THE VALLEY OF THE MEDICINE

Medicine Creek is one of the more important spring-fed tributaries of the Republican River in Southwest Nebraska. It orginally was known as Medicine Lake Creek, a mistranslation by the early whites for the Sioux words "Ble Wakan, meaning Spirit Lake. As the lake always appaars holy to them. Ble means Lake. Wakan means Holy or Spirit." /Rosa Clifford Ruff, letter, 26 November 1927, to John Link, "Link Place-Names Collections, NSHS Archives./ Ambrose S. Shelly, one of the first settlers on the stream, wrote of its name:

> I will say that the name Medicine for this stream is not correct. They, the Indians, named it after a large pond or lake at the mouth of the canyon well up toward the head of the stream. After this pond freezes up solid the ice after it is frozen up for a certain length of time bursts open in different places and makes a very loud noise like distant canonading. The Indians could not understand this or account for it...so they laid it to Spirits or Ghosts and called it Spirit or Ghost Lakeand while the stream runs close by the foots of the pond, they named the stream after the pond..../Ambrose S. Shelley, letter, 8 March 1926, to John Link, Ibid./

South of the Platte River, in the area of Fort McPherson, the land rises sharply to a high plain or "divide" that slopes south-

erly to the Republican River. The high bluffs south of the Platte, formed by the river over the centuries, gives a wild touch to the more prosaic scenery of the valley. The Medicine (the "lake" in the name has long since been dropped) is one of but many such streams flowing to the Republican, through this region--west from it are Red Willow, Blackwood, and the large Frenchman or Whiteman's Fork, with its major tributary, the Stinking Water. Because the north edge of this divide is higher than the rest of its plain, virtually all of the streams run from the land just above the Platte to the southeast and the Republican. The valleys for this stream vary in width from very narrow to over a mile in width, and, over the years, they have cut the valleys from twenty to seventy-five feet below the level of the plain. But these are not the only low levels, for the drainage has cut hundreds of steep-edged canyons throughout the upland, which run intothe various streams. It makes travel across the region very difficult for a deep wide canyon, making a natural road, will suddenly end against surrounding high banks, while a flat piece of upland of several hundred acres, may suddenly end at the edge of a cliff, with no possible way down to the valley below except on foot or by horseback. Getting lost in this area was a common event for early settlers or greenhorns.

It was discovered early that traveling south from Fort McPherson, via Cottonwood Canyon west of the fort, one could reach the upland with little trouble, and, from there, overland to the Medicine. Following the valley of the Medicine, they had a fairly easy--at least for that region--highway to the Republican. Other trails were discovered, but they were not were far from easy, particularly during rainy or thawing weather.

The Medicine and its sister streams do not carry a great deal of water, except after the spring thaw or a heavy rainstorm, and they are very crooked streams (as are the valleys), sometimes all but forming a complete loop in places where the valleys are particularly wide. Unlike the larger river valleys, these streams were lined with trees, probably because they were protected by their topography from prairie fires, which could spread faster on the uplands and in wider river valleys. The cliff-like walls of the canyons and valleys were usually sufficient in stopping a raging upland fire, as the sides are often nearly devoid of vegetation. Native trees included willow, ash, cottonwood, elm and hackberry, while in places, particularly in the canyons nearer the Platte, there were rich stands of red cedar. There were also scattered thicked of wild plum and chokecherry. Wild life in the area consisted of buffalo, elk, deer, antelope, coyotes, wolves, prairie swift, squirrals and racoons, along with occasional wild species of the feline family, including an occasional (though always rare) mountain lion.

The whites were not the first to appreciate the Medicine. Prehistoric Indians had lived there for thousands of years, before the coming of the Sioux, Cheyenne and Pawnee. These latter day tribes in particular liked the Medicine and the other streams. Because of their level far below the upland, they provided protection from the winter winds, and it was here they usually sat up their winter hunting villages, away from the larger streams. Also, far up these streams, they were less likely to be found by their enemies, either red or white. But the encroaching frontiersmen also recognized these valleys as havens for settlement, and Medicine Creek was the first of them to receive settlers.

