communities.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Harmon Bross, Lydia Altuna Kingsbury Bross, Lydia M Johnson Bross, Thomas Doane, John B Finch, James W Dawes, Horace M Wells, Darius J Jones, John L Maile

Nebraska Place Names: Crete, Chadron, Wahoo, Lincoln

Keywords: First Congregational Church (Crete), Doane College, Congregationalism, Order of Good Templars, Thomas Doane, Nebraska Sunday School Assembly, Chautauqua, Nebraska Home Missionary Society, National Council of Churches, Grand Army of the Republic

Photographs / Images: Harmon Bross when he was superintendent of home missions for Nebraska (1889-1906); Lieutenant Bross, c. 1862; Crete Congregational Church; Merrill Hall, constructed on the Doane College campus in 1879; Chadron Congregational Church; the first Chadron Academy graduating class, 1892; map showing the distribution of Congregational churches in Nebraska, 1905; Bross; Lydia Johnson Bross



The Reverend Harmon Bross wore this buffalo hide coat during his years as superintendent of home missions for Nebraska (1889-1906). His headquarters were first at Norfolk, then at Chadron.

THE REVEREND HARMON BROSS AND NEBRASKA CONGREGATIONALISM, 1873-1928

By ANNADORA F. GREGORY

Congregationalism in Nebraska may be said to have begun while the region its boundaries now cover was still known as Indian Territory. Between 1834 and 1847 the Reverend John Dunbar, the Reverend P. E. Ranney, Dr. Benedict Satterlee, Samuel Allis, George B. Gaston, and Mr. and Mrs. L. W. Platt served their denomination as missionaries and teachers to the Indians.¹ Some of these workers must have preached sectarian sermons to their aboriginal audiences, though the nature of their service was more likely of a non-denominational nature, since their co-workers were often of other faiths.

While the Reverend G. G. Rice secured building lots for a church in Omaha in 1854 and preached a Congregational sermon in the legislative hall of the capitol in 1855, the Reverend Reuben Gaylord is considered "the first Congregational pastor in Nebraska." He came to Omaha from Iowa in 1855 and with nine charter members organized the First Congregational Church in Omaha on May 4, 1856. Soon other churches appeared in Fontanelle, Fremont, Platford, Decatur, and Fort Calhoun. By 1871 thirty-two churches were represented at the Lincoln meeting of the State Association of Congregational Churches in Nebraska. Among them was Crete, destined to become the sect's educational center and home of Doane College, today the oldest church-sponsored institution of higher learning in Nebraska.²

The roots of this denomination are in New England, where the Puritans and Separatists from Britain and the Continent had emigrated beginning early in the 17th century. In America their reliance on strict autonomy for each worshiping unit caused them to be called Congregationalists. Indeed, each congregation

was accustomed to writing its own creed. The sect, though less evangelistic than most Protestant groups, carried its tenets to the unchurched and ministered to its communicants as they moved westward in the homesteading era. The Reverend Harmon Bross served Congregationalism in Nebraska as a preacher, "home missionary," and administrator during these years of its greatest expansion.

Harmon Bross, son of Luke and Theodocia Britain Bross, was born on October 20, 1835, at Montezuma, New York. A year later the Bross family left their farm in western New York and began the long journey to Michigan in search of new land. They traveled by Erie Canal barge, by river boat, and over miles of land by team and wagon until they reached the rich farm lands available to settlers in Hillsdale County, Michigan, on the frontier of the old Northwest Territory. There young Harmon grew to manhood.

At the age of 20, Harmon enrolled with the first class in the preparatory department of the newly opened college at Hillsdale, only a few miles from his home. Although only one building housed the entire school, he acquired a basic classical education there.³ (Its president, the Reverend Edmund B. Fairfield, later became chancellor of the University of Nebraska.) Seemingly, by 1860 Bross had established himself in the teaching profession, but he continued to study theology.⁴ A proficient speaker, he became a leader in small churches on the Michigan frontier. He had joined the Congregational Church at the age of 14, and in 1858 at Somerset he was licensed to preach although he continued teaching until 1862.⁵

On January 17, 1861, his wife Lydia Altuna Kingsbury Bross, whom he had married December 28, 1856, died of tuberculosis. Bross was left with two small children, Inez May and Ernest H.⁶ The following year, convinced of the rightness of the anti-slavery cause, he left his pastoral duties at Somerset, Michigan, to answer the call of President Abraham Lincoln for army volunteers. He was mustered in at Detroit in Company G of the 18th Michigan Volunteer Infantry and was commissioned a second lieutenant on August 26, 1862. Before enlisting he had written a letter to his 4-year-old daughter:

My dear little girl:

The call of our country has been so urgent for me to come to her defense that I have volunteered with many others to go. In a little time we expect to go forth to

meet the enemy. I may not return & I write these lines for you to read if I should not.

You will find your mother's letters, the advice in that I recommend you to follow and it is just what I should wish to say. Let me join your dear departed mother in urging you, in *entreating* you, early to be a Christian. May God so bestow upon you his spirit that you will be. I am in great perplexity as to where to leave you. I pray that God will lead me to do that which shall be for the best.

I leave directions with your uncle Wesley for the disposal of the books, letters . . . in the manse; yet much in regard to dividing the keepsakes, I have directed him to give into your hands. You will do justice by your little brother. While in my few words to him I have urged him to be kind and faithful to you as a brother I hope and trust that you will repay him with a sister's fondest attachments and warmest love.

Ina, should you live to a suitable age & be prospered, doubtless there will be those who will seek your love. At that age be careful, be considerate, do nothing save from a fixed principle of right & may the Lord save you from being deceived . . . You will I have no doubt, sometime, feel that you have someone to love, some one will love you: that is all proper when you are at a suitable age, but be most careful who that is.

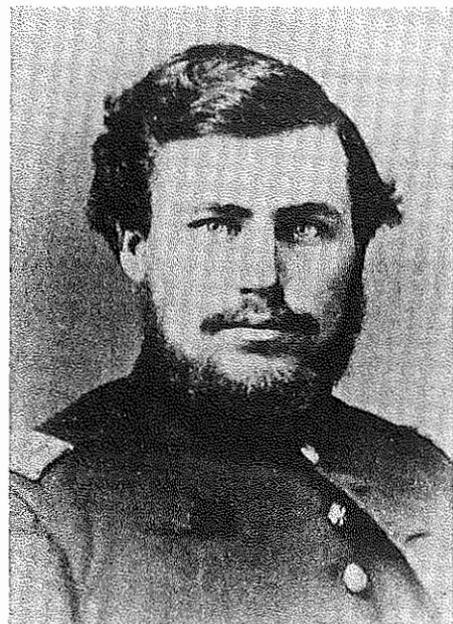
I hope the friends with whom you are left will give you such education as to fit you for a useful sphere in life. And now nothing remains for me to do but to recommend you to the grace of that God [who] has promised to be the orphan's friend.

Your papa
Harmon Bross⁷

The young father's military career was cut short when illness incapacitated him, and he was discharged on March 5, 1863.⁸ On September 22, 1863, Harmon Bross was ordained a Congregational minister at Canandaigua, Michigan, and remained as pastor until the fall of 1864, when he entered the Chicago Theological Seminary.⁹ He married Miss Lydia M. Johnson at Fremont, Illinois, on September 4, 1865.¹⁰ After completing study for an A.B. degree in divinity, he accepted a call to the First Congregational Church at Ottumwa, Iowa, in April, 1867. He remained at Ottumwa until August, 1873, when he commenced his pastorate of the First Congregational Church at Crete, Nebraska. In welcoming him to Crete, the *Saline County Post* reprinted an article from an Ottumwa newspaper:

Mr. Bross goes from here to Crete, Nebraska, where a Congregational College [Doane] is now established but still in its infancy. The Church here parts with him with great reluctance, but thinking that the new field is better adapted to his labors, he feels it his duty to enter upon it. In our view he cannot fail to succeed well wherever he goes, for his life among us has shown that he brings to any field of labor excellent ability, ripe scholarship, eminent Christian character and untiring industry and faithfulness to duty. Our best wishes go with him to his new home.¹¹

Located on the Big Blue River and with an estimated population of 400, Crete was the largest of several Saline County villages and towns established along streams or rail-



*Lieutenant Harmon Bross served
in the 18th Michigan Volunteer
Infantry in 1862-1863.*

roads. It had been incorporated in 1871, shortly after the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad line reached the town.

