



# Buffalo Tales



Volume 2, No. 9

Buffalo County Historical Society

October 1979

## THE WATSON RANCH - Part I.

by Philip S. Holmgren

In December of 1936, Will C. Scoutt an erstwhile partner of H. D. Watson, wrote "The story of Watson's Ranch has never been told; no living person, other than the writer, knows it, even meagerly." Scoutt also wrote, "few, if any, would believe the real facts in connection with that operation, if told." These two statements tell us much about what one very close to the Watson Ranch felt about its operation.

Most of the accounts dealing with the ranch spend some time with the ranch and its operation but dwell upon the activities of its colorful promoter and manager Henry David Watson. Again in the words of W. C. Scoutt, "to tell the story of Watson's Ranch would require a volume." This will be far short of a volume.

A search of official records will do little to help clarify the exact size of the Ranch since the Watson property was never a consolidated unit. It can be described as an aggregation of properties under one management. That management was H. D. Watson. In addition to the land which was in his possession, Mr. Watson was the controlling factor in three companies each of which owned hundreds of acres of land. W. C. Scoutt puts the total of land held at about 7,000 acres, while an item in the **New Era Standard** of June 9, 1909 has the figure of 10,000 acres. The last figure appears to be a little inflated, but no more than the stories repeated by those with some association with the ranch both before and after its breakup. The common descriptions were that it extended from Kearney to Odessa from the Platte River into the hills north of what is now Highway 30.



Mowing alfalfa - H. D. Watson in the buggy to the left.

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
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Buffalo County Depot Museum Phone. . . . . 234-3041

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**WITH THE SOCIETY**

Our program at the Cottonmill Park Amphitheatre on September 30 was well attended. Leonard Silver gave the history of the cotton mill and its operation from 1891 to 1901. He also covered the development of the lake into the present city-county recreation area. West Kearney and the factories of the boom period was presented by Alice Howell in a map and copies of an 1889 plat of the area.

Following the meeting, Mrs. Ed Anderson invited those present to come to her home to view the site and remains of the historic cotton mill.

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The October meeting will be on Sunday, the 28th, at the Otto Olsen Auditorium on the Kearney State College campus at 2:00 p.m. Dr. Helen Stauffer of the KSC English faculty will present the program. Some college students who have done outstanding research on ancestors will share the results of their studies. The Olsen Building is directly east of the Coliseum, and its entrance is on the north.

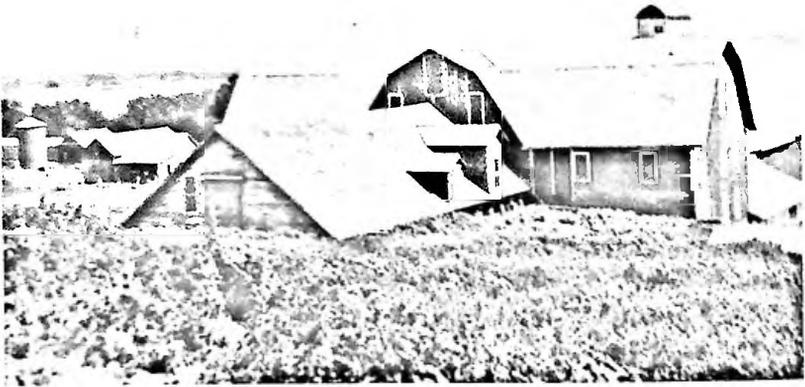
In November we will meet in Pleasanton on the 18th for a Show and Tell program.

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It is not too early for Holiday ideas. You may want to consider items from our gift shop: **Where the Buffalo Roamed**, the Kearney, Lowell or Denman booklets; Barb Avery's notepaper, or any of the Union Pacific souvenir spoons and forks or chinaware.

Remember, also, that gifts to our Building Fund are tax deductible.

The headquarters of the Watson Ranch were located about five miles west of downtown Kearney. U.S. Highway 30 bisects the area where the buildings were located. The original part of the 40 room ranch house was constructed by an earlier owner, Captain David Anderson, and was located to the south of the Highway. The large number of buildings located on the ranch must have made it appear to those who saw it more like a small city than a ranch. To the south of the ranch house were a large number of cottages, the figure has been put as high as fifty-two, which were provided for those who worked on the ranch. Since there were never more than 50 employees working the ranch and a description of the Ranch as purchased by Wood Brothers of Lincoln in 1917 lists only 15 tenant houses the larger estimate must be inflated. To the north on higher ground, dwarfing everything around, was the large barn. Close by the



Looking south from the hill north of the big barn, a few of the other ranch buildings to the left.

barn was a steam powered creamery. Skimmed milk flowed from the creamery directly to the calf barn. In addition there were buildings to house the numerous implements, all the buildings associated with the large poultry operation, and numerous other buildings plus a school house.

To the north of the buildings there was a small lake, fed by the Kearney Canal which ran through the ranch. North and west of the lake was Cedar Hill covered with Cedar trees.

Visitors to the ranch could follow a private road some fifteen miles long which took them from the Platte into the hills to the North. Depending on the season the visitor could view the activities of planting and harvesting of the corn, the wheat, the alfalfa and the thousands of fruit trees from blossoms to harvest plus numerous other crops and ranch activities.

H. D. Watson came to Kearney in 1888 and became a part of the Kearney Boom. During a period of drought Watson discovered that alfalfa could grow under such severe conditions. This find resulted in the planting of 15 acres of alfalfa in 1893.

It was such a success that the acreage was expanded rapidly until about 3,000 acres were planted to alfalfa. Even though much of the fame of the Watson Ranch was to come from the growing and promotion of alfalfa it was not a financial success. Three thousand tons of the crop were raised in 1896 but none of it could be sold. It was considered by many to be worthless as a feed. Some even claimed that it made their cattle and horses sick.

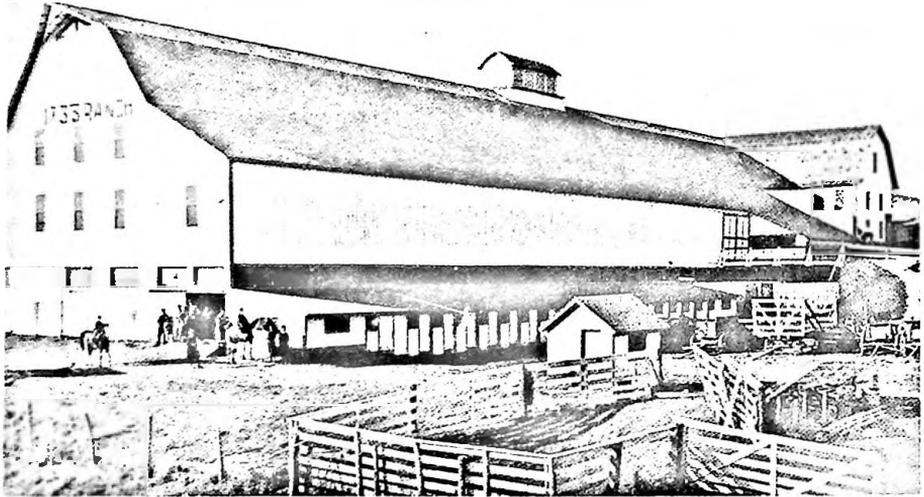
The first sizeable sale of alfalfa was made in 1897 when 1,000 tons were sold to a sheep feeder for three dollars a ton and just for good measure all the hay in the old stacks was given at no additional cost. The alfalfa could not be sold for the cost of production. To demonstrate the value of alfalfa as a feed, it was fed to the livestock on the ranch, sheep and cattle were brought in and fed nothing but alfalfa. The work horses were fed only alfalfa and yet maintained their flesh and strength even though they worked hard.

The acceptance of alfalfa as a feed did not then bring prosperity to the ranch even though it has had a profound affect on agriculture in Nebraska and the region since. The acreage produced on the ranch was so large that the job of harvesting it was impossible to manage effectively. They could not assemble enough equipment, nor the number of men for the short time when the whole crop had to be harvested. The result of this condition was the loss of a large percentage of the crop. The large acreage of alfalfa, like a number of other ventures on the ranch, was spectacular but impractical. An observation made by a member of a delegation of German agriculturists who visited the ranch in May of 1903 applies to the alfalfa raising on the ranch as well as to other activities: "More is lost than gained on the ranch."

