



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: Across Nebraska by Train in 1877: The Travels of Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg

Full Citation: Frederic Trautmann, "Across Nebraska by Train in 1877: The Travels of Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg," *Nebraska History* 65 (1984): 411-422.

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

Date: 1/22/2013

Article Summary: Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg (1854-1918) was perhaps the 19th century's foremost traveler and greatest travel writer. His career as a diplomat and his marriage to Minnie Hauck (1852-1912), who performed in opera around the globe, seems to have been secondary to his travels. He was the first German in Korea, was largely responsible for the maritime practice of signaling positions of icebergs and wrecks and for universal and standard time zones. He was a "writing machine": 40 plus books, including eight American titles. This article is an edited translation of his description of Nebraska in 1877.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg, Minnie Hauck, Thomas D Clark, Mark Twain, Patrick McDonald, Jim Moore, Julius Froebel

Place Names: Since this article represents a journey across Nebraska, only the unique names will be listed as follows: Kanesville; American Styx; Elkhorn River; Platte River; Barton; Julesberg; Fort Sedgwick; Cheyenne; Sidney; Cheyenne County; Black Hills; Tracey City; Bushnell

Keywords: Union Pacific; Pullman palace cars; Iliff the Cattle King's Tavern; supper station; vigilance committee; *SidneyTelegraph*; bullwhacker; *Williams' Travel Guide*; *Aus Amerika*

Photographs / Images: None

Across Nebraska by Train in 1877: The Travels of Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg

Translated and Edited by Frederic Trautmann

INTRODUCTION

Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg (1854-1918) was perhaps the 19th century's foremost traveler and greatest travel writer.¹ At 21 he began the trips and the books that led him all over the world and brought the world to countless readers of several languages. His career as a diplomat—consul in Loncon for years—seems to have been secondary to his travels, as was his marriage to Minnie Hauck (1852-1912), who performed in opera around the globe and sang the first American *Carmen*.²

Hesse-Wartegg himself was the first German in Korea. Moreover, he was largely responsible for the maritime practice of signaling positions of icebergs and wrecks, and for universal and standard time zones. To call him an author is misleading. He was a writing machine: 40-odd books, including ones on the Balkans, Canada, China, India, Japan, Korea, the Middle East, Samoa, Siam, Tunisia, South America, and the United States. Probably nobody has written more American description and travel than this German. Some of the eight American titles went into later editions; others were in multiple volumes. His comprehensive study of the United States, four volumes, appeared in *Nord-Amerika: Seine Stadte und Naturwunder, sein Land und seine Leute* (*North America: Its Cities and Natural Wonders, Its Land and People*), which contains a chapter on Nebraska. He produced this work like so many others, by traveling in the places discussed, by reading their history and current affairs, and by questioning authorities. Thus, Nebraska was on the itinerary in 1877, and his description reflects his research and reflection on Nebraska's past, present, and future. How good was he as a travel writer? How good was his method for composing travels? Thomas D. Clark commends "this German observer's writings" and their "many

precise and enlightening observations," and notes that in *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain "leaned heavily" on Hesse-Wartegg.³ Below, in translation, is Hesse-Wartegg's description of Nebraska:⁴