If the first settlers on the Medicine had one thing in common, it was their inability to remember dates. Many of the memoirs are without dates, while those with dates are suspect. While many whites visited the valley on hunting trips or on their way to the Republican, we are not sure when settlement began. The men were Henry Clay Clifford Mortimer Harrison Clifford, Arthur Ruff, and John Young Nelson, along with their Indian wives and children. Other men were apparently in and out of their camp, particularly after Whistler and his Cut-offs also began to make the area their permanent home. It is not unlikely that the first settlement there is related to the following telegram:

Ft McPherson
/Tuesday, November/ 29 /1870/

To Maj Geo D Ruggles A.A.G.
Dept. of the Platte

A party of seven white men with Sioux wives from spotted Tails band with their children are crossing the platte towards the Republican to pass the winter hunting have concluded not to stop them unless instructed to do so

W H Emory
Col Comdg

/RG-2702, National Archives./

It is certain, at least, that the group were settled on the Medicine in 1871. William Herbert or Paddy Miles, the lonesome cowboy, who wrote his Christmas letter from Plum Creek in 1870, wrote of the settlement:

The Indians that camped on the Medicine in 1870 were Whistler's Band, that had been cut off from the tirbe of Spotted Tail, the big Sioux chief. Hank and Montie Clifford and John Nelson were with them and had Indian families; W. H.

> Miles /the writer/ found them, built a smoke-house, dried buffalo meat and trapped during the winter....We killed the buffalos, and the squaws tanned the robes, until we had ten thousand pounds of meat and a thousand tongues dried, that we expected to ship East.
>
> But, alas! a shadow came over the spirit of our dreams of wealth, in the shape of sixty Indians that came down to spend the winter with us, which they did. The meat and the tongues went to entertain our guest. /W. H. Miles and John Bratt, Early History of Frontier County, Nebraska (Maywood, Nebr.: Reporter Publishing Co., n.d.), 10./

The above may relate to the winter of 1871, as he then goes on to describe the Christmas of that year. It also seems likely that Whistler did not bring his people to the Medicine until 1871, at least mentions of them do not appear in military reports. They were still in trouble for the killing of the Buck survey party and their part in the attack upon the Daugherty survey party, in August and September of 1869, after which they had gone to Whetstone Agency on the Missouri.

Miles apparently moved to the Medicine sometime during the spring or summer of 1871, and it is during that period that the following event took place:

> The first farming in the county /Frontier County, as yet unorganized,/ was a failure. We planted some squaw corn and pumpkin seed, which soon gave promise of good returns for time and labor bestowed. But one morning we heard bellowing in the field. We gathered our cartridge belts and guns, then went to see what the intruder was.

> About one thousand buffaloes had taken possession of our field. We protested with a vengeance and brought down fifteen of those lordly brutes of the plains, but the entire crop of Frontier County was tramped out of sight for that year. The squaws came out, butchered our game, and a feast followed the loss of our crop. /Ibid., 13./

John Y. Nelson, in his autobiography, tells of the group being persecuted by the military, who tried to drive them from the region, until Hank Clifford made a trip and got permission for them to remain from the Department of the Platte. If this is so, no record of it has yet turned up. Nelson was not noted for telling the truth, and his book creates many problems for its readers, because of this reputation and for his seldom mentioning of a date. Miles wrote for local newspapers, and his stories jump backward and forward in time, with an occasional date thrown in--some correct, some incorrect.

The Clifford brothers were experienced frontiersmen by the time they settled on the Medicine. Henry Clay or Hank was born about 1840 and Mortimer Harrison or Monty was born in Illinois or Missouri between 1842 and 1845. They came to Otoe County, Nebraska Territory in 1855, with their parents, Orlando H. and Elizabeth J. Clifford, and a younger brother, John M., in 1855. Mr. Clifford was Nebraska City's first ice dealer, and, in April 1860, he opened a hotel, the Clifford House. Hank had been living on his own for several years working as a carpenter, but he began his frontier career in 1859, when he signed on as a freighter with John and Jeremiah Gilman, who had contracted to haul goods to Colorado City in the region of the recent Pikes Peak gold rush.# The Gilman brothers were natives of New Hampshire, and they had arrived in Nebraska City in 1857, where they opened a livery stable.

