

introduction

By David L. Bristow, Editor

Ninety-seven volumes of *Nebraska History* fill twelve feet of shelf space. You are holding the first quarterly issue of Volume 98, an issue in which the editors, caught up in sesquicentennial enthusiasm, attempt the impossible. Those bookshelves contain thousands of articles and millions of words, telling the story of millions of lives and their accompanying cities, farms, conflicts, triumphs, and failures. We propose to sum it all up in just 150 pictures.

Our task was complicated by the fact that we weren't merely trying to find the "best" or most spectacular pictures (which would be hard enough), but that we wanted to use images to tell a complex story. Not only that, but we didn't even limit ourselves to 150 years of statehood, but reached back into the territorial period and beyond. (We chose, however, only to hint at the thousands of years of human occupation that precede our collection of photographs and drawings. That story is told in *Nebraska History's* and *NEBRASKAland Magazine's* joint 1994 publication, *The Cellars of Time: Paleontology and Archaeology in Nebraska.*)

What you have here, in other words, is an over-simplification, a kind of sketch that implies a more detailed picture through a minimum of lines. But just as an artist is forced to look deeply at his or her subject to interpret its essence, so we found ourselves looking beyond the particulars of each photograph to consider how each relates to the larger themes of Nebraska's history, such as: Nebraska's land and climate and the often-mistaken ideas people have had about them; water and its abundance or absence; agriculture; the way the Platte River valley forms a natural highway, and the uses people have made of it; the railroad and the way it shaped Nebraska geographically, socially, and politically; the issues associated with building a new society on a land that is already home to other people; the continual arrival of new



people and the question of who is included in our ideas of “Nebraskan” and “American”; the question of who is to exercise power and for whose benefit this new society is to be governed; the development of technology and infrastructure; the growth of recreation and entertainment; and the universal human themes of work, family, community, conflict, disaster, and celebration.

Most of all, these images tell a story of continual change. These photos were not made to document the old and quaint, but to record the latest developments of contemporary life. As our late colleague John Carter used to say about turning points in history, “This is when things got *different!*”



Our colleagues, present and past, influence every page of this issue. The writing and photo selection was done by myself and Assistant Editor Kylie Kinley, and our late Senior Research Historian Jim Potter was involved in the planning stages. Many of the images and captions are drawn from articles and exhibits by Potter, John Carter, Tom Buecker, Pat Gaster, Bob Puschendorf, David Murphy, and others. Our selection and interpretation was also informed by numerous scholars who have contributed over the years to *Nebraska History* and to books about the state. Most of the photos and accompanying data are from the NSHS photo collection maintained by Karen Keehr and her staff. NSHS volunteers Vince Goeres, Christie Nelson, and John Strobe provided additional help with research and proofreading.



Detail of Fort Kearny sketch on pp. 6-7.