TRANSLATION

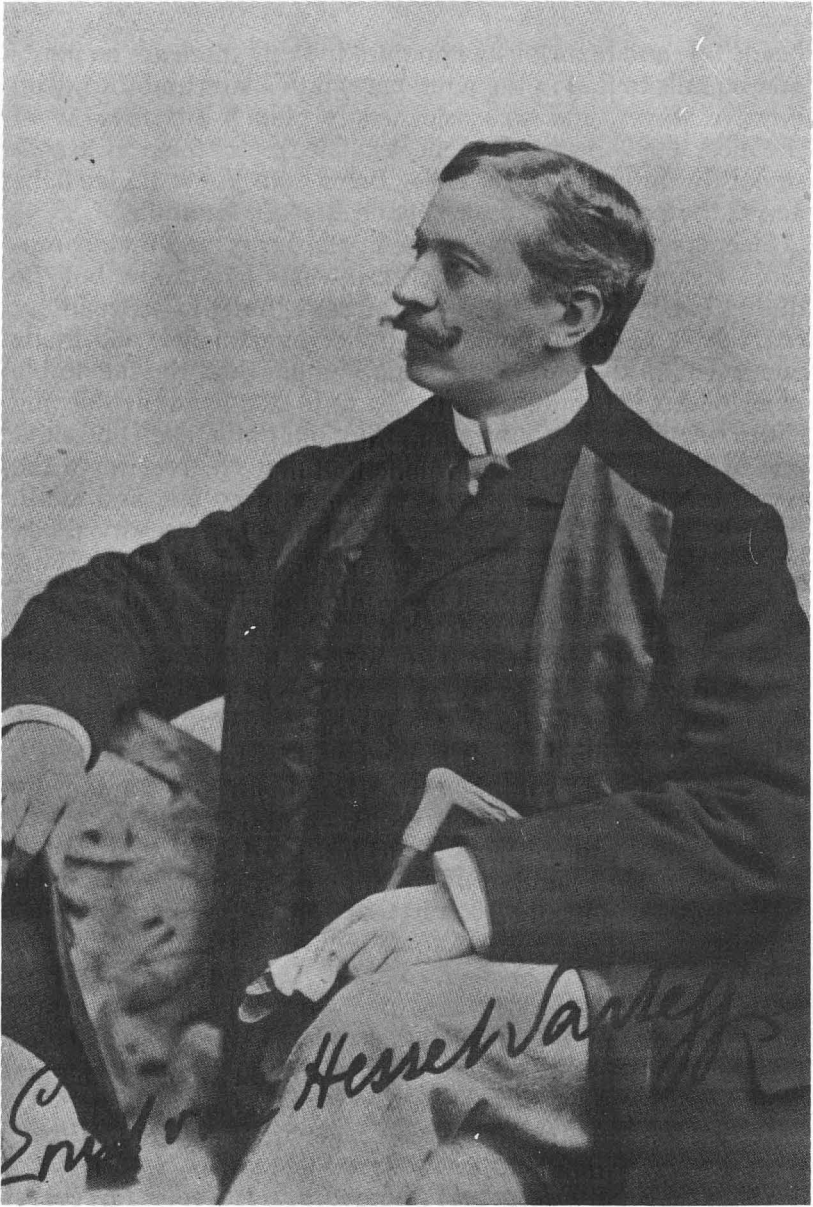
In the Valley of the Platte

We are in Omaha, capital of Nebraska, on our way to California.⁵ The reader will search older geographies and maps in vain for Omaha; it is only about twenty years old.⁶ Twenty years ago this place was in the big white patch on American maps, from Missouri to California, called "The Great American Desert—unexplored." On the site of this important center of trade and transportation, however, the Missouri River ferryman lived in this board shack, civilization having come far enough to need a ferryboat. Indeed, east of the Missouri was the Mormon town of Kanessville;⁷ and the Mormons, in expeditions in various directions, crossed what was then the American Styx, into the expanses of the Far West.⁸

Twenty years later we see, not a fragile ferry, but a colossal iron bridge, one of the largest in the world, nearly 3,000 feet long. In Kanessville's place is the flourishing city of Council Bluffs with 20,000 inhabitants. Across the river, along its banks, is Omaha with about 30,000, plus the state capitol [not in 1877], colleges, transportation terminals, factories, machine shops, and hotels; one of the most important cities of the greater Mississippi valley. Everything it has it owes to the railroad.

The railroad's steady, beneficial influence on civilization was first recognized in the United States. Built through a dry, treeless, unpeopled desert, the railroad now crosses an agricultural paradise.⁹ Civilization sweeps like a storm across the plains and smashes what will not bow down or give way before it. Buffalo, panther, Indian—all flee north to the wastes of Dakota and Wyoming, while Nebraska becomes a farmer's dream, the New World's breadbasket.

