

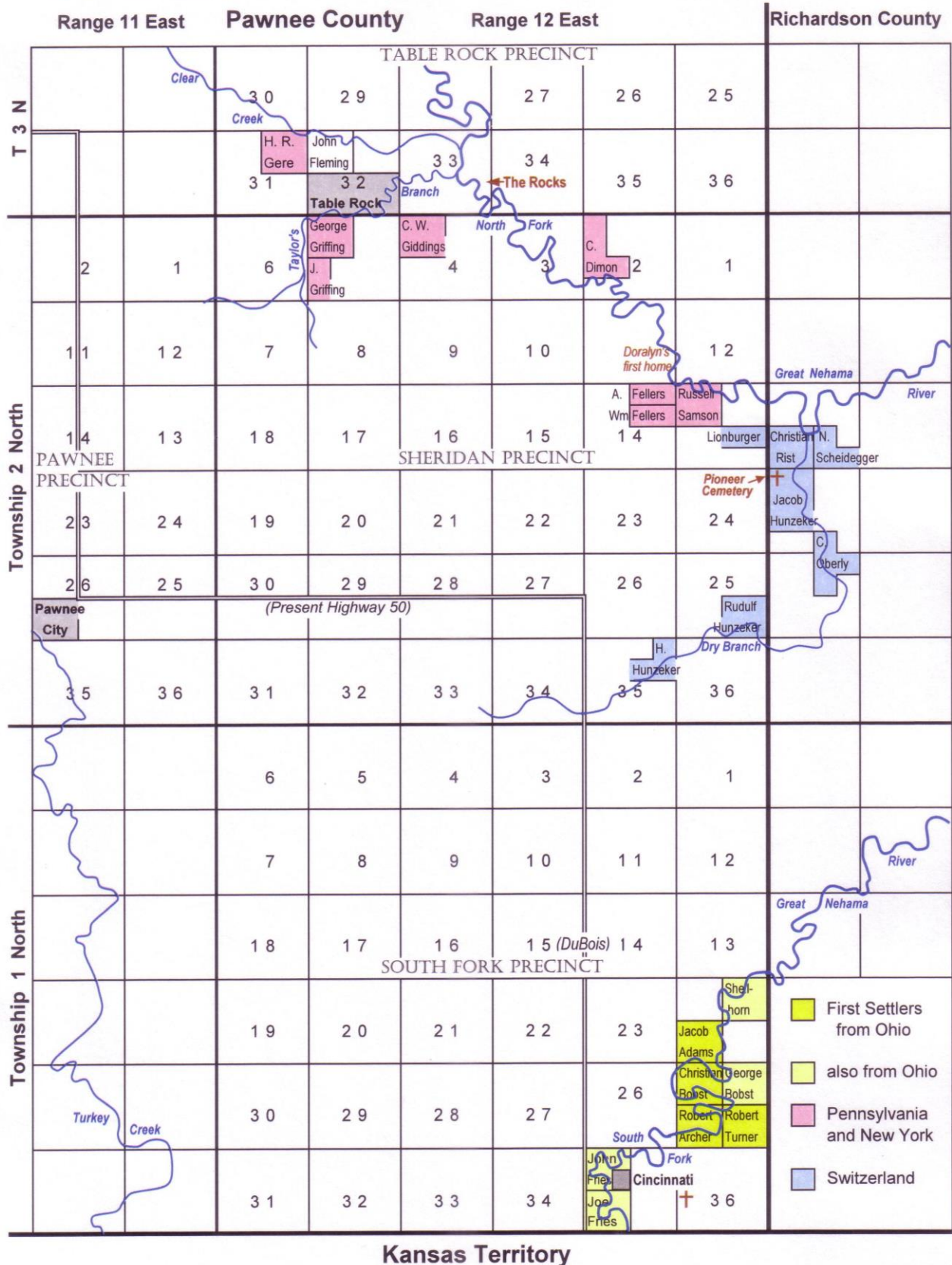
*Stories of Early Settlers  
Along the Nemaha*



by

**Doralyn Steiner Cheney**

# EARLY SETTLERS ALONG THE NORTH FORK, SOUTH FORK & DRY BRANCH



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To my sister, Sylvia

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## Chapter One

### To the Great Nemaha River

Two territories were created by the U. S. Congress in 1854. The territory to the north of the 40<sup>th</sup> parallel was named “Nebraska,” the Otoe Indian name for the Platte River meaning “flat water.” The territory to the south was named “Kansas” which was the name given to another river that flows into the Missouri River near the home of the Kansa or Kaw Indians. In between these two principle rivers are the watersheds of the Nemaha Rivers.

The Great Nemaha River is formed by two branches, one originating in Nebraska and the other in Kansas. The longer branch, the North Fork, has its beginnings in Lancaster County, Nebraska, and flows in a southeasterly direction towards the Missouri River. On its way, it courses through the northeastern corner of Pawnee County. Prior to being straightened, it meandered for some 150 miles before merging with the South Fork. The South Fork has its beginnings in Nemaha County, Kansas, and flows north into Nebraska where it takes a more easterly course. It cuts across the southeastern corner of Pawnee County and merges with the North Fork midway through Richardson County at the town of Salem. Originally the South Fork was about 50 miles in length. Today the Great Nemaha River finally enters the Missouri River just two miles north of the 40<sup>th</sup> parallel.

For those who settled in northeastern or southeastern Pawnee County, the river that flowed through their land was simply called “the Nemaha.” Here are some of the stories about the earliest settlers along the Nemaha.

#### To the South Fork

The bill creating Nebraska and Kansas Territories was signed by President Pierce on May 30, 1854. By that time claims had already been staked in the territories. With the coming of spring, some of the folks who were waiting in Missouri to settle in the new territories joined that year’s migration on the Overland Trail from St. Joseph to California. After following the trail for a few days, there were those who left it to search for land along the Great Nemaha River and its many tributaries, usually avoided by the overland travelers.

In April of 1854 four men who had left Ohio earlier that year marked their claims along the South Fork. The land claimed by the four men was not far from the present-day town of DuBois, Nebraska. However, they would not know until later that year when the 40<sup>th</sup> parallel was surveyed that their claims were located within Nebraska Territory by a mile or more. They came to be recognized as the first settlers in Pawnee County, Nebraska.

The four men, Christian Bobst, Jacob Adams, Robert Archer and Robert Turner, had followed the St. Joseph to California Trail through northeastern Kansas until they reached Baker’s Ford, the rock-bottom crossing of the South Fork about a half mile south of where Turkey Creek empties into the river. There they camped and let their livestock graze. The next day, about five or six miles north of where they had camped, they came to a bluff overlooking the meandering South Fork as it snaked its way more eastward. According to one account, Mr. Bobst was so overjoyed with the wonderful view and beautiful landscape that he exclaimed, “I expect to live and die right in that valley” (*Kern*, 3). Bobst, who was the leader of the group, called the place where he settled “Pleasant Valley.”

The land selected by Christian Bobst (NW ¼ of Section 25, T 1 N, R 12 E) was described by Judge Joseph L. Edwards in his important early book, *Centennial History of Pawnee Co. Nebraska*,<sup>1</sup> as “the best timber claim probably in southern Nebraska . . . unquestionably the finest body of timber in Pawnee county” (7). Andreas described it as “one of the finest timber claims in the state” (1246). Jacob Adams, a bachelor, staked his claim directly north of Bobst near the mouth of a creek that in early years was called “Jake’s Run” (now known as Lore’s Branch). Robert Archer chose land directly south of Bobst. Robert Turner, Bobst’s son-in-law, claimed land diagonally to the south and east of his father-in-law and later George Bobst claimed the remaining quarter of the section to the east of his father. (See map on page 8.) The eastern edges of the latter two claims turned out to be on the Richardson County line.



