



# Buffalo Tales



Volume 4, No. 6

Buffalo County Historical Society

June, 1981

## SARTORIA, A LOVELY GHOST TOWN

"Coming to my new habitation \* \* \* I ascended a high bluff from which I could view the landscape in all directions. No where was there a habitation of man visible. But along the river bottom was life and joy; there were thousands of prairie chickens playing and cooing, while in the hills vibrated the thrilling melody of cranes." Thus John Swenson describes the land on the South Loup River in Buffalo County on which he settled in early March, 1879. Here he was to become a successful farmer, cattle and sheep dealer, and founder of the village of Sartoria.

Born in Sweden in 1838, John Swenson came to the United States when he was 22 years of age, settling in Geneva, Illinois. At the outbreak of the Civil War he joined the 52nd Illinois Volunteer Infantry and served all four years of that war. At the battle of Corinth his left arm was shattered, forcing amputation. After his recovery he assisted the quartermaster at brigade headquarters until the end of the war. After discharge from the army he attended college at Fulton, Illinois, graduating with a bachelor of science degree.

John Swenson arrived in Buffalo County in 1874 and homesteaded twelve miles north of Kearney in Divide Township. In 1876 he became county superintendent of schools, serving two terms. In his travels around the county visiting schools, he had a good chance to view the land and to see the living conditions of the new settlers who were then arriving and choosing land throughout Buffalo County.

The South Loup River valley in northwest Buffalo County appealed to John. In his reminiscences of the early settlements of Scott and Sartoria Townships, found in **Bassett's History of Buffalo County, Vol. I**, he wrote:

My reasons for becoming a dweller in the region afterwards named Sartoria was that I wished to get into a territory which afforded opportunities for raising livestock. The country was then regarded as useless for any other purpose; with this end in view I went from my homestead (in



JOHN SWENSON

Buffalo Tales is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Editor.....Gene E. Hamaker

Membership in the Buffalo County Historical Society is open to anyone who has an interest in Buffalo County and its people, or in the history of the area.

Annual dues, payable January 1:

- Family membership.....\$ 5.00
- Individual membership... 3.00
- Institutional membership. 5.00
- Sustaining membership... 25.00 +
- Life membership..... 100.00

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Trails & Rails Museum

Phone.....234-3041

**WITH THE SOCIETY**

An old time railroad film will be shown at the Trails and Rails Museum on Saturday, June 20, at 3:00 p.m., and again on Sunday, June 21, at 2:30 and 4:00 p.m. The film tells the story of railroading from its earliest beginnings to the end of World War II. It is approximately fifty minutes in length. The public is invited.

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The Nebraska Museums Coalition state meeting will be held at the Nebraskan on the Kearney State College campus on Saturday, June 19. It was necessary to cancel the folk craft festival, but there will be workshops, films and special helps for those interested in museum work.

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Committee chairmen were appointed for the 1981-82 year by Maxine Schroeder, newly elected president, at the Board Meeting of the Historical Society on June 4:

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|------------------|--|
| Program          | Marian Johnson   |
| Membership       | Leonard Silver   |
| Tours            | Laverne McMullen   |
| Publications     | Alice Howell   |
| Historic Markers | Maynard Envick   |
| Grants           | Philip S. Holmgren   |
| Museum Planning  | Maynard Envick and Alvie Payne   |
| Museum Board     | Philip S. Holmgren, Marian Johnson, Viola Mueller, Carl Oran and Earle Webb. |
| Archives         | Alice Howell, Barbara Saum and Ruth Curd.                                    |

Divide Township) up along the South Loup River to look for a suitable location. At the foot of a high hill, now called Black Hill Creek, I saw a cabin. Here dwelled Jephtha Hooley, a professional hunter. Making known the object of my visit, Hooley pointed east: "See that bluff yonder? There you will find a log house and a good well; occupy this and you will have plenty of hay and lots of range." I took Hooley's advice and am still (1916) on that ground to which he pointed me.

From John's reminiscences we learn that Hooley was to become a good friend and a source of help many times during the next two years as John struggled to raise and protect his cattle and sheep during the harsh, bitter cold winters on the new and practically uninhabited land. This land, incidentally, is still owned by John's descendants, a family ownership that has continued over a period of 102 years.

It was 1878 when the first homestead was taken in Sartoria Township, and only eight are recorded during the years of 1878-1879. Kearney, twenty-eight miles distant, was the nearest town for supplies. Some of the homesteaders owned only one horse, or none at all, and if one possessed a team of oxen he was considered well off. The South Loup River banks were covered with big trees and lots of brush, which for a short time was a real blessing to the new settlers, furnishing both fuel and building material. How extensively the pioneers made use of this timber can be judged from the fact that there were 300 large cottonwood trees in front of the Swenson house in September 1879, and within a year only eleven "scrubs" were left.

John is remembered as a friend and neighbor to all as they worked to settle the new land, to plant and harvest the few acres they could cultivate, and to take care of whatever livestock they owned. Harold Arp, who now lives on the Swenson land and knew him in his later years, says of him, "He would do anything for anybody. He was always taking strangers or people who were down and out, feeding them and giving them a place to stay above his store."

In the **Biographical Souvenir of the Counties of Buffalo, Kearney and Phelps**, it is noted that John Swenson "had marvelous success. He now (1890) owns 1500 acres of fine land, the greater part of the little town of Sartoria, and operates two stores of general merchandise, besides dealing largely in cattle and sheep." John was twice married, first to Eva Jane Thornton, and after her death to Miranda Powers. John and Miranda had one son, John, Jr.

It is probable that the idea of a town was not immediately in the mind of John Swenson when he chose to move to Sartoria Township. However, he did establish a post office as early as January 16, 1880 and served as the first postmaster. The post office continued until February, 1924. It was undoubtedly the prospect of a railroad that prompted the plan for a town. In the 1880's branch lines of both the Union Pacific and the Burlington railroads were being built all over the state, including Buffalo County. Soon after the construction of the Burlington line across the northeast corner of the county in 1886, the Union Pacific built a branch line known as the Omaha and Republican Valley Railway from Boelus to South Ravenna, to Poole and on to Pleasanton. Sartoria, seven miles west of Pleasanton, was to be on this railroad and the grade was completed west to the county line but the railroad was never built beyond Pleasanton.

In any event, Sartoria was a flourishing village as early as 1888. The Buffalo County Historical Society has in its archives a copy of **The Sartoria Independent**, dated Thursday, July 26, 1888, which gives a glimpse of people, places and events in Sartoria at that early time. J. T. Meere was the editor of this weekly newspaper, published every Thursday. It is numbered 14 of Volume 1, which would indicate that publication started sometime in April of 1888. From the list of advertisers, there were

many going businesses and professional offices, namely:

Empire Pharmacy, Dr. O. S. Milnes, Prop.

J. P. Norcross, Physician and Surgeon

The Sartoria Dining Hall, F. W. Oesterle, Prop'r.

I. Hawk, City Barber

G. L. Darrow, Plasterer, Brick & Stone Mason

Walter Price, Blacksmith Shop (next to A. Goehring's Livery Stable)

John S. Windsor, Justice of the Peace, Attorney at Law, Notary Public

The Sartoria Billiard Parlor, E. C. Cross, Prop.

Whitaker & Sons Hardware Store

Pioneer Hardware Store, E. Murphy, Prop.

E. Murphy, Farm Implements (Branch Store at Armada)

O. R. Bryan, General Merchandise

Among the activities of the community were listed

Sartoria Union Sabbath School No. 2 meets every Sunday at 3 o'clock p.m., and

Grand Ball in the Town Hall. Music by the Brewer's Band of Oak Creek

Items of interest in the **News of the Week** column:

If you are fond of sport, come and join our boxing school.

If you want Banjo, Guitar or Violin strings or Musical Instruments, go to E. H. Kretzschmar, Post Office.

The Sartoria Dining Hall will pay the highest market price for potatoes. They want POTATOES and WANT them BAD. Read this once more.

And further down in the column, again:

WANTED—At the Sartoria Dining Hall, 1000 potatoes at once.

The obituary column carried notice of one death in the area with the heading, "DIED—At his residence in Lee Valley, about three miles north of this place, on Friday, July 20, 1888, at 1:30 o'clock p.m. Mr. William Brown, aged 67 years, 2 months and 15 days."



View to the south from the bluff in back of the townsite, overlooking the South Loup River Valley. The letter A was the site of the post office; B was the blacksmith shop. Other business buildings were along the bluff line to the east (to the left of picture.)

The selling prices of the Sartoria Markets column are in marked contrast to today's prices:

Flour—Spring, per 100 lbs.	\$2.20
Potatoes, per bu.	.65
Salt per bbl.	2.50
Eggs per doz.	8
Butter per lb.	7
Ham per lb.	15
Shoulders per lb.	10
Lard per lb.	10
Dry Salt Sides per lb.	12½

One item relating to the forthcoming railroad quotes a letter from the Land Department of the Union Pacific Railway Co., from Omaha, Nebraska, dated July 13, 1888, addressed to John Swenson, Esq., Sartoria, Nebraska, and stating among other things, "The Town-site property at Sartoria is held by yourself and the Omaha & Republican Valley Ry. Co. in undivided interest. \* \* \* "This confirms that John Swenson was indeed the owner of the town in partnership with the railroad.

A legal notice from the Land Office at Grand Island, Nebraska, dated July 6, 1888, mentions the names of Karl Jahn, August Gunst, Adolph Theil, Joseph Schickling and Joseph Hadweger, "all of Sartoria, Buffalo County, Nebraska."

Even without a railroad, Sartoria existed and was a thriving settlement for many years. In front of the high bluff from which John Swenson first viewed his land, the town was strung along the bluff line with buildings on both sides of the road. How many buildings comprised the townsite is not known, but oldtimers remember two store buildings, drug store, blacksmith shop, hardware store, a two-story bank building with living quarters, post office, library, church and school house. At one time there were two doctors. When automobiles became available there was a car dealer handling Maxwells, and later a Ford agency. Also another newspaper appeared in later years called **The Morning Star**, published by the Morningstar brothers.

Sartoria was the center of living from the 1880's through the 1920's not only for its peak population of near 40, but for all other residents of the area. 4th of July



**GENERAL STORE**

Left to right on porch, Stella and Anton Arp, Alfred Pearson, Store Manager. Small building at left was a hardware store; corner of building shown at extreme left was a clothing store.

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celebrations, ice cream socials, box suppers, revival meetings and school activities drew people from miles around. For many years after the turn of the century there was a race track on top of the high bluff which offered added entertainment to the area residents.

All that remains today of the Sartoria townsite are two buildings, one is the general store and the other a two-story white house. Both are wooden structures, framed by the high bluff in back and facing the South Loup River to the south. It is a lovely and picturesque ghost town and the surrounding area with the fringe of trees along the river valley and the wide prairie beyond is a peaceful and pleasant scene. A short distance to the south is a sod house, perhaps the only one left in Buffalo County. The large number of trees in the area were planted by John Swenson and other settlers to replace the timber cut by the first homesteaders in their struggle to survive on the new land.

#### NEW MEMBERS

Patricia McMahon	Amherst
Deloris Gustafson	Hordville
Mr. & Mrs. Harold Ahrendts	Kearney
Mr. & Mrs. Terry Houghland	Kearney
Mr. & Mrs. Dennis O'Neill	Kearney
Gary Zaruba	Kearney
Janice Power	Shelton



Left to right: John Swenson, Jr. and Anton Arp. Sartoria buildings in background. On top of bluff on the left was site of the race track.

#### SOURCES

Bassett, *History of Buffalo County*, Vol. 1; *Biographical Souvenir of the Counties of Buffalo, Kearney and Phelps*; *The Sartoria Independent*, July 26, 1888; *Kearney Daily Hub*, September 29 & October 1, 1871; Interviews with Mr. and Mrs. Harold Arp and Mabel Frame Rice.