



## The Story of Mud Springs

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Article Summary: The Scherers, early settlers in western Nebraska, purchased in 1896 the land on which the town of Mud Springs and the site of the old Pony Express station are situated. Once a place of refuge from hostile Indians, the property became an outstanding ranch noted for its hospitality.

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Photographs / Images: Mud Springs area map, ground plan and location map of Mud Springs

# THE STORY OF MUD SPRINGS ✓

BY PAUL HENDERSON

**M**UD Springs, because of the events which took place there in the days of the Covered Wagon Emigration, has become one of the many "story spots" that dot the way along the old Oregon-California wagon road, a trail that has become almost obliterated except in the non-agricultural area of the West.

The history of this great Central Overland Route was made not only by those who travelled it in their ox-drawn covered wagons, but also by the many individuals who risked their all in developing commercial enterprises that would connect the distant settlers in the West with their friends, relatives and government in the East. Outstanding among these were the huge "bull outfits" that drew heavily laden wagons across the plains and through the mountain ranges into the distant Oregon, California, and Utah settlements; the stage coaches with their mail, express, and passengers; the Pony Express; and the lonely strand of wire of the first trans-continental telegraph line. All shared in the financial risks and hazardous maintenance, and had a part in the glorious task of building and extending a young nation from one ocean to the other.

Mud Springs ranks high among the places which helped to maintain the old lifelines. It was an oasis far out in the wilderness where the tired and thirsty emigrants and their beasts of burden rested and refreshed themselves; where the stage coaches with their passengers and drivers paused for

a few hours sleep and food; where the gallant Pony Express rider finished a long and tiresome ride at the end of his division,<sup>2</sup> and where primitive fortifications were erected by a few of the handful of soldiers that were stationed here and there along the way to protect travelers and property from the warlike Indian tribes that roamed the country and claimed the land through which this great thoroughfare passed.<sup>3</sup>

Mud Springs is situated in the south central part of Morrill County, Nebraska, approximately one mile west of State Highway 19, about midway between Bridgeport and Dalton, in the immediate vicinity of Simla, a railroad siding on the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad. More precisely, it is in the northeast corner of the SW  $\frac{1}{4}$ , of Section 31, T. 18 N., R. 49 W.

To the early covered wagon pioneer, the stage driver, and the Pony Express rider, it was at the north end of the Jules Stretch. This name was applied to a later branch of the Central Overland Route which was surveyed and laid out by Lt. F. T. Bryan in 1856, from a junction of the Pikes Peak Trail at Jules Ranch near present-day Julesburg on the south fork of the Platte River to the old road up along the North Platte about ten miles northwest of Court House Rock.<sup>4</sup> This famous camping ground and station evidently derived its name from the seep springs that come to the surface at the mouth of a long canyon which leads northward down from the high tablelands between the Lodgepole Creek and North Platte River valleys. When the pioneers arrived at these springs after a long twenty-five mile drive over the high, dusty plateau they often found the springs muddy from the trampling feet of buffalo. In many of the early diaries we

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<sup>1</sup> Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints and Across the Rocky Mountains to California* (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1861), p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Chapman, *The Pony Express* (New York: G. P. Putman's Sons, 1932), pp. 152-153.

<sup>3</sup> C. G. Coutant, *The History of Wyoming* (Laramie, Wyoming: Chaplin, Spafford and Mathison, 1899), I, 390-421.

<sup>4</sup> Letter, Lt. Francis T. Bryan, St. Louis, Missouri, to Col. J. J. Abert, February 19, 1857, *Senate Executive Document 11*, 35th Congress, 1st Session, III, 455-481.

find the following or similar entry: "We arrived late, at Muddy Springs after a hard, dusty drive over the uplands, though they are much riled and muddy from the Buffalo wading and wallowing in them, they are a welcome to man and beasts." Lieutenant Bryan may have gained his knowledge of these springs from a fur trader who had visited the place when some one of the Indian tribes were camped here, as their location was not generally known to the covered wagon pioneers prior to the opening of this branch of the road. It was their situation that made possible the direct route heretofore mentioned.