We are about to embark on the green ocean of prairie, in a palace car of the Union Pacific. These cars are to the West what great passenger liners are to the Atlantic—big, fast,



Ernest von Hesse-Wartegg, about 1900.

beautiful, and luxuriously appointed. True, there are no masts and no sails to flap in the wind here, no rocking and tossing on massive waves, and no seasickness to blanch the roses out of the most lovely passengers' cheeks. The ship of the prairie rolls smoothly on shiny, level rails. Before we know it, we'll be across the prairie-ocean and at the Rocky Mountains!

Sleepers and parlors of Pullman palace cars, and their sumptuous accommodations are no longer new to Europe. but the dining car is *ne plus ultra* [the utmost limit] in railroading. Scarcely have we left our sleeping compartments, and made our toilets in the elegant dressing lounge, than the inevitable black porter in blinding white asks us to step from the sleeping car to the diner. We hand the cashier our dollar each and sit at one of the attractively laid tables. Again, Negroes serve the lavish meal. Steak, chops, fish, ice cream, coffee, and tea in the greatest variety, as much as you can eat and as tasty as can be: we imagine ourselves in the fanciest of French restaurants, not in a dining hall speeding across the prairie at thirty miles an hour! Coffee hardly finished, we are invited again to change cars, this time for the parlor or smoker and its plush armchairs, splendid cigars, and the morning papers with news of exciting European events! And all in the middle of the prairies, 2,000 miles from New York, 5,000 from Europe!

At first we race through the American breadbasket. Here and there appear small, neat towns of twenty to fifty houses, largely built in the last five years and inhabited by German and Bohemian immigrants. At the stations we see well-dressed, well-nourished country people and eager, bustling enterprise. Thirty miles from Omaha we reach the broad, open valley of the Platte, one of the Missouri's largest tributaries. We will follow it across Nebraska, several hundred miles upstream. We have gained the expansive region of steppe [level unforested plain], which, despite its seeming desolation, is full of the most interesting life.

Before reaching the Platte itself, we cross a high bridge over the Elkhorn, which empties into the Platte here. Not long ago a freight left this bridge and plunged into the river, an event not worth further attention because of frequent occurrence, except that one car carried a load of fish and fish eggs for the stocking of California rivers. The Elkhorn is now one of the richest in fish of all prairie rivers.

The Platte deserves the name.¹⁰ Its course, often divided by

many sandy islands into as many branches, is frequently miles wide¹¹ and so shallow it could be waded, were its bed not of treacherous quicksand into which horses and riders, and wagons and teams, have sunk without hope and without a trace. The water is yellow and muddy, like the Mirrousi's, and impassable to all boats, even canoes. The farther upstream you go, the fewer trees you see, and the less agriculture. The steppe is open and not farmed. Civilization appears only every ten to twenty miles as a railroad water station, where perhaps an immigrant or a farmer has built a little house. Now and then we notice prairie dogs and watch delicate antelope on the broad steppe. To the north rise chains of hills with steep slopes, called *bluffs*.

Gibbon, Kearney Junction, North Platte, and many other stations appear on the map but consist of few houses, one or two stores, one or two newspaper offices, and a hotel.

Here is another station or, rather, a city: Boston [Barton].¹² Has the reader heard of it? We search the map. Here it is: a fairly big circle, and beside it, in fat letters, *Boston* [Barton]. At last, an important place in these wide-open spaces! We have come hundreds of miles, measuring the length of spacious Nebraska, and met not one city. Repeatedly we hear:

"There was a city of 5,000—there, one of 10,000."¹³

"Where?" we ask.

"There!"

And the speaker points into the blue.

"Is no trace left? No house, no ruins, no hut, no tree? When was it founded?"

