



Postscript: Hammer Gang

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Editor’s Note: The text that accompanies this photograph is an excerpt from “Driving Over a Thousand Stakes in Less Than an Hour,” by Cleveland Moffett, *McClure’s* (Vol. 5, No. 1, June 1895).

Cataloging Information:

Photographs / Images: hammer gang (photo by Frederick Blaine Humphrey, c. 1915)



Photograph by Frederick Blaine Humphrey (1876-1952), Lincoln, Nebraska, ca. 1915. NSHS RG3322-47

When the circus hit town, the roustabouts, canvas crews, and hammer gangs had little time to get the tents and rigging ready for the first matinee.

“Driving of the stakes [is], no slight task, since each stake is four or five feet in length, two or three inches thick, and has to be driven three fourths of its length into hard ground. Between two hundred and three hundred blows of the sledge are required to get a stake home. The sledges have handles three feet long and heads that weigh seventeen pounds. They must be swung high into the air, and be brought down with the full force of a pair of strong arms. There are over a thousand of these stakes to be driven, which means two hundred and fifty thousand blows of the sledges. But for their special skill, this work alone would take the men half a day. They will do it easily in forty-five minutes. . . . The leader of each gang places the

stake. . . [and] taps it two or three blows to make it stand alone, and then with a nod signals the gang to begin striking. The seven men stand in a circle around the stake, their sledges ready. Each man swings his sledge through a full circle, the heavy hammers coming down on the iron head of the stake in regular and rapid succession. Each man strikes about one blow a second, so that the stake receives seven blows a second. So skillful are the men that they never miss a blow, never interfere with each other, and never vary from the musical rhythm set by the leader. The blows have a well-marked accent or beat on the third or fourth stroke, so that they seem to be striking in three-time or four-time. . . .”

—from “Driving Over a Thousand Stakes in Less Than an Hour,” by Cleveland Moffett, *McClure’s*, (Vol.5, No. 1, June, 1895). 📖