An examination of the archeological evidence found at Mud Springs and in the surrounding area suggests that Indians have occupied the region for many centuries.<sup>5</sup> Among the stone artifacts found here are those of the Folsom and Yuma types, both of which are believed to be of great antiquity.<sup>6</sup> Other archeological remains indicate that the area has been peopled by later Indian groups, each possessing a distinctive material culture.<sup>7</sup> In historic times, western Nebraska was ranged over by Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and Dakotas. The first white man to visit Mud Springs probably was a fur trader, possibly Spanish or French, but more probably American. The Americans began taking the "Short Cut" along the Platte to and from the Rocky Mountains as early as 1824.<sup>8</sup> The fur traders explored along every stream between the Missouri River and the shores of Oregon and California. Two of them, Gonneville, and Lorren, were reported to have lost their lives not far distant from Mud Springs.<sup>9</sup> Gonneville was killed near the junction of Law-

<sup>5</sup> W. D. Strong, *An Introduction to Nebraska Archeology*, Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, Volume 93, Number 10.

<sup>6</sup> E. H. Barbour and C. B. Schultz, *The Scottsbluff Bison Quarry and Its Artifacts*, Bulletin of the Nebraska State Museum, Volume I, Number 34 (1932), pp. 283-286.

<sup>7</sup> —, *Paleontologic and Geologic Considerations of Early Man in Nebraska*, Bulletin of the Nebraska State Museum, Volume I, Number 35 (1936), pp. 431-450.

<sup>8</sup> LeRoy R. Hafen and Francis Marion Young, *Fort Laramie and the Pageant of the West, 1834-1890* (Glendale: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1938), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Grant L. Shumway, *History of Western Nebraska and Its People* (Lincoln: The Western Publishing & Engraving Company, 1921), II, 9.

rence Fork and Pumpkin Creek in 1830 and Lorren up on Lawrence Fork a few years later. So it may reasonably be assumed that it was an American fur trader or trapper who first kindled his fire at Mud Springs.

The early history of Mud Springs is difficult to separate from legend. The early fur traders who first explored the western country did not keep written accounts of their distant journeys. They told their associates where they had been when they met at the annual rendezvous, and even gave names to streams, springs, buttes and other natural landmarks; but most of the detailed historical facts were lost forever in the death of these old explorers. Many later traders, however, left a record in well-kept diaries and travel journals which reveal a great deal about these historic places along the way, making it possible to piece together the story of these once important—but now almost forgotten—places.

The travel that followed the Central Overland Route originated at several points along the Missouri River and led to a more or less common junction near Fort Kearny, on the south bank of the Platte River. Here the routes became, with the exception of several cutoffs and byways, one great trail up the Platte, its North Fork, the Sweetwater River, through the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains and on down to Fort Bridger, far out in Wyoming, where friends parted, and commercial caravans divided to go their several ways to the scattered settlements and towns up and down the Pacific coast, and into the Great Salt Lake Valley.

For a number of years the covered-wagon emigrants to Oregon, and the California gold seekers crossed the South Platte River at several places between the junction of the two forks of the Platte, and the Beauvais Trading Post, near present Big Springs, Nebraska—the latter being often referred to as "The Upper Crossing," "California Crossing," and "Laramie Crossing" by early travelers. From these several crossings the emigrants cut across to the North Fork of the Platte and closely followed its south bank to Fort Laramie. The discovery of gold in the Colorado country in 1858 brought some changes in the lines of travel just mentioned. A new road continued westward from Beauvais, or

the old Upper Crossing, along the south bank of the South Platte River to the new settlements at Denver City and in the Pikes Peak country.

The mail for these regions, however, continued on the old route along the North Platte River to Fort Laramie, and from there it was carried by private conveyances southward to Denver City.<sup>10</sup> This was not satisfactory. To improve the service the stages were sent westward from Beauvais to Jules Ranch. There the mails were divided, that destined for Colorado being sent up the South Platte, with the Salt Lake, California and Oregon mail going over the new route which Lieutenant Bryan had surveyed in 1856. This route crossed the South Platte river near the mouth of Lodgepole Creek, a ford that soon took the name of "The Upper Crossing," while the old Upper Crossing near Beauvais Ranch became known as the "Ash Hollow or Lower Crossing." From the new crossing the road followed Lodgepole Creek to within three miles of present Sidney, thence over the table lands northward to Mud Springs, joining the old North Platte River road about six miles east of Chimney Rock.<sup>11</sup>