Although Congregational services had been held in Crete as early as 1870, it was not until March, 1871, that the Reverend Fred Alley, under the auspices of the American Home Missionary Society, organized a church of four members. It was affiliated with Nebraska Congregational churches of the South Platte Association in June, 1871. When Bross arrived, there were fourteen members, and no church building or property had been acquired. The acting superintendent of the home missions counseled the new minister to make the building of a strong church at Crete his chief task.¹²

Harmon Bross proved to be a tireless leader in his church and community. As church membership increased, organizations were formed within the church. A Sunday School, first established in 1870, flourished under the leadership of Colonel Thomas Doane. In addition to the Sunday morning and evening services, there were Thursday evening prayer meetings. A Ladies' Aid Society, organized by the pastor's wife in 1873, looked after the unfortunate and assisted the wayfarer. Later a Women's Missionary Society and a Children's Missionary Society were organized.

Delighting in the rapidly developing state of Nebraska, Bross ventured over the new Burlington railroad line to Kearney Junction in May, 1874, to visit another Congregational minister. He related his travel experiences in a letter published in the *Post*:

Leaving Crete, Monday afternoon, the train in charge of Conductor Morse, I had a most delightful ride over the B. & M. to Lowell. After the shower of the previous night the air was pure and stimulating, the prairies dressed in their richest green like a garden dressed for visitation, nor are visitors wanting. Land hunters on the train, and the way lined with prairie schooners bound for the Republican Valley, show that the fame of Nebraska has gone out into all the earth. The country along the line of the road is a marvel of thrift and progress. In towns, fine schoolhouses have been erected; in addition to comfortable residences and business houses heretofore built, good residences, stores, shops, manufacturing establishments &c. are in progress. In the country, wide stretches of green wheat and oats, and corn just beginning to show itself. The crops are in excellent condition. The area of prairie broken and to be broken in this part of the state this year is simply immense. . . .

Tuesday brought as beautiful a morning as ever shone on any land. . . Miles and miles of prairie so similar in aspect that you can hardly tell one section from another. . . The refreshing green of the wide prairie is dotted here and there by patches of flowers. Antelope are feeding quietly in different directions—or running gracefully before you, as you come over a little rise, skeletons of buffalo are all about you; a shaggy badger hurries into his hole; the delightful mirage shows you lakes and woods in every direction. You find land good enough for anybody. . . Returning, we pass old Fort Kearney on the military reservation. A few soldiers have just been removing the few buildings that remained and there is to be left to it only the glory of other days. The last squad of soldiers leave tonight over the U.P. Road for Sidney. . . .

The lands of the B. & M. have sold so rapidly this spring that in some counties few lands are left on the market. . . The Grand Hotel, refurnished and in new hands, affords a pleasant stopping place. I have spent a very pleasant day . . . at the home of Rev. L. B. Fifield, pastor of the Congregational Church here.¹³

The first Crete Congregational services were held successively in the Burlington depot, a small store building, and the home of the Reverend Fred Alley. They were transferred to the Crete Academy building after its completion in 1871, but increased enrollment at Doane College (into which the academy had been merged in 1872) made the need for a separate church building apparent. Ground was acquired in October, 1876, the cornerstone laid in November, and the church dedicated on June 3, 1877. Present from Lincoln to give the dedication address was University of Nebraska Chancellor Fairfield. Crete's response to appeals for help had been generous in dollars, as well as in donation of work, and friends in the East financed windows, furnishings, and an organ. The total monetary cost of the

debt-free church was nearly \$4,000. A local newspaper noted the event:

We believe we express the general conviction in saying that this new church is a beautiful and tasty building, and does much credit to the liberality of those who, under pressure of hard times, have brought the effort safely through. Not only did the Congregational Society give liberally, but the citizens of Crete generally were very bountiful, not only in goodwill but in good subscriptions.

Taken together, the services were very pleasant and will be long remembered by the large audience who were present. A Lincoln gentleman visiting Crete said there was not so good a church in Lincoln.¹⁴

For about thirty years the church auditorium served as a center for many college and community events. The church suppers and sociables, arranged by the Ladies' Benevolent Society, were appreciated by students, church members, and townspeople alike. Church attendance increased to about two hundred, and the main building was enlarged in 1883. Congregational Church leaders encouraged the Saline County Bible Society and in 1874 joined with other Protestant churches in union meetings. An expansion in church membership resulted.

During the late 1870's a nationwide temperance movement reached Nebraska, and two lodges of the Order of Good Templars, a fraternity of young "drys," were activated in the Crete area. Interest waned after 1878 when one lodge was disbanded. Several temperance groups were sponsored by Congregational leaders and Doane College officials. Thomas Doane, benefactor of the college, ruled that deeds to his land must contain clauses prohibiting manufacture and sale or use of intoxicants within its boundaries. At the invitation of Congregational leaders, John B. Finch, nationally known temperance speaker, came to Crete for ten days in January, 1878. During his meetings five hundred persons signed "the temperance pledge." His work closed with the organization of a Red Ribbon (temperance) Club in connection with a library and reading room. For their support \$450 had been subscribed. Union temperance meetings were subsequently held, and in 1880 a Crete Temperance Alliance was formed with Bross serving as president. A Band of Hope, another young people's temperance organization, became a factor in creating "dry" sentiment. By 1882 its membership reached 328, and under the leadership of George A. Gregory, a Doane student, it presented Sunday evening concerts. Its Christmas sociables and program at the Opera House in 1881 attracted over six hundred people.¹⁵

Difficulties arose over laxness in granting Crete saloon licenses in 1881. Temperance meetings were held for a week by Colonel Woodford, who reportedly influenced about three hundred persons to sign "the pledge" of abstinence. A Saline County Alliance was formed with Professor Arthur B. Fairchild as president, and a temperance committee of five was appointed by the Congregationalists. Church members took an active part in demanding strict law enforcement.

"A petition had been circulated and largely signed in the county asking our delegation to take certain action upon a measure before the state legislature. I was requested to go in person to present the petition and urge its importance," Bross wrote. His account of his trip is memorable more for his 21-mile walk from Lincoln to Crete in a blizzard on February 11, 1881, than for legislative accomplishments:

I could not well leave home, but much interested in the matter, I decided to leave home on the five o'clock freight Thursday evening, and return the next noon. The freight was two hours late in its arrival at the capital, so I could not see any of the delegation that night. The next morning, however, I succeeded in getting them all together in the corner of the assembly room and laying the matter before them. I was then ready for home. It had been snowing fearfully since early morning. It was the terrible storm of Feb. 11th. . . . I made my way through the storm to the depot. . . . I went to the office of Supt. Phillips. . . . When I asked about getting home he said, "No chance today, we'll send a snow plow through to Crete in the morning and I'll put you on it." In an hour after I left the office to go up town, came news of the train snowed in at Newton, six miles east of Lincoln. . . . It was Saturday, two o'clock, however before the train ran into the Lincoln depot. . . . The promise was for a train west next day. Inquiries Sunday morning, however developed several unwelcome features. . . . The sun shone bright on Sunday and four of us attended together the church services of the Rev. Mr. Gregory in the morning and two of us went back to the same place in the evening. Instead of being from home eighteen hours as I had planned, this completed the third day. I was so uneasy about affairs at home that I could not sleep nights and Monday morning I decided that something must be done. I went to the Supt's office. . . . About the only thing that I could ascertain certainly was that no train would be run west Monday and no one knew how soon. . . . Visits to different livery stables developed the fact that no one would attempt to drive through to Crete.

After consulting with friends who warned him against trying to walk and although it was snowing heavily around ten o'clock, he determined to make the trip on foot:

At five minutes of eleven I left the B. & M. depot with my face homeward. For two miles and a half the walking was tolerable, then I struck one of the huge drifts. On the north side of the track I think the snow was piled at least twenty feet in height. The snow had drifted down from the high bank on the north and settled down unevenly, much like the swells of the sea after a great storm. By following the travel of these crests, or ridges, one could walk on top of the first snow but would have to wade through the fresh fallen snow of that day. In that way I had to manage



First occupant of the Crete Congregational Church pulpit was the Reverend Harmon Bross. Erected in 1877, it served the congregation until 1910.



Merrill Hall (right), constructed on the Doane College campus in 1879, was destroyed by fire in 1969. Other buildings are Boswell Observatory (foreground) and Whitin Library (background). The photo was made in 1905.

getting through the big drifts which I encountered at every cut in the road. Sometimes I tried going up on the highland around these, but that was so tedious that I gave it up; for once out on the prairie I broke through to the ground constantly, and had to wade through snow from two to three feet deep. The best way seemed to be to keep directly over the road bed and observe the drifts so as not to fall into some loose drift and go over one's head. At one time when I was walking carefully on the crust of a drift about ten feet deep, I broke through suddenly and began to sink, but cautiously treading the snow under my feet, I extricated myself and went on. At another time when ten or twelve feet above the ground the whole space for six or eight feet around me began to sink, but I walked on as lightly as I could, and passed the broken line. The snow fell so thick that at midday it seemed as if night were coming on. Now and then one would pass a dead prairie chicken or a dead rabbit on the track, but no living thing stirred. One was startled at times at hearing something like the shrill whistle of a locomotive, but it proved to be only the peculiar noise of the telegraph wires in the wind.