"Hmm, hmm—about ten years ago."

"What happened to it? Fire? Earthquake?"

"No. Disappeared. About ten years ago. Dismantled. Moved on."

The story is the same all over Nebraska: on the map, large circles and high-sounding names along the railroad and the river. In reality, not a house anywhere nor the remains of one.

Now another young city, Boston [Barton] and with an exceptionally big circle on the map. Only we have no more faith in these circles. We look in our guidebook. Boston [Barton]! There it is! We read the description: "Boston [Barton], named for a very honorable Mr. Boston [Barton] of North Platte; 368 miles from Omaha and 3,421 feet above sea level; only a siding

for railroads that meet here." Aha! We cut short our expectations, be the circle as large as a dish.

Still, we did the circles great injustice. The next station was a town, Julesburg.¹⁴

Julesburg. The guidebook tells us the "city" had stood *across the river*, four miles from its present location, and was a *pretty rough place*. Did the city move? Yes. Though it had several thousand people, it moved, after repeated Indian attacks, to a site hard by Fort Sedgwick, built here twelve years ago. We studied the horizon through binoculars.

"Looking for Sedgwick?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't exist anymore. Taken down."

We lower our binoculars, disappointed. We have had enough of Nebraska [and Colorado] and its cities.

Nothing remains of old Julesburg but the cemetery, an original indeed: when the city was dismantled in 1868 and moved to its present site after a short existence, the cemetery numbered seventy-four graves and only three—I say, three—held people who died a natural death. The rest passed away "with their boots on," a euphemism for such demises as being killed in a holdup, murder, suicide, manslaughter, hanging, and lynching. To one dead man alone does the euphemism not apply: he was murdered in bed, barefoot.

According to the guidebook, Julesburg now consists of "one or two stores, stables, corrals, and some *adobe* huts. Residents, about five dozen in all, admit reluctantly that Julesburg's growth 'has slackened somewhat.'" If this "slackening" continues, nothing will be left of the city in a few months. Except the cemetery, if a cemetery exists now. But it is not advisable for tourists to voice such opinions about Julesburg's future while the train stands in the station. Before the Union Pacific gave Julesburg a brief importance, it was a station on the famous Pony Express, precursor to the railroad.

To Cheyenne

From Julesburg to Cheyenne is only about 140 miles but of naked, lifeless steppe, without agriculture, without a city, without people. The Union Pacific's palace cars, speeding across it daily, do not stop. Yankee passengers stretch out in

soft, comfortable, velvet-covered easy chairs and glance now and then through the windows at prairie dogs sitting beside their holes and barking at the passing train. European passengers imagine an Indian attack, a derailment, or a collision, to round out memories of the trip. Everything between here and Cheyenne is so desolate, so absolutely without life, that a traveler unwillingly calls upon imagination to fill the emptiness with all sorts of wildly exciting shapes and populate it with people, animals, and Indians.

Yet the traveler does the Julesburg-Cheyenne leg an injustice by rushing over it without stopping. Every stone would be historic, were any visible above the grass.

In Julesburg itself, the little town with the epic past, there is a dugout (or there was yesterday—remember, we are on the rapidly changing steppe), one of many underground dwellings in the plains states, where fierce storms militate against frame houses and tents. It displays the sign: "Iliff the Cattle King's Tavern," a name that signifies something unusual, irregular, in prairie life.¹⁵ We were most interested in the dugout, created in "Julesburg's best days." The present occupant, Mr. Patrick McDonald, whose nationality the reader will have guessed, seemed very proud of it. Thus, when we entered, this curly-haired tatterdemalion with a grey, matted beard, stood there in rags, put his hands in what would be called pockets in trousers of newer make, put on airs, and said: "Yes, gentlemen, in this dugout I made all my money." (He forgot to add that, after Julesburg's best days ended, he lost all his money in this dugout.) Unfortunately, even in its heyday, Julesburg never saw a brick or a tree to use in building. When Patrick, a laborer on the construction of the railroad, could no longer work because of an injury to the back of the head, given him "accidentally" by a drunken co-worker, he decided to open a *whiskey shop*. Nothing else was necessary but a barrel of whiskey (recipe: alcohol diluted with water) and a spade. With the spade he dug a square hole about six feet deep in the beautiful, soft soil of Julesburg.