Stage stations were established on the new road as follows: Twenty-Two Mile Ranch, about twenty-two miles up Lodgepole Creek from Jules Ranch, or Overland City as it was sometimes referred to; Roulette & Pringle's Ranch, where the road left Lodgepole Creek Valley to cross over the table lands; and McArdle's Ranch at Mud Springs, from whence the trail led to Chimney Rock Station on the old route. McArdle's Ranch soon became generally known as Mud Springs, and at first its function was the ordinary one of caring for the stage stock and serving meals to the stage passengers. The meals were noted for their poor quality and high prices. A stage passenger in the 1860's referred to the place as, "a dirty hovel, serving tough antelope steaks, fried on a filthy stove, with wooden boxes serving as chairs at a bench like table." He preferred to wrap up in a dirty buffalo robe and sleep in an abandoned wagon, rather than occupy

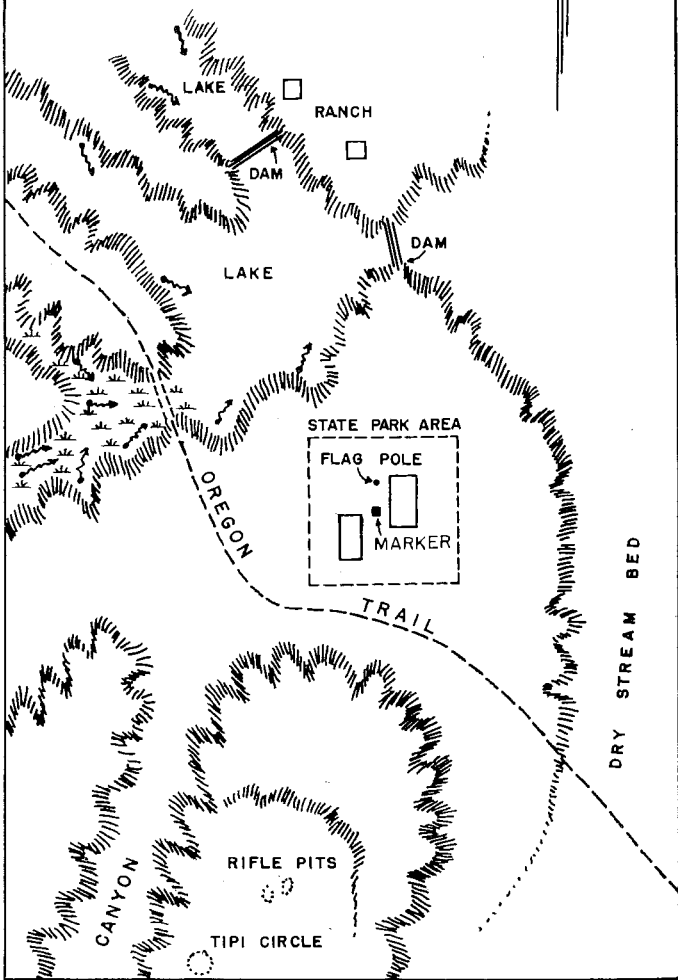
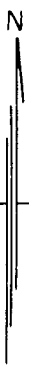
<sup>10</sup> Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 263-264.

<sup>11</sup> Paul and Helen Henderson, "Following Old Trails" (Ms. in possession of the author).

