



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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Agriculture: Buffalo County Pioneers Lacked Creature Comforts

by Philip S. Holmgren

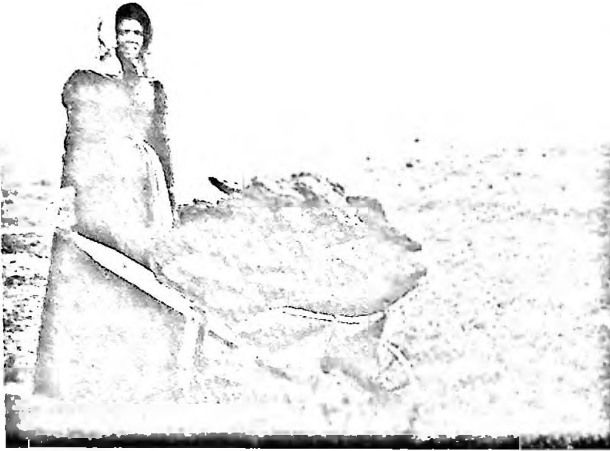
Pioneer agriculture in the eastern half of the United States is described as resting on a three-legged stool. The three legs referred to land, water and wood. As the pioneers moved out on to the plains, one and sometimes two of these legs were missing. Wood seemed to disappear, and water was often hard to find.

The few very early settlers in Buffalo County, who arrived before the railroad stripped the valley of the little timber which was here, were able to get enough to build a few log houses. One of these was the home of William Nutter and his family from 1869 to 1886, located east of present Gibbon. It had been constructed in 1859, and was occupied for a time by William Story before it became the home of the Nutters.

The story of the early homesteaders in the county is one of a struggle of an agricultural society attempting to accommodate itself to resting on a stool with one leg—land. Early arrivals found very little that could pass as trees, except for a few on the islands in the rivers. In building the Union Pacific Railroad, everything had been cut down which was large enough to be used as ties. Some brush might be available to the settlers, but even that soon disappeared. Water for those who settled in the Platte valley, along the Wood River, or along the South Loup could be obtained from these rivers or from comparatively shallow wells, but those who settled outside the valleys found it more difficult to obtain a reliable water supply for the use of the family and their animals. All were soon made painfully aware of the fact that they had moved into a region where an adequate amount of rainfall was not always forthcoming for the raising of crops. Some help in providing stability came from having enough water to keep humans and animals from suffering any real thirst, but crops had to suffer through periodic drought.

Housing for the family was always an immediate problem of the pioneer. Unless the family was blessed with unusual financial resources and could afford to purchase building materials hauled in by freighters or shipped in by the railroad, they had to depend on native material. In Buffalo County this meant a dugout, a sod house, or a combination dugout and sod house. "The little old soddy" and, to a lesser extent, the combination sod house-dugout have been the subject of much romanticizing, especially by those who never lived in one or had forgotten what they were really like. Their coolness in the summer and their warmth in the winter was given much attention. More obvious to those who inhabited them was their darkness, dirt always dirt, their attractiveness to rats, mice and snakes, and a roof which continued to leak long after the rain had ceased. Not only was the collapse of a rain-soaked roof very

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A pioneer woman with a load of cow chips.

Most of the early settlers were persons of very limited means. It was not uncommon for two or more to join in owning a wagon, a plow, a team of oxen or horses and later more sophisticated machines like a reaper. The popularity of oxen was related to the cost factor. They cost less to purchase, required no grain but could live and work on grass in the growing season and on hay and forage in the winter and required no expensive harness.

The mechanization of the farm was in its early infancy. Not many labor-saving machines had been invented and few of these were in general use. Some of the farmers made "A" shaped harrows from oak secured at the Loup River. These harrows were used to cover the newly sown wheat and oats. Fortunately weeds were not a serious problem on the newly plowed sod. Much of the early grain was harvested with a scythe and cradle, thrashed with a flail on the ground, and cleaned by throwing the grain against the wind.

The cost of establishing a farm home often far exceeded the amount anticipated by those who looked at the "Cheap" government land, "free" land under the homestead act, or the "cheap" land available from the railroad. A conservative cost figure for getting to Buffalo County, establishing the bare necessities of a home, and living until the first crop could be harvested would be about \$2,000.00. With \$1.00 per day considered a very good wage, it is not too difficult to understand why it took so long to acquire enough funds to provide a "good" home in this new land during the pioneer stage of settlement in Buffalo County.