Just before leaving Lincoln, wishing to have something in the way of lunch by the way, I had bought and placed in my overcoat pocket, a pound of pressed corn beef as containing the most nutriment to the smallest weight. At one o'clock I cut from it and ate about two ounces, I soon found my mistake, for the salt in it produced such a thirst that I added another mistake in eating snow to quench it. Occasionally I took from the end of a railroad tie which was exposed, a little sheet of ice that had been sleeted upon it. The drifts [were] so formidable that there seemed no prospect of a train going through for three or four days, and I felt that I must push on toward Crete.

When within a mile and a half of Denton station, I met the section boss and a man with him, and upon my telling him that no one was working from the Lincoln end of the section, they turned back. The last of the ten miles to Denton seemed long enough to be the ten miles itself. The thirst had grown almost unbearable; the ice under the snow, often caused me to slip and my knees were sprained so that for the last half mile it seemed as if I could not take another step. I arrived at the section house at Denton a few minutes before three. Nothing could be more grateful or refreshing than a cup of pure cold water, which they gave me. I asked for dinner and they kindly gave me the best they had, coffee without milk or sugar, some fat ham and pickled cabbage, neither of which I could eat, and some bread without butter. I found that Frank Denton, who had been married in the fall, lived only a half mile from there, across the prairie and I decided to turn aside and try to find lodging for the night.

Such kindly hospitality I found in this pleasant home for the night will never be forgotten. He and his bright cheery wife made the stay appear to be more like a pleasant visit than the experience of a snow-bound traveller. May their home be ever as bright and happy as now.

Tuesday at eight o'clock I set out on my journey again, making Highland, seven miles, at a few minutes before eleven. I had passed Road-Master Daily and his gang of hands the other side of Highland, and at Highland I was greeted with the sight of two engines. Mr. Fields, who lives in the section house, insisted upon my going in to get a cup of tea before coming to Crete, and I rested an hour. As there was little probability of the engines coming back until night, I continued my walk, but when about half a mile from the depot, the train came up behind me, and Alex Stewart, the head engineer, stopped the train and kindly took me in. At a few minutes after one I was at home.

H. Bross¹⁶

If endurance and determination were necessary attributes of

a frontier minister, the Lincoln-Crete blizzard ordeal indicated he lacked for neither. An item in the *Post* on March 7, 1881, might account for his feeling that he had to fight the storm to reach home: "Born to Mr. and Mrs. Bross, a son, February twenty-eighth." Harmon and Lydia Bross became the parents of six children: Willard Perry Bross, Alice Heywood Bross, Philip Fitts Bross, and three children who died in infancy (Howard, Anna, and Frank).

The Crete Congregational Church became the center for the promotion of Doane College by both pastor and church members. For twenty years Bross served as a Doane trustee and was a member of the executive committee for several years. The Young People's Christian Society, which had been organized about 1877, grew into the Young People's Endeavor Society which was effective as a means of training lay church leaders. Doane students participated in teaching Sunday School classes, where they worked closely with the church members.

Out of the desire of Congregationalists to improve Sunday School instruction, the Nebraska Sunday School Assembly developed. Beginning in 1881, it grew (after its incorporation) into the largest assembly of its kind west of the Missouri River. Located on the Big Blue River west of Crete and termed "The Tent City of the Blue," its ten-day yearly sessions attracted visitors who at first lived in tents pitched in rows. Permanent buildings were added gradually, including a large pavilion, a dining hall, and a headquarters building. Morning sessions for teaching Sunday School methods were conducted by men and women from Nebraska and from eastern states. Afternoon and evening sessions featured popular speakers, orators, and musicians in a less academic atmosphere. On some days attendance soared near ten thousand.

The Crete assembly followed patterns developed at Lake Chautauqua, New York. Chautauqua literary and scientific circles, which provided correspondence courses throughout the year for persons interested in continuing their education, were formed. Material for the courses was provided by and directed from the parent chautauqua in New York. Few opportunities existed for serious study, recreation, or amusement among settlers in isolated areas on the prairies before railroad transportation had been fully developed. The chautauqua was ideal



Chadron Congregational Church (foreground) was built in 1887. Its first pastor was the Reverend Harmon Bross. This panoramic view of Chadron dates from about 1905.

for filling a void. The assembly expanded its program, and attendance remained rather stable until adverse economic conditions led to its closing in the late 1890's.¹⁷

Although he considered it improper to hold political office himself, Bross became involved in the political aspects of current social problems. During the grasshopper years of the 1870's and the hard times following, protests intensified from debt-ridden farmers and others who had come to Nebraska with but slender means. They felt that the railroad rate structure made the advantageous marketing of farm products almost prohibitive. Placing some business and political leaders in the same category as the railroads, many farmers joined the grange organizations, the Greenback Party, temperance groups, or various reform parties.

By 1879 a rising Crete politician James W. Dawes had become chairman of the Republican State Central Committee, and Horace M. Wells, owner of the *Saline County Union*, Republican newspaper published at Crete, was its secretary. By 1880 Dawes was a member of the Republican National Central Committee. (Dawes reached the summit of his political career when he was elected governor of Nebraska for two successive terms in 1882 and 1884.) During his Crete pastorate, Bross had

become a personal friend of Dawes and both served as Doane College trustees.

In the fall of 1880, Wells, an Episcopalian, became Republican candidate for state senator from Saline County. However, an Independent Republican county convention nominated the Reverend Darius J. Jones of Crete, formerly a Congregational minister at DeWitt, Nebraska, who declared himself in opposition to high taxes and high railroad rates, although approving of the old Republican principles. The ensuing contest, termed "the most desperate campaign ever waged in Saline County," took a sharp, personal aspect. In reality it became a contest for the control of the Republican Party. Election returns gave Wells a majority of only three votes over Jones. After a contest over the returns, Wells was awarded the seat on January 1, 1881, by the senate committee on elections.

Animosities engendered by the election results left discontented elements in Crete. Jones and some of his supporters who favored the reform element within the Republican Party, along with other dissident voters, joined the Farmers' Alliance.¹⁸ Amid these shifting political lines, Wells established another newspaper, the *State Vidette*, at Crete in May, 1883, as the official paper of the Saline County Farmers' Alliance. Such "turn-about" politics encouraged scurrilous articles in the Crete papers which affected business, social, and even church circles. Bross, a loyal Republican, was caught in this turmoil and became a casualty. His leadership in the temperance cause, his support of the Republican Party and Governor Dawes, and his position as a correspondent for the *Lincoln State Journal* (published in Lincoln but widely read in Crete and throughout the state) made him a target for opposing elements. Dissension within the Congregational Church culminated in Bross' resignation in the fall of 1883. Friends, including business and professional leaders and Governor Dawes, rallied to his support and a reception in his honor was held at the church. A purse of about \$350 was presented to him, a gold watch and chain given to Mrs. Bross, and a petition read requesting that he remain as pastor. Bross withdrew his resignation, but in February, 1884, feeling that the division within the church could not be healed, he accepted a previously offered six-month commission for Congregational missionary work in northern Nebraska.¹⁹

The American Home Missionary Society of New York was in charge of major financial assistance for Congregational home missionary work throughout the nation. The Nebraska branch of the society processed requests for aid from within the state and sent them to the national society whose officers determined apportionment from funds available. The state board then apportioned the amount received among the churches needing aid. In this manner more affluent eastern churches could contribute equitably to support missionaries or to build churches in sparsely settled areas of western America. At times when national society funds were low, grants had to be curtailed and local churches suffered. Other benevolent groups contributing to church missions included the Congregational Sunday School and Publishing Society and the Congregational Church Building Society.²⁰

Bross assumed his duties under the direction of the Nebraska Home Missionary Society, Headquartered first at Norfolk, then at Chadron, his field of work extended over northwest Nebraska, part of Wyoming, and the Black Hills of South Dakota. Although railroad lines which had gradually extended into the region helped the settlers—and the itinerant missionary preachers—transportation was still extremely difficult. After leaving the railroad, settlers frequently journeyed over unmarked wagon trails to homesteads which might be miles away from neighbors. Into the new, spacious regions, with high hopes hurried the landless, the dispossessed, the debt ridden, the unscrupulous, the fortune seekers, those with adequate resources, the eager immigrants from Europe—and the missionaries of many denominations. Life for all of them proved difficult beyond their imagination, and the hardships encountered discouraged some; but the hardest remained to find a common bond with their neighbors in the struggle for survival.