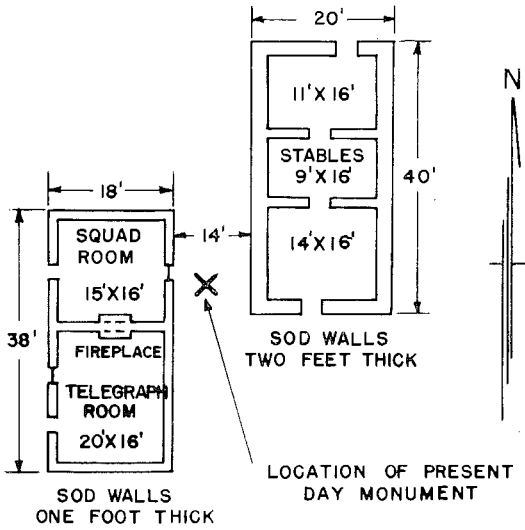
# MUD SPRINGS AREA

SOURCE MATERIAL  
FROM  
PAUL HENDERSON

-  SPRING
-  SWAMP
-  LAND SLOPE

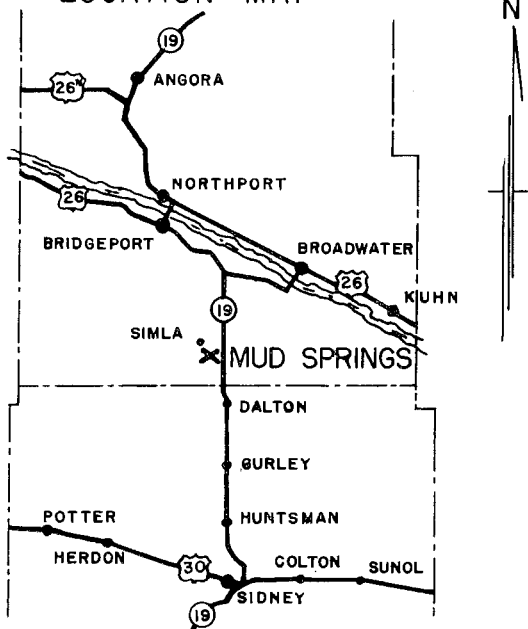


# GROUND PLAN OF MUD SPRINGS



## OLD OREGON TRAIL & PONY EXPRESS TRAIL

### LOCATION MAP





the shanty which served as the sleeping quarters.<sup>12</sup>

The buildings at Mud Springs were erected of sod, the roofs being made of poles, brush and earth, with a final layer of coarse gravel sprinkled over all to keep the wind from blowing the earth and brush away. From all indications this original set of buildings served the stage line, the Pony Express, and finally as a station on the first transcontinental telegraph line.<sup>13</sup> When the Pony Express service was established, many of the old stage stations were improved and a number of new intermediate stations were erected between those already in service as stage stations.<sup>14</sup> Mud Springs then had new neighbors on each side—Midway Station, to the southward about half way over the divide to Rouillette & Pringle station on Lodgepole Creek; and another at the point where the trail crossed Pumpkin Creek, about half way between Mud Springs and the old Chimney Rock station. Mud Springs was a "home station" where the pony riders rested at the end of their division. Jules Ranch, which now had become known as (Julesburg), was the next home station to the southeast; and Fort Laramie alternated with Cottonwood Station, near present Wendover, Wyoming, as the next home station to the west.<sup>15</sup>

On April 3, 1860, at approximately 5 P.M., the first Pony Express rider left the west bank of the Missouri River, opposite St. Joseph, Missouri, for Salt Lake City and California. At the rate these riders traveled over the prairies east of the Rocky Mountains, it may be reasonably assumed that rider, Hogan, dashed into Mud Springs from Julesburg at approximately 10:30 A.M., April 5th. There he handed the mochila, which contained the mail, to Henry Avis, who was off in less than two minutes on his way to the end of his run over a hundred miles up the North Platte River. Hogan and his faithful horse, upon which would be found the X P, stock

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<sup>12</sup> Burton, *op. cit.*, pp. 88, 89

<sup>13</sup> Frank A. Root and William E. Connelley, *The Overland Stage to California* (Topeka, 1901), pp. 113, 127; Interview, Thomas Montgomery, 1930.

<sup>14</sup> John G. Ellenbecker, *List of Pony Express Stations*.

<sup>15</sup> John G. Ellenbecker, letters to the author, 1930.

brand of the company, would rest at Mud Springs until Avis returned from the west with the east bound mail.

For fifty-six weeks—at first once a week, later twice a week—Mud Springs sheltered these dashing riders and faithful horses, while the stages, laden with passengers and the heavier mails, continued on their regular schedules. Then, sometime during the month of August 1861, the last pony rider to leave Mud Springs, took the messages from the telegraph operator, who had copied them from the end of the telegraph wire which now had reached this point. He and a few others would relay them towards the end of the wire being stretched from the west to the east. Soon the wires would be connected out in Salt Lake City, to form the first transcontinental telegraph line, which would forever retire the spectacular riders and horses of the Pony Express.

Diligent search among old records has not revealed the identity of the first telegraph operator at Mud Springs. However, in 1930, Mr. Thomas Montgomery came from his home in Fort Collins, Colorado, to visit the forgotten site of Mud Springs, where, in 1867, he served as telegraph operator and also had charge of the station. While on this visit, Mr. Montgomery pointed out the location of the old buildings and gave a description of their construction, as well as relating some interesting events that transpired there at the time that the old station was serving the United States Army, and still carrying a limited amount of commercial telegrams across the nation.