*Joseph L. Edwards*

The men immediately started to erect log cabins on their claims. Christian Bobst’s cabin was the first to be finished, thereby gaining the title as the first dwelling house in Pawnee County (*J. Edwards, 7; Andreas, 1246*). Robert Turner’s cabin stood for over 100 years on his claim. (After having been enlarged and later abandoned the original cabin now stands in Table Rock where it was reassembled log by log to become one of the Table Rock Historical Society’s Museums.)<sup>2</sup>

Christian Bobst and Robert Archer made the 75-mile trip back to St. Joseph to bring their families and belongings to Pleasant Valley. Christian Bobst’s wife was the former Sarah Book who had married him thirty years earlier. In addition to their oldest son, George, Christian and Sarah’s family included three younger children, Robert, Samuel, and Martha, plus their married daughter, Mary Turner, wife of Robert Turner, and their year-old grandson, George Turner. Years later Samuel Bobst, who was a lad of ten years when he came to Nebraska, told how they made the drive from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Pleasant Valley with ox teams. They followed the California Trail to within five miles of their new home, “not a house in sight the entire distance, nor at that early period even a Buffalo to welcome them to the rich lands they had so long possessed. Indians too were few and far between” (*Kern, 4*).

By the time the men returned with their families in June, other dwellings had gone up in the vicinity of Pleasant Valley. Joseph Fries, his wife, America, and their children were situated in their cabin on their claim in Section 35 upstream (south and west) from Bobst’s claim. According to some accounts, the Fries family, also from Ohio, had joined Bobst and the other men from Ohio in early April on their initial trip from St. Joseph. “Aunt America,” as Mrs. Fries was later known, was recognized as being the first woman to settle in Pawnee County. She is said to have accompanied her husband to the Pleasant Valley area with her three small children in an ox cart. “Mrs. Fries attended to the cooking of the meals when the men erected a log cabin on each claim” (*Brand Irons*). Sadly, a few years later “in the dead of winter when her husband had gone to St. Joseph on a trading trip,” diphtheria took two of her children from her. “All alone with her own hands she must lay their bodies away” (*Ord, 1954*).

In August of 1854 Henry and Anna Shellhorn, also from Ohio by way of Missouri, came to the Pleasant Valley area accompanied by several of their adult children as well as several grandchildren. (More Shellhorns came later.) Henry and Anna selected land in Section 24, downstream (north and east) from Jacob Adams. Three of their sons, Jacob, Gerome, and John, took claims of their own. The land that they claimed turned out to be on both sides of the Pawnee-Richardson County line.

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<sup>1</sup> The book was published on July 4, 1876, and was later used as a source by Andreas in his *History of the State of Nebraska*.

<sup>2</sup> See pictures of the cabin and more about the Turners at [www.tablerockhistoricalsociety.com/turner-log-cabin.html](http://www.tablerockhistoricalsociety.com/turner-log-cabin.html).

Robert Archer, one of the first four settlers at Pleasant Valley, decided to go on to California and sold his claim. Later word came back that he had died before reaching California (*Kern, 6*). Archer's claim was purchased by young James O'Laughlin. His father, John O'Laughlin, had staked his claim on Turkey Creek in Kansas Territory a few weeks before the Bobst party arrived. According to Pawnee County history, on July 20 of 1854 the adventurous 21-year-old James O'Laughlin went exploring with Charles and Arthur McDonald. They followed Turkey Creek upstream to the location of present-day Pawnee City. As they ascended to higher ground, they observed "a large party of Indians, with ponies grazing, just beyond where the cemetery now is" (*Johnson, 504*). They quietly withdrew and made their way back to their places on the South Fork. They were believed to be the first white men to set foot on the present site of Pawnee City.

### **"Squatters"**

Under an act that was passed by the U.S. Congress in 1841, any head of a family or single male adult who was a U.S. citizen or declared his or her intention of becoming a citizen, could claim up to 160 acres of government land where Indian title had been extinguished. The claimant would be able to purchase the land by paying a minimum price, usually \$1.25 per acre, before it was offered for public sale. This was called "pre-emption."

But before a claim could be filed, there first needed to be land offices with approved plats of the surveyed land. It would take two or three years for the land to be surveyed and for land offices to open. Until that time, the early settlers did not have title to their land. They were "squatters." Claim disputes were a threatening problem. To help protect their claims, settlers in a number of areas formed claim clubs as had been done with success the decade before in Iowa Territory.

On July 4<sup>th</sup> of 1854, settlers along the South Fork met at Baker's Ford to form a claim club (*Andreas, 1246*). George Bobst was chosen to be secretary. The document that was signed by them on that day was framed by George Bobst and kept as a souvenir for the rest of his life. Included in its provision was the following: "That each settler or claimant shall build or cause to be built a log dwelling house on the land upon which he settles not less than ten by twelve feet within thirty days from the date of registering his claim or show good cause for his delay in not so doing" (*Kern, 8*).

Within the document John Lumpkins was named as the club's "register." He was responsible for keeping a book in which the name of each claimant, the date of settlement and the locality of the land "as near as can be ascertained" were registered. Names of claimants continued to be entered into the book until the spring of the next year by which time it contained over sixty names (*L. Edwards, 123-125*). The land claimed by them turned out to be located in three different counties of two territories.

### **In Pawnee County**

The organization of the Territory of Nebraska did not get underway until the fall of 1854 when eight temporary counties were created by proclamation by the acting governor. One of them was Richardson County located in the southeast corner of the territory. As first defined, it extended west for sixty miles from the Missouri River, including all of the territory that later would become Pawnee County. Christian Bobst was appointed Probate Judge by the acting governor. Also appointed were Joseph Fries as Justice of the Peace, and Robert Turner as Constable (*Johnson, 504*). Christian Bobst's cabin was designated as one of two polling places for the first territorial election held in December of 1854 (*L. Edwards, 134*). (The other polling place was at William Level's cabin in the eastern part of Richardson County.)

Pawnee County was created the next year by an act of the First Territorial Legislature. Pleasant Valley was situated just inside of the new county. The early pioneers who had settled there would share more



“firsts” for Pawnee County. In the spring of 1855 the first sermon was preached by Rev. David Hart, a Methodist Episcopal minister, at the home of Henry Shellhorn. Unfortunately, Mr. Shellhorn was destined to live only a short time in the new county. That spring he made a trip for supplies and returned, lying very ill in the wagon bed (*Ord, 1954*). He died on the 4<sup>th</sup> day of May, the first death among the settlers (*Johnson, 505*).

In August of 1855 a baby girl, Elizabeth, was born to Mary and Robert Turner, thought to be the first white child born in Pawnee County (*Kerns, 5*). “Indians often tried to trade their ponies for the white baby” (*Ord, 1954*). In March of 1856, James O’Laughlin and Lydia Adamson were one of the first two couples to be united in marriage within the new county by Justice of the Peace Joseph Fries (*Johnson, 506*). (It is possible that the wedding was a double wedding for sisters—the other couple was Robert Clency and Prissilla Adamson.)

Christian Bobst became Pawnee County’s first postmaster. The Pleasant Valley post office was established at his cabin in April of 1856. Being the only post office in the area, “his patrons extended for many miles in every direction” (*Kern, 7*). Judge Bobst and his son, George, had the job of sorting through several bags of mail to find the few pieces for people living in the area (*Andreas, 1246*). From Pleasant Valley the mail was taken on to Marysville, Kansas, and finally to Fort Kearny on the Platte River in Nebraska (*L. Edwards, 638*).

Unfortunately, Christian Bobst’s wish to live and die in Pleasant Valley was fulfilled all too soon. He died in 1859 at the age of 57 (*Kern, 3*). After his death, his son George served as postmaster of the Pleasant Valley post office until 1866 (*Kern, 7*).

## **Cincinnati**

In 1856 John Fries, brother of Joseph Fries, came to the Pleasant Valley area. In 1848, he had driven an ox team in a caravan bound for California. It was told that he had made a fortune in the gold fields. He returned around “the Horn” carrying “\$10,000 in coins in a money belt around his body” (*Ord, 1954*). He acquired land (the NW ¼ of Section 35) next to his brother’s place, one mile south and one mile west of Christian Bobst’s claim. A small lake was situated on his property on the east side of the river. It was on the south end of this lake, or “the pond” as it was called, that he built a saw and grist mill, the first in the county<sup>3</sup>. It was powered by steam, generated by a wood or coal burning engine. In the spring of 1857 he platted a town between the lake and the Nemaha. Both the town and the lake were given the name of Cincinnati.

