



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

October 1978

TOWNS OF THE WOOD RIVER VALLEY: SUCSESSES AND FAILURES TO 1890

by Alice Howell

It was a good place to settle—the Wood River Valley—the fine soils, the abundance of summer and winter pasture, the streams, the rainfall. The pioneers discovered it early, some of the first were from the 1871 Gibbon colony, and others, impressed with the beauty and the agricultural opportunities of the land. Between 1873 and 1890 eight settlements were founded along the valley within Buffalo County: Huntsville, Armada, Stanley, Green Dale, Miller, Amherst, Riverdale and Glenwood. Of these, only Amherst, Miller and Riverdale have survived as towns to the present time.

Huntsville, about three miles northwest of present Riverdale, was the first settlement. A few families had moved into the area in 1872 and several more in 1873, most of them living in dugouts the first year or two. When Miles B. Hunt came in 1873 he petitioned for a post office named Huntsville and was appointed the first postmaster.



*The First Bank of Miller, moved from Armada, 1890.
Photo, courtesy of Mrs. C. N. Brown.*

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.

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Buffalo County Depot Museum, 710 West 11th Street, Phone 234-3041.

WITH THE SOCIETY

Programs for the balance of 1978 have been planned. Circle your calendar for these events:

October 29, 2:00 p.m., at Elm Creek Catholic Hall.
Program by Paul Brodine, a slide show presentation on his recent trip to Africa.

November 19, 2:00 p.m., at Gibbon Senior Citizens Center.
Program on the Audubon Wildlife Sanctuary..

December 2-3, 9-10, 16-17; Exhibit of Antique Toys.
At the Museum, 2:00 to 4:30 p.m.

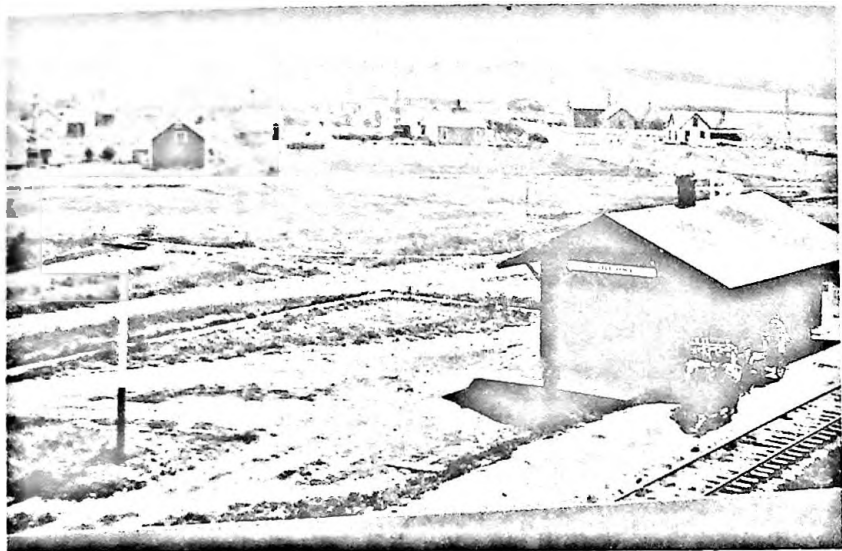
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We are in need of some secure storage space for items from the old courthouse too large to store at the museum. These have been stored in a building that is soon to be sold. Contact Leonard Silver or Philip Holmgren.

* * * * *

Thanks to Vergene Wolfe and her crew of Elm Creek ladies who have spent many hours at the museum deep-cleaning the furniture.

He was also president of the first school board, organized in the spring of 1873. Records disclose that there were twelve children of school age in the school district. The post office was located in the schoolhouse. There is no record of a store or other buildings; probably the schoolhouse was the gathering place for the settlers in the community for church or prayer meetings, political gatherings, or to play baseball.



1904 View of Amherst.

Photo, courtesy of H. E. Belschner.