Lydia Bross related an experience she encountered at the time the family arrived in northwest Nebraska:

When we first visited Chadron it was a town of white tents and we occupied a tent for several days. Then the tent was needed for other purposes and Mr. Bross suggested that we find lodging in a building in process of erection for a hotel. The frame was up and enclosed, the floors laid, but no stairs and no division into rooms. The proprietor said we could have a bed in the upper room, where there were fifty beds side by side. He would put a curtain around the bed. As that was the only thing to do, we accepted the situation and later I climbed a ladder to the upper floor.

The bed in one corner was enclosed with a calico curtain just the size of the bed. I

climbed on, and prepared the baby boy and myself for sleep. As I was the only woman in the room and every bed was occupied before morning by two men, the situation was somewhat unique. However, I was soon asleep. About three o'clock I was awakened by the stealthy footsteps of two men on the ladder. They came to the bed at the foot of the one we occupied, and after settling themselves to their satisfaction began discussing the incidents of the night. As they were gamblers, the conversation was a trifle strange to a woman.

Soon in the darkness below and close to the side of the building where we were, rang out several pistol shots with startling distinctness. One man remarked, in a calm, impersonal tone, "I prefer to be on the ground floor when the shots fly around like that." The remark was not especially reassuring for a mother with a sleeping baby by her side. As no one in the room seemed to be disturbed, and as the tumult below soon died away, I again slept, and awakened in the morning none the worse for the experience of the night.²¹

The arrival of the Fremont, Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad in northwest Nebraska coincided with the assumption of missionary duties by Bross in that vast three-state area:

With the first train into Chadron, August, 1885, I went to begin permanent work. I made headquarters at Chadron and soon had a gospel tabernacle ready for church and Sunday School. On Sunday, Sept. 13, 1885, the three churches of Rushville, Hay Springs and Chadron were recognized by council. Rev. Holt of Neligh being the delegate from that church, and Mrs. Bross from the church at Norfolk, where we were then living. . . . With the extension of the railroad in the spring of 1886, church work was established at Crawford. . . . September 29, 1887, the Northwestern Association was organized at Chadron and later the Chadron Academy was established. . . . The extension of the Burlington road into northwestern Nebraska and the Black Hills in 1888-1889 opened another large region, and population began pouring in. . . .

An interesting feature in the extension of this work was the use of Gospel tabernacles in the beginning. The success of the one at Chadron was suggestive of what could be done at other places, and in a short time the general missionary had at his disposal six canvas roofs which might be used for gospel tabernacles at various places. One of these had been purchased at Chadron by the Sunday School of Farmington, Connecticut; another was bought by money given by the Sunday School at Milburn, Illinois, and four were donated by the firm of J. W. Farwell & Co., Chicago.

At each place the use of a lot was secured, a collection taken to furnish sufficient lumber for the walls of the temporary building, and this was covered with the heavy ducking. No windows were needed, and one small door allowed entrance to the unique structure.

In this way the church and Sunday School had a home at once with regular hours for service and a distinct place in the life of the community. One of these tabernacles at Buffalo Gap was used for eighteen months. When one which had been used at Lusk for some time was not needed there, it was brought down to Ravenna and sheltered that church in its early history.²²

In addition to his duties as general missionary, Bross served for a year as pastor of the newly organized Chadron church. Besides organizing other new churches, he advised their leaders, supervised out-stations lacking pastors, carried on correspon-

dence, and kept records so that reports could be made to the Nebraska Home Missionary Society, as well as to the Nebraska General Association and the American Board of Home Missions at New York. Life was busy and far from monotonous for the middle-aged pastor:

A respect and reverence was granted to religious leaders and their churches. It was not unusual for those least expected to do so, to take an active part in the construction of new church buildings. At times, saloon keepers, gamblers as well as the more sober residents of a town would help gather collections, sing in the choir or sit in the congregation. The first church social, as always a community event, would attract cowboys and ranchers for miles around. Barrels of water were needed for one such celebration. When the minister was seen kicking a barrel down hill from the saloon to the general gospel tent, bystanders said to one another, "Any church would grow with that kind of a minister." Once at the close of the service, just after the benediction, the young banker stood up and said, "Boys he has forgotten the collection." A hat was passed around and soon weighted down with coins that showed that though the assembly was uncouth, it certainly was neither poor nor stingy.

One day in Wyoming, an especially rough looking band of cowboys appeared in town with a grand flourish and cloud of dust. They made their profane and noisy way along the street that led to the gospel tent. "Hush boys, there's a church!" the leader called out and the men passed by respectfully.²³

At the first meeting of the newly formed Nebraska Home Missionary Society in 1884, Bross was chosen a member of the Board of Directors for a term of three years. In a summary of his work since entering the missionary field early that year, he reported finding only sixteen organized Congregational churches and eight ministers in the northern one-third of the state. Bross had organized five new churches and had found ministers for them. Due to the "immense tide" of immigration into northern Nebraska that year, he felt the need for new churches was urgent, but adequate funds were not easy to find.²⁴

At the annual meetings of the General Association of Congregational Churches, reports of missionary work in the state were presented at the session of the Nebraska Home Missionary Society. In 1885 at the association meeting at Beatrice, Superintendent John L. Maile reported that out of a total of 168 churches in Nebraska, 109 were receiving missionary aid. Since contributions by Nebraskans for home missionary work in the state almost equalled the amount granted by the American Home Missionary Society, it was felt that all Nebraska churches should become self-supporting. However,



The first Chadron Academy graduating class in 1892 included (from left) Nathaniel Edward Gardner, Austin Craig Bowdish, Ada Belle Brown, Edwin Wright Arnold, and James Allen Brown. The Congregationalist-founded academy eventually became Chadron State College.

many difficulties remained to be overcome before that could be accomplished.

At the general association meeting in 1888, the need expressed by Superintendent Maile for more missionary work in southwest Nebraska was met by appointing a general missionary for the area and recommending that Maile spend more time raising money. During the year there had been a general missionary at work among the German areas for six months and part-time workers among the Germans and Bohemians. Sixteen churches had been organized with a total membership of two hundred. Obviously, churches with an average of fourteen members could not be self-supporting, but increasing settlement in western Nebraska indicated the need for more congregations.

Reports at the General Association of Congregational Churches at Ashland in 1889 showed ten churches had been organized that year with 170 new members, but the American Home Missionary Society found it necessary to decrease Nebraska appropriations. Of 171 Congregational churches in the state, only fifty-three were self-supporting, ninety-nine received missionary aid, and twenty-four were pastorless. Discouraged,

Maile resigned as superintendent of home missions in Nebraska to become field secretary with the American College and Education Society at Boston. Bross, chosen as his successor, became the sixth Nebraska Congregational superintendent of home missions, thus assuming responsibility for all home missionary work in the state.²⁵ Traveling widely under all sorts of circumstances, he was determined to promote Christianity in communities with few or no churches. Colonel S. S. Cotton, writing in 1904, mentioned the missionary work of Congregationalist Bross a quarter of a century previously in the Elkhorn Valley:

In the early times home missionaries often passed through Norfolk, as if it was a railroad center. Many times it was convenient for them to stay over a day or two. A large corner room was always ready for them in our home, and one of our greatest privileges was the entertainment of these heroic pioneers.

Chief among them, and counselor for them all, was the Rev. Dr. Bross, General Missionary, and afterward Superintendent of Home Missions. He was many times an honored guest in our home, but never for long. It was always "move on." I well remember one Sabbath. The Doctor told a most eloquent story of his work in our church in the morning. He was due at Pierce in the evening. At noon a blizzard began. Snow falling fast; wind blowing faster still. Unavailing were all entreaties to prevent his venturing on the perilous drive of twelve miles. His faithful wife insisted on keeping him company. The Lord needed them for future work, and they arrived safely. Where is the romance to home missions?

Thirty years ago, how few churches in all this region of country! How bare and unadorned they were! How small the congregations! With what struggling they maintained the preaching! Now, dotting the landscape everywhere, are beautiful houses of worship, with earnest and increasing memberships.

And let it not for one moment be forgotten that the home missionary and the church building societies are the parents of them all. They have all been helped into existence, and sustained until strong enough to stand alone, by these societies.