Probably the most dramatic incident in the history of Mud Springs was the attack by hostile Indians in 1865.<sup>16</sup> On February 4th, Col. William O. Collins of the 11th Ohio Volunteer Cavalry at Fort Laramie, received a telegram from Mud Springs, stating that the station was being attacked by a great number of Indians. At this time there were only nine soldiers and five civilians there. Immediately Colonel Collins ordered Lt. William Ellsworth, commanding Company H of the 11th Ohio, then at Fort Mitchell, to proceed without delay to Mud Springs, forty five miles from there,

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<sup>16</sup> This account, except where otherwise indicated, follows Coutant, *op. cit.*, I, 425 ff.

with all the men that he could spare. Ellsworth marched all night, arriving at the station early the next morning and immediately entered the fight with thirty six men. Colonel Collins, with 120 men, from different companies of the 11th Ohio, and part of Company D, of the 7th Iowa Cavalry, left Fort Laramie at seven, the evening of the 4th, and arrived at Mud Springs the forenoon of the 6th. The weather was bitter cold, and the soldiers had suffered a great deal but were ready for the fight when they arrived. The main body of the Indians who had been in great numbers on Lodgepole Creek on February 3rd had stolen the stock at the station and also the cattle herd of Creighton & Hoel on Pumpkin Creek.

The next morning they surrounded the station but seemed greatly surprised at the increase in the number of men. After a little firing their attack ceased. At daylight the morning of the 6th they began to come over the bluffs from all directions and attack in earnest, trying to cut off some of the arriving troops. They plainly intended taking the post. The odds were greatly against the soldiers, as the men and horses were much fatigued by travel and some were frost bitten. The station was surrounded by hills and knolls full of ravines and gullies. This enabled the Indians to ambush and creep up on the soldiers without exposing themselves to a cavalry charge. About 200 Indians crept behind a hill approximately seventy-five yards southwest of the station, and from there without being seen, were able to shoot arrows at an angle of about forty-five degrees, which wounded many men, horses and mules in the post. Two charging parties were sent out, one mounted and the other on foot. These soon cleared the Indians from that place. A rifle pit was dug on the highest point, where an out-guard prevented any future trouble from that point. The remains of this rifle pit and several others that were dug later are still in evidence about sixty yards from the old station site.<sup>17</sup>

After about four hours fighting the soldiers began pushing the Indians back in all directions, and soon drove them off; at about two o'clock in the afternoon, their fire slackened

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<sup>17</sup> Explorations by Paul and Helen Henderson, 1938.

and they withdrew to the hills, being seen during the balance of the afternoon and until dark on the hill tops surrounding the post. During the course of the day seven soldiers were wounded, three severely, and some horses killed. The Indian loss was estimated at about forty killed. About 1,000 warriors armed with rifles, revolvers and bows and arrows, were engaged in the fight. Many of the warriors were mounted. There were also Mexicans and white men among them. They had plenty of ammunition, Minie balls being common. The warriors were brave but generally shot too high to hit the soldiers.

Soon after the fight started the telegraph wire was cut. A strong party was sent out to repair the break which was about a mile northwest of the station. Later it was cut again, and some of the poles were torn down, and this break could not be repaired until after dark. The soldiers who spent the night fortifying the post and preparing for the offensive were greatly surprised the next morning to find that the Indians had moved away in the direction of the springs on Cedar Creek, about ten miles east. The country was covered with trails which they had made in the snow.

As soon as possible Colonel Collins organized an expedition for pursuit, leaving Capt. William D. Fouts in command at the station. An abandoned Indian camp was found at Cedar Creek Springs, there being evidence that it had been left but a short time and indications that some of the Indians had been there about three days. The deserted camp covered about three miles along the creek and showed that they had been there in great numbers. More than a hundred cattle had been slaughtered; flour sacks, empty oyster, meat and fruit cans were plentiful. A quantity of codfish and numerous trophies of raids on the ranches and trains were scattered about.