An early settler in what is now Armada Township was Aden L. Armstrong. In 1875 he became the first postmaster, choosing the name Armada because he had lived in a place in Michigan by that name, and also because he thought it "appropriate for a western place, as its meaning is a fleet of armed ships . . . representing strength and power, a determination to push ahead and overcome all apparent difficulties." Armada post office was located in various farm homes until November of 1881 when Will M. Craven became postmaster. Mr. Craven had fitted up an apartment at his sod house residence to accommodate the weary traveler, and for the convenience of the settlers he purchased a stock of merchandise invoiced at less than \$10.00, coffee, sugar, tobacco and a few notions, thus becoming the first business in what was to be the thriving village of Armada located north of the river, just one-half mile north of present Miller.

The route of the Kearney & Black Hills Trail in 1876 followed the Wood River valley, and Armada was the first relay station out of Kearney where horses for the stagecoach and freighting wagons were changed. Stage and freight lines continued after the excitement of the Black Hills gold rush had died down. Situated midway between Kearney and Broken Bow, Armada became a good trading point. A livery barn was erected by W. H. Fox in 1885 and did a flourishing business, and a year later O. F. Hamilton built a 2-story hotel. The next few years saw a rapid growth, and by 1890 Armada was a busy village of some 250 residents. It had a public school with 85

pupils, five church organizations (although no church buildings), a literary club, and six Lodges or fraternal societies. Businesses listed in the Armada **Watchman** of May 15, 1890 were:

- | | |
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| W. A. Milton's Blacksmith &
Carriage Shop | A. B. Cherry, jeweler |
| E. W. Northrup's Buggy Bazaar | G. E. Tarbox, lawyer and
money-lender |
| R. Darbyshire's Livery &
Feed Barn | W. W. Pierce Furniture |
| Will Craven's Pioneer Dry Goods &
Grocery Store | J. M. Frantz Drug Store |
| Ed Coombs Blacksmith & Repair
Shop | B. F. Harbaugh, Justice of the Peace,
Notary Public, Insurance and Farm
Loans |
| Madsen Lumber Yard | Jo Millspaugh Harness Shop |
| Dan White's Carpenter Shop | Wood River Mercantile |
| J. W. Hitchcock, Shoe Shop | Armada State Bank |
| First Bank of Armada | Billiard Parlors |
| Hackett & Houston's Grocery | P. L. Anderson, general store |
| Gard & Walker's City Meat Market | Mrs. J. H. Wilson's Millinery |
| The Smith Hotel | A. S. Haddix, barber |
| L. A. Hazzard's Pump & Wind Mill
House | Armada Watchman , published every
Thursday |
| Armada Land Office | S. D. Wells, Photograph Gallery |
| Armada Lumber Yard | The Fitch House - hotel |
| B. N. Springer's Pioneer Hardware
Store | Dr. J. W. King |
| H. S. Pease, People's Drug Store | Clark Gillett, painter |
| | James McCalla, plasterer |

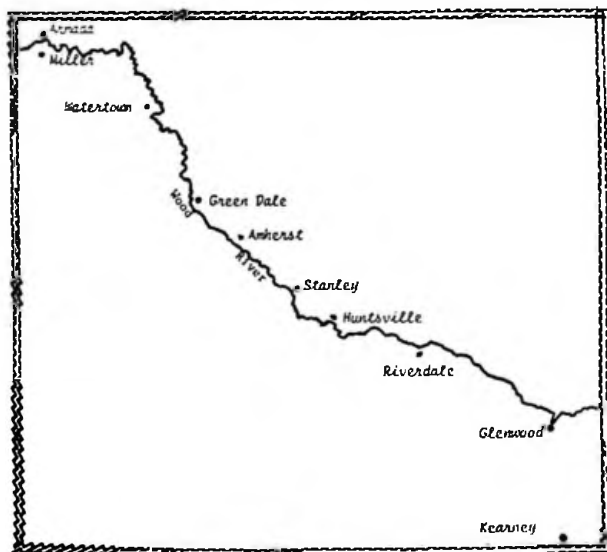
The Kearney **Enterprise** says of the village: "Its beautiful streets, abundant shade, swift flowing river, magnificent farms, stately residences and prosperous people all combine in establishing the name given to the flourishing village of Armada—The Gem City."

In the meantime, two other settlements had been established along the Wood River valley. Stanley, two miles northwest of Huntsville, secured the post office on March 15, 1877 when the one at Huntsville was cancelled. Stanley had a hotel, store, blacksmith shop, church and school—the beginning of an active village.

Green Dale was never more than a rural center with the post office established in a farm home on April 11, 1879. Its outstanding baseball team and the large flouring and feed mill of J. B. Smith, powered by water from the Wood River, are mentioned in the Armada **Watchman** of January 23, 1890. Adolph Voss, in his life story, tells of coming to Green Dale in September of 1882, riding from Kearney in a lumber wagon. "There was no real road," he said, "just a trail through the tall waving grass called blue stem." He attended school in a sod schoolhouse. "A two-horse rig carried Uncle Sam's mail to Callaway from Kearney right by the schoolhouse," he recalled. His father and brother Herman, with their team of horses "Doll and Tom", worked on the grade of the railroad from Kearney to Callaway for \$3.00 a day, good money in those days.

But the long-awaited railroad brought trouble for Armada, Green Dale and Stanley. When the Kearney & Black Hills Railroad was built up the Wood River valley in 1890, the tracks were laid on a route that did not include the established settlements. This meant that Armada, although less than a mile from the railroad, had to cross both the river and the track, because the depot was to be built on the south side of the railroad. Two townsite companies, Miller and Hancock, vied for the new town. C. M. Houston, editor of the *Watchman*, held out for saving Armada, pointing out that the town would grow to meet the railroad. In his editorial of June 20, 1890, he urged, "On with the Armada gait. The 1890 gait." But the Miller Townsite Company won, offering free town lots and payment of moving expenses to Armada citizens who would move to Miller. Fifty-two business and residence buildings and most of the 250 people moved across the river to the new town of Miller within a one-month period, and Armada, in spite of the meaning of its name, was not able to "push ahead and overcome all apparent difficulties." Today only two buildings remain in old Armada town, a small house on the west side of the highway, and a farm home on the east side which had been one of the early hotels. The Armada Cemetery has continued to be the Miller cemetery.

Even Editor Houston joined those moving, publishing the first issue of the *Miller Union* on July 17, 1890, a 10-page issue with a full page ad: "There is no Question but that MILLER will be the Best Town in Wood River Valley," surely a classic example of "off with the old and on with the new."



Stanley and Green Dale were also eventually abandoned, although the old Stanley Cemetery today is Amherst's cemetery. Glenwood, Riverdale, Amherst and Watertown, along with Miller, became new towns in the summer of 1890, each a station on the new Kearney & Black Hills Railroad.

Watertown, between Miller and Amherst, was founded in the summer of 1890, and was so named because of its water tanks constructed to supply water to the steam

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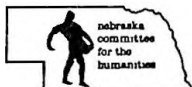
engines on the railroad. It had a store, church, grain elevators, blacksmith shop and brickyard. When the necessity for the water stop ceased, Watertown also became a ghost town. Its post office was discontinued September 30, 1921.

Glenwood, only three miles north of Kearney, was originally Glenwood Park, named for a nearby park on the Wood River. The post office was established in 1892 and was discontinued in 1900, but as a community center Glenwood was one of the earliest. The school dates from 1873. For several years it was known as the Glenwood Community House because, in addition to school, it was the meeting place for religious services, patriotic events, political rallies, and the Glenwood Grange, one of the largest and most progressive in the state. The Blue Mill was located on the Wood River at Glenwood, and at one time there was also an ice house in operation there.

With the advent of the family auto and development of highways, many residents of the valley towns travel to Kearney or Broken Bow to shop. The number of stores has dwindled, the schools have consolidated, and the loss of railroad passenger service has caused the closing of depots and hotels. The small towns appeared doomed. However, the advantages of quiet living, clean air, and close community relations have made the villages of today as inviting and attractive as ever to many people. Some who work in larger towns prefer to live in the villages, and many farmers are moving into town. Amherst, Miller and Riverdale are alive and doing well today, and Glenwood, on the outskirts of Kearney, is now becoming a popular residential area.

SOURCES

The Armada Watchman, April 11, 1889 - July 10, 1890; The Miller Union, July 17, 1890 - September 4, 1890; S. C. Bassett's History of Buffalo County, Vol. I; Adolph Voss, My Life Story.



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