The dear little church on the prairie! If all the boards could speak, what a story they could tell of the dollars that nailed them there! But the record is not lost. God has the story written down in His own book. All the consecration, all the self-denial that has planted His houses is put down in letters that time can never blot out.²⁶

During the economically hard 1890's the newly settled areas of Nebraska lost population as unfortunate homesteaders were forced off the land by record drouth and unprecedented hard times. While drouth and depression ravaged the prairie, eastern financial failures restricted funds available for western missionary support, and pioneer churches suffered. Bross appealed to churches in eastern Nebraska to become self-supporting and asked that each member give a contribution for the aid of the suffering churches in western Nebraska. He urged Congregationalists to give generously so that

every minister and every little church . . . shall feel its support and comfort, instead of having an isolated outpost here and there, with the pastor as lonely as Robinson Crusoe on his desert island; we shall have communities of churches strong for God, and for each other; then shall our Congregational Zion show some appreciation of her heritage, of her ability, and her opportunity.²⁷

In 1891 Bross was chosen the delegate of the Nebraska Congregational Conference to the National Council of Churches. He had helped organize the council years earlier. In his report to the general association in 1893, he reemphasized the pressing need in the western areas:

The supreme need of the hour is the breath of God's spirit upon all churches. These gathered forces — churches, pastors, evangelistic general missionaries — all need the tender, sympathetic, moving presence of the Divine Spirit that we may respond to these urgent calls for the extension of the Master's Kingdom. . . . The communities without the gospel as yet, those home missionary churches with closed doors because means are not forthcoming to support home missionary pastors, make their short but eloquent appeal to us for the help which Christian fellowship ought to be ready to bestow.²⁸

In a letter to the American Home Missionary Society that year, Bross explained the situation faced in various communities:

The year has been one in general of progress in our work. This is seen not so much in the additions to the number of churches as in the increased efficiency of those already organized and in the general strengthening of our Congregational Zion throughout the state. The Superintendent has received urgent letters during the past year to visit communities with reference to organizing church work, but has been compelled to decline for the lack of means with which to carry it forward. All of the five churches organized during the past year, among our English speaking population, have been planted in communities where there was no Protestant church of any denomination. Whatever may be true in regard to the multiplication of churches in small towns in other states, our Congregational fellowship in Nebraska has nothing to fear from the most rigid investigations. We have been first upon many fields and other denominations have followed, until sometimes there have been so many that it has seemed wise to surrender our work, but, for such increase of churches we have been in no wise to blame. In all towns in the state of less than 2,000 inhabitants where there are Presbyterian and Congregational churches, we have been first on the field. . . .

We are impressed with the fact that our home missionary work in Nebraska has just begun. We have an immense region in the western part of the state, now rapidly settling, where we have been able to do almost nothing for lack of men and means. There are twenty-five counties in which we have not a single Congregational church, and of our one hundred and seventy-eight all but thirty-three are in the eastern part of the state and of our 11,190 members all but 1,200 of them are here in the eastern half of the state.

And yet, the counties of western Nebraska are settling with an intelligent, enterprising class of people. Lands have been advancing in price, many in eastern Nebraska are selling their farms and locating again in the western part of the state, thus showing their confidence in the growth and prosperity of that section. In other

cases colonies are coming from other states to the interior with train loads of household goods, stock and agricultural implements, ready for their new home.

We ought to organize at least twenty new churches in Western Nebraska during the present year, and our Board of Directors made an earnest appeal for an increased apportionment for the State so that something worthy of the opportunity and of Congregationalism might be done in these newer regions.

We still have . . . hope . . . and we look forward with courage and expectancy toward the work of another year.²⁹

But the relentless, adverse conditions continued on the western prairie, and in letters to the Home Missionary Society Bross told of requests received from the mission field. One pastor possessed only one suit of "old country" clothes; another reported that his wife had been ill for a year and there were no clothes for her or her son; another asked for a "black wool dress." Help came as shipments of clothing, food, fuel, household items, and small amounts of cash were sent to western Nebraska. Barrels and boxes of necessities were gratefully received, and when not needed were sent to less fortunate areas.³⁰ In 1895 Bross reported that although hardships were unparalleled in the state's history, only four home missionary pastors had left the state and replacements for them had been found. Not one pastor left his post during the hard winter. The Nebraska Home Missionary Society could borrow no money, having already incurred a debt of about \$200,000.³¹

In 1895 the Congregational General Association met at Crete, where Bross had commenced his pastoral work in Nebraska twenty years before. His report was tinged with optimism:

We have been reminding ourselves while together of the progress made by our Congregational Zion in Nebraska since we last met here in General Association, in 1877. . . . At that time we reported eighty-seven churches (in the entire state) with a membership of 2,613. We have now one hundred ninety churches with a membership of 12,780. . . . Now nearly all our churches are housed and reports show 72 parsonages. . . . The benevolences of our churches have increased from \$42,370 to \$105,621 and our Sunday School attendance from 3,649 to 19,511. . . .

Brethren, standing in the presence of this history today, surely we may gird ourselves with strength and consecration for the work remaining to be done.³²

In spite of the efforts to promote it, home missionary work did not fare well, and in 1897 few new churches were organized. A few had become self-supporting, but general missionary work had been given up, though contributions from Congregational churches within the state had increased about \$300 over the previous year. Bross urged that home missionary

"rally days" be held so that no church would have to be abandoned. The following year, however, the outlook was even less promising. Contributions from the Nebraska churches had fallen short of estimate and the apportionment from the East had been decreased, yet Bross retained the hope of better days and advised in 1898:

What is especially needed now in our home missionary work in Nebraska is that all our churches should be in line and thoroughly interested. We have been simply taking care of the work we have long enough. We need to come to self-support; to respond to the calls of communities where there are no religious influences and to do our part in the work of national evangelization.³³

Furthermore, Bross believed that Congregationalists should consecrate themselves to evangelizing the nation, and "Save America to Save the World" became his slogan.

Unfortunately the depression disappeared more slowly than did missionary need. By 1899 Bross reported that even though missionary churches had grown, their pastors had become restless. The percentage of pastors with college degrees and seminary backgrounds was as high in missionary churches as in self-supporting churches, and they were eager to move where the pastor received adequate remuneration. An increase in giving by self-supporting churches would provide for higher standards in missionary churches, and there would be less cause to leave poorer locations.

Improvements gradually appeared. By 1900 six new churches had been organized and the debts of the association were nearly paid. There had been some increase in giving by 1901, and four churches had come to self-support without reducing the pastors' salaries. Although the population in Nebraska had increased only slightly during the 1890's, there had been a 13 percent increase in Congregational churches and a 50 percent membership gain during the same period. But a sparsely settled area of the Sandhills, thirty miles wide and 102 miles long from Blaine County west to Alliance, still needed church assistance in the view of its leaders.³⁴

At state conference at Weeping Water in 1902, it was announced that missionary societies were out of debt. The state superintendent suggested no help should be given any church not contributing to the Congregational Home Missionary Society and to at least two others of the seven Congregational missionary societies. Seven churches had come to be self-

supporting and there had been a fair increase in contributions, but Bross urged continued giving to gain self-sufficiency:

Brethern, for our little churches at the front with self-sacrificing men as pastors to wage warfare against sin and wrong and indifference is an unequal contest unless they be supplied by forces on the main army. . . . They are too far from the base of supplies.³⁵

Following good harvests in 1903, it appeared that hard times were over, but other difficulties faced the Congregationalists. The search for pastors reached into seminaries of Chicago, Hartford, Yale, and Union, but most graduates were placed in the East. A "Yale Band" was organized to encourage seminary students to go to Nebraska. Bross summarized the situation in these words:

We need more ministers; we need to pay them better salaries, we need to expand our work and must have the means to do it; we need a general missionary, a man wise and strong to develop our work along spiritual lines. We need to have our work more sympathetically joined together, and with more power in it.³⁶

