



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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THE SETTLEMENT OF GIBBON

by Leroy A. Walker

The day was April 5, 1871. A group of people, all strangers to each other, were waiting at the Rock Island depot in Chicago. They were waiting for a special excursion train that had left Buffalo, New York, the day before. As the train moved westward it gathered other people who had answered certain advertisements in several eastern newspapers extolling the virtues of free Nebraska lands. People from New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio had responded, and now the train approached Chicago for yet another group of settlers. They traveled on "excursion" tickets, not emigrant tickets. The excursion tickets were sold at \$12.00 to \$15.00 off the regular passenger rates. However, they paid full price for any freight that they brought with them.

A business venture initiated by Colonel John Thorp of West Farmington, Ohio, brought these people together. Patterned after a prior experience somewhere in Kansas, Colonel Thorp had approached the Union Pacific Railroad officials with a proposal to build a new town in Buffalo County, Nebraska. The railroad was delighted to agree, the more people the more business. Thorp was to receive free all of the lots in the town, and, when he sold these, he could keep all the money. The Colonel had come to Buffalo County in February, 1871, selected the site, and ran the advertisements in eastern newspapers. Now, only a few weeks later, the first emigrants were nearing Nebraska.

The pioneers traveled across Iowa by coach until they came to Council Bluffs. Twenty-one months before this, the Golden Spike had been driven in the rail at



Looking east on Front Street from Gilmore Street: Left to right, S. D. George Store, 1871; W. H. Kelley Harness Shop, 1871; Bank building, circa 1881; Post Office built by Christopher Putman; Hotel, 1871, built by George Gilmore.

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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Buffalo County Depot Museum Phone. 234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

September 30, 2:00 p.m., at the amphitheater of Cottonmill Lake Recreation Area. MARK YOUR CALENDAR NOW. This will be the first meeting of the fall season and the program will be on the history of the Cottonmill Lake area, including the historic cottonmill and West Kearney.

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Several hundred visitors were attracted to the Buffalo County Historical Museum during our first full summer of operation. Peak attendance was in June when the Butcher collection of frontier photographs was on display. We will continue to be open on Sunday afternoons and by appointment, and we urge teachers and program leaders of clubs and youth groups to arrange for special visits to the museum. Arrangements for opening may be made by calling Alice Howell (237-7858) or Leonard Silver (234-9696.)

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We are pleased to announce that contributions to the Land and Building Fund have made it possible for us to purchase the four lots immediately south of our present grounds for future expansion.

Alvie E. Payne is chairman of the Building Fund and urges members and friends to remember the Buffalo County Historical Society in their gifts, memorials, estate planning, and income tax write-offs. The Society is a non-profit corporation and all contributions are tax-deductible.

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In the July-August **Buffalo Tales** we call attention to an error in date on page 6, line 4. The Kearney School system (District #7) was organized on March 23, 1872, not 1892.

Promontory Point in Utah, but there still was no bridge across the Missouri River. So all on the train got off with their belongings, put them on a dray and had them hauled to the river's edge. They and their possessions were then put on rafts and rowed across the Missouri. The rafts landed on the muddy bank on the Nebraska side, and here again their goods were placed on horse-drawn drays and taken to the waiting Union Pacific train in Omaha. After the confusion had subsided, the train pulled out for Gibbon Switch. The record states that only one member got drunk while in Omaha. The time was now April 6.

The Colonists, as they were later to be called, traveled all that night and until two o'clock in the afternoon of the next day. So it was, that on Friday, April 7, 1871, the excursion train was put on a siding at Gibbon Switch. As the train pulled out and con-



Looking west on Front Street from Gilmore Street: Left to right LaBarre Store and Hall, 1871 (first building in Gibbon); small building, unknown; L. J. Babcock Hardware Store, under construction, 1881, (late Walker Hardware); D. H. Hite Drug Store and residence; I. N. Davis Store, 1872; S. B. Lowell Store.

tinued on its journey westward, it left several freight cars behind. These contained livestock, machinery, building materials, merchandise stocks, and personal belongings. Also several passenger cars were left for people to live in until their homes could be built. There were representatives of about 65 families. By July, 1872, there would be about 150 families, and all who arrived by this date were considered original members of the Gibbon Colony.

What the colonists saw on their arrival was not encouraging, the prairie lay blackened from a fire a few days before. There was only one building in sight—a house for the section man that looked after the single track laid through the county in 1866. There were no trees in sight. The Union Pacific had cut them all down, either for ties or for fuel for the engines. Still, every one of the original settlers stayed but one, the man who was to have been the station agent. Within a few days, the Union Pacific sent out a new agent, James Ogilvie. Some stayed because they did not have the money to return east, but most were veterans of the Civil War who found in this new

life an answer to their restlessness. With one or two exceptions, they were all young, in their late twenties or early thirties. The eldest man was 55. The names of these original settlers are engraved on a monument in Gibbon's Pioneer Park.

Gibbon was named in honor of General John Gibbon, a Union general in the Civil War. He was at Gettysburg, and was a member of the government exploratory expedition to what is now Yellowstone Park in 1871, hence the "Gibbon River" and "Gibbon Falls" there. He would be more famous than he now is if he had been one day earlier in his attempt to aid General Custer at the Little Big Horn.

On Saturday, April 8, the new arrivals looked around and some found land that they would like to have. They also made arrangements for a community church service the next day.

