



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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THE WATSON RANCH - Part II.

by Philip S. Holmgren

Part I of this account of the Watson Ranch emphasized those aspects of the Ranch and its operation dealing with the size, the large barn and the introduction of alfalfa to this region of the United States.

Although the introduction of alfalfa to the middle west was the major contribution of Watson and his ranch, the ranch like the man, exhibited a variety of activities almost beyond belief. Alfalfa was the principal crop but as a part of the rotation with alfalfa, up to 2,000 acres of corn, as well as several hundred acres of wheat, were planted. A large feeding operation developed. Sheep and cattle were brought in from western ranches to be fattened on alfalfa and corn. A seed raising experiment was begun in 1898 but it seems to have been most successful in producing alfalfa seed. Very early it was discovered that alfalfa grown in the hills produced better seed than that grown in the valley. Other than the crops mentioned already there were extensive plantings of such garden crops as potatoes, squash, corn, cucumbers, melons, celery as well as other garden crops for use by those living on the ranch.

Fruit growing was another large scale venture on the Watson ranch. The trees were planted on the low hills to the north of the buildings. Thousands of cherry, peach, apple and plum trees were planted. The rows of trees followed the contour of



H. D. Watson

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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
- 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

Sunday, November 18, 2:00 p.m. The Buffalo County Historical Society will meet at Pleasanton in the cafeteria room of the public school. Mrs. Opal Reese and Mrs. Maurine Urwiller are in charge of a Show and Tell program. Members are asked to bring family heirlooms, pictures, or items of historic interest to the community, which will be described and displayed.

Bring your friends and enjoy an afternoon of nostalgia.

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The application of the Buffalo County Historical Society has been accepted by the American Association of State and Local History for a two-day conference under their Consultant Services program. Officers and directors of the Historical Society asked for this service in order to have guidance and expertise in making long range plans for outdoor exhibits and a future new museum building.

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The museum will be open only by appointment until next spring. Call Leonard Silver, Philip S. Holmgren or Alice Howell for arrangements to open.

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End-of-year Reminders:

1980 dues will be payable on January 1. Sustaining or Life memberships are tax-deductible for the amount above \$5.00 Family membership dues.

Gifts to our Building Fund are also tax-deductible.

the hills and methods of their tillage, pruning, and general orchard care were adapted from other fruit growing regions of the country. Visitors from as far away as Cornell University liked what they saw and pronounced the fruit as fine as anywhere.

One of the most interesting events that drew large crowds to the ranch was the annual cherry picking day. A proclamation signed by N. D. Dunlap, a ranch foreman, and published in the local papers, invited people to the ranch for a day of cherry picking. The proclamation gave complete instruction on registration, equipment they should bring, cost of cherries per bushel if you picked them (\$1.50) and cost if picked for you (\$2.50). People were instructed on expected behavior such as "wearing your sunniest smile". Children under fifteen were permitted only if they had parents along to paddle them if they got smart. One such proclamation brought over 1,500 people

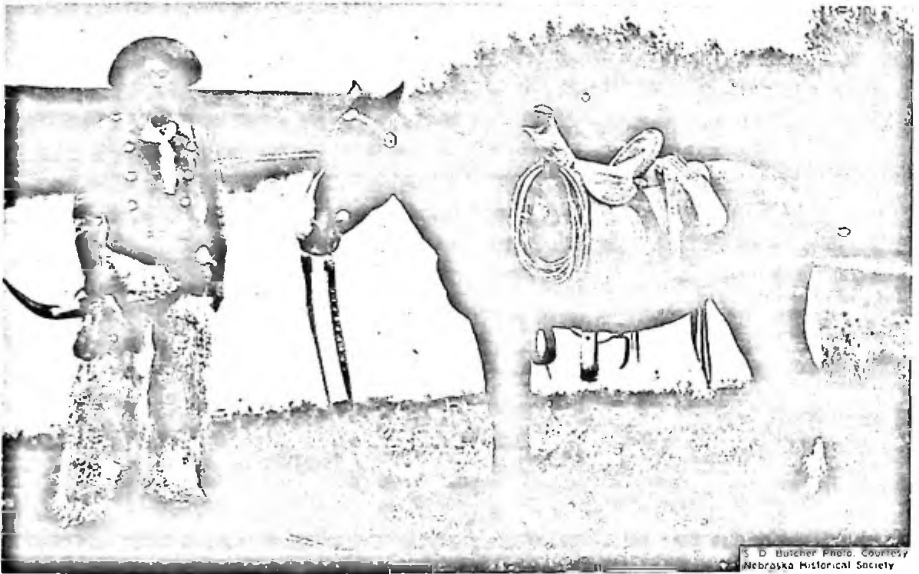


**Philadelphia Press
Auto Relay Racer
Carrying
President Taft's Message
across the continent
to Seattle**

to the ranch with 625 bushels recorded as having been picked.