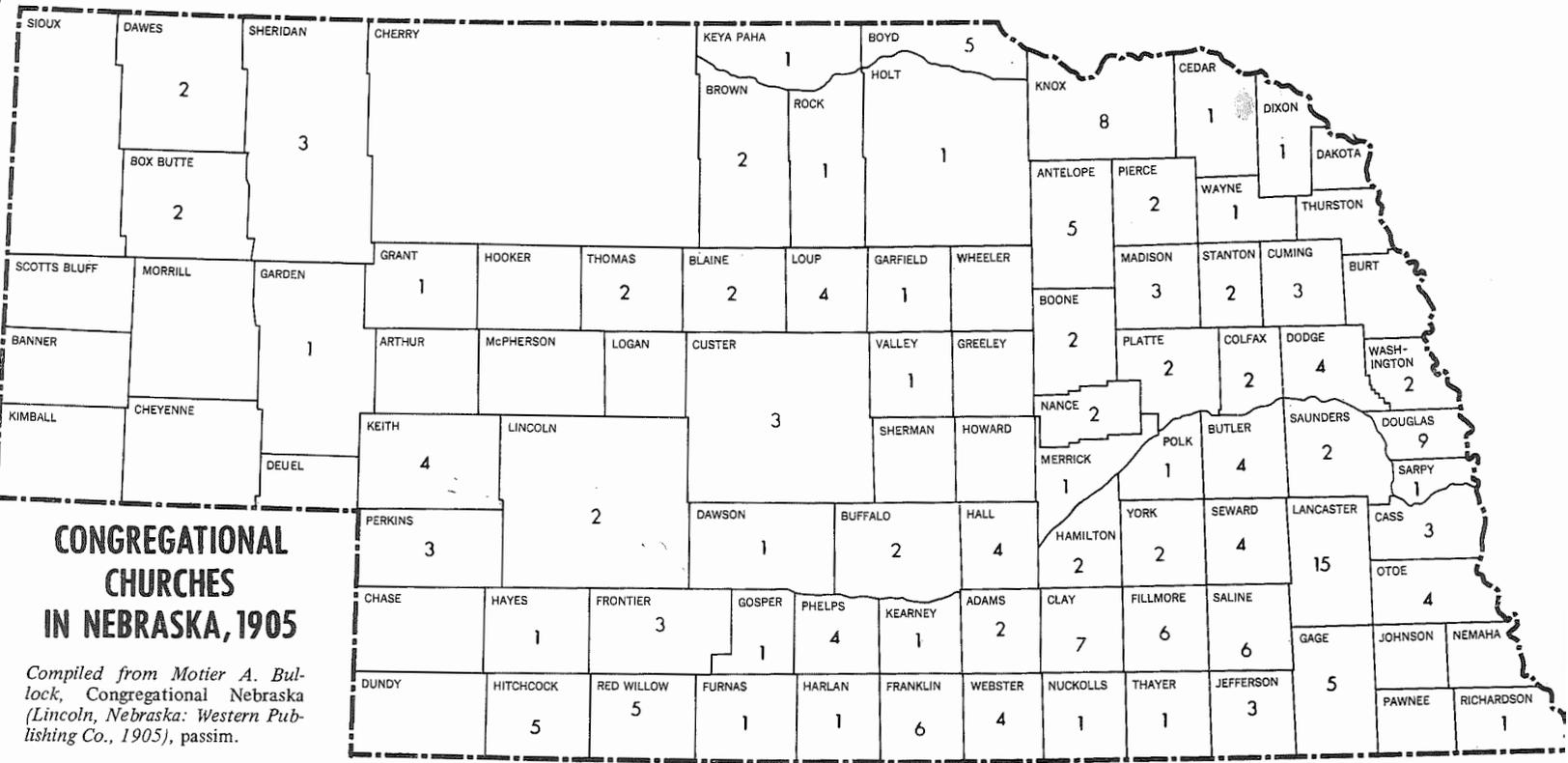
A "Stewardship Band" started in Nebraska urged the state's Congregationalists to pledge from \$10.00 to \$100 annually to home missions in addition to regular church support.

At the general association meeting in 1904, Bross reported that although Nebraska was largely a home missionary state with 116 churches and fifty out-stations still requiring aid, eight more churches had reached self-support. In the 116 churches were seventy-seven pastors, sixty-nine of them ordained Congregationalists. Although eleven men had left pastorates, twenty new Congregational pastors were expected to replace them. Evangelistic work had resulted in increased membership, and the Christian stewardship had shown some success. A number of churches had met in full the apportionment set for them:

Several of our frontier churches have exceeded this amount. . . . The evangelism of America, not simply for America's sake but for the sake of the whole round world is an enterprise to stir the dullest of heart. . . . There ought to be more to gather under the flag of our Home Missionary Society, and more and more enthusiasm in following it. "Save America to Save the World."³⁷

For over twenty years Bross had labored on the Nebraska missionary frontier. By the age of 70 he had seen his dream of establishing the foundations on which his denomination could build, and at the general association meeting at Chadron in 1905 he presented his resignation:

I have looked forward to this meeting, twenty years from the time of the beginning of our work in this northwest region, as the time and place where I should



The number of churches officially reported in 1905 was 202, with an approximate membership of 15,836. The larger churches were located in eastern Nebraska, mostly south of the Platte River. Nebraska during the 1880-1890's had suffered through depression and drouth, especially severe in the west, with a sharp population decline. Many small churches lost all or most of their membership. Weaker churches merged with stronger churches, perhaps to reorganize later. Records were difficult to keep. A list of closed churches would hardly indicate the real work of Congregationalists, since the total membership increased. Afterward, leaders decided to strengthen existing churches and not to expand or scatter too widely in organizing new congregations. Only 200 churches are located on the map since two cannot be accounted for. (See footnote 38 for listing of churches by name and location.)

announce my purpose to retire. . . . I take you all therefore into my confidence to say I have communicated with the Advisory Board and to the society of New York, my purpose to terminate my relations with the society at the Jubilee Meeting in May, 1906.

It has seemed to be after careful and prayerful consideration that this is wise and I hope at that time to express more fully than I have time to do here that appreciation which I have and always will have for the esteem and forbearance and the cordial co-operation of my Nebraska brethren during all these years, and the joy I have in having had the privilege of laboring with them and the Master for these thirty-three years.

Now that we are face to face with this problem of self-support there are several things to be emphasized. Chief of these is the undertaking to get our churches to appreciate the supreme importance of this crisis to which we have come; to lead them to see, as many of us see, the pressure of responsibility and privilege to take care of this work planted in care and sacrifice and Christian faith; to see how utterly inadequate to meet our needs is the apportionment of the National Society which has shrunk in these twenty years from \$28,000 to \$9,600 with the prospect of a still smaller sum next year. . . .

One other matter needs consideration, viz.: The relation of the Nebraska Home Missionary Society upon achieving independence to the Congregational Home Missionary Society. . . . We have had abundant and sympathetic help for years from that Society. What shall we do to show our allegiance to the national work? Give a lump sum each year for the regions beyond, or . . . give a percentage of our total offerings?

In looking toward the future, whatever difficulties we have to encounter. . . . I am sure we can go forward under the old flag. "Save America to Save the World."³⁸

At the meeting of the state Home Missionary Society, a memorial was read in appreciation of the long years of service by the Reverend Harmon Bross to the Congregational Church in Nebraska:

We have ever found in our Brother Bross a faithful minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, thoroughly equipped and capable to an unusual degree; a leader and a captain whose far-seeing wisdom has been splendidly useful in planning and promoting the great home missionary campaign of our broad commonwealth; an administrator and executive of rare ability and generalship; a man and a companion of ready sympathies, whose words of good cheer and stalwart Christian enthusiasm have always brought new strength and hope to church and parsonage of lonely fields. . . .

God bless you. May the Divine Providence lead kindly on, and may your last days be blest in peace of heart and in the fruits of past toil, blest in continued usefulness in such ministries as may be congenial and as a counsellor, an elder in Zion.³⁹

After the years of hardship, a new day had come for Congregational home missions in Nebraska. At a special meeting of the Nebraska Home Missionary Society in December, 1905, the Reverend Samuel I. Hanford was chosen as the new superintendent to take office at its jubilee (fiftieth) meeting in Omaha in May, 1906. At that meeting Nebraska Congregationalists assumed self-support of their home missions.

Bross had resigned from missionary work, but in 1906 he became pastor of the Congregational Church at Wahoo, where he served until permanent retirement from the ministry in 1912. The church was small but active, and after its church building burned in 1908, it was immediately rebuilt. Following the Easter service in 1911, he distributed a leaflet to his congregation informing them of his reasons for postponing his retirement:

I have been speaking to you of Easter joy; I have reason to rejoice with you today. I have always been slow to take any time set apart for our religious service for any personal word, but during the past few days, I have passed through a somewhat unusual experience for a minister who celebrated his 75th birthday six months ago. After almost five years of most strenuous work among you, I felt that some younger man would be able [to do] more for the field than I could and said so to some of you. While thinking of this, there came a call to another field with an increased salary and a heartiness and unanimity that left nothing to be desired.