The little town of Cincinnati “thrived thro the 60’s” (*Ord, 1940, 2*). During this time Cincinnati had one or two general stores, a drug store, a doctor’s office, a blacksmith shop and a three-story hotel. The stage route stopped there bringing mail to the post office (relocated there from Pleasant Valley). “All businesses of the day prospered there” (*Ord, 1940, 2*).

All that remains of Cincinnati today is the cemetery on a knoll overlooking the former town site not far from the Nebraska-Kansas line. There under tall pine trees is where Christian Bobst lies buried beside his wife, Sarah. She lived for another 33 years after her husband’s death, spending her last years in a little one-room house built for her on the Turner homestead near her daughter Mary (*Ord, 1940, 2*).

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1870s the mill on the lake was replaced with a mill on the Nemaha located just north of the Cincinnati bridge that was erected in 1872.

## **To the North Fork**

When the northeastern corner of Pawnee County was surveyed in the fall of 1855, the surveyors noted that there was an Indian trail that forded the North Fork (about 2 miles above the future town site of Table Rock) as well as a wagon trail running from the northeast to southwest. In their notes they also described “the thick growth of maples, oaks and walnuts along the Nemaha. The land along the river was reported to be ‘level prairie bottom, soil 1<sup>st</sup> rate’” (*Danker, 38-39*).

Located on the bluffs on the east side of the river were unusual rock formations. Between Sections 33 and 34 (T 3 N, R 12 E), the surveyors noted, “Here are some remarkable stones . . . composed of soft sand stone. They are about 18 or 20 feet high. . . . They are covered with unintelligible hieroglyphics and were once objects of reverence to the Indians” (*Danker, 39*). One prominent formation was shaped like a large table, nearly high enough to stand under it. The surrounding area became known as “Table Rock.” The surveyors also noted that below the formations “about 1/8 of a mile is a fine mill seat on the Nemaha” (*Danker, 39*).

The “fine mill seat” had been claimed before the surveyors came. Joseph Edwards named one person who settled in the fertile valley of the North Fork in 1854—James M. Hinton. “Mr. Hinton arrived in the county in the fall, or late in the summer, and proceeded at once to the erection of his house” (7). It was reported that he erected a small building with the help of some of the men who had settled on the South Fork. The Table Rock Mill was later erected on the land originally held by Hinton (*J. Edwards, 8; Andreas, 1247*).

## **Table Rock—The First Town Site**

In addition to being a promising site for a mill, the first arrivals envisioned the surrounding area as a favorable location for a town. The following year Hinton and several other men organized the Table Rock Town Company. The site that they selected for their town (the South ½ of Section 32, T 3 N, R 12 E) was west of the Nemaha River by three fourth to one and three fourth mile along a creek that came to be known as Taylor’s Branch. There the town of Table Rock was “partially laid out in the year 1855” (*J. Edwards, 21*) making it the first town to be marked off within the newly created county. Active in this venture was a man by the name of John Fleming (who was listed as a 1856 settler by Edwards). Mr. Fleming built a cabin on the town site and lived there with his family for approximately a year. Another man who became involved in the venture was Robert Furnas of Brownville, editor of the *Nebraska Advertiser* (and future governor of Nebraska). On July 12, 1856, he reported in his newspaper:

We have made a short tour of Pawnee county . . . and were agreeably surprised at the vast amount of good land, timber and stone. . . . The quality of timber on the Big Nemaha is the finest we have seen in the territory. . . . The water power on this stream can not be surpassed. . . . Pawnee county, and especially this portion of it, is susceptible of a heavy population. It only wants to be found out, to have it fill up rapidly. It is immediately on the most practical route for the Territorial Road from Brownville to Fort Kearney.

## **More Settlers**

By 1856 more settlers were finding their way to the valley of the North Fork. Whereas, according to Joseph Edwards, only one pioneer (Mr. Hinton) arrived there in 1854 followed by four more in 1855, in 1856 he reported that there were fourteen who settled near the North Fork and five others who staked claims on Taylor’s Branch. (*J. Edwards, 9*). The town of Table Rock, however, remained a paper town.

In 1856 another census of the Territory of Nebraska was authorized by the legislature. Pawnee County was included with the census for Richardson County. The enumerators were sworn on August 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> and returns were dated the August 29<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>. N. J. Sharp, County Clerk, served as the enumerator for western Richardson County and Pawnee County. The census for Pawnee County consisted of two pages: “Bobst or Pleasant Valley” on page 6 and “Table Rock” on page 7. On page 7, Mr. Sharp listed the names of seventeen men whose dwellings he had found scattered across the northeastern part of the county. By each name a tally was made (by gender and age group) of the number of persons living there. The tallies indicated that a total of 121 people<sup>4</sup> were living in or around the 17 dwellings. Eight of the dwellings had two or more men living there.

To the chagrin of those of us trying to determine when folks arrived, there is little correspondence between the names of the “Table Rock” settlers shown on the census of 1856 taken by Sharp and the names of early settlers on the North Fork and Taylor’s Branch reported by Edwards in his 1876 book. Only five names appear on both lists. (Edwards’ list included men who arrived in the fall of 1856. Also it is possible that Edwards’ list included some of the unnamed “bachelors” staying with the men named in the census. Furthermore, it seems that some of the settlers named by Edwards might have come a year or two earlier or later than he reported.<sup>5</sup> And, of course, some folks were missed.)

### **Up North on the North Fork**

It is elsewhere that one reads about an early pioneer on the North Fork missed by the census enumerator. Peter Foale arrived in Nebraska Territory on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July of 1856 (*Chapman Brothers, 455*). He selected land along the Nemaha River one mile south of the Johnson County line and five miles north of the “partially laid out” town of Table Rock. At that time, he had only one neighbor in sight, Artemis Armstrong. Mr. Armstrong, who was found by the census enumerator, lived a half mile away.

Peter Foale was born in Devonshire, England, the son of William Foale, a stone mason, who died when Peter was fifteen years old. In 1848 when Peter was 26 years old, he and his brother, William, sailed from Liverpool, England to the United States. When they arrived in New York City, Peter was “ill with a high fever. He was hospitalized. His brother, William, was informed that Peter had died and was buried, so the brother took the trunk containing all the money, clothing and went on” (*Brand Irons*). Peter recovered from his illness and worked his way to Ohio. There he married Susan Hewitt. From Ohio they migrated to Illinois and on to St. Joseph, Missouri. Peter and Susan had two sons: Oscar, born in 1850 and another son, William, who died in infancy (*Chapman Brothers, 455*).

During his first fall in Nebraska, Foale sheltered himself in a “rail shanty.” It was described as being a dugout that was covered with rails and hay (*Brand Irons*). A year or two later the shanty and all of its contents were destroyed by a prairie fire that swept through the area after jumping the Nemaha River. Thereafter, he built a small log cabin in which he and his family lived for the next ten years.

After coming to Nebraska, Foale continued to work at his trade as a stone mason in Forest City and St. Joseph, Missouri. He walked thirty miles to Brownville to catch the ferry for St. Joseph. He came home once a month and carried a sack of flour or sugar on his shoulder (*Brand Irons*). Over time, he purchased additional land. He would eventually own a total of 760 acres along the Nemaha, “one of the most valuable homesteads in this region” (*Chapman Brothers, 455*).

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<sup>4</sup> By age groups there were 34 men age 21 and up, 6 men between the age of 16 and 20, 17 women age 16 and up, and 64 children.

<sup>5</sup>For example, George and Samuel McMahan, found in 1856 by Sharp, were reported to be 1858 settlers by Edwards. On the other hand, C.V. Dimon, who came in 1856 according to Edwards, probably came in 1857 as reported in *Chapman Brothers*, p. 527.