On Sunday they had their open air church service. For seats they took lumber that one S. B. Lowell had brought with him for a store building. The weather was lovely—never a brighter or finer spring morning. The sermon was given by the Rev. Josiah Allen, the prayer by Christopher Putnam. The fact that Christopher later became an atheist took nothing away from his prayer of that morning. Everyone in town attended. It can easily be said that no church service has contained a higher percentage of the population of Gibbon than that first church service. This service was held in the area of the present (1979) Miller-Godberson Mortuary. Within ten months, two congregations, Baptist and Presbyterian, had been established in the community.

Sunday morning was indeed a beautiful setting for open air services, but by two o'clock in the afternoon it began to "spit snow". By nightfall a regular blizzard was raging. It blew all that night and all day Monday and Monday night. By Tuesday morning the snow had drifted as high as the top of the freight cars; there had been nothing to stop the snow, no trees, not even weeds or grass.

Some events during the storm seem worthy of mentioning. The single men in the cars were cold, especially since their stove had been taken away from them and given to the Georges. Mrs. George was soon to have a baby and her comfort was important. In a few weeks a baby boy was born to the Georges and he was named Gibbon George. The single men were provided a place during the storm by D. P. Ashburn. He took the horses and cows from his freight car and tied them outside in the storm, and the men went into that car—well, it was better than freezing. Most of the "single men" were married. They had come on west alone, and as soon as a house could be built they would send for their wives and children.

Tuesday the weather cleared enough so that the heads of the families got together and decided who should have first choice at the land. It was decided to draw lots. No. 1 was to have first choice, and No. 2 second choice, and so on. Wm. Brady drew No. 1; as a coincidence, Mr. Brady was the first man to die in the new community. He was killed, on September 4, 1872, in a cave-in in a sand pit along the Wood River while making brick for the first Buffalo County Court House.

On April 22, 1871, the Colonists had a school meeting. They voted to tax themselves \$1,000.00 and build a temporary school. The building was erected, and they had six weeks of school before the fall term. It was an illegal procedure, as none of the members of the Colony had been in the state long enough to be Nebraska citizens, but they did it anyway.

It was called School District No. 2, and in 1872 the first permanent school was built. This building is still standing, and is in use as a residence at 519 1st Street in Gib-

bon. In 1880 the first High School was built. This building, too, is still in use as the I.O.O.F. Hall in Gibbon.

The first days after arrival the new settlers were busy constructing their homes. Most used the material at hand—sod. Sod houses were not easy to construct, especially by people who had never even seen a sod house before, so it was only natural that many selected a spot on a side hill or even a slope of a few feet, and dug back into the rise to cut down on the labor of stacking the sod any higher than necessary. Store-bought lumber for roofs was almost a necessity as there were no trees to provide the home-cut poles that were usually used to support sod roofs. Until the soddies were built the railroad cars, both freight and passenger, were “home”.

To secure fuel in a treeless prairie was a serious problem. The first few weeks the Colonists “borrowed” railroad engine fuel stacked near the track. As short as rooms were in the small soddies, one family devoted one of the two rooms of the house for the exclusive storage of fuel, in this case small twigs and branches, stacked to the rafters, that had been scrounged along the Platte. Later, burning buffalo chips provided the heat needed, and after this source was used up, twisted hay made a hot but short-lived fire. As soon as finances would permit, coal was purchased.

The diet of the early Gibbonites contained plenty of meat and home grown vegetables, but very few fruits. Choke-cherries were one local fruit, and, although a lot of trouble to process, they were sought after as the people developed a physical craving for fruit. Most of the settlers maintained a taste for choke-cherry jelly and wild plum jelly all of their lives. Dried fruit, often sent as a help to the poor relatives in Nebraska, helped sustain them in the cold winters. One family received a barrel of dried apples every fall for several years. When you know how much a small dish of dried apples will expand into, when water is added, a barrel of dried apples is a lot of apples. The barrel was placed outside, right by the door and usually it froze solid in winter. When apples were needed a hatchet was used to chop out the frozen fruit.

It is often mentioned that when the settlers first came to Gibbon there were no fences to aid in keeping in the cattle or, on the other hand, to bother one on the way to town. The reason is that barbed wire was not even invented until Gibbon was two years old and it was probably ten years old before the wire was here in much quantity. By the time Gibbon was 20 years old the whole country was fenced and cross-fenced.

After the Colonists had been here six months and were legal residents of the County, they voted on Oct. 10, 1871, to locate the County Seat at Gibbon. On May 7, 1872, another special election was held. It was decided to build a Court House at Gibbon. In July, 1872, a contract to build a brick Court House was let to a Mr. H. G. Dexter of Omaha for \$16,000.00 with the stipulation that the bricks be made in Gibbon. Getting the bricks manufactured was very difficult and is a story all its own. However, a 3-story brick Court House was built with home-made bricks in 190 working days (90 of these days in the dead of winter). This would be a fair speed even today. The swiftness of construction was not the only evidence of speed for when the Court House had been in use in Gibbon only 20 months the contents of the county offices were whisked away to Kearney between days. The County Seat has been in Kearney ever since.

In 1891, twenty years after arrival of the Colonists, that resulted in the establishment of a new town, a reunion meeting was held to celebrate that arrival. At this reunion meeting it was decided to meet annually on April 7th to commemorate the

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founding of Gibbon. And this resolve has been kept. The "Soldiers Free Homestead Colony" has met every year since.

SOURCES

1. "History of Buffalo County, Nebraska" Vol. 1 by S. C. Bassett.
2. "Trail Dust to Star Dust" by Mabel Vohland.
3. Stories from Mr. and Mrs. J. M. Bayley, grandparents of Leroy A. Walker.
4. Photos were taken by I. D. LaBarre in 1881 and were originally produced as stereoptican pictures.