Fortunately the railroad was provident enough to pile ties at the station. Patrick required only a moonlit night to roof his hole with them. And he had to be sober, of course. After several tries he sobered up and, next morning, Julesburg had a well-roofed saloon. Nothing of it was visible above ground but

the entry hole and a piece of white canvas on a stake.

Patrick and his superb recipe for whiskey sold the first barrel the first day; and for a long time, business boomed. But Julesburg disappeared and with it his customers. Patrick put the whiskey barrel to his own use and so you see how his fortune was lost. He can still speak with praise of Iliff's cowboys, however. His only customers, they come once a week. So we learned who Iliff is.

He is the local cattle king. His herds number no less than 30,000. His grazing lands, called *range* in America, stretch 150 miles, from Julesburg in the northeast corner of Colorado, to Greeley, near the Rockies. His herds are outdoors summer and winter, foraging for themselves, tended by cowboys on horseback and eating nothing but rich prairie grass, which grows even under the snow. Every spring, several dozen riders round up three-and-four-year-olds; and they are sold to eastern markets. Otherwise this colossal herd, one of the world's largest, needs no care except branding the calves. As can easily be imagined, cattle suffer much from the severe cold. Indeed, in 1872, no fewer than 5,000 froze to death on open range. Iliff also does extensive buying and selling of Texas cattle. Annually, 20,000 to 30,000 are driven to him across Kansas and Colorado; and he re-sells them to big slaughterhouses in St. Louis and Chicago, a business that runs yearly into millions.

From the train we could often see large herds on wide-open expanses where, only a few years ago, hundreds of thousands of buffalo grazed. Buffalo were so numerous that trains would frequently have to stop to let them cross the tracks. Where are they now? Vanished. Exterminated. Their bones bleached in these empty tracts and their hides are lap robes in sleighs in New York and Stockholm. Buffalo Bill and other hunters shot the poor beasts by the hundreds of thousands for their hides alone, skinned the carcasses on the spot, and sold them at the next station for \$1.50 each. The remains lay on the ground, welcome booty for vultures and coyotes, which have multiplied dramatically since the mass extermination of the buffalo.

We were not so lucky as to see one of the powerful creatures. Not until later, farther south in Kansas, would we observe a buffalo hunt. But we watched many charming antelope, herds

of them, racing our train and then gradually veering off and out of sight. Doubtless it is the prettiest—and tastiest—animal here, as we learned at Sidney, the railroad's *supper station*.

Sidney, being the seat of Cheyenne County, should make an effort to appear respectable to the tourist. Before that meal of roast antelope we looked open-mindedly and energetically but found nothing respectable, nothing at all. What Julesburg was, Sidney is—a caravansary of scoundrels, hunters, vagabonds, and a few upright people who try to compensate for being the numerical minority by becoming the spiritual majority. They are the police and the so-called *vigilance committee* or underground court, like the secret and popular self-appointed criminal tribunal of old Westphalia in Germany. We were able to sample evidence of this honorable court's happy work. The *Sidney Telegraph* wrote of Mr. Jim Moore and three masked men standing under the third telegraph pole from the station. Then the masked men pulled a rope and Moore stood no more: he hung. Sidney was rid of a great evil.

Sidney is also one of those remote stations where you can learn *ad nauseum* about life "before the railroad." As if out of the past, a wagon road runs 180 miles to the American Black Forest, the gold-rich Black Hills, recently a famous destination, as Colorado was, for pilgrimages of gold-hungry miners and rascals. Any wonder, therefore, that society is so charming here? "Sketches of Society in Sidney" could fill volumes.