/Raymond E. Dale, "Otoe County Pionners" (typescript), NSHS, 523-25./

They did their first freighting to the gold field late in 1858, or rather John made the trip while Jeremiah or Jerry stayed in Nebraska City to tend to the livery business. John was ready to make his second trip overland as early in the year as possible, and, along with Hank Clifford, he hired Jerome H. Dauchy, who had made the trip with him the previous year. The latter, twenty-five, had previously freighted for Russell, Majors and Waddell. They made a successful, quick round trip, being back in Nebraska City by June, immediately preparing to go west again. This time their good luck failed them, and, about fifteen miles east of Cottonwood Springs, one of their wagons broke an axle. While they worked on the wagon, they found an opportunity to trade, not only with other overland travelers, but with passing Indians as well. By the time, the wagon was fixed, John Gilman was convinced that it was more profitable to trade on the trail than to continue freighting to the mines. The Gilman brothers road ranche was established, possibly that autumn, and it became one of the main landmarks on the trail, for they continued in business until after the Union Pacific railroad was constructed. Dauchy later established his own ranche further west, while Hank Clifford continued to freight, though he spent at least some of his time around the ranche. /Musetta Gilman, Pump on the Prairie (Detroit: Harlo Press, 1975), 35, 38-39. For understanding life on a road ranche, this work is important, as it is the only book devoted to the study of an individual ranche. Located so near Cottonwood Springs and later Fort McPherson, it contains much valuable information on life there./

During the 1860s, Hank was joined on the Plains by his younger brother, Monty, though it is said he was shocked and disapproving when he learned his elder brother had taken an Indian woman for a wife. If so, he soon got over his feelings, for Monty, too, married an Indian. Little is known of Hank's wife, Mary, and she is said to have been either a Cheyenne or an Oglala. Monty's wife, Julia, was an Oglala, reportedly related to Chief Red Cloud. Julia was a half-blood, being the daughter of Augustine Lucian and Ena-Tagleka. The spellings for both names vary greatly in reports, but Lucian is remembered mainly for having been the interpreter at the so-called Grattan massacre of 1854, and having been killed in the battle. It is said that Leon Pallardy served as guardian to the Lucian children. It is not known when Monty and Julia were married, but their first child was born in a tent on the Medicine, June 25, 1871. Hank was active as a scout and guide, while Monty tended to stay more at home working as a frontier farmer and stockgrower. Though he built a small home for his family, his mother-in-law had a teepee, which she lived in at least a good part of the year. /"Mortimer H. Clifford Family Sheet", prepared by Orlando H. Clifford for William Shelley (copy provided the author, 3 August 1959); and Emily H. Lewis, "Shadows of the Brave", True West, (September 1962), 29, 55-57 (Story of Rosa (Clifford) Ruff, fourth of Monty's twelve children.)./

Arthur Ruff had also spent many years on the frontier. He was married to Mary Gary, half-blood daughter of Elbridge Gary, an early fur trader in the vicinity of Fort Collins; he was also a descendant of the Signer of the Declaration of Independance of the same name. Ruff's son later married Clifford's daughter. /Lewis, Ibid./

Other whites drifted in and out of the small settlement, but this was the main group, though quite often they were away from the valley on hunting or trading trips to the Republican and its tributaries. Indian parties camped in the neighborhood for visiting and trading, and, once Whistler established his village, commerce between the two groups was all but continual.

A new and important influence on the Medicine arrived in the autumn of 1871--this was the arrival of the Texas cattle of John Bratt & Co., his partners being Isaac Coe and Levi Carter. The latter two were residents of Nebraska City, who had been active in the freighting business for many years. Bratt had been in their employe for several years and was gradually developing into a major figure in the business, as his partners aged. As well as freighting, they had helped construct the Union Pacfic and dabbled in mining in Wyoming Territory, as well as ranged cattle not far from Cheyenne. Now, they were spreading out, moving into central Nebraska, where Bratt had recently filled a hay contract at Fort McPherson, for the company. The "home" ranch for John Bratt & Co. was built a few miles west of the fort, but the cattle were allowed to range from there to the Republican. Line camps, or shelters for their cowboys, were built as far south as the Medicine country. These were probably the first log structures in what was to become Frontier County. It is said the company brought in approximately nine thousand head of cattle. It was a bad year for the importation of a large number of southern cattle, for the weather was bad throughout the fall of 1871, and, after the good weather during the hunt of the Grand Duke, bad weather commenced again. Not only did they lose a good number to the storms, they also lost several hundred to starving Indians, into whose camps the cattle wandered.