Note: Material relating directly to the early settlement of Gibbon is taken from Samuel Clay Bassett, *Buffalo County Nebraska and Its People*, Volume 1 (Chicago: S. J. Clark, 1916).

Some individual dues for 1978 are outstanding. Please send these in so that a separate billing is not necessary.



One of the Earliest Homes in Buffalo County, Log House of Wm. Nutter and family, 1869-1886. (Built by Wm. Story, 1859)

messy, but it was dangerous. Buffalo County residents are numbered among those who lost their lives in such accidents. The dugouts which were occupied for any length of time were usually improved by plastering the interior walls, and making the entrances more functional and attractive. The soddys which were used over a long period of time were frequently plastered inside and out, as well as having the sod roof replaced with a frame roof covered with either shingles or tin.

As soon as lumber was available, those who could afford it constructed frame houses. Those built early in the period of settlement were usually small, and frequently of single wall construction. As time and funds permitted, many of these were improved by additions and by adding an inner wall which made them more comfortable in the winter time. Some of the early settlers at Gibbon lived for a time in box cars provided by the Union Pacific. The attractiveness of these as a home was diminished somewhat by the fact that on occasion a train would bump into them while using the siding on which these cars were located. When this happened there was an understandable rearrangement of the contents of the car.

During the winter months the absence of wood for use as a fuel was a real problem. Those who settled in the Platte and lower Wood River valleys were able to use the willow brush and dead cottonwoods from the islands in the Platte. Some made the long trip to the Loup River to bring back a load of wood. For those living near the Union Pacific track, some assistance in the matter of fuel came about as the old cottonwood ties used in some of the original construction were replaced by a better

grade of tie, and the old ties were then available as firewood. Families tried to keep warm by cutting up corn stalks and using them as fuel. As corn became more plentiful the whole ear, not just the cob, would sometimes be burned.

The inventiveness of some of these early settlers was demonstrated by their attempts to find ways of using unlikely material as fuel. The Rev. J. N. Allen is credited with the development of a mechanical device which took coarse grass and twisted it into a tight roll which could then be cut into lengths to burn in a stove. Ira P. Bunker constructed one of a number of hay-burning devices. Some of these hay-burning stoves were built to continue pushing hay into the firebox as it was consumed by flames. The device patented by Mr. Bunker fed hay from outside his home into the furnace under the house.

Buffalo County pioneers, in common with other pioneers on the plains, resorted to the use of buffalo chips, and later cow chips, to provide the heat to cook their food and warm their houses. Coal, even for those with the money to buy, was often not available. Coal mines were under-developed, and the railroads had inadequate rolling stock for hauling coal, so it was impossible to meet the demands of the early settlers. The seriousness of the fuel shortage and the discomfort which resulted becomes more easily understood when the fact is known that many of the very early houses were poorly constructed and frequently only singlewalled. Even though they were small and the space to be heated was not great, still the suffering in severe weather was intense.



Dugout on the South Loup River, 1892. (S. D. Butcher Photo)



A pioneer woman with a load of cow chips.

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Buffalo County Historical Society
 Box 523
 Kearney, NE 68847

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 Bulk Rate

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Buffalo County is one of ten historical societies in Nebraska selected to sponsor two programs in April by the Nebraska Educational Television Council for Higher Education (NETCHE). "The Legacies of the Depression on the Great Plains" is the subject of the programs which will deal with the events that occurred in the 30's and their effect on life today as told through the experiences of every day people who lived through this time on the Great Plains. Both programs will be narrated by John Beal, veteran Broadway actor, on the ETV show from 8:00 to 8:30 p.m.

At various points in the state, open meetings will be held in connection with the TV show for input into the program. Our Society will sponsor the following:

April 4, 7:30 p.m., Nebraska State Savings & Loan,
 31st St. & 2nd Ave, Kearney.

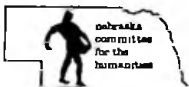
A look at the problems of the farmer through the depression era.

April 11, 7:30 p.m., Amherst High School Gym, Amherst.

A look at the small towns on the plains through
 the experience of one, namely Broken Bow, Nebraska.

There will be a short introduction before the film, and a discussion group following, with opportunity to call questions and comments in to a panel of historians at the ETV studio.

Both meetings are open to the public, and we urge members and interested people to attend and take part in the discussion groups relating to that era of life on the Great Plains.



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