Let us examine one type, the western coachman or *bullwhacker*. There being no railroad to the Black Hills, a number of stores here have undertaken to supply mining settlements there with food and household essentials, carried by caravans of wagons driven by bullwhackers. Because of restless Indians the bullwhacker keeps revolver and rifle in reach. Blankets for the night's rest lie atop a wagon filled with all sorts of goods. The whacker walks beside his six to ten yokes of oxen, the powerful but slow locomotion for these conveyances. Look at him. Everything about him is big and strong, even his boots. The sun has never shone on a longer whip or more savage curses. The whip's handle is no more than three feet but the woven-rawhide lash is much longer, a boa constrictor in thickness and length. The end of this 20-foot leather snake is called the "mover"; its effect on oxen is magical. But their delicate nature is even more sensitive to the

bullwhacker's curses. In amount and vigor they exceed even those of the Mississippi-riverboat captain.

Our conductor, who served under Sherman in the Civil War, told us an apt and amusing anecdote. A St. Louis firm supplying the Union army and dispatching wagon trains to it daily, decided out of sanctimoniousness to replace bullwhackers with more pious drivers and sent off a train driven by them. Three days later, word came back that the train was stalled: the oxen would not take another step. Two bullwhackers were dispatched to the train. Some distance from it these good fellows began their usual cursing. Before they had gotten within "whipping distance," the oxen had pulled the wagons out of the mud and were moving.

Even more amusing tales are told of bullwhackers' accuracy with the whip. One of their favorite games is knocking a coin from the top of a stick without disturbing the stick.

Accuracy is the gist of the tale about the wager of a pint of whiskey between bullwhackers. One maintained he could cut the seat of the other's pants without touching the anatomy underneath. The bet was made. The two positioned themselves, the proper pose was struck for a target, and the whip was cracked with seriousness and care. Whoops! The leap into the air broke all records. The owner of the unlucky pants had parted with a bit of them and a strip of skin. The whipper scratched his head. "Damn it—I lost the whiskey!"

We leave Sidney, studying the beautiful Union Pacific route map. (Any traveler may pick up one or more in any hotel in American cities, free. They usually serve Union Pacific passengers as wrapping paper for sandwiches, chicken, and other snacks.) We learn from the number of cities marked between Sidney and Cheyenne that this must be the most populated area in the United States. The heavy black line for the railroad is crossed with circles and names of cities. Even densely populated Pennsylvania boasts scarcely six such circles. In truth it would be an exaggeration to say that more than 200 people lived in all these dozen Nebraska cities combined. The attractive *Williams' Travel Guide* confirms this estimate somewhat shamefacedly. On page 60, no fewer than nine cities are described just this way: "Tracey City"—473.8 miles from Omaha. Elevation 5,149 feet. A railway siding, named in honor of Judge Tracey in Cheyenne."¹⁶

Civilization. Does this western corner of Nebraska lack it? Does all this immense region, of which we are now in the center, lack it? The traveler will find the lack richly compensated by natural wonders that offer themselves on every hand. Partly because of the vastness of these wide-open spaces, partly because of the proximity of the Rockies, natural wonders appear with the greatest intensity—sunrise and sunset, clouds and rain, thunderstorm and downpour. What amazed us most was electricity, not only huge thunderbolts that illuminated the skies, but also the voltage that sprang from our bodies. Now we know what Julius Froebel meant in *Aus Amerika*:¹⁷ “At nearly every touch, sparks flew from our clothes as well as from the mules’ harness. The whip’s every crack was a cone of fire on the mules’ backs. I could feel distinctly the prickle of sparks in my fingertips when I touched a part of my clothing.”

Even more magnificent are hailstorms and cloudbursts. Last summer, our engineer told us, a hailstorm overtook a train, broke every window, and pockmarked the sheet iron of the boiler. We counted ourselves lucky to cross the Nebraska-Wyoming border beyond Bushnell without suffering such an attack.

