



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

April 1983

ROOTS OF BUFFALO COUNTY: THE IRISH - Part I

by Margaret Stines Nielsen

The Irish played an important part in the early development of Buffalo County. Among the first of these were the Boyd brothers, Joseph, James and Samuel, and, Patrick Walsh, all Irish born. The Boyd Ranch, a landmark on the Mormon Trail, was established about 1847 on what was then Indian land. Joseph Boyd purchased the land in 1867 and deeded it to his brother James who had managed it since 1858. James secured a contract for grading the Union Pacific in 1866. That year he had served in the Territorial Legislature. In 1868 he moved to Omaha, after becoming Governor.

Patrick Walsh, known as the father of Shelton, was born in County Sligo, Ireland. Coming to America when about twenty-one, he went first to Mississippi, where he married Agnes Welch, also of County Sligo, in 1856. Walsh later joined the Fifth U.S. Volunteer Infantry, in 1864. After an expedition to Montana, the Company was garrisoned at Ft. Kearny, where Walsh was mustered out in 1865. His family joined him at the fort, where they lived until March of 1866.

Mrs. Walsh baked pies and cakes which her children sold to travelers on the Oregon Trail. With the proceeds of this, they bought a mule and moved to a squatter's claim on the Wood River, owned by Sergeant Michael Coady, who was stationed at Ft. Kearny. In 1869, Walsh filed a soldier's homestead claim on a quarter which included the present site of Shelton. To support his family, he took sub-contracts under James Boyd for the grading of the Union Pacific as far west as Rawlins,



Patric J. Walsh
(Continued on Page 3)

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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\$ 7.50
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- Sustaining membership ... 25.00 +
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WITH THE SOCIETY

Notice to Members of Buffalo County Historical Society

ANNUAL MEETING

Sunday, April 24, 1983, 1:00 p.m.

Fellowship Hall, First Lutheran Church

3315 Avenue G

Kearney, Nebraska

The annual meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society will be held on Sunday, April 24, 1983, in the Fellowship Hall of the First Lutheran Church, 3314 Avenue G in Kearney. A covered dish luncheon will start at 1:00 p.m., followed by the business meeting at 2:00 o'clock.

On the agenda for the business meeting is the election of president, vice-president and secretary, and three 3-year directors. A report of the year's progress will be given and certificates of appreciation awarded. A Nebraska Tourism Travelogue program will follow the business meeting.

Bring a casserole, a salad or a dessert for the 1:00 p.m. luncheon.

Wyoming.

The country was beginning to fill up, and Walsh investigated the possibility of establishing a school. He found it was about as easy to organize the county; in due course schools would follow. Accordingly, in January, 1870, Walsh, Sergeant Coady, and Martin Slattery, "three sturdy and whole-hearted Irishmen who had landed interests in the county," wrote to Governor David Butler asking for an organization of Buffalo County, (although the county lines had been established, judicial and revenue affairs were conducted in Hall County). The men were all Democrats. As the state administration was Republican, they added a postscript after their signatures: "three d---d good Republicans" and, Andreas continues, "regarded it as an excellent piece of diplomatic strategy". Governor Butler issued a proclamation declaring the county organized and appointed Walsh probate judge with the authority to appoint county commissioners. Patrick appointed Sergeant Coady as sheriff, he in turn appointed Walsh his deputy, as well as furnishing an iron-bound box for county records from stores at the fort. In the tangled circumstances of the first election, Coady and others failed to qualify. Walsh was elected judge and appointed deputy county clerk, under Martin Slattery, as well as holding the offices of deputy sheriff, treasurer, and superintendent of public instruction. His first bill to the county included: salary as judge, \$100; \$8.00 as superintendent of schools; \$150 as deputy county clerk; and \$11 for drawing eleven county warrants.

Although he had little formal education, Walsh widened his knowledge by reading and observation. He was a "fine penman, had excellent diction, and (was) a master in spelling", according to S. C. Bassett. In 1872, Walsh was appointed postmaster of Wood River Center. Hall County also had a town named Wood River, and, because of the confusion of mail, "in a moment of honest Irish indignation," he wrote to the Postmaster General:

Sir—You are hereby notified that, as there is another post-office in the state named Wood River the name Wood River Center is changed to Shelton, and you will please govern yourself accordingly.

Since the township had previously been named Shelton, apparently no one questioned Patrick's authority to change the town's name.

Walsh was elected county commissioner in 1874. At this time, Kearney boosters were campaigning to have the county seat moved to their booming town. Previously county business had been conducted at Wood River Center, Kearney Station (Buda) and Gibbon where a courthouse was built in 1872. In a last ditch effort to keep the county seat, Gibbon supporters suggested that the county be divided, with the western border just west of Kearney. This would place Gibbon nearer to the geographical center of the county. Walsh went on record against this suggestion, although the location of the county seat at Kearney might lead to a depreciation in the value of his property.

In 1882, Shelton was incorporated and Patrick, along with county surveyor, Simon D. Murphy, laid out the streets of the town on twenty-five acres of what had been his land. One of the streets was named for his old friend, Sergeant Coady.

Walsh continued to be a leader in the affairs of the town. His advice was always, "avoid booms and stay out of debt." After his death, on November 17, 1902, county historian Bassett wrote, "Some of his methods were decidedly original but no one who knew ever questioned but his motives were honest and for what he deemed the best

interest of the public”.

Two brothers, John and George Conroy and their families came to Buffalo County in 1878, walking from Grand Island to Shelton. They were born in Ireland of Patrick and Elizabeth Conroy. Patrick died in February, 1861. In March, 1867, Mrs. Conroy brought her seven children to this country, settling in Pennsylvania. John left home at the age of twenty to learn the tanner's trade. When he arrived in Buffalo County, he bought a farm six miles north of Shelton where he lived for eight years, when he was appointed postmaster of Shelton by President Cleveland. He served for four years and also operated a general store. After disposing of that business he was deputy postmaster and served as county assessor until 1914 when he was again appointed postmaster. He had married Anna Edwards in 1874, and the couple had seven children.

George Conroy married Anna Connors in Pennsylvania, and the family group also included a brother-in-law, John Roan, when they moved to Shelton. George purchased a farm near his brother's place. He raised cattle for a number of years before moving to Shelton in 1912. He was elected a county supervisor in 1895, when the "new" courthouse had been completed. He served for 28 years, and was chairman of the board at the time of his death in 1922. He was also president of the original First State Bank of Gibbon. There were eleven children in the family, surviving are two sons, Floyd of Shelton, and Cornell of Omaha. Floyd also served as a county commissioner of District two for eight years, and, like his father, began his first term in a new courthouse.

Waterford County, Ireland was represented by a number of early day settlers of the Elm Creek area: Matt and Ed Fitzgerald, Tom Bolan, William Barron and Matt Hurley. They arrived in the period from 1868 to 1881.

Mathew Fitzgerald, with his wife Mary, also of Waterford County, came to Elm Creek to work on the railroad. The family lived in the section house east of town.



1880 Catholic Church in Elm Creek as it looks today on the Matt Broe farm.

Mike, one of the eleven sons, was the first white child born in Elm Creek. Three grandchildren still living in Buffalo County are Mary Fitzgerald Worthing of Elm Creek, Fern Fitzgerald Thurston and Keith Fitzgerald of Kearney. Two Edward Fitzgeralds followed Matt to Elm Creek, one a brother and one an uncle. The brother, Ed, came to Nebraska in 1875, moved to Colorado for six years, then returned to Elm Creek where he bought a farm in 1881 and was able to accumulate other property "by economy and industry." He married Kate Coffee, also a native of Waterford County, in 1881. They were later postmaster and postmistress in Elm Creek.

Thomas W. Bolan came first to Boston where he had a sister living. He worked in a boat yard, and at other jobs, until he made his way to Overton in 1871. The next year he filed on a homestead near Elm Creek, worked on the railroad part time, and hired some sod breaking done. After three years he was able to devote full time to farming. He sold the homestead in 1883 and bought a tract of raw prairie over the line in Dawson County. In 1884 he married Addie Gingrich and the couple had seven children. The Bolans farmed and raised sheep until 1905 when they sold their stock and moved to Kearney.

Mathew Hurley, who came to this country in 1863, worked in a boot shop in Worcester, Massachusetts for a time. There he married Bridget Bolan. About 1880, they followed Bridget's brother, Tom, to Elm Creek, where they secured a homestead a mile north of town. The Hurleys and their three children lived with William Barron, a section foreman for the U.P., until their dugout was ready. Matt also worked on the railroad at a dollar a day. They built a sod house next, where their daughter Nell (Carter) was born, on June 5, 1881. During heavy rains the roof leaked, soaking all their belongings. The opening for windows was as deep as the sod blocks and formed a shelf for their belongings, and a dry bed for Nell during rainstorms. When asked if the family had a lot of hardships, Nell said "I suppose, but we didn't know it. We had a good time." There were five boys and two girls in the family. Nell, almost 102, and her sister, Margaret Hurley, 95, are living at Mt. Carmel Home in Kearney. A niece, Margaret Connors, of Kearney, recalls when she and her brother George traveled on the local to Elm Creek, where they spent their vacations with their grandparents. Mrs. Hurley, who was a "wonderful cook", always had a large crock of doughnuts waiting for them.

Bridget was a small, lively woman who was "afraid of nothing". A midwife, she traveled many miles to deliver babies. When Indians, attracted by the aroma of baking bread, came to beg she shared what she had, for the Pawnee Indians had been guards for the railroad workers. Although Matt could read and write English, Bridget couldn't read at all and had never learned the language. The two conversed in Gaelic until their daughter Kate had picked up some of the words. After that, "there were no secrets", and Matt taught his wife to speak English. Matt was "quite a talker", and an ardent Democrat. When the farmers gathered in Tom Gass's hardware store, Matt was "usually on his soap box". He often said, "That Billy Bryan (William J.) was a foine b'y".

Mathew Broe, born in Bleffington County, Ireland, first landed in Boston with his brother James. The two later went to Champaign, Illinois, where they farmed. There, Matt married Elizabeth Byrne, also of Bleffington County. The family moved to Elm Creek about 1880. James and Matt farmed east of Elm Creek for three years, then Matt bought a farm north of Elm Creek.

Buffalo County Historical Society
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When the Union Pacific was built across Nebraska in 1866-67, Catholics along the railroad from Columbus to Julesburg, Colorado were served by priests from Columbus. Mass was occasionally celebrated in Elm Creek at the home of William Barron, a Waterford Irishman, remembered by some to this day for his deep religious faith. The Catholics at Elm Creek organized in 1878, a building was constructed at the first town site and dedicated in 1880. Later it was moved one mile east to the new town, and in 1889 was enlarged.

Church dinners were held at the Pacific House, owned by John Dermody. Much of the credit for fund-raising went to Mrs. Dermody, Mrs. Hurley and Mrs. Broe, who hired a team and drove around the country for miles, soliciting food and other contributions for the bazaars which lasted two or three days.

Other Irish names on the early church rolls were Bartley Brennan, Michael Shannon, John McMahon, and Pat McDermott. In 1907 Father Timothy Sullivan was appointed the first resident priest. In 1913 a fund was started for a new church, completed in 1917. Tom Broe bought the old church and moved it to his farm where it remains today.

Resources will appear at the end of Part II.