

Part 2: 1867-1916

The period between statehood and World War I saw the building of a vast infrastructure across Nebraska: railroads, towns, farms, ranches, economic and social networks. Settlers poured in from eastern states and from multiple countries, speaking many languages and bringing a variety of cultural traditions. Native peoples struggled to protect their interests and to assert their rights even as they were confined to reservations. Everyone faced the challenges of making a living in an environment prone to extremes of weather. And while we don't usually think of this as a high-tech period, major technological changes were altering the ways in which Nebraskans did business, entertained themselves, and traveled.



Nebraska State Capitol, Lincoln. At the time of its designation as the state capital in 1867, the town of Lancaster was composed of two stores, one shoe shop, six to seven houses, and approximately thirty residents. Forces opposed to removing the capital from Omaha now focused their invective on the newly renamed "city" of Lincoln.

"It is founded on fiat," one newspaper complained, "no river, no railroad, no steam wagon, nothing. It is destined for isolation and ultimate oblivion." Governor David Butler feared that unless a new capitol was completed and ready to receive the state legislature in January 1869, Lincoln would lose its status and the plan for capital removal would fail after all. The builders met their deadline, but the rush-job capitol was so poorly built that it needed to be replaced just twenty years later. NSHS RG1234-3-1



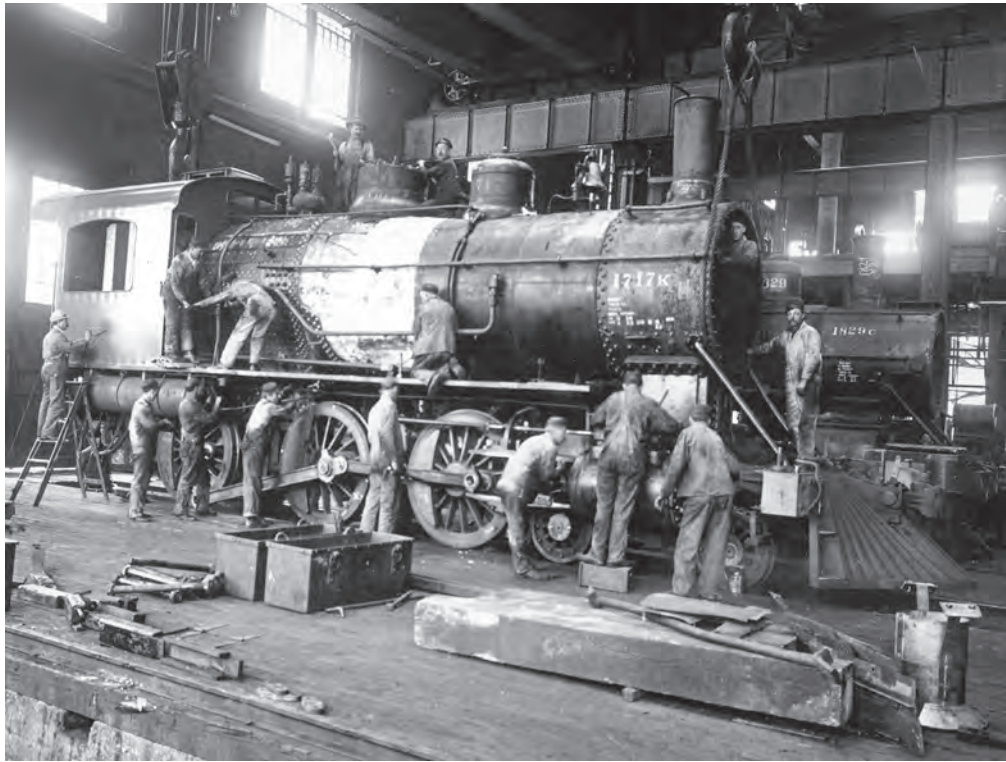
Lincoln still looked sparse when viewed from the capitol tower in 1872, but by then it boasted a grand building housing the University of Nebraska, founded in 1869. "Old Main" stood at the center of campus until it burned down in 1948. NSHS RG2158-23