Pressing forward on a fresh trail they found the Indians on the north bank of the Platte River opposite the mouth of Cedar Creek, scattered over the plain between the river and the bluffs, grazing their horses. Colonel Collins, considering the odds against him, did not attempt to cross the river, full of floating ice, to attack the Indians who began to move

slowly northward into Lower Dugout Canyon. On returning to Mud Springs, he found that Pvt. J. A. Harris, Company D, 7th Iowa; and Pvt. W. H. Hartshorn, 11th Ohio, had died of wounds received in the battle of the day before. After several days spent in reenforcing the fortifications about the post, Colonel Collins took the dead and wounded and moved back to Fort Laramie to prepare for any future counter attacks from the Indians who were moving northwestward into the Powder River country of Wyoming.

Mud Springs continued to serve as a telegraph station and an outpost for several years thereafter until the completion of the building of the Union Pacific Railroad in 1869, which was followed by several wires that took over the transcontinental telegraph business. After that time the lonely wire through Mud Springs served the military forces until the Indians had been placed on their several reservations.

The year 1876 found many persons flocking into the Black Hills region of Dakota to newly-discovered gold fields. Several points along the Union Pacific railroad became important outfitting stations for this new tide of emigration. Huge bull outfits with their freight wagons, stage coaches with their passengers, and a Pony Express fast mail were traveling new roads that ran at right angles to the old covered wagon roads that led to the distant West. One of them leading from Sidney, Nebraska, to Custer City, in Dakota, missed Mud Springs by only a few miles<sup>18</sup> but far enough that the historic old station was quickly forgotten. A part of the wire that spanned the continent through Mud Springs was taken for a new line to the Black Hills diggings. The springs at the old station became a water hole for great herds of longhorn Texas cattle brought northward into the prairie country of Nebraska. The old buildings gradually tumbled into decay and were almost obliterated by the elements and the feet of the "free range cattle." The place where once tired and weary travelers rested and refreshed themselves at these springs of pure water, and where brave men fought and

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Norbert R. Mahnken, "The Sidney-Black Hills Trail," *Nebraska History*, XXX (September 1949), 203-225.

died to protect a life-line of our nation, became a lost and forgotten spot in our national history.

In 1896, Mr. and Mrs. J. N. Scherer, early settlers in western Nebraska, became owners of the property on which Mud Springs and the ruins of the old station are situated. They, true to the spirit of the early home-building settlers, erected their home and established a fine ranch on the banks of the little rivulet fed by those historic springs. They resided here for many years and raised their family. Having been told by some old-timer that the low sod mounds across the creek were once an early stage station, they never obliterated the site in any way with the plow or the erection of later building.<sup>19</sup>

At this pleasant location they developed one of the outstanding ranches in the country, noted for its hospitality, and as a home where neighbors lived who would join and cooperate in everything that was good for their community. Thus Mud Springs once again became prominent, not as a place of refuge from hostile Indians, but a place where peace reigned, where neighbors gathered and children played in security on the camp grounds and battlefields of many an anxious pioneer of yesteryear.

Mr. Scherer preceded his faithful helpmate to that "Land of Beautiful Homes" by several years. She carried on, ever a true pioneer mother of the West. In 1939, a few months before her passing, she presented the late Dr. A. E. Sheldon, Superintendent of the Nebraska State Historical Society, a deed to the small plot of ground on which the old station had stood. It was her wish that this historic site be preserved as a memorial to all the pioneers who had come this way. This patriotic act aroused interest throughout the entire neighborhood. The Mud Springs Woman's Club, sponsored the erection of a monument made of the native stones, and a day of dedication was set for the historic spot. Sunday, June 11, 1939, found early settlers, old friends and neighbors, and hundreds of people from all over the Nebraska Pan-handle gathered at Mud Springs for the occasion. Dr. Shel-

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<sup>19</sup> Interview, Mrs. J. N. Scherer.

don, a life-long pioneer of the West, came many miles to deliver a rousing address on "Putting Mud Springs Back on the Map," and to accept the deed for the plot of ground from Mrs. Scherer, in behalf of the citizens of Nebraska. A fitting monument, erected on the site of the old telegraph station building, bearing a beautiful bronze Pony Express medallion and a plaque with the following inscription, was unveiled.

### MUD SPRINGS STATION

A Station on the Pony Express Route — 1860-61.

A station on the First Transcontinental Telegraph Line

A station on the Overland Stage Route.

Battle between Sioux Indians and U. S. Troops, Febr. 6th-7th, 1865

This site given to the State of Nebraska

by

Mrs. Etta A. Scherer and children

To be preserved as a memorial to all the early settlers who won the West.

Monument erected June 11, 1939,

by

The Mud Springs Womans Club