The ranch was a show place and visitors were welcome. Prominent people were entertained in the large ranch house and fed elaborate meals. This practice, plus its size, all must have contributed to a feeling on the part of some outsiders that here was public property free for the taking. Those responsible for the day to day management of the ranch were annoyed almost beyond endurance by "pilferers". One of the managers had himself appointed as a game warden to attempt to control the hunting on the ranch by outsiders. Sheep seem to have been a major target of those who stole from the ranch. Sometimes the thieves even butchered and dressed them on the ranch before making off with the meat. This practice seems to have carried over long after the Watson ranch was broken up and the nucleus of it was bought by Wood's Brothers and re-named the 1733 Ranch. Further breakup followed and new tenants

continued to be bothered by outsiders helping themselves to any product they could find. When confronted with the demand for an explanation of their action, they would say it was all right to take anything they wanted from the ranch.



N. C. Dunlap, foreman of the Watson Ranch.

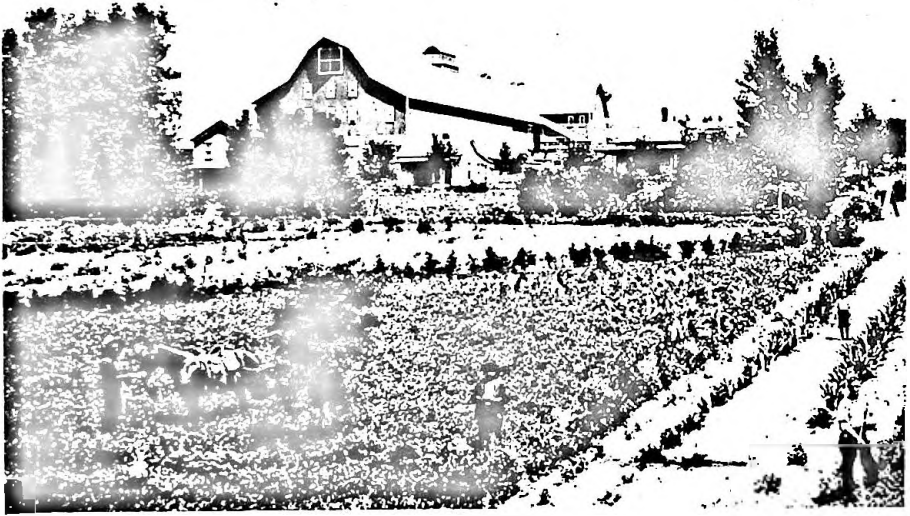
The prominence of poultry is associated with the later years of the Watson ranch. Like everything else on the ranch it was carried on in grand style complete with a three story poultry barn and extensive hatchery facilities. Watson is given much credit for the



Cherry Orchards

introduction of Chinese Pheasants to the Midwest. The high point in the poultry operation appears to have been reached after Watson left the management of the ranch.

Financing of the Watson ranch is extremely involved and cannot be reduced to any single explanation. Watson's method of financing has been described as taking from Peter to pay Paul but never giving Paul as much as was taken from Peter. Throughout its existence the Ranch operated under a heavy burden of debt. Its operations were so extensive and so diverse it resulted in disjointed management and ineffi-



Barn and fields.

cient operation. The major cohesive force appears to have been the magnetic personality of H. D. Watson whose many other interests frequently kept him away from the ranch for extended periods of time. Some of these interests showed a profit and these profits were sunk in the ranch. In the end investors in the land are reported to have lost in excess of 80 per cent of their investment. Walter M. Parker, president of the Manchester National Bank, Manchester, New Hampshire was the real owner of about 4,400 acres from 1901 to 1917. This made up the heart of the ranch, including all the buildings, and was the ranch purchased by Wood's Brothers June 20, 1917 and renamed the 1733 Ranch because it was located 1733 miles from Boston and 1733 miles from San Francisco. After changing hands several more times in the next few years, the final break up came in 1923.

Financially the ranch was a disaster for all those who invested in it and yet this huge operation, often described as a gigantic experiment station, enriched the lives of many people associated with agriculture in the Midwest. It drew many people from all parts of the United States and some foreign countries to Kearney and Buffalo County to view the development of alfalfa, dairying, livestock feeding, fruit raising, seed production plus numerous other agricultural developments. The credit or blame for all of this, for there are those who praise and those who curse him, rests heavily on the shoulders of Henry David Watson, a dreamer of great dreams who died penniless on February 9, 1924.

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SOURCES

Much of the information in this article comes from an unpublished masters thesis, H. D. Watson and His Agricultural Experiment written by Floyd A. Miller. Additional information was obtained from items in Kearney, Lincoln and Omaha newspapers, a letter written by Will C. Scoutt to Floyd Miller, as well as some data provided by Albert Kjar.

The Buffalo County Historical Society has numerous pictures of the Watson Barn but is interested in obtaining pictures of the other ranch activities.

WITH THE SOCIETY

For Christmas giving, may your Historical Society suggest the following:

A 1980 gift Family Membership

This includes a year's subscription to **Buffalo Tales** \$ 5.00

Where the Buffalo Roamed

Stories of Early Days in Buffalo County, compiled for the 1967 Nebraska Centennial by the Business and Professional Women's Club of Kearney 10.00

City of Kearney, 1873 - 1973 Centennial Booklet 2.50

Denman

A memento to the Village of Denman, compiled by Dessa Woodman 5.00

Lowell, Boom Town in the 1870's

A history of Lowell, compiled by Mrs. George H. Myers 8.00

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Notepaper, sketches by Barbara Hueftle Avery 3.10

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Send orders to Buffalo County Historical Society, Box 523, Kearney, NE 68847; or call Alice Howell, president, 237-7858, for information.