Ahead lay the Rocky Mountains.

NOTES

1. This sketch is based on *Wer ist's* (Leipzig, Germany, 1914), Vol. VII, 685; *Deutsches Biographisches Jahrbuch* (Berlin and Leipzig, Germany, 1928), II, 690; *Meyers Konversations-Lexikon* (Leipzig, Germany, 1893), VIII, 753.

2. *New York Times*, November 19, 1912, 15.

3. “The New South” in Thomas D. Clark, ed., *Travels in the New South: A Bibliography* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), I, 190.

4. *Nord-Amerika* (Leipzig, Germany: Weigel, 1880), II, 126-139. This book has not been published in English. A few passages, unrelated to Nebraska, have been deleted, as has a long footnote on Nebraska’s location, size, population density, climate, and weather. Words in English in the original are italicized their first time in the translation.

5. In 1877, the year this description was written, the Nebraska capital was located in Lincoln. The seat of state government had been removed from Omaha by legislative statute in 1866, and a Lancaster County site selected in 1867 for a new capital.

6. Omaha was founded by William D. Brown, Dr. Enos Lowe, Jesse Lowe, Jesse Williams, and Joseph H. D. Street in 1854. Elton Perkey, *Perkey's Nebraska Place-Names* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1982), 69.

7. Kanesville, a station on the Mormon migration route, was named for Thomas Leper Kane. In 1853 the Mormons “made their final official exodus from Iowa. . . . The empty houses and barns [of Kanesville] were soon appropriated by Gentiles. . .

and from this time on the name Kanesville rapidly gave way to Council Bluffs." Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), 123, 126.

8. The Styx in Greek mythology is one of the rivers of Hades, across which the souls of the dead are ferried.

9. Tracks for the Union Pacific Railroad were laid across Nebraska and joined with those of the Central Pacific at Promontory Point, Utah, in 1869 to form a transcontinental line.

10. On early maps the Platte is called the Nebraska or Platte River, the former denoting an aboriginal name and the latter a translation of an aboriginal name as given by the French. "They called it 'La Riviere Plate,' . . . derived from the French 'plat,' meaning 'flat': the 'Flat River.'" Lilian L. Fitzpatrick, *Nebraska Place Names* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 178. In German "plat" signifies "flat" or "dull".

11. The Platte is probably more than one mile wide in places.

12. Hesse-Wartegg is almost certainly referring to Barton, Deuel county, "called after Hon. Guy C. Barton of North Platte Union Pacific contractor. It is 368.7 miles from Omaha, and 3,421 feet above the sea—simply a side track where trains meet and pass." Henry T. Williams, *The Pacific Tourist, Williams' Illustrated Trans-Continental Guide of Travel from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean* (New York: Henry T. Williams, publisher, 1877, 1879). This popular travel guide by Williams is the "guidebook" referred to by Hesse-Wartegg throughout his narrative.

13. It is almost certain that no early town in western Nebraska, including Barton, ever contained 5,000-10,000 inhabitants. Some clusters of buildings at the end of the Union Pacific line may have contained a sizable number of workers while track was being laid nearby. However, temporary camps were quickly abandoned and most structures removed as the rails were laid westward.

14. Hesse-Wartegg seems to have thought that Julesburg, so near Nebraska, was as much a part of Nebraska as of Colorado, a regional center that typified both states. Indeed, he asserts later, "What Julesburg was, Sidney is." Moreover, he says in effect, Nebraska's desolation hereabouts forces the traveler to look anywhere for diversion and interest.

15. "Iliff" is John Wesley Iliff, one of the region's greatest cattlemen, who died in 1888. At one time he owned 35,000 head of stock and controlled the South Platte valley.

16. The name is spelled by Williams without an "e": "Tracy."

17. 2 vols. (Leipzig, Germany: J. J. Weber, 1857-1858).