



# Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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## NEBRASKA CENTRE AND THE BOYD RANCH

Compiled by Alice Howell

One of the intriguing questions regarding the early history of Buffalo County concerns the site of Nebraska Centre. History seems to disclose that Nebraska Centre was located at the Boyd Ranch, and yet any written record confirming this fact eludes us. Both places, along with Wood River Center (later Shelton), are the very earliest place names in Buffalo County history.

Nebraska Centre is identified as the county seat of Buffalo County when the county was named and bounded in 1855 by the First Territorial Legislature. However, from 1859 to 1870 county business was conducted from Hall County; the only county business recorded at Nebraska Centre was in connection with the 1859 elections. Post routes established by Congress June 14, 1858 include "Florence via Elk Horn City, Fremont, North Bend, Emerson, Buchanan, Columbus and Nebraska Centre, to New Fort Kearny."

The first post office in Buffalo County during the territorial period was at Nebraska

**JAMES E. BOYD**  
Governor of Nebraska  
1891-92  
Proprietor of Boyd's Ranch  
one mile west of Gibbon.  
This ranch was established  
about 1846.



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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
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Trails & Rails Museum

Phone..... 234-3041

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*WITH THE SOCIETY*

The Buffalo County Historical Society bus tour to Red Cloud to visit Willa Cather country and the Webster County Museum is rescheduled for Sunday, October 5. Cost of the bus fare will be \$10.00: admissions, if any, are not included but would not exceed \$2.00. Reservations must be paid in advance and a check for \$10.00 must accompany each reservation.

It is planned to leave the museum grounds by 10:00 a.m. Each tour participant is to bring a sack lunch for a noon picnic in Red Cloud. The bus should return to Kearney before 7:00 o'clock. We will need 40 reservations for this tour, and would appreciate your early response.

Please send reservations to the Buffalo County Historical Society, Box 523, Kearney, NE 68847.

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The Trails & Rails Museum closed the summer season on Labor Day, September 1. Over 1,200 visitors signed the museum register during the summer. The museum will now be open by appointment at any time by calling Alice Howell in Kearney, 237-7858, or contacting any member of the Board of Directors.

It is hoped that some special events will be held during the fall and winter season at the museum.

Centre, opened the 29th day of July, 1859 with Anan Henry as postmaster. Dr. Anan Henry was the father of Mrs. James Boyd; he was a doctor at Fort Kearny but spent much of his time at the home of his daughter. This would seem to support the fact of identical locations, plus the fact that James E. Boyd followed Dr. Henry as postmaster on September 15, 1860 and retained that position until October 30, 1866. Postal records indicate that the Nebraska Centre post office was discontinued October 26, 1868.

Joseph Owen, an early settler of Buffalo County, stated: "I have always known that the J. E. Boyd place, when I came in 1863, was known as Nebraska Centre." This is further verified by diaries and records of travelers on the trails. Two such pioneers were Charles W. Baker from Illinois and a William E. Atchison, who were on the same wagon train. Quoting from Mr. Baker's diary:

"Tues. May 24 (1864): Day pleasant, left camp at 5:30 A.M. -travel 23 mi. to **Boyd's Ranches**. Passed along Wood River all day. Wood, water and short grass. Read letter from home, all well. Wrote letter to Lydia..."

And from Mr. Atchison's diary:

"Tuesday, May 24, 1864. Broke camp at 5:00 a.m. Our route today layed several miles from the river and through a part of country as level as a floor. Arrived at **Nebraska Centre** at 4:00 P.M. and camped, having driven 28 miles. Here we were cheered by letters...which to the weary emigrants are a thousand times welcome."

The place known as the Boyd Ranch was one of the first landmarks west of the Missouri River on the California-Mormon Trail, having its initial or starting points at Florence, Omaha and Bellevue on the Missouri River. Fort Kearny and the Boyd Ranch are mentioned in the earliest accounts of pioneers on the trails. Located about one mile west of present Gibbon, the ranch, on what is now recorded as the SW $\frac{1}{4}$  of Section 14, Township 9, Range 14, in Buffalo County, was situated on the Wood River at the point where the river approaches the nearest to the Platte, less than three miles distance; thus all the emigrants traveling over the trail passed close to the ranch. About twelve miles to the south and west, across the Platte River, was Fort Kearny, near enough to afford some protection to the ranch, but not so near as to cause Dobytown, the small settlement on the west edge of the fort, to compete for business on the trail.

In describing the business of a ranch in those early days and of the store sometimes connected with it, some writers often seem to draw on their imagination. One writer's description of the ranch and store at Wood River Center, seven miles east of Boyd's Ranch, says, "At this point he had a large outfitting store for the accommodation of the many who were rushing to the gold fields of California." As a matter of fact, early settlers still living in Buffalo County about 1900 state that the principal business of this storekeeper at Wood River Center was as a blacksmith and wagon-maker repairing wagons passing over the trail and that the stock of goods carried by him would not have made a wheelbarrow load. Most emigrants purchased their outfits, including provisions, before starting on the long journey over the plains and mountains.

The exact date of the establishment of the ranch later to become known as the

Boyd Ranch is not known. Buffalo County historian S. C. Bassett, in response to a paper relative to the early settlement of the Platte Valley presented to the Nebraska State Historical Society by David Anderson on January 18, 1910, writes as to the beginning of the ranch. "that it was in 1847, the year of the first Mormon movement to Utah, but certainly not later than the establishment of Fort Kearny in 1848. From the first it was occupied continuously as a ranch..." The names of the first ranch operators are not known. It apparently began as one of those settlements on the trails and adjacent to the Fort Kearny Military Reservation where the needs of travelers on the trails could be purchased, and weary animals exchanged for fresh ones.