Omaha thrived despite the loss of the capital. A railroad town, it grew to 16,000 residents by 1870, and nearly doubled in size by 1880. Looking northwest from 15th and Farnam in the 1870s, what is now downtown Omaha was still mostly wood-frame construction, with a mix of commercial and residential properties and muddy streets—all without water or sewer systems. Built in 1872, the city's first high school is shown atop the former Capitol Hill. NSHS RG 2341-2



The final gap in the transcontinental railroad was not filled by the "golden spike" at Promontory, Utah, in 1869, but by the completion of the first bridge spanning the Missouri River in 1873. Until then, railcars were ferried by steamboat between Council Bluffs and Omaha. In 1868 Union Pacific threatened to build the bridge near Bellevue, relenting only when Omaha and Council Bluffs offered free land and nearly half a million dollars in cash. A tornado partly wrecked the bridge on August 25, 1877, and a night watchman had to cross the stormy river by boat to stop an oncoming train. NSHS RG2341-847



Union Pacific shop, Omaha, undated. The partial destruction of the Union Pacific bridge in 1877 proved lucky for Omaha. It allowed Union Pacific to defy an earlier U.S. Supreme Court order to relocate its terminus to Council Bluffs, as specified in the Pacific Railroad Act. The railroad now argued that the bridge disaster demonstrated the folly of moving its shops east of the river when the railroad itself was on the west side. As the *Omaha Bee* boasted on August 25, 1877, "The supreme cyclops of the universe has reversed the decision of the supreme court of the United States and the terminus of the Union Pacific is located in Omaha." NSHS RG3761-10-6



Rivers were major travel barriers for most of human history. And even after railroad bridges spanned the Missouri River, they were usually closed to wagon traffic. In 1888 Nebraska City subsidized a thousand-foot pontoon bridge, said to be the first pontoon bridge across the Missouri and the largest drawbridge of its kind in the world. The V-shaped "draw" opened for steamboats or flowing ice. The pontoon bridge served until 1891, when the Burlington Railroad added planks to its existing bridge and opened it as a toll-bridge for non-railroad traffic. NSHS RG2294-71



A 1915 view of the York County Courthouse, built in 1886 for \$60,000. Early courthouses were simple wood-framed buildings, and sometimes courts leased space in a town's business district. But by the latter nineteenth century the grand courthouse was becoming a point of civic pride for Nebraska's developing county seats. York is also an example of an older style of Midwestern town layout: a business district centered on a town square. Such towns were platted before the arrival of a railroad. NSHS RG3542-125-2



Unlike York, McCook was a railroad town from its founding in 1882, when the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad reached that point. This early photo shows the T-shaped pattern common to railroad towns. Instead of being built around a square, the business district's main street (at the center of the photo) was perpendicular to the tracks and led straight to the depot. NSHS RG3464-7 and RG3464-8 (composite image)



Pawnee women and girls on the reservation in Nance County. Of Nebraska's native tribes, the Pawnees arrived earliest. They were living in central Nebraska at least by the sixteenth century, and perhaps since the twelfth century. They planted corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers, and left their earth lodge villages for part of the year to hunt bison. Epidemics reduced their population from an estimated 15,000-20,000 at the time of European contact to fewer than 2,000 by the 1870s. During an 1873 hunting expedition through southwestern Nebraska, the Pawnees were ambushed by their traditional enemies, the Lakotas, at a place thereafter known as Massacre Canyon. Such hardships persuaded the Pawnees to relocate to Indian Territory later that year.