But when I informed you at a meeting only little more than a week ago, of my disposition to accept the call, there was a protest that compelled me to pause. The history of the last Wednesday evening you know. When the petition, so numerously signed and couched in such terms that any pastor might be glad to cherish it for himself and children, was presented there was nothing to do but for the pastor to surrender. So I have said that while I am able to continue work I remain in Wahoo. When you think it is time for me to quit, you can say so. Heaven is as near the Wahoo parsonage as any place I know.⁴⁰

Following his retirement from the pulpit in Wahoo, Bross returned to Lincoln, where he had lived when serving as state superintendent of home missions (1889-1905). He had taken an active part in the organization of the Vine Street Congregational Church in 1890 as a charter member and a trustee.⁴¹

Even before his retirement from missionary work, Bross had been active in another field: the Grand Army of the Republic, the Civil War veterans organization. "Old soldiers" faced the same problems after the war as did other settlers: hard times plagued the nation; unemployment was high; crops were poor; prices remained too high; some people suffered. But the veterans had a claim on the public that others did not have—their service to the Union. When the acclaim for the returning veteran subsided, they acted jointly in relief of their distress. Gradually the G.A.R. developed into an effective political pressure group demanding pension raises and other "benefits" from Congress. Well organized, they constituted not only a political action group but a strong brotherhood.⁴²

Bross first joined the G.A.R. in 1881 when he assisted in

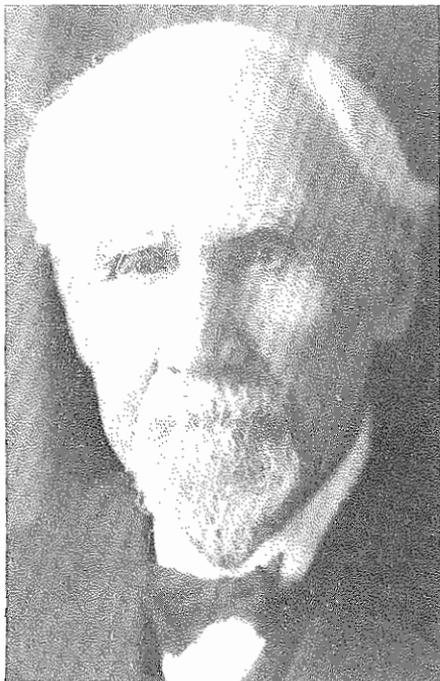
organizing the Holland Post No. 75 at Crete. At Chadron he joined the Leamington Post No. 227, and in Lincoln he transferred to the Farragut Post No. 25.⁴³ Appointed chaplain of the G.A.R. Department of Nebraska in 1901, he urged the holding of impressive memorial services on Memorial Day. He encouraged political activity by veterans demanding increased pensions. In his 1902 chaplain's report, he emphasized the organization's essential weakness—its inability to perpetuate itself:

As I travel about 25,000 miles each year within the bounds of Nebraska, it has been a rare privilege to meet officers and comrades . . . and give to them the word of cheer. . . . Other organizations may increase in numbers, towns may add to their inhabitants, churches may increase in membership, but the Grand Army will have a lessened list of members each year.⁴⁴

He was state delegate to the G.A.R. National Encampment at Washington, D.C., in 1903. In 1904 he was chosen commander of the Department of Nebraska. At the close of his term of office in 1905, he delivered this report for the year:

Comrades: . . . One year ago you committed to me a great trust . . . The Department Commander has loved the work and has tried to spare neither time nor pains that he might serve the cause we all love so well. . . . [He] has traveled in the interest of the Department during the year between 10,000 and 15,000 miles by rail and team, has conducted personally a large correspondence, and has sought to come into close touch with comrades all over the state. . . . The thirty-eighth National Encampment held in the historic city of Boston, August 17-18 was one of rare interest and never to be forgotten. . . . The journey there was in a solid train from Lincoln through. The generous hospitality of the city; the commonwealth and the Posts of Boston; excursions, and various gatherings, made that Encampment one memorable in the history of the Grand Army. We of Nebraska came back proud of the impression Nebraska had made; rejoicing in the election of Comrade Blackmar as Commander-in-chief and the selection of Denver as the place of National Encampment for 1905. . . . The Department Commander appreciated the loyalty and the support of our Nebraska comrades on that occasion. The only regret was that more could not attend . . . I am sure that we all unite also in the desire that we may have in our deliberations and upon the conduct of the affairs of the Grand Army the blessing of Him who has been and will be the God of the nation we love.⁴⁵

For nearly ten years Bross was assistant state adjutant of the Nebraska G.A.R. with offices in the state capitol. For many years he had compiled the journal of each annual encampment; the report in 1927 was his last one. That September, though in poor health, he attended the national encampment at Grand Rapids, Michigan. Upon his return he was confined to his bed until his death on January 8, 1928, in his 92nd year. At the annual meeting of the Nebraska department that year, his contributions to the G.A.R. were summarized:



While Harmon Bross was assistant adjutant general and chaplain of the state Grand Army of the Republic (Civil War Union veteran organization), he and his wife (Lydia Johnson Bross) lived in Lincoln.

His identity with the Nebraska G.A.R. extended over many years and his capacity for leadership has been exemplified in the offices of Chaplain, Commander and Assistant Adjutant General. Comrade Bross was appointed to the latter office in 1919 and most efficiently filled it until the time of his passing. . . . Great was the loss to the Nebraska Department of the G.A.R. when their beloved comrade was called away.⁴⁶

At the annual Congregational State Conference in 1928, the Reverend David Tudor read the following eulogy to the Reverend Harmon Bross at a memorial service:

The Nestor of Nebraska Congregationalism departed this life. . . . He came to Nebraska from Ottumwa, Iowa in 1873 and undertook the pastorate of Crete First Congregational Church. At that time the church had a membership of only fourteen, during his ministry of eleven years, the membership increased to 185 and a new church edifice had been built. He then was appointed general missionary with headquarters at Norfolk. His mission was to organize churches in the rapidly growing towns of Northwest Nebraska. In the following year, 1885, he removed his headquarters to Chadron and organized churches in that region. Chadron Academy was established very soon after. He extended his work to the Black Hills and into Wyoming, and became the Superintendent of the territory. "The aim of the work," as he states, "was to have our churches in groups, so that they might support each other and have fellowship among themselves. With this in view we passed from Ainsworth 150 miles west before attempting the organization of another church. The churches thus organized have proved efficient and fruitful in their influence for good, and in developing character among young people."

His work as a missionary was so successful that when there occurred a vacancy in the superintendency, in the state, Dr. Bross was naturally the one called to fill it. This was the year 1889.

Superintendent Bross was a wise leader and devoted his life to the highest welfare of both churches and ministers. After serving the denomination in this capacity for seventeen years, he retired, to spend six very happy and useful years at Wahoo where, during his ministry, both church and parsonage were erected.

He served as Moderator of this conference and for twenty-four years as its registrar. He helped to organize the National Council and held life membership in each of the five original Congregational Missionary Societies. In 1889, he was honored by Tabor College, Iowa, with the degree of Doctor of Divinity. He was widely known and honored everywhere in Congregational circles and outside.⁴⁷

On September 4, 1927, the Reverend Harmon Bross and Lydia Bross had celebrated their sixty-second wedding anniversary at their home in Lincoln, a quiet occasion in keeping with their advanced years. A friend calling upon them a few days later left this memorable description of the elderly churchman:

Now in his ninety-first year, more erect in his bearing than many men half his age, with the senses of sight and hearing unimpaired by any appearance of senility, Dr. Bross presides over his large family of grandchildren and great-grandchildren as a kindly patriarch. Although few men have had the opportunity for such service as his, still fewer have made such full use of the powers which nature gave them.⁴⁸

During the early years of this century, Nebraska Congregationalism appeared firmly established. However, gradual changes moulded new patterns of action. The state conference grew to be more unified; hence, church activities over the state became broader and more effective. An ecumenical trend at local and state levels encouraged cooperation among various Christian denominations. A national union of the Congregational and Christian churches took place in 1931 under the name of the Congregational Christian Church. Then during the years 1957-1961 the Congregational Christian Church and the Evangelical and Reformed Church perfected a national union entitled the United Church of Christ. Christian efforts were thus combined to meet challenges of another age.

NOTES

1. The Reverend Motier A. Bullock, *Congregational Nebraska* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Western Publishing Company, 1905), 5-6, 147-153. The wife of L. W. Platt, the former Elvira Gaston, must certainly have been one of the first women schoolteachers in Nebraska. Her career as a teacher to the Pawnee began in 1843 and except for enforced interruptions lasted until 1883.

2. *Ibid.*, 16-17, 27, 52.

3. A brief biography of the Reverend Harmon Bross is found in J. Sterling

Morton, Albert Watkins, and George Miller, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1905), II, 490-492; Marguerite Manzer, grandniece of Harmon Bross, North Adams, Michigan, to Annadora F. Gregory, July 9, 1969. Bross Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

4. Harmon Bross' license to teach, 1859, and composition book used at the Newaygo Union School, Michigan, October, 1860, March, 1862. In possession of Mrs. Keith Brunig, a granddaughter, at Eugene, Oregon; Henry Ford, "Quarter Century of Education in Michigan," *Michigan Pioneer Collections* (Lansing, Michigan), IX, 96, gives evidence of activity in Michigan State Teachers association; *Hillsdale* (Michigan) *Standard*, April 17, 1860.

5. Mrs. T. L. Harris, granddaughter of Harmon Bross, Mill Valley, California, fall, 1969, to Annadora F. Gregory; Mrs. Keith Brunig to Annadora F. Gregory, July 21, 1969.