## Selecting a County Seat

During the summer of 1856, the organization of Pawnee County got underway. (Until then, the new county created by the legislature the year before continued to be administered by Richardson County.) An order was issued by John C. Miller, the Probate Judge for Richardson County, for an election to be held on August 25<sup>th</sup> to select a seat of justice for Pawnee County. The Table Rock town site west of the Nemaha River was a favored location. However, a second site was proposed “on the high ground across the Nemaha River, just east of the mill site” (*J. Edwards, 10*). Because the “partially laid out” Table Rock town site was closer to the central part of the county, the backers of the town site thought they could count on the support of the voters who had settled farther west along Turkey Creek. They did not suspect “that the dark horse itself was to spring up from that section” (*Andreas, 1250*). Twenty years later Joseph Edwards recounted the ensuing escapade in his *Centennial History*:

But in the mean time, the active and energetic settlers of Turkey Creek could not bear to sit tamely by and not seek to profit by this contention among near neighbors, by pressing their local claims for the county seat. . . . The result was when the election came off it developed a third site, the S.W.¼ -26-2-11, as a candidate for the county seat. Neither one of the three obtaining a majority of the votes cast and consequently neither one was legally chosen county seat.

By some means the poll books of the election held at Table Rock . . . were not signed by the judge or officer of the election. This, it is claimed by some, was in accordance with a preconcerted plan; by others that it was purely an accident or an oversight. But notwithstanding this irregularity, when the returns were carried down to Archer, the county seat then of Richardson county, the County Clerk, N. J. Sharp, after canvassing the returns declared the S.W.¼ 26-2-11 duly elected as the seat of justice for Pawnee county. . . .

Notwithstanding the certificate had been issued by Mr. Sharp, in favor of the present county seat, the Hon. John C. Miller, Probate Judge of that county, when the matter was brought properly before him, declared such certificate null and void; that no choice had been legally made; and therefore ordered that a new election be held on the 4<sup>th</sup> day of November, 1856. (*10 -11*)

Had the election been held within a few days of the first election, Edwards thought it would have been likely that the town site of Table Rock would have become the county seat.

But with nearly two and a half months in which to work, the Turkey Creekers wrought a radical change in the drift of events. With the prestige of the certificate already issued, fixing the county seat on S.W. ¼ 26, 2, 11, and with unremitting and well directed efforts, they soon had the tide of immigration changed, and the center of settlement fixed at a point near the forks of Turkey Creek. By that kind of diplomacy which has ever obtained in politics, even some of the settlers on the North Fork were secured for this point. . . . The South Fork in the new election mainly favored the new movement; and things had been so well managed, that on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November, when the election came off, the S.W. ¼ 26, 2, 11 had 16 majority of the votes cast in the county. . . . (*11*)

County officers were selected at the same election. Nearly all of them resided near Turkey Creek or on the South Fork. Joseph Fries was elected as one of the county commissioners; J. Adams, as a justice of peace; and J. O’Laughlin as a constable.

## Chapter Two

### To Dry Branch

One of my favorite cemeteries is the Pioneer Cemetery situated on a hill in Richardson County, Nebraska, just a hundred feet or two from the Pawnee County line. At the bottom of the hill to the east is a creek called Dry Branch. To the north is the valley of the North Fork of the Great Nemaha River. My first home was located just a few miles “around the corner” to the northwest. No doubt, as a youngster I rode past the little cemetery a number of times in the back seat of my father’s Model-T going to Humboldt by the “back roads.” However, I do not remember seeing the little cemetery on the hill.

It was on a windy afternoon in October nearly sixty years later that I finally stopped there. The cemetery, also known as the Dry Branch Cemetery, has no trees to shade the graves. It is separated from the surrounding fields by a fence. Growing in the fields, then part of the conservation reserve program, was native grass that swayed in the autumn wind. No farm buildings could be seen from the hill save one in the next section to the north almost hidden from view by a grove of trees. Was this something like the way the prairie looked 150 plus years ago when the first settlers arrived, I asked myself.

After untwisting the wire that kept the gate in place, I entered the cemetery. Reading the tombstones, I was struck by the number of folks from the small but densely populated, far-away country of Switzerland who now rest here in this sparsely inhabited area. Later it would become even more intriguing when I learned that six of the pioneers buried in the little cemetery had crossed the ocean together on the same ship in the spring of 1854. Three others buried beside them arrived in this country later that same year.

Eighteen hundred fifty-four was a peak year for immigration in the mid nineteenth century. More than 425,000 immigrants entered the United States that year (*Hansen, 303*). The number of immigrants had increased nearly every year since 1845. During those years potato blight and a series of crop failures throughout Europe had caused widespread food shortages and hard economical conditions. Following a good harvest in the fall of 1854 the exodus finally slowed. However, malnutrition and poverty persisted, especially in the little country of Switzerland where food production had not kept up with the increase in population.

In 1850 there were 13,000 Swiss living in the United States. By 1860 that number had grown by 40,000 (*Hansen, 280*). Eight thousand of them came during the year of 1854—a number that would not be reached again until the 1880s.

#### Those Who Came First

Twelve of those who left Switzerland in the spring of 1854 crossed the ocean together and later lived within a few miles of each other in the Dry Branch area. They came from neighboring towns of the Emmental—the valley of the Emme River—in Canton Bern. (The region shares its name with the renowned Swiss cheese that is produced there.) It is not certain if they had known each other before embarking upon their journey to a new country.

One of them was a young man by the name of Nicolas Johann Scheidegger. He was born in the town of Lützelflüh along the Emme River. He was twenty-five years old and unmarried when he came to this country. More than a century later, his grandson had in his possession Nicolas’ passbook. Said to be a “permit to leave the country, and journey to other lands” the passbook was issued in Bern, Switzerland, on the twenty-fifth day of February, 1854” (*Schuetz*). A later entry made at Havre, France, showed that

he engaged passage on the ship “John Wesley.” The entry was dated the eighth day of March, 1854 (*Scheidegger*). The “John Wesley” arrived at the Port of New York on the fifteenth day of April, 1854. Its passenger list (or manifest) contained the name of “Scherdeger, Johan.” (His descendants have found many different spellings of the name over the years.)

Also listed on the manifest were the names of two other young men. Ulrich Leuenberger was seventeen years old when he came to the United States. Like Nicolas Scheidegger, he was from the town of Lützelflüh. The other young man was Frederic Parli, the son of a cabinet maker born in the town of Rüegsau, located about four kilometers northwest of Lützelflüh. He was nearly nineteen years old when he came to this country.

The manifest also listed two families from the Emmental. One family consisted of Christian Oberli, his wife, Elizabeth, and their little daughter Madeleine. Little information has been found about the Oberli family. In the United States, the spelling of their last name was changed to Oberly. Evidently Christian Oberly was the oldest of those who first came to the Dry Branch area. His small tombstone not far from the gate of the Pioneer Cemetery indicates that he died at the age of 60 in March of 1866. This would have made him 48 years old when he traveled to this country. It is possible that he came from a small town of Rüderswil<sup>1</sup> located approximately five kilometers southeast of Lützelflüh. His wife was much younger according to cemetery records. Elizabeth Oberly is shown to have been born in December of 1832, making her 21 years old when she came to the United States.

The second family was the Reist family that included twenty-seven-year-old Christian Reist, his wife, Kathrina, and their four young children—Maria, Johann, Christian and Frederic—the oldest not quite five years old. According to family tradition, Christian Reist was born in 1827 in “Summerwaldt,” an older name for the present-day town of Sumiswald, located about ten kilometers east of Rüegsau. Sumiswald is several kilometers north of the Emme River along a stream called the Grüene. (Today with a population of over 5,000, Sumiswald is the largest town in its district.) Further research, however, has indicated that both Christian Reist and Kathrina Hug were on the registry at Rüegsau.<sup>2</sup>

### From the Emmental

The Emme River flows through the “Middelland” or midlands to the east of the city of Bern for some 80 kilometers (50 miles) before joining the Aare River. The picturesque countryside of the Emmental abounds with gently rolling hills where cows can be seen grazing in lush pastures that are bordered by steeper wooded hillsides. Farms and hamlets line the roadways that curve their way through the hills. Along these roadways are a number of wooden covered bridges crossing the Emme River and the streams that flow into it.