As 1871 ended, the small group of ~~whites~~ traders and their mixed blood families decided to have a celebration, even under their primitive circumstances. Miles later wrote:

> We prepared for a "big time" on Christmas; so Clifford went into town and brought out some "fixin's" such as currants, sugar, etc.; last but not least, a keg of whiskey, of which Indians and all indulged freely. The Indians had a war dance which came very near to a "killing off," but we had a good time all the same.
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> The Indians said they would celebrate Christmas too, by killing and eating all the dogs in the village. I had a fine dog and told them to spare him; but the first thing I saw Christmas morning was poor Dodge roasting on the fire. There were ten dogs eaten at the first Christmas celebration in Frontier County. /Bratt and Miles, op cit., 10./

Though Miles did not mention it, a new comer arrived on the Medicine on Christmas Eve. This was Ambrose Shultz Shelley, who had had his twenty-eighth birthday on the 19th. He was a native of Berks County, Pennsylvania, and, on his father's side, he was descended from the Schwenkfelders, a group of Protestant Germans, who had begun to settle in Pennsylvania in 1732. On his mother's side, he was descended from a Mennonite family of Bucks County. His parents were Henry and Solomi or Sarah (Shelley) Shultz. Shelley--or Shultz as he was then known--enlisted in Company G, Forty-seventh Pennsylvania Infantry, on February 29, 1864, just more than two months after his

twentieth birthday. He was then sent to join his regiment at Algiers, Louisiana, which was taking part in the Red River Campaign. Toward the end of 1864, they were shipped north to Washington, D.C., and became a part of General Sheridan's Army of the Shenandoah. The battle of Cedar Creek, on October 19, 1864, was the major engagement in which he took part. At one point, the battle turned into a Union rout until Sheridan, himself, was able to ralley the troops. Shelley was one of those who saw and heard Sheridan cheer on his men, a story he often told, and he was always a hero to him. He served with his outfit until being discharged on Christmas Day, 1865. /William M. Shelley, Stockville, Nebraska, letter, Tuesday, 19 October 1971, to P. D. Riley./

Shelley (still Shultz) arrived at Omaha, Nebraska Territory, on July 4, 1867. He had come west to join his mother's brother, Benneville or B. Y. Shelley, a noted Nebraska pioneer, who is most remembered for his part in the founding of Niobrara, Nebraska. The twenty-three year-old Pennsylvanian soon struck out on his own and got work helping with the construction of the Union Pacific, being at Promontory Point, when the golden spike was put in place, joining the two railroads, in May 1869. It is thought he came back to Fort McPherson and worked on a hay contract late that summer.

On June 17, 1870, however, he was at Sherman, Wyoming Territory, working as a millwright, possibly for the Union Pacific, living with five other men. Nearby, however, were Daniel F. Smith, who had formerly had a road ranche in Dawson County, and Isaac Snell, son of Jacob Snell of Cottonwood Springs. About this time, he went with a group of men gold prospecting in North Park, Colorado Territory. The party were

attacked by a party of Ute camping nearby. Charlie Wood and Shelley were standing on a ridge overlooking the Indian camp, when a Ute shot and killed Wood. The prospectors buried Wood and finally decided to send Shelley to the nearest military post in Wyoming, as two of the ten survivors were too old or sick to make a forced retreat. The trip took him twenty-six hours, and they were soon on the way back--a military escort with wagon and Shelley. John Bratt said he too made the trip, as two of the men were prospecting for him. Upon their return they found five bodies, but nothing could be learned of the other four. Before leaving, Shelley had buried a bottle of nuggets, but, in the excitement of the return, he forgot to get it before the military left.

Sometime after this, Shelley came east to Fort McPherson--and became Ambrose Shelley, rather than Ambrose Shultz (as he had appeared in the 1870 census. He worked around the post and possibly for John Bratt on his ranch, for they certainly knew each other in Wyoming. This is something of the background, then, of the newcomer, who arrived at the Medicine on Christmas Eve, 1871. He would remain there long after the others had left or were dead, becoming <u>the</u> pioneer and founding father of Frontier County. /U.S. Census: 1870. Sherman, Wyoming Territory, 33; <u>Curtis Enterprise</u>, Thursday, 4 December 1930; Maywood <u>Eagle Reporter</u>, Saturday, 15 September 1928; William M. Shelley, Stockville, Nebraska, letter, 11 March 1972, to P. D. Riley./