6. Mrs. R. B. Hartman, daughter of Mrs. Harris, from Mill Valley, California, to Annadora F. Gregory, March 28, June 10, 1972.

7. Letter in the possession of Mrs. T. L. Harris, Copy in Bross Collection.

8. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Pensions, Washington, D.C., Pension Records, 1898, 1915, 1920; War Department, Records of War service and discharge. Bross Collection.

9. Necrology of Congregational Ministers, 1928, copy received from Congregational Christian Historical Society, Boston, October 9, 1969. Bross Collection.

10. Family data from pension records, marriage license of Harmon Bross; geneological records of Mrs. T. L. Harris. Bross Collection.

11. *Saline County Post* (Crete, Nebraska), November, 1873. Clipping in the Bross Scrapbook. Bross Collection.

12. *Fifty Years, Semi-Centennial of the First Congregational Church* (Crete, Nebraska, 1921). Accounts written chiefly by participant observers who had been church members during its existence, with the exception of the Reverend Handord, then superintendent of Congregational work in Nebraska.

13. *Saline County Post*, May 22, 1874. Letter to the editor, signed H. B. Bross, Bross Scrapbook. Bross Collection.

14. Unidentified newspaper clippings. Bross Scrapbook. Since they carry accounts of the new church dedication, June 3, 1877, they must have been written about that date.

15. *Fifty Years, Semi-Centennial of the First Congregational Church*, 36.

16. *Saline County Union* (Crete, Nebraska), February 17, 1881.

17. Annadora F. Gregory, *Pioneer Days at Crete, Nebraska*. (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1937), 172-179.

18. *Ibid.*, 86-87, 148-150.

19. *Daily State Journal* (Lincoln, Nebraska), November 2, 1883; Minutes of 28th Annual Meeting of the General Association of Congregational Churches of Nebraska, 1884. (Lincoln, Nebraska: State Journal Co., 1884), 24-26.

20. Charles Johnson Kennedy, *History of Congregationalism in Nebraska* (Chicago: Mid-West Congregational Historical Society, 1937), 34-37, 39.

21. *Collections of Nebraska Pioneer Reminiscences*, issued by the Nebraska Society of Daughters of the American Revolution (Cedar Rapids: Torch Press, 1915), 50.

22. Bullock, *Congregational Nebraska*, 83 ff.

23. Rosalie Trail, "A Nebraska Pioneer." Original copy owned by Bessie B. Brunig.

24. *Minutes of the General Association*, 1884, 24-26.
25. Letters concerning appointment of the Reverend Harmon Bross are in the archives of the American Home Missionary Society, Hammond Library, Chicago Theological Seminary, and on microfilm at Nebraska State Historical Society. Bross Letters and Reports, MS 2659, reel 4, letters 1104-1123.
26. Bullock, *Congregational Nebraska*, 130.
27. *Minutes of the General Association*, 1890, 11.
28. *Ibid.*, 1893, 29.
29. Harmon Bross to the American Home Missionary Society, March 15, 1893; Bross Letters and Reports, MS 2659, reel 4, letter 1105.
30. Bross Letters and Reports, MS 2659, reel 4, letters 1125, 1140, 1145.
31. *Minutes of the General Association*, 1895, 32.
32. *Ibid.*, 33.
33. *Ibid.*, 1898, 39.
34. *Ibid.*, 1901, 32.
35. *Ibid.*, 1902, 38.
36. *Ibid.*, 1903, 47.
37. *Ibid.*, 1904, 50.
38. *Ibid.*, 1905, 31-34; Bullock, *Congregational Nebraska*, 298-322, lists the following churches by county in 1905:
- Adams: Hastings, Hastings (German).
- Antelope: Brunswick, Neligh, Park (Elgin), West Cedar Valley (Elgin), Willowdale.
- Boone: Albion, Petersburg.
- Blaine: Brewster, Dunning.
- Box Butte: Alliance (German), Hemingford.
- Boyd: Butte, Butte (German), Naper, Naper (German), Spencer.
- Brown: Ainsworth, Long Pine.
- Buffalo: Kearney, Ravenna.
- Butler: David City, Rising City, Ulysses, Linwood.
- Cass: Avoca, Eagle, Weeping Water.
- Cedar: Aten.
- Clay: Clay Center, Fairfield, Inland (German), Liberty Creek, Sutton, Sutton (German), Harvard.
- Colfax: Howells, Leigh.
- Cuming: Beemer, West Point, Wisner.
- Custer: Sargent, Wescott, Comstock.
- Dawes: Chadron, Crawford.
- Dawson: Farnam.
- Dodge: Dodge, Fairview, Fremont, Scribner.
- Dixon: Newcastle.
- Douglas: Irvington, Omaha (First), Omaha (St. Mary's Avenue), Omaha (Plymouth), Omaha (Saratoga), Omaha (German), Omaha (Cherry Hill), Omaha (Hillside), Omaha (Park Vale).
- Fillmore: Exeter, Fairmont, Geneva, Strang, Grafton, Shickley.
- Franklin: Campbell, Clemen, Franklin, Riverton, Hildreth, Naponee.
- Frontier: Curtis, Eustis, Stockville.
- Furnas: Cambridge.
- Gage: Beatrice, Cortland, Highland, Pickrell, Wymore.
- Garden: Mumper.
- Garfield: Burwell.
- Gosper: Bertrand.
- Grant: Hyannis.
- Hall: Grand Island, Doniphan, South Platte, West Hamilton.
- Hamilton: Stockham (German), Aurora.
- Harlan: Alma.
- Hayes: Hayes County (German).
- Hitchcock: Eureka, Palisade, Fairview, Rosefield, Trenton.
- Holt: Dustin.
- Jefferson: Steele City, Plymouth (First), Harbine.

- Kearney: Wilcox.
 Keith: Brule, Keystone, Morning Star, Ogallala.
 Keya Paha: Springview.
 Knox: Addison, Bazile, Bloomfield, Center, Creighton, Santee, Crofton, Niobrara.
 Lancaster: Lincoln (First), Lincoln (Plymouth), Lincoln (German), Lincoln (Vine Street), Lincoln (Butler Avenue), Lincoln (Swedish), Lincoln (Zion), Lincoln (Salem), Olive Branch (German), Havelock, Princeton (German), Rokeby, Waverly, Waverly (Swedish), Hallam (German).
 Lincoln: Wallace, Daily Branch.
 Loup: Cummings Park, Moulton, Taylor, Almeria.
 Madison: Newman Grove, Norfolk (First), Norfolk (Second).
 Merrick: Clarks.
 Nance: Genoa, Timber Creek.
 Nuckolls: Superior (German).
 Otoe: Camp Creek, Minersville, Paisley (Unadilla), Syracuse.
 Perkins: Grant, Madrid, Venango.
 Phelps: Holdrege, Keystone, Loomis, Urbana (Welsh).
39. *Ibid.*, 27-28.
 40. Copy of original page at the Nebraska Historical Society, Bross Collection.
 41. Grace Harrison Swift, *The First Fifty Years, Vine Congregational Church, 1890-1940* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1965), 3-4.
 42. Mary R. Dearing, *Veterans in Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952), 219-489.
 43. *Journal of the Proceedings of the Nebraska G.A.R.*, VIII, (Lincoln, 1928), 48.
 44. *Ibid.*, IV, 1902, 96, ff.
 45. *Ibid.*, V, 1905, 21, ff.
 46. *Journal of Proceedings of the Nebraska G.A.R.*, VIII, 48-49.
 47. *Minutes of the General Association*, 1928, 33; Survivors were: wife, Lydia; daughters, Mrs. Inez Gordon, Wagon Mound, New Mexico, and Mrs. Alice B. Newell, Blair; sons, Perry, Kansas City, Missouri, and Philip, Lincoln, Nebraska. *Lincoln (Nebraska) Star*, January 9, 1928.
 48. Trail, "A Nebraska Pioneer." Bross Collection.
- Pierce: Plainview, Pierce.
 Platte: Monroe, Columbus.
 Polk: Silver Creek.
 Red Willow: Indianola, McCook, McCook (German), Noble, Danbury.
 Richardson: Verdon.
 Rock: Bassett.
 Saline: Crete, Crete (German), DeWitt, Friend, Friend (German), Turkey Creek (German).
 Sarpy: Springfield.
 Saunders: Ashland, Wahoo.
 Seward: Germantown, German-town (German), Milford, Seward.
 Sheridan: Bingham, Hay Springs, Reno.
 Stanton: Maple Creek, Stanton.
 Thayer: Bruning.
 Thomas: Thedford, Seneca.
 Valley: Arcadia.
 Washington: Arlington, Blair.
 Wayne: Carroll (Welsh).
 Webster: Bladen, Cowles, Indian Creek, Red Cloud.
 York: York, Arborville.