“Bauernhauses” or farmhouses of this region have a distinctive character—well built from sturdy timbers, topped with large roofs that have overhanging eaves reaching part way to the ground. Often featured on the front are tiers of wooden balconies with carved decorations and boxes filled with colorful flowers. Located nearby are well-kept vegetable gardens and orchards. Barns are often attached to the farmhouses. Little houses built for the grandparents and local inns share these same characteristics.



<sup>1</sup> FamilySearch.org showed a person by the name of Christian Oberli who was born in Rüderswil in October of 1805.

<sup>2</sup> ancestry.com.au/surnames.reist

Christian Reist was a shoemaker. He married Kathrina Hug when he was twenty-one years old. Her grandchildren recalled that she was “a Swiss mountain girl, living on the famous Alps, where she and her parents made cheese. . . . Every spring she would accompany her parents up the mountain side where their cattle and goats would graze on the fresh grass; and with the coming of fall and the rigors of winter, they came down to the lowlands again until the following spring” (*Sunday Journal and Star*).

Here in the United States, Christian and Kathrina changed the spelling of their last name to Rist. Five more children were born to them in their new homeland. One hundred years after their arrival, over three hundred of their descendants gathered at Humboldt, Nebraska, for a centennial commemoration. Articles about the Rist family appeared in newspapers during August of 1954. James Rist, the youngest and the only surviving child of Christian and Kathrina, then 88 years old, told of his parents coming to the United States.

For three weeks they were tossed and rolled on the turbulent ocean trip, finally landing in New York city. They boarded a train for Dayton, Ohio. Enroute on the train, Christian, Jr., age two years disappeared. A kindly brakeman, speaking their language, was informed of the lost child. Father tells of the mixed feelings of the other passengers. Some displayed disgust and others felt a bond of sympathy. It took five hours of moving boxes, suit cases and bundles to finally locate the child fast asleep in another coach (*Humboldt Standard, 18*).

Twenty years earlier in a 1934 article it was reported that the Rist family spent their first summer at Dayton, Ohio (*Haskins*). According to the Scheidegger family tradition, Nicolas also stopped in Ohio near the town of Massillion where he “worked for a farmer a short time for \$7.00 per month” (*Scheidegger*). The rest of the trip from Ohio to St. Joseph, Missouri, was made by riverboat. They traveled “down the Ohio River to its confluence with the Mississippi, thence up that mighty stream to St. Louis, Missouri” (*Schuetz*). There they boarded another boat that followed the Missouri river upstream to St. Joseph.

“This slowly moving trip,” James Rist related in 1954,

made a vivid impression on my parents. I recall him telling his first reaction to the new land, so different from his native Switzerland. He told us the boat reeked with body odors and stale food, with loud and boisterous talk of the adventurous passengers. This tension and discomfort was eased by watching the moving panorama approaching and receding with the forward movement of the boat. . . . Instead of the wild angry waves of the big ocean, they look upon a “Sea of Grass.” . . . Father recalled often times his wonder and amazement at the vastness of this new land (*Humboldt Standard, 18*).

When the Rists arrived at St. Joesph, Missouri, they had less than \$100 in their pockets. Christian soon found work at an ice plant. While putting up ice, he heard a lot of “wild tales floating around the plant”—tales about a gold strike in the west as well as a railroad to be built from St. Joseph. He also heard disturbing talk about slavery. But all of this talk “did not deter them from their original purpose. They wanted to establish a home and land ownership” (*Humboldt Standard, 18*).

Nicolas Scheidegger and others made their way northward to Andrew County, Missouri, across the river from the boundary between Kansas and Nebraska. There they met a fellow countryman who had been to Nebraska Territory. This countryman gave a “glowing account” of what he had seen beyond the Missouri River. They were persuaded to “take a look for themselves” (*Schuetz*).

So late in the fall or early winter they landed in Nebraska. Wending their way westward, they at length reached a fringe of timber which promised fuel and logs for building homes

and water to use. Finding a dry spot in the creek bed they made their camp for the night. Keeping a fire burning all night they managed to keep from freezing but slept very little owing to a cold north-wester blowing that night. After some days spent in scouting about and locating and marking out claims, the party returned to civilization, that is to say, Missouri, to spend the winter. (*Schuetz*)

So it was that three Swiss immigrants staked claims in Nebraska Territory in late 1854 approximately thirty miles west of the Missouri River and less than ten miles north of Kansas Territory. Nicholas Scheidegger (who added an “h” to the spelling of his first name) selected land next to the North Fork of the Nemaha River. His claim was a mile northeast of the future site of the Pioneer Cemetery. Christian Oberly claimed land along Dry Branch stretching from one to two miles southeast of the cemetery. (See map on page 8.) Christian Rist staked his claim one or two miles south of the cemetery.

It was in the spring of 1855 that the entire party, including women and children, completed the last leg of their long journey. James Rist said that his father “had bargained for a wagon, two oxen and a cow and the essential items for the trip westward” (*Humboldt Standard, 18*). His parents kept their first claim for only a short time. Christian Rist sold the rights to the claim for \$125 (*Sunday Journal and Star*). The family moved onto land just north of the Pioneer Cemetery where Dry Branch joins the Nemaha River. It became the family’s permanent home. “Here was grass land, timber, water and fertile bottom soil,” James Rist said of the property where he was born and that he still owned nearly one hundred years after his parents settled there (*Humboldt Standard, 18*).

The bachelors of the group stayed with the Christian Oberly family on the Dry Branch during the winter months (*Schuetz*). The 1856 census for Richardson County, Salem Precinct, showed that there were four males over the age of 16 living in the household of “Christopher Overly,” born in Switzerland.<sup>3</sup>

In 1855 the young Fred Parli (not yet 20 years old) staked out a claim on the North Fork of the Nemaha River a mile and a half within Pawnee County, west of “Luthy’s Mill.”<sup>4</sup> There he built a log cabin. “Later by unfair means he was beat out of his claim. In 1856, he again located on a claim 9 miles south-west of Pawnee City, in Pawnee County, Nebraska, now known as the Johnson Creek Vicinity” (*Schuetz*). Andreas lists the name of Fred Parli among those who settled on the North Fork during 1857 adding the comment that he “afterward removed to Johnson Creek” (1248).

## **Those Who Came Next**

On that October day that I stopped at the Pioneer Cemetery, I was looking for the graves of Rudolph and Verena Hunzeker. My great-great grandparents, also from Switzerland, had stayed with the Hunzeker in the Dry Branch area during their first winter in Nebraska. In the southeast corner of the cemetery I came to a dark granite tombstone. As I approached it, I saw the name “Verena Hunzeker” engraved on the south side of it. It indicated that she was born in 1815 and died in 1891. Even though I was looking for a woman who was born in the year 1814 (according to Hunzeker family history) I still was hopeful that I might have found the gravesite. On the front side the name “Hunzeker” was prominently displayed with “Ruhet in Frieden” (“Rest in Peace”) written below. Walking around to the next side, I expected to see the name of “Rudolph Hunzeker.” Instead, I was surprised to read “Jacob Hunzeker.” He was born in 1812 and died in 1870. (I never did find markers for the graves of Rudolph and Verena Hunzeker.)

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<sup>3</sup> Nebraska Census, 1856, Richardson County, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> The mill built by the Luthy brothers in the early 1880s was located in Section 12. It sounds like Parli’s claim may have been in Section 11. Perhaps it was situated on the farm owned by my parents some 85 years later.



Who were Jacob and Verena Hunzeker? Thanks to an Internet connection at the motel where I stayed, it was not long before I had a likely answer. My search yielded a Jacob Hunziker (as the name was spelled in Switzerland) born in the village of Kirchleerau in Canton Aargau on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January, 1812 (which matched the date of birth on the tombstone). In 1838, he married Verena Mueller from Niederbipp, Canton Bern. Her date of birth was the 1<sup>st</sup> of March, 1815 (also a match). A son, Hans Ulrich, was born to them on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December, 1838, followed by three daughters. One of their daughters died young.