Three weeks later, of course, was the buffalo hunt of the Grand Duke Alexis, and both Shelley and Miles joined the entourage when they stopped at the Medicine. Miles later wrote of insulting the Grand Duke by going up and introducing himself, but it can only be wondered if

Shelley got to meet his old commander and hero, Philip H. Sheridan, the Russian's host. Both being drifters, Miles and Shelley could have hardly realized that they were beginning an association of many years standing--Miles, who was really William Herbert Palmer of Georgia, and Shelley, who was actually Ambrose Shelley Shultze of Pennsylvania. Both were Civil War veterans, Miles fighting for the Confederate States, and Shelley fighting for the Union. Both came west, drifted from job to job, finally settling on Medicine Creek and becoming founders of a new county. There were two be other surprising parallels in their lives.

John Bratt and his ranching partners wanted to get Frontier County organized before homesteaders started arriving. Bratt imported enough men to take part in the organization. The reason for this haste when there were less than a dozen men and no white women in the county was to hold an election so the Herd Law would be passed. This meant that any farmers would have to fence their fields, while the cattle could run free. Otherwise, the ranchers would be responsible for damage done to any open fields. The expense would have been enough to drive the ranchers out of business.

Though only a few days after the Alexis hunt, a terrible snow storm had struck the area, and Bratt and John Kirby had great difficulty in making it from Fort McPherson to Hank Clifford's. As there was no notary among the founders of the county, Kirby, a clerk at Charles McDonald's store at Cottonwood Springs, was sworn in there as County Clerk of Frontier County. They finally made it to Bratt's line camp on Fox Creek, where he picked up the county books, and then started on. They were also accompanied by two cowboys, John D.

Jones and James D. Kerr. Going down a hill, the horses lost their footing in the snow, resulting in a wreck. Kirby was thrown from the rig and an arm was broken in two places and his collar bone fractured. They were able to get him back to Fox Creek, where he swore Bratt in as County Commissioner. Bratt, Kerr and Jones then proceeded on to Clifford's teepee.

The following men were selected for county office: Samuel F. Watts, county judge; John Bratt, William H. Miles and Monty Clifford, commissioners; Hank Clifford, sheriff; Levi Carter (who never lived in the county and seldom visited it), treasurer; John D. Jones (a cowboy), coroner; Arthur Ruff, justice of the peace; John Y. Nelson, surveyor (!); James D. Kerr (cowboy), registrar; Elias Miller, assessor; and Everett G. Nesbitt, county superintendent. Also in attendance were Shelley, a Robert Cooper and Asa McManus. It must have been a crowded teepee. Bratt, having been sworn into office by the injured Kirby then swore in the others. When it came down to signing the various documents, however, it was found no one had pen or ink. Finally a pen nib was found, which was then tied with string to a weed stock. Soot was mixed with water to make ink. Thus Frontier County came into being that night of Thursday, January 18, 1872. It was to live up to its name for several years.

It is not known that Jones, Kerr and Cooper played any further role in the history of the county. When the commissioners held their first meeting on February 5th, there were so few people in the county, all were needed to sign the bonds of the new county officials. /Bayard H. Paine, Pioneers, Indians and Buffalo (Curtis: Curtis Enterprise, 1935), 13-16./

As we know from the military reports and the accounts from the various Indian camps south of the Platte, the bad weather continued. Nothing is known of the little group on the Medicine for several weeks, but it is likely the time of the men was spent in hunting game trying to kill enough meat to get through the winter. Perhaps some of them drifted back to Fort McPherson to finish out the winter.

We do know that Paddy Miles, now a county commissioner, left for the Union Pacific sometime in March, where he caught a train east. He returned to McPherson Station on March 19th, and he was not alone. Even though life on the Medicine, now Frontier County, had never been prosaic, it was now to receive a new resident, undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary frontierswoman ever to settle in the West. And it should be noted that the term "frontierswoman" here means not just a woman who lived on the frontier, but in the sense of the male term "frontiersman". For the lady easily takes her place among those other outstanding names: Buffalo Bill, Texas Jack, the North brothers, John Y. Nelson and the others. Enter Ena Raymonde, whom, if she had had to list her occupation, probably would have said "poetess", but femme fatal would have been more apt.