An outgrowth of the attempt by H. D. Watson to convince the public of the merits of alfalfa as a feed was the establishment of a dairy operation. A car load of Holsteins purchased from the Iowa State Agricultural college formed the nucleus of the dairy herd which eventually grew to about 400 cows. Since it was not in the nature of Mr. Watson to do anything on a small scale, the building of the "biggest barn in the world" to house his dairy herd was a logical development.

Much has been written about this structure which was a landmark for travelers up the Platte Valley for over thirty years, designed by a member of the Ohio State University faculty Professor Oscar Erf as the first third of what was to be a 1,200 cow unit. Even at one third its intended size, it was indeed an imposing structure. Watson wanted to build the entire 1,200 cow unit but was persuaded against it by Professor Erf. For all its spectacular prominence, the number of conflicting statements that can be found in accounts detailing the size of the structure is surprising. Pictures of the structure attest to its great size and the figures most commonly used are 300 feet long, 100 feet wide and 56 feet high at the south end. It was built into the side of a hill so that teams of horses pulling loads of hay could be driven into the second floor from east or west at the north end of the structure. Nine hundred tons of hay could be stored on this level. Connected to the north end of the barn was a silo which held over 1,000 tons of silage. Descriptions of the first floor vary even more. Such statements as "individual stalls for from 200 to 300 cows" is common while others put the figure as high as "room for 400 individual stalls." There are also accounts which state there was room on the first floor for calves and the horses needed in the dairy work in addition to that for the dairy cows. All feed was distributed and all refuse removed in trolley cars. Regardless of the discrepancies, it is obvious that it was very large but, in the words of

W. C. Scutt... "It was illy conceived, and with the attendant losses, cost a very pretty penny." On a hot August a few years before the barn was dismantled Professor Erf visited the old barn and in the process of pointing out the features of the barn to his friend Albert Kjar they walked into the second floor level and were greeted by the sights and smells associated with 300 old ewes, feeding in there when no refuse trolley cars had run for a long time. His only comment was "it was a grand old barn in its day." In the end the barn's greatest contribution, through most of its 36 years of existence, was as an object of wonder for the gaze of the curiosity seekers.



**"The Largest Barn in the World" looking northwest 1900-1935.**

With a large modern dairy barn, a herd of good quality cows, a modern creamery, more than enough alfalfa to feed the cows and an outstanding customer in the Union Pacific Railroad, whose dining cars were well supplied with milk and butter from the Watson Creamery it must have appeared that the dairying venture must surely prosper.

On February 26, 1903 a fire destroyed the creamery, Watson announced he was not going to rebuild because of the pressure of other interests. Thus another of the apparently successful ventures undertaken on the ranch became just another liability to add to its increasing burden of debt. Watson had convinced the middle west that alfalfa was its logical feed, and his ranch became known as the center of one of the greatest dairying enterprises ever undertaken, but all this could not be converted to profit for those who had invested so much in the ranch.

#### 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. Scutt 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.

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WITH THE SOCIETY

The Save the Depot organization, with support from the Nebraska Arts Council and the Union Pacific Railroad, will sponsor a concert by the Nebraska Sinfonia on October 25, at the KSC Recital Hall, at 8:00 p.m. This 38-member core of the Omaha Symphony is recognized as one of the nation's finest. The Union Pacific will bring them to Kearney by train. A reception and brief appearance in concert is planned upon their arrival at the old Union Pacific depot on 1st Avenue and Railroad Street.

General admission to the evening concert is \$5.00, and patron tickets are \$10.00, of which \$5.00 is tax deductible. Patrons will be invited to a reception following the concert at the Frank House with Union Pacific officials, Sinfonia members and Save the Depot leaders. Call Phyllis Roberts or Alice Howell for tickets.

Most of Kearney's historic buildings have fallen to the wrecking ball. The Kearney depot has been a significant building in the history of our city, and should be restored and reused as a tribute to Kearney's railroad heritage since its founding in 1873.

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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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