It was more than a year later that I came across a microfilm image of a hand-written page stating that John U. Hunzeker, born December 3, 1838, in “Kirchlerau”, Canton Aargau, came to the United States “with his parents and two sisters in 1854.” It continued: “The sailing ship—the Neapolitan—left August 3, 1854, and landed seven weeks and one day later.”<sup>5</sup> The Hunziker family making that voyage in 1854 included Jacob, age 42, Verena, age 39, John, age 15 ½, Marianna, age 11, and young Verena, age 8.

The village of Kirchleerau from which they came is located in the southwestern part of Canton Aargau in the valley of the Suhre River, a tributary of the Aare River. Its history goes back to the thirteenth century. By the 1850s there were numerous families with the last name of “Hunziker” living at Kirchleerau and in the surrounding area. They included Rudolph Hunziker and his wife Verena whose maiden name was also Hunziker. Rudolph Hunziker was a blacksmith and a member of the village council (*Hunzeker, 4*). He and his wife lived in a two-and-a-half-story house with the barn attached to it. In 1854, Rudolph and Verena had a family of five sons, one daughter and another child on the way.

It was in 1854 that their oldest son, Heinrich, nearly 19 years old, left Kirchleerau to come to the United States. Even though it was difficult to provide for the needs of his family, Rudolph managed to save a small amount of money to give to his oldest son for his journey across the sea (*Hunzeker, 4*). I have concluded that Rudolph Hunziker was the older brother of Jacob Hunziker.<sup>6</sup> It is possible that Heinrich traveled to the United States with his uncle’s family. If so, Heinrich left a month before his youngest brother was born.

Like Nicholas Scheidegger who had traveled to Missouri earlier the same year, Henry (as he was known in the United States) stopped for a while in Ohio. There it was that his money gave out and he sought employment. For the next seventeen weeks Henry “labored hard for the insignificant pittance of seventy-five cents a week” (*Chapman Brothers, 427*). In 1855 he reached Andrew County, Missouri, where he found much better employment. He made rails for which he was paid \$15 a month plus \$1 for each 100 rails. “By steady toil and judicious economy he was enabled to save enough money . . . to buy a yoke of cattle, a cow, several needed implements and some extra money which he wished to invest in land” (*Chapman Brothers, 427*).

Most likely Jacob and Verena Hunziker and their family also lived in Missouri during 1855. The 1860 census for Richardson County shows that they had a daughter, Ann, age 5, who was born in the state of Missouri.<sup>7</sup>

It was during 1855 that Henry Hunziker mailed a letter back to his parents giving a good report about his new homeland. To emphasize that he was not merely writing flattering words about the country where he

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<sup>5</sup> The note was written by a descendent, Donald Kettering. It was included in documentation of the Christian Rist family compiled by Elaine Gunzenhauser found at the Bruun Memorial Library at Humboldt, Nebraska.

<sup>6</sup> According to information found on Family Tree Maker and FamilySearch.org, Jacob had an older brother, Hans Rudolf, born on 22 Jan. 1801 who married Verena Hunziker, born on 18 Jul. 1816. Although these dates of birth differ from those shown in the 1959 *Rudolph Hunzeker Family History*, the dates of death, in Pawnee City, Nebraska, are the same. The names and dates of birth of their seven children match or very nearly match.

<sup>7</sup> 1860 Federal Census of the Nebraska Territory; Salem Precinct, Richardson County, P.O. Salem, page 31.

now resided, it was told that he included a gold coin with his letter. When it was received, his letter caused quite a bit of excitement. Sixteen-year-old Jacob was eager to follow his brother to America. His father is reported to have said: "I cannot afford to let my children emigrate one by one; we will make arrangements and all go together" (*Hunzeker, 4*).

"The evening before their departure, the people of the village gathered at grandfather's home to bid them farewell, visiting and singing hymns, many parting with tears," his grandson wrote years later (*Hunzeker, 4*). It was the first of November in 1855 when the Rudolph Hunziker family left Kirchleerau. Making the trip to America were Rudolph, age 54, Verena, age 39, and their six children: Jacob, age 16, Rudolph, age 12, Verena, age 11, Melchoir, age 8, Samuel, age 4, and John, age 1.

The Rudolph Hunziker family also spent several months in Ohio before going further west. In 1856 they arrived in the town of Savannah in Andrew County, Missouri. It is likely that the two Hunziker families from Kirchleerau were reunited in Missouri during the spring of 1856. The Rudolph Hunziker family remained in Missouri for over a year during which time Rudolph and the older children "accepted employment wherever available" (*Hunzeker, p. 4*).

It was while they were in Missouri that the Hunzikers heard about the Swiss family by the name of Reist who had settled some thirty miles west of the Missouri River in Nebraska Territory (*Hunzeker, 4*). It was in 1856 that John U. Hunzeker arrived in Nebraska (*Humboldt Standard, 18*). Most likely John (who would not have been 18 years old until December) accompanied his parents and sisters. His father, Jacob Hunziker, claimed 80 acres along Dry Branch just east of the future site of the Pioneer Cemetery. John was living in his parents' household four years later when the census was taken. During the 1860s, Jacob Hunzeker claimed more land under the Homestead Act. It included the land on which the Pioneer Cemetery is now located. Later this land would belong to his son, John U. Hunzeker,<sup>8</sup> who had married Mary Rist, the oldest daughter of Christian and Kathrina Rist.

Elsewhere one reads that it was in June of 1856 when young Henry Hunziker crossed the Missouri River and journeyed by foot to the Dry Branch area (*Chapman Brothers, 427*). It is possible that he traveled with his uncle's family. Not yet 21 years old when he first came to Nebraska, he might have spent the first winter with them while he scouted the area for a claim of his own. He selected land on Dry Branch in Pawnee County, three or four miles southwest of the other Swiss who had settled along Dry Branch in Richardson County. It was claimed that Henry Hunziker was the first to settle in Sheridan Precinct<sup>9</sup> (*Chapman Brothers, 427*). The 120 acres of land that he pre-empted in Section 35 was located six miles north of the town of Cincinnati, platted in 1857. He eventually acquired more than 500 acres of land in Sheridan Precinct.

Rudolph and Verena Hunziker and the rest of their children left Savannah, Missouri, for Nebraska in 1857. As later told by his grandson, Rudolph had purchased "a team of oxen, a wagon and some cattle for breeding purposes" as well as supplies for the family. "Crossing the Missouri River by ferry, the balance of the trip was made on foot with the exception of Grandmother and John (the youngest child), who rode in the wagon loaded heavily with supplies. The older boys drove the cattle" (*Hunzeker, 4*). They settled along Dry Branch in Section 25 of Sheridan Precinct, a mile northeast of their son, Henry, and seven miles east of Pawnee City, the new county seat, platted that same year.

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<sup>8</sup> 1896 Atlas of Richardson County, Nebraska, Humboldt Township

<sup>9</sup> However, Sheridan Precinct originally contained only 21 sections. (*Besom, 30*) Already there were people who had claimed land along the North Fork, originally part of Table Rock Precinct.

After they settled in Nebraska, the Hunzikers changed the spelling of their name. As explained by a great-granddaughter many years later, “the people in Nebraska did not place the accent on the first syllable as had been done in Switzerland; they said ‘HunSICKer’ so the ‘i’ was changed to ‘e’ and the name became Hunzeker.”<sup>10</sup>

### “Really Rugged” Years

According to Rist family tradition, the early years in Nebraska Territory were “really rugged” (*Humboldt Standard*, 18). “Those of us who came on the scene later can hardly appreciate the hardships and trials which these pioneers encountered. There were no towns, no roads, no means of communication and the land was as nature fashioned it. They had to build their house, break the sod and draw their entire living from a new and untried field” (*Sunday Journal and Star*).