In the spring of 1853, trail traveler Riley Wescoatt (who returned to Nebraska to make his home some twenty years later) and his brother Jonas, with their wives and three children, camped just beyond what was known as the Boyd Ranch enroute to California. Mr. Wescoatt stated that the principal business conducted at the ranch at that time was trading in oxen and horses and selling whiskey. In the journey over the trail, both oxen and horses often became footsore, but after a few days rest, when their lameness had disappeared, these animals would again be traded to other travelers on the trail.

Mr. Wescoatt stated that his party and that of Captain John Fuller, who were traveling together, each purchased twenty gallons of whiskey at the ranch, paying therefor \$20.00 a gallon. The wives of the Wescoatt brothers carried the money of the firm, and the husbands had quite a time convincing the women that whiskey was a necessary purchase, but the men in their employ thought they ought to have the whiskey on the long journey, and since it could not be secured elsewhere the purchase



An old barn dating back to the early days that was located on the 'Boyd Ranch' west of Gibbon. It blew down in a blizzard on March 18, 1971.

was made. From the earliest days of this ranch, continuously until its sale in 1874, it is believed that the sale of intoxicating liquor formed a regular part of the business of the ranch.

The quarter section comprising the Boyd Ranch was first purchased from the United States Government by Joseph Boyd, his deed from the United States bearing the date of December 10, 1867 and signed by Andrew Johnson, President. The ranch had been in operation for several years before this, but all lands in Buffalo County except the Military Reservation were Indian lands until 1857, and were not surveyed and opened to settlement until 1867. In fact, the deed to Joseph Boyd covering the ranch was the first piece of land in Buffalo County to be owned by an individual. Joseph later deeded the ranch to his brother, James E. Boyd, for a consideration of \$500.00, this deed dated April 5, 1867. There was also a third brother, Samuel, at the Boyd Ranch, who served as one of the commissioners at the first meeting of the Board of County Commissioners of Buffalo County in January 1870.

James E. Boyd, who seems to have assumed active management of the ranch in 1858, was born in Ireland on September 9, 1834. He came to the United States with his parents when ten years of age, settling first in Ohio where he lived with his family until 1856 when he emigrated to Nebraska. He worked with his brother John as a carpenter and painter on the new county court house in Omaha at the northeast corner of 16th and Farnam, which was completed in 1858. He must have spent some time at the ranch during this two-year period, as in August of 1858, he married Ann Henry, the daughter of Dr. Anan Henry, an army doctor stationed at the Fort at that time.

The buildings of the Boyd Ranch were made of sod with dirt roofs, and the owner had a large corral in the bend of the Wood River west of his house. He had a considerable number of men about the place, frontiersmen, some half breeds, most of whom could speak the Indian language. He seemed to be on good terms with the Indians and did not seem to fear an attack.

In the early 1860s Mr. Boyd had more than 100 acres under cultivation where he raised principally corn and barley, the corn bringing a good price from the trail travelers. With the barley he established a small brewery on the bank of Wood River where he brewed about ten kegs of beer at a time, which sold at Fort Kearny and at Doby Town for from \$6.00 to \$8.00 a keg. In connection with the brewery he had an ice house which he filled in the wintertime from the Wood River east of the ranch house. He also had at that time about 100 head of cattle. The Boyd Ranch was an important stop on the Western Stage Lines, established from Iowa to Fort Kearny in 1860 and serving until the coming of the railroad.

In 1864 Mr. Boyd went to Missouri and purchased 24 mule teams along with new harness and new wagons with the intention of engaging in the freighting business. Among the first freight brought out from the Missouri River by Mr. Boyd's teams was lumber for a new frame house for the ranch. This would be the first frame house in the county, the home of James and Ann Boyd and their three children. Their eldest daughter Eleanora was the first white child known to be born in Buffalo County.

When the Union Pacific was built across Nebraska, Mr. Boyd secured a sizable contract in 1866 for grading on the railroad, and thus found a profitable use for the mule teams he had purchased in Missouri. In the four years following, he graded over 300 miles of the line, accumulating thereby a considerable fortune.

In addition to his ranching operation and railroad contracts, James E. Boyd was

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active in the political field. He was elected as justice of the peace in November of 1860, and was elected as a representative to the territorial legislature of 1866 for the joint district of Platte, Merrick, Hall and Buffalo Counties.

In February of 1868, Boyd and his family returned to Omaha to make their home. He continued to be active in business and political affairs there. He was a member of the constitutional conventions of 1871 and 1875. In 1880 he served on the Omaha city council and in 1881 was elected mayor. He projected the first railway from Omaha to the north, established the first large pork packing plant at Omaha, and in 1881 erected the first large theater in Omaha, known as Boyd's Opera House, on the northeast corner of 15th and Farnam.

In 1891-92, James E. Boyd, formerly of Buffalo County, served "with marked ability" as the seventh governor of the state, the first democrat to be elected governor of Nebraska. Following his term in the state house, he continued to live in Omaha until his death on April 30, 1906.

#### SOURCES

We wish to thank Mabel Vohland for granting us permission to use the portion of her book, *Trail Dust to Star Dust*, Gibbon's centennial story, 1971, which relates to the Boyd Ranch.

Other sources: S. C. Bassett, *History of Buffalo County*, Vol. I, 1916; Morton's *History of Nebraska*, Vol. I, 1907; *Nebraska State Historical Society publications*, Vol. 16; *Diary of Charles W. Baker*, 1864; *Diary of William E. Atchison*, 1864.