NSHS RG2065-1-11



Oglala Lakota leader Red Cloud was one of the most important Native American leaders on the Great Plains during the nineteenth century. He was born near Blue Water Creek in present-day Garden County, Nebraska, in 1821. In 1866-68 he led a successful war against the United States in defense of the Powder River Country in present north-central Wyoming. "Red Cloud's War" led to the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868, creating the Great Sioux Reservation in Dakota Territory. NSHS RG2845-4-2

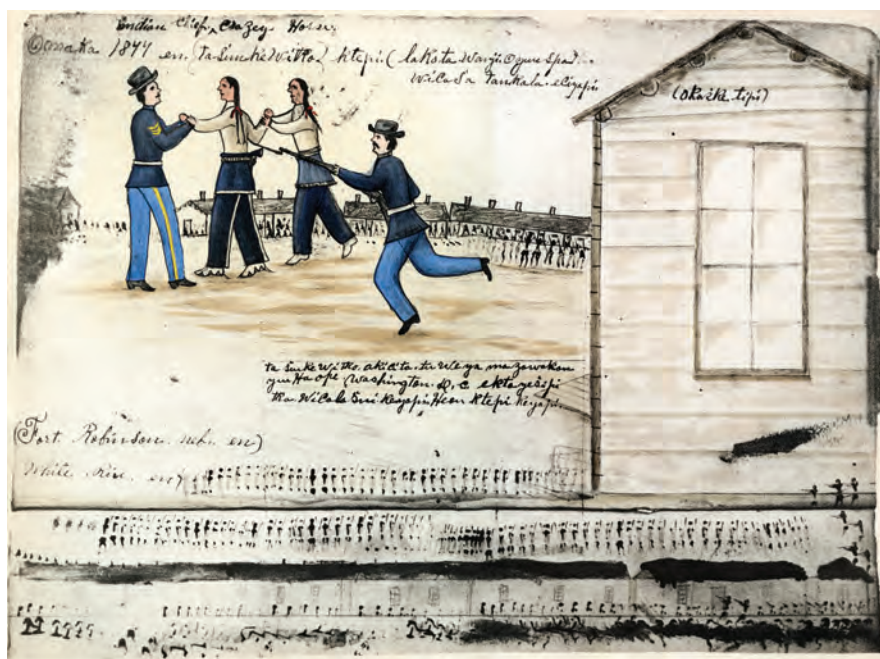




Red Cloud Agency, Nebraska. Shown in 1876, the agency served as a distribution point for government goods promised to the Indians by the Treaty of Fort Laramie. The Lakotas were deeply divided about how to respond to growing encroachment on their lands. Red Cloud now believed that further wars would be futile, and he worked to keep the peace and preserve as much independence as he could. Other Lakotas favored armed confrontation. In 1874, violence by non-treaty bands led the agent to request military assistance, leading the army to build Camp Robinson nearby. NSHS RG2095-80



In 1874, a military expedition led by Lt. Col. George Custer confirmed reports of gold in the Black Hills of Dakota—territory that was part of the Great Sioux Reservation. As word spread, the army tried to keep miners out of the Hills, even as the government tried to convince the Lakotas to sell the land. By 1876 a full-fledged gold rush was underway. Goods and prospectors could be transported west on the Union Pacific to Sidney, Nebraska, and from there be taken north in wagons and stagecoaches over the Sidney-Black Hills Trail. But the wide and soft-bottomed North Platte River was nearly impossible for heavily-laden wagons to ford. In June 1876 Henry T. Clarke completed a massive sixty-one truss structure that spanned nearly 2,000 feet near present-day Bridgeport. A settlement known as Camp Clarke sprung up around the bridge and thrived until railroads reached the Black Hills in the mid-1880s. NSHS RG3289-1



The death of Crazy Horse at Camp Robinson on September 5, 1877; ledger art by Lakota tribal historian Amos Bad Heart Bull (ca. 1868-1913). A tragic chain of events followed the discovery of gold in the Black Hills. The U.S. waged war on the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne after they refused to cede ownership of their land. Despite an Indian victory at the Little Bighorn in June 1876 (the same month Clarke opened his bridge in Nebraska), the army, by attacking encampments and destroying property, gradually forced one band after another to surrender. Crazy Horse surrendered in May 1877; four months later he was bayoneted by a soldier while resisting arrest. NSHS 11055-2241-18



Chief Standing Bear with his wife, Susette Primeau, and one of their sons. Though the Ponca never fought the United States, their land in northeast Nebraska was illegally assigned by treaty to the Santee Sioux. The government forced the Poncas to walk to Oklahoma in 1877. Nearly one quarter of the tribe died there, including Standing Bear's son, Bear Shield, whose dying wish was to be buried in his homeland. In 1879 Standing Bear and his small band eluded authorities to return to Nebraska, only to be arrested and imprisoned at Fort Omaha.

With the help of Omaha attorneys, Standing Bear sued for a writ of habeas corpus in U.S. District Court. On May 12, 1879, Judge Elmer S. Dundy ruled that an Indian was a person within the meaning of the law and ordered Standing Bear's release, the first such decision made by a court and now recognized as a landmark case in the struggle for Native rights.

NSHS RG2066-5-2



A Ninth Cavalry squadron on the drill field just west of Fort Robinson, ca. 1892-93. The Ninth Cavalry was one of two African American “Buffalo Soldier” regiments serving in the racially segregated army. Comprised of career soldiers, the Ninth Cavalry was a crack unit; here each of the four troops has its own guidon and its own color of horse. The Ninth was based at Fort Robinson from 1887 until the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898. NSHS RG1517-93-20



Buffalo Bill's Wild West, undated. William F. Cody was an army scout, bison hunter, and showman who served at Fort McPherson, Nebraska, and for many years had a home in North Platte. After years of stage performances, Cody premiered his outdoor, circus-like “Wild West” show in Omaha in 1883. Featuring sharpshooters, trick riders, and Native American performers, it toured for decades and did much to create the mythology of later Western movies and TV shows. In this detail of a group photo, Cody is seated third from left; sharpshooter Annie Oakley (wearing medals) is standing at right. NSHS RG3004-32



Branding at the Spade Ranch, undated. Early cattlemen thought the grass-covered dunes looked desolate and stayed out. Later, even as large ranches were established, homesteaders came too, claiming land for small farms or ranches. The Kinkaid Act of 1904 allowed homesteaders to claim a square mile of Sandhills land, but even this wasn't enough to make a living. The Spade Ranch was the largest in the Sandhills. Founded by Bartlett Richards and his partners, by 1900 it comprised some 500,000 acres in Sheridan and Cherry counties. After years of illegally fencing public land, Richards was convicted in 1905 and died in prison a year later. NSHS RG2455-183



Neligh Mill, ca. 1885. Now a state historic site, the mill was built from locally fired brick in 1873 by John D. Neligh. It was the first business in the town named in Neligh's honor. A good mill was a major factor in the growth of Nebraska communities during the 1870s and 1880s. Mills turned locally grown grain into flour, cutting down on expensive long-distance shipping. Mills with an ample water supply and situated on main rail lines were able to produce quantities in excess of local needs, and sometimes received lucrative government contracts with the Army or the Indian bureau, or sold flour for overseas export. NSHS RG3551-5



Swain Finch of Custer County demonstrates in 1900 how he tried in vain to kill swarming grasshoppers in 1876. To help re-create the scene, photographer Solomon Butcher added a cloud of 'hoppers by scratching some into the emulsion and drawing others with India ink. Grasshopper infestations were the bane of Great Plains farmers starting in the 1870s. Often described as looking like a cloud of smoke in the distance, a swarm could devour an entire crop in minutes, leaving the ground, as Butcher wrote, "as brown and bare as if it had been swept with fire."

NSHS RG2608-2156h



This photo is iconic in three distinct ways: it shows a one-room schoolhouse with its teacher and students; the school is built of sod; and the teacher is Minnie Freeman of Valley County, the most celebrated hero of the Schoolchildren's Blizzard of 1888. The sudden blizzard on January 12 caught many people away from home and dressed for unseasonably warm weather. When the wind tore the roof off her schoolhouse, Freeman led her pupils through the zero-visibility storm to a farmhouse a half mile away. Many other teachers performed similar heroic acts. It is estimated that between forty and a hundred Nebraskans died in the blizzard.

NSHS RG2035-154



Steam threshing machine, Buffalo County, ca. 1888. Farming has always been a hazardous occupation, and the modern viewer can imagine many ways for these men to get hurt or killed if they weren't careful. The application of steam power (and later, gasoline power) transformed farming. As technology improved, it allowed fewer and fewer workers to raise and harvest ever-larger crops. In time, this would reduce Nebraska's rural population, but that wasn't apparent when this photo was made.
NSHS RG2608-2012a



Rainmaking equipment, 1890s. "Rain follows the plow" is among the most influential ideas in Great Plains history, even if it turned out to be false. The idea was that as more soil came under the plow, the moisture released from the earth would result in greater rainfall, transforming the semi-arid plains into lush cropland. Many settlers believed it until the severe droughts of the 1890s. In desperation, communities sometimes turned to professional rainmakers, whose machinery discharged smoke or chemical fumes to form clouds, around which moisture in the air was supposed to coalesce into rain clouds. Rainmaking proved about as trustworthy as "rain follows the plow."
NSHS RG2545-9



Main Canal, Farmers and Merchants Irrigation Company, between Cozad and Lexington, 1904. The big lesson of the 1890s was that the Great Plains is prone to severe periodic droughts. Farmers began looking to irrigation. In the Platte valley, this meant diverting river water into canals which could then flood fields. Early projects were led by local groups; later, large-scale projects would require state or federal funding. NSHS RG2608-2954



Hord feedlot near Neligh, early 1900s. This view seems common today, but the scale and modernity of Thomas Benton Hord's cattle-feeding operation was impressive at the time. Headquartered in Central City, his conglomerate comprised thirteen separate feed yards in the region, along with 18,000 acres of crop land. He fed scientific rations to cattle, installed windmills at each feedlot to water the stock, offered profit sharing to key employees, and managed it all with the help of telephone lines back to the main office. Hord, who started out in the era of the open range cowboy just a few decades earlier, did much to invent the modern livestock industry. NSHS RG4232-2-20



Union Stockyards, South Omaha, 1909. Founded in 1883, the city of South Omaha (later annexed by Omaha) was known as the "Magic City" for its rapid early growth. From the beginning it was a meat-packing town, its location chosen for easy access to rail and river transportation. By 1892 South Omaha had become the nation's third largest meat-packing center. Meatpacking drew immigrant labor; then as now the city was ethnically diverse. NSHS RG1085-0



Populist convention, Callaway, Nebraska, 1892. The People's Party, better known as the Populists, became an important third political party during the 1890s. The movement was a response to growing economic pressures on farmers, who faced a combination of drought, low crop prices, and debt. Farmers wanted the government to reduce interest rates, to regulate railroads to bring down high shipping rates, and to increase the money supply through inflationary measures such as unlimited silver coinage. When the major parties proved unresponsive, a new party was born. Omaha hosted the Populists' first national presidential convention in 1892, and for several years Populist candidates were successful in Nebraska and other Great Plains states.

NSHS RG2608-2185



William Jennings Bryan accepting his third Democratic presidential nomination on the north side of the state capitol in Lincoln, August 12, 1908. Bryan rose to national prominence in 1896, when his "Cross of Gold" speech electrified the Democratic National Convention and secured him the presidential nomination at age thirty-six. That year Bryan was also nominated by the Populists, but he championed their ideas without supporting their party. Despite his three electoral losses Bryan remained powerful in the Democratic Party, helping to reshape it along more progressive lines.

NSHS RG3198-41-10



Before a women's suffrage parade in Blair, July 11, 1914. Nebraska could have been the first state in the Union to allow women the vote. A suffrage bill passed in the lower house of the territorial legislature in 1856, but failed in the upper house. Wyoming gave women the vote in 1869. Nebraska, with the help of suffrage leaders Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, became the second state to allow women to vote in school district elections. Yet three times Nebraska voters, led by religious and anti-prohibition groups, voted down women's suffrage: 1882, 1891, and 1914. A limited-suffrage act passed in 1917, but by the time court challenges to it were complete, the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution had taken effect. NSHS RG1073-4



Louise Pound, left, and Willa Cather, ca. 1891-92. Just sixteen when she moved from Red Cloud to attend a year of Latin school in Lincoln before enrolling in the University of Nebraska, Cather at that time wore her hair boyishly short, favored an androgynous wardrobe, and signed her letters "William." Pound was already a university junior at age eighteen, a brilliant student, musician, and dominant multi-sport athlete who, among other accomplishments, won the university's *men's* tennis championship. Pound went on to a distinguished academic career as a folklorist; Cather became one of America's greatest novelists. NSHS RG1951-1163



Bethel Chapel, near Gibbon, 1903. After years of holding services in a local rural schoolhouse, the United Brethren built this 26-by-40-foot church in 1900 at a cost of \$1,488. It was "one of the nicest in the county," said the *Gibbon Reporter* upon its completion. Rural churches tended to be smaller and simpler than their urban counterparts, but were no less significant to their communities. Like courthouses for secular society, a well-built church was a point of pride for communities of faith. NSHS RG2608-2623



Germans from Russia arrive in Lincoln, undated. Lincoln's North Bottoms neighborhood was settled by Germans from Russia beginning in the 1870s. During the preceding century they had colonized in Russia, attracted by offers of free land, military exemption, and political autonomy. In 1871, when the Tsar revoked these privileges, a flood of German emigration to the Americas began. Like other immigrant groups, they were drawn to the Great Plains by land and jobs. NSHS RG2824-5-14



Susan La Flesche Picotte as a student at the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, ca. 1888. The first Native American physician, Dr. Picotte was the youngest daughter of Joseph La Flesche, the last traditional chief of the Omaha tribe. After earning her medical degree and completing a hospital internship, she served as physician at the Omaha Agency Indian School, and later practiced medicine among both Indians and whites in Bancroft and Walthill, Nebraska. She also campaigned for various public health causes, for Prohibition, and for the right of Omaha tribal members to rent out their land and manage their own monies. NSHS RG2026-6



Looking east along Farnam Street, Omaha, 1889. No longer a frontier town, Omaha boasted substantial brick buildings, pavement and streetcar tracks, telephone and electrical wires. "I guess there ain't any end to Omaha," sixteen-year-old Frisby Rasp of Gresham, Nebraska, wrote to his parents in 1888. "You can walk till you are tired out in any direction you choose, and the houses are as thick as ever.... It is dusty just as soon as it quits raining, and the dust here is the worst dust I ever saw. It is all stone and manure. Streets that ain't paved, 2 feet deep of mud." NSHS RG2341-28



Modern city life wasn't limited to Omaha and Lincoln. Kearney's Central Avenue boasted electric streetcars and miles of wire in 1891. NSHS RG2178-20



Omaha's Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition was the type of event later known as a "World's Fair." Inspired by Chicago's Columbian Exposition of 1893, the fair attracted two million visitors in 1898. It highlighted the economic and cultural development of Omaha and of the American West as a whole. Its ornate plaster-and-lath buildings looked especially grand in the soft glow of 20,000 incandescent light bulbs. This display of outdoor lighting was unprecedented in scale and was an object of wonder to fairgoers.

RG2752-1-1-1



Court House being moved distance of 20 miles from Hemingford to Alliance, Nebr. July 3rd 1899.

Eastern Nebraska had a generation-long head start on the Panhandle in terms of development. In 1899, a year after Omaha hosted its great exposition, Box Butte County was still sorting out the location of its county seat. After Hemingford lost the vote, Alliance men came to get the courthouse, which they removed with a little help from the Burlington Railroad. NSHS RG3152-3-19



In Scotts Bluff County, meanwhile, a new town was born in 1900. Gering had occupied the south side of the North Platte River since 1887. Now the city of Scottsbluff claimed the north side, starting with a dirt main street and misspelled "SALOONN." Fueled by irrigation and the sugar beet industry, the new city grew rapidly from its humble beginnings. NSHS RG2528-6-3



Telephone switchboard operator in Neligh, ca. 1900. New communication technology was not limited to major cities, but transformed life across the state. Nationally, women were preferred as switchboard operators. They could be paid less than men, but were more polite than boys. The job provided a new employment opportunity for women at a time when Americans were talking about the growing independence of the "New Woman."

NSHS RG2876-731



Rural Free Delivery postal wagon, Seward, early twentieth century. Along with the telephone, RFD removed some of the traditional isolation of farm life. Instead of having to travel to a post office, farm families could receive mail at home. The RFD movement began in the late nineteenth century and was generally adopted by the United States Postal Service in 1902. NSHS

RG2536-5-133



Ladies Ward, State Hospital for the Insane, Norfolk, undated. The hospital opened in 1888 to ease overcrowding at the Nebraska Asylum for the Insane in Lincoln. In the early years it had a farm and dairy where many of its inmates worked to raise their own food. Nationally, such institutions tried to improve their image following New York World journalist Nellie Bly's 1887 expose, *Ten Days in a Madhouse*. NSHS RG2186-5-108



Herbert Cockran had to be restrained for his 1899 Omaha Police Court mugshot. Starting in 1867, the state penitentiary used photography to identify its prisoners; Later, the Omaha Police Court photographed suspects upon arrest and recorded physical characteristics for future identification. NSHS RG2339-595



First touchdown of the season, September 24, 1904. Forward passes: illegal. Helmets: optional. A thousand spectators came to Antelope Field in Lincoln to watch the Cornhuskers rout Grand Island College 72-0. Nebraska fans were used to lopsided games. In 1903 the undefeated Cornhuskers shut out eight of their eleven opponents, and in 1902 they gave up no points at all. NSHS RG 3451-3-122



Hammer gang, Lincoln, ca. 1915. 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. *McClure's Magazine* reported in 1895 that 200-300 blows were required to drive home a five-foot tent stake. Standing in a circle, the hammer gang worked their seventeen-pound hammers with such perfect rhythm that a stake received seven blows per second, and a good crew could sink a thousand stakes in forty-five minutes. NSHS RG3322-47



It wasn't clear that aviation would ever be more than a circus stunt when John, Joe, George, and Matt Savidge of Ewing posed for this photo in 1912, a year after their first powered flight. Another set of Nebraska brothers, the Baysdorfs of Omaha, made the first flight in a Nebraska-built airplane near Waterloo in 1910. The Savidges toured as barnstorming pilots. Their sister, Mary, was probably the first female in Nebraska to be an airplane passenger. Matt learned to loop the plane, and was apparently the world's first pilot to do skywriting. He died in a crash in 1916, after which his brothers gave up aviation. NSHS RG2508-3



Cedar County, ca. 1910. This view by A. E. Severance of Coleridge shows that automobiles were still a novelty worthy of a group photo with (almost) everyone aboard. Even after automobiles became common, it took years of promotion to convince the public that tax-funded highways were worth the expense. In the meantime, private organizations promoted "automobile trails" such as the Meridian Highway (1911) or the Lincoln Highway (1913). At first these routes were little more than local dirt roads with new signage. Today the Meridian is U.S. 81; the Lincoln is U.S. 30. NSHS RG2341-31-1



Street paving crew, Oakland. Though increasingly aided by machines, the building of modern infrastructure took an incredible amount of hard, physical labor. NSHS RG2079-18-2



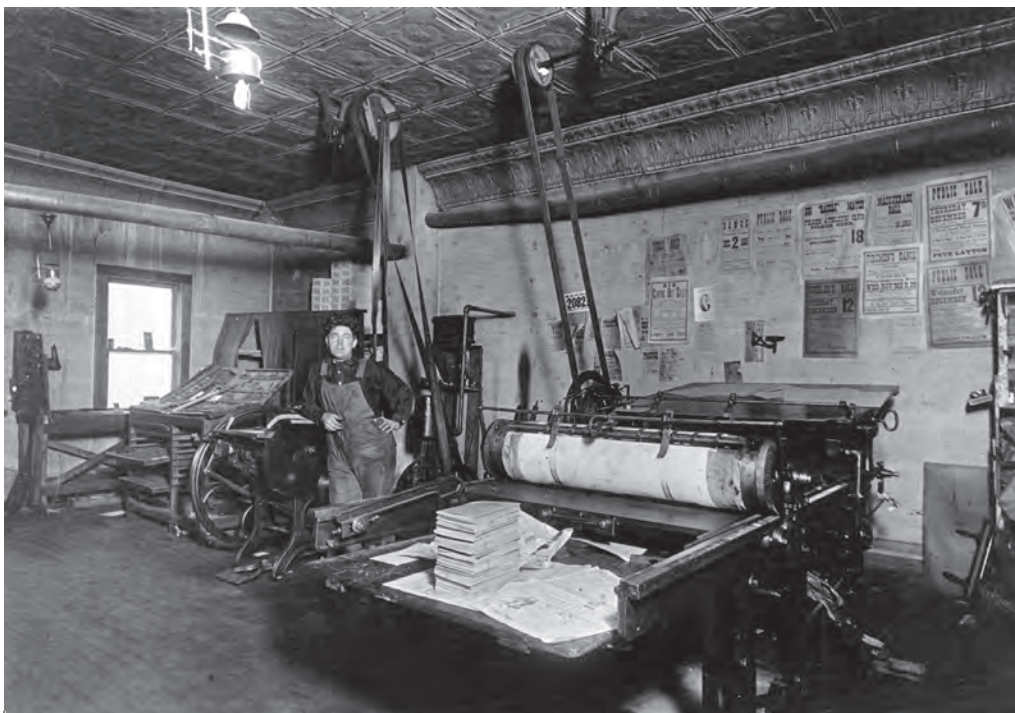
Laundry workers, Crete, 1909. No child labor laws protected the little girl shown here, but that year a young woman from Grand Island, Grace Abbott, earned a master's degree in political science from the University of Chicago and began writing a series of articles about the exploitation of immigrants. Abbott went on to campaign for federal laws protecting children's rights, heading the Department of Labor's Children's Bureau from 1921 to 1934. NSHS RG2491-2-123



A head-on collision of two passenger trains near Indianola killed eighteen people and injured many more on May 29, 1911. The *McCook Republican* called the wreck “the worst ever known on this division of the Burlington Railroad and possibly west of the Missouri River.” Railroad fatalities grew as trains became bigger, faster, and carried more passengers. During the peak year nationally for railroad accidents, 1907, trains were the largest single cause of violent death, and had a fatality rate 110 times greater than that of modern airlines. NSHS RG2442-7-43



Aftermath of one of the Easter Sunday Tornadoes of March 23, 1913, Omaha. Seven tornadoes struck eastern Nebraska that day, killing more than 160 people in Omaha, Ralston, Yutan, and Berlin (Otoe). The deadliest spot, shown here, was the Idlewild Pool Hall at 24th and Lake, where twenty-five people died. Without a civil defense system or radio, people had little or no warning that the storm was approaching, and it took hours for news of the damage to spread throughout the city. NSHS RG3348-6-329



Office of the *Pilger Herald*, 1915. The press is a Prouty “grasshopper”—its roller was propelled back and forth by slotted bars that looked like grasshopper legs. Patented in 1878 by a Baptist minister in Wisconsin, the Prouty was small and inexpensive, and remained popular with small newspapers well into the twentieth century. *Pilger* had only 471 residents in 1910, but printing technology helped it and other small towns keep up on local and national events. NSHS RG2587-1-16