It took “long days of tedious labor” for the Rist family to build their first log house (*Sunday Journey and Star*). Likewise, Rudolph Hunzeker and his sons labored to build their first log houses “from logs taken along Dry Branch creek, hand hewn with an adze, and erected by themselves” (*Hunzeker*, 5). The timber that was found along the Dry Branch and the Nemaha River was essential to these early settlers. In addition to furnishing logs for their first homes, the timber also “furnished fuel and a wind break from the stormy blasts of winter” (*Sunday Journey and Star*).

To a great extent, it was the pioneers living on their claims during the spring of 1855 who “had the honor of putting in the first crop ever attempted to be raised by white men in this unknown and untried region” (*L. Edwards*, 107). The year before there were very few settlers who had arrived early enough to break the soil and plant crops. No doubt, the pioneers of 1855 had little time to ponder the experiment in which they were participating. “With the coming of spring and the influx of a new crop of settlers, a real, earnest effort was made to break up the land. This was a tedious, difficult and slow task to be performed with the farming utensils at hand, but a good showing was made” (*L. Edwards*, 107).

Andreas informed his readers “that for the first few years little or nothing but sod corn could be produced” (1247). John Rist, the oldest son of Christian and Kathrina, was five years old when his family came to Dry Branch. Interviewed for a 1935 article, he said

#### Breaking the Soil

In 1937 Thomas Lewis described how, seventy years earlier, sod had been broken and the first crop planted on his parents’ land. In 1867 his parents and others in their party settled along Whiskey Run in the southeastern part of Nemaha County, Nebraska, on land that had been part of an Indian Reservation. (It was located within the Half-Breed Tract.) They purchased it from Indians for \$5.00 an acre.

One man brought two teams of oxen, and a big plow; he did the breaking of the ground. During the first year each man had a small field broken around his house, which was planted to vegetables and corn. The corn was planted in this method: After the sod was broken the farmer came along with an axe and dug holes in the over-turned sod, the corn was dropped by hand and covered with the foot and was tended with a hoe. The next year larger fields of corn were planted, also small fields of spring wheat. This wheat was cut with a scythe and bound in bundles by hand. For threshing this wheat poles were put over the wagon box, on which the bundles were placed and the grain pounded out. The wheat was then put in sacks and stored until the time when it would be taken to the mill.

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<sup>10</sup> As told in a paper written by Dora Hunzeker Koester.

that corn and potatoes were about all that they raised the first summer (*Hodgin*). In another article, it was told that Parli, Lionberger, and Scheidegger “would take corn to grind in a sack, as much as they could carry and take it to Salem, Nebraska to grind, 18 miles away, and then carry the meal back to the Oberlys” (*Schuetz*). They made bread from the corn meal. They also roasted corn for coffee. Eighty years later, John Rist still remembered “how his mother used to parch corn in the oven until it was black and then grind it to use for coffee” (*Hodgin*).

“For the first few years, the only clothes they had were those they brought with them from the old country” (*Sunday Journal and Star*). According to John Rist, his father had earned enough during his first winter at St. Joseph to buy a supply of leather that he brought with him to Dry Branch. He made shoes not only for his family but for his neighbors’ families as well. They, in exchange, tilled his land for him (*Hodgin*). Times were hard and money was scarce. Nearly all transactions were made without the use of money.

The weather added to the trials of the pioneers. The winter of 1856-57 was very severe, the summer of 1858 was extremely wet and the summer of 1860 turned very dry. Among the many adversities faced by the early settlers, however, their worst enemy, according to some, was the prairie fire (*Lewis*). According to Pawnee County history, “the most destructive prairie fire ever known in this County” occurred during the fall of 1857. It left many settlers “burnt out of house and home” (*Johnson, 507*). Many years later, Henry Hunzeker’s granddaughter Florence Shafer shared the story that her grandfather had lost his first log cabin to a prairie fire in 1857 shortly after it had been built (*Terrill*).

## Growing Families

In May of 1856, a daughter was born to Christian and Kathrina Rist. It was thought that Elizabeth Rist might have been the first white baby to be born in that part of the county. In 1858 a son, Samuel, was born followed by three other children—Henry, Rose and James—born during the 1860s. Sadly, little Elizabeth lived to be only four years old. No doubt, the loss of their little daughter was the worst hardship of all endured by this pioneer couple.

In the summer of 1858, Nicholas Scheidegger made a trip back to Andrew County, Missouri. There he married Anna Marie Miller. She was born in Canton Aargau in 1834 and came to America with her parents, Henry and Anna Mueller, about 1842. (In this country, they changed their name to Miller.) At Dry Branch, Nicholas and Anna Marie lived in a small log cabin that he had build on his claim. A daughter, Mary Magdalena, was born to them the following year. Unfortunately she, too, lived to be only four years old. Ten more children were born to the Scheideggers during the 1860s and 1870s.

It was probably around 1860 when Ulrich Leuenberger (who Americanized his last name to Lionberger) married Maria Magdalena Moesching. She was born in Switzerland in 1839. Five sons and two daughters were born to Ulrich and Maria during the 1860s and 1870s, the oldest shown to be nine years old in the 1870 census for Richardson County.<sup>11</sup> In 1863 Ulrich Lionberger filed a homestead claim for 80 acres of land in Pawnee County, adjoining the land that belonged to Christian Rist. Ulrich and Maria Lionberger eventually owned over 300 acres of land in Section 13 of Sheridan Precinct in Pawnee County. Unfortunately, Maria died in 1881 and Ulrich in 1882, their children being left as orphans. Some of their younger children made their home with Dry Branch neighbors for several years.

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<sup>11</sup> The 1870 Federal Census for Richardson County, Nebraska, Post Office Humboldt, page 8.

## Chapter Three

### To Table Rock—1857

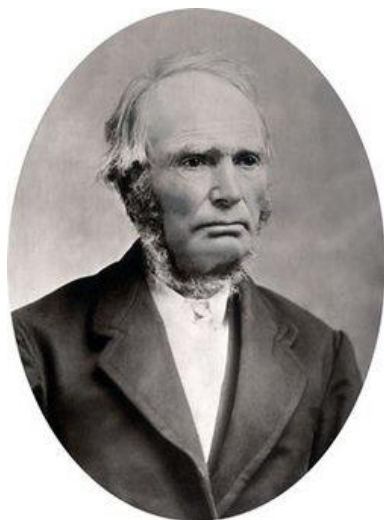
*It was Table Rock where I grew up—the first six years on a farm southeast of town and the next eleven years a block south of the town’s main intersection. However, I never knew about the early history of Table Rock until a few years ago. It was excerpts from the diaries and memoirs of four women, two of them teenagers when they came to Nebraska, which painted a poignant picture of Table Rock a century before I last lived there.*

Julia Marie Gere returned to her parents’ home near the town of Greene, New York, for the last time after completing the winter term at the Academy at Oxford, New York. On Saturday, March 14, 1857, she took a few minutes to make the following entry in her diary: “In one week probably we shall be on [our way] to Nebraska, how strange the thought and yet I suppose it is true. I do not care much either way.”<sup>1</sup> The sixteen-year-old girl would be accompanying her parents and younger siblings to Nebraska Territory while her older brother, Charles Henry, remained in the East to continue his education.

Her indifference about the upcoming move was replaced with enthusiasm just three days later. Before going to bed on Tuesday night, she again took out the diary and wrote, “Hoorah for the West!! I have heard its merits discussed for the last few hours, and it has been proved to be an earthly paradise. There have been nineteen persons in the room at a time this evening, and a crowd have just left. Br. Giddings is now here and will stay all night.”

#### The Prime Mover

“Br. Giddings” was the Rev. Charles W. Giddings. He was an ordained Methodist Episcopal minister who had served at fourteen different appointments in the Susquehanna Valley of Pennsylvania and New York during the past twenty-five years (*Ostwald*). It was he who had baptized Julia Marie Gere. In her diary she said of him: “He is truly a fine, noble looking man with his high pale brow and stately form.”



The forty-seven-year-old Reverend Giddings, however, was a worn man. The life of a preacher had been hard on his health. Furthermore, during the 1850s the rural areas of southern New York and northern Pennsylvania had become economically depressed. Even before the 1850s, Rev. Giddings had considered going west. He had two brothers who practiced law in the state of Texas. Then in the fall of 1854 his wife’s brother, James Griffing, also an ordained Methodist Episcopal minister, was sent to Kansas Territory where he became a missionary to the Indians.

Not only was Rev. Giddings interested in relocating himself and his family, he “envisioned a better life for the poor of this area through resettlement in the west” (*Ostwald*). He found support for his idea from other ministers in his conference and some of their parishioners.

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Marie Gere wrote her entries in pencil in a small 1857 diary. (Some entries are hard to read.) Other members of the family also wrote in the diary, usually in ink. I first learned of the Gere diaries from the James and Augusta Griffing website, now expired. Some quotes are from my 2008 six-page printout from that website. I transcribed April entries (page 19 & 20) from the original 1857 diary at the Nebraska State Historical Society’s archives.

In 1856 Rev. Giddings left on a trip to Topeka, Kansas, to visit his brother-in-law, James Griffing. He was “impressed with the climate and opportunities of the vast new area of the Kansas-Nebraska territory that had so recently been opened to settlers” (*Danker, 34*). It is likely, however, that he was concerned that Kansas might become a slave state. He decided to look in the southeast corner of Nebraska Territory for a site for his settlement.

When Rev. Giddings came to the valley of the North Fork of the Great Nemaha River twelve miles north of the Kansas-Nebraska line he found his “earthly paradise.” The Rev. Giddings would become “the prime mover in the establishment and development of the community” at Table Rock (*Danker, 33-34*). Returning to Pennsylvania, he took a leading role in organizing the Nebraska Settlement Company. He found some “enterprising capitalists from the coal regions of Pennsylvania” to back the company (*J. Edwards, 21*). A constitution was drawn up in the fall of 1856. C. W. Giddings was elected its general superintendent.

Backers of the company were interested in transferring operations to the west. According to Giddings, they “had selected the Nemaha Valley as the most promising field to commence operations” (*J. Edwards, 21*). They believed coal would be found in the area and planned to make Table Rock their headquarters. They “also believed that a railroad would be built from Saint Joseph up along the Nemaha Valley and on to the Pacific Coast. Table Rock was to be one of its principal stations” (*Danker, 39*).

In early 1857 Superintendent Giddings and R.V. Muir, treasurer of the Nebraska Settlement Company, purchased the interests of the Table Rock Town Company. Giddings called these interests “more imaginary than real” (*J. Edwards, 21*). In an article printed nearly fifty years later based on the reminiscences of old settlers, it was stated that the purchase price was \$1500. The article also claimed that on the due date, “R.V. Muir arrived with the money only to find his way blocked by the Nemaha River at flood stage. He is said to have delivered the money by plunging into the Nemaha and swimming to the opposite bank” (*Nebraska State Journal, June 10, 1916, in a footnote by Danker, 39*).

### **To a Log Hut in the Wilderness**

The enthusiasm that Julia Marie Gere had felt for the West seemed to waiver the day after Br. Giddings left. On Thursday, March 19, 1857, she wrote:

It is late in the last day I shall spend in this house I suppose. I have spent very many happy days here, probably I have been as happy as I shall ever. But now I soon must exchange the pleasant woods where I have so often roamed in search of flowers for the far spreading prairies of the west. This little room for one in a log hut in the wilderness. I hope I shall be happy.

The Gere family traveled with others to Nebraska Territory. Family members making the trip included Horatio N. Gere, his wife, Juliana Grant Gere, and four of their children: Julia Marie, age 16, John, age 14, Hannah Jane, age 12 and George, age 9. It is thought that they traveled by train from Greene, New York to St. Louis, Missouri. From there they traveled up the Missouri River by steamboat. It is doubtful, however, that they were able to reach Nebraska Territory by boat.

Others were making their way to the Table Rock area in late March and early April of 1857. Two of them who had started from Pennsylvania were Charles and Caroline Dimon. “At Weston, Mo., they were obliged to disembark from the boat, as the river was full of ice, and was not navigable beyond that point. Mr. Dimon bought a yoke of cattle, and from that city they traveled in a wagon up through Kansas, and arrived at Table Rock on April 4, 1857” (*Chapman Brothers, 527*). The Dimons pre-empted 160 acres of prairie land three miles southeast of Table Rock (on the east side of the Nemaha River).

The Gere family also made the last leg of their trip by wagon. It is likely that they traveled through northeastern Kansas on a part of the St. Joseph to California Trail that crossed Wolf River near the present-day town of Hiawatha. Julia wrote about the trip in her diary.

Wednesday, April 1 Stayed last night at Mr. Fisher (?) and had plenty of company as thirteen (?) men stayed there also. We crossed Wolf river this morning and the ford was very hard as they have no bridges here. It is very difficult crossing even small streams for the banks are very steep and muddy. We have been in company with the Pennsylvanians today and it makes traveling a great deal pleasanter for they are clever agreeable people. There are about 20 of us in all.

Thursday, April 2 The weather is still cold and windy and we started late this morning from our quarters. . . . The prairie traces (?) are very uneven and we no sooner rise one hill then another is before us. We stayed last night at Mr. (?) and his house is quite large but without a floor or a loft. I am tired of traveling so.

The Gere family arrived at the Table Rock town site on Tuesday, April 7, 1857. On that day, Julia wrote:

Came to the great City of Table Rock this morning and found that it holds but one house and the body of another and we have moved into this the great City house where we intend to live for the present with the family already there. We are all sadly disappointed and if wishes would take us back to the East we should soon be there. I do not know who is most to blame but we certainly been deceived.

The town site purchased by the Nebraska Settlement Company was located along a creek known as Taylor's Branch. In the center of the site was higher land situated on a hill that rose between Taylor's Branch to the south and Clear Creek to the north.

The Gere family would become one of the earliest families representing the Nebraska Settlement Company to live at Table Rock (*Ostwald*). For most of the next year they stayed in a small cabin built by the previous owner, John Fleming—the only dwelling in the town site when they came. Probably it was located on lower land near Taylor's Branch on the eastern end of the town site.<sup>2</sup> The Fleming family, their two boarders and hired man continued to live there until late April while another dwelling was being built for them. They allowed the Geres to “come in with them at once.”

Julia's disappointment seemed to subside by the next day.

Wednesday, April 8 We are living with a very kind family the mistress of which is but 19 years old and she has one child. [*There are two*] boarders, one of whom is Mr. C (?) who has left a wife and two children in England and Mr. Smith who is from England. They are both well educated and intelligent. They say Mr. Smith expects a young lady from England this summer whom he will make his wife.

Thursday, April 9 It is a delightful day and I have just been taking a nice nap on the soft grass beside a branch of the Nemaha after rambling around over the prairie which is now burning a short distance from me. The flames go creeping slowly along through the grass as the wind is not very high now. I begin to like the country better and I wish Pa had taken up a good claim and we had a good home here.

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<sup>2</sup> On different occasions Juliana Gere wrote that they were ½ mile from Mrs. Anderson (see page 24), probably in Section 33, and ½ mile from the Giddings' house (see page 23) located on the site of the present Methodist Church.

One year after their arrival, Julia's mother, Juliana Gere, wrote a longer account about their first year at "Table Rock City"<sup>3</sup> from a little notebook she had kept during 1857.

Our new home consisted of a hewed log house consisting of one room without any loft. . . . The lower floor was made of narrow boards with cracks between each one. . . . The house set up on blocks and not underpinned or banked up. . . . The weather continued cold nearly all the month as cold as it seemed to us as any time during the past winter. Water would freeze sitting in the room in the daytime in a very short time. To add to our discomfort we did not get our freight in two months. We had but one feather bed – two small comforts, one bed quilt, two flannel and two cotton sheets for us six and a boarder besides occasional guest.

Mr. and Mrs. Fleming were very kind to us giving up one of their beds to us though we had to furnish it with our scanty bedding. . . . Of course we were crowded but that was not the worst, we were cold! Seldom getting comfortably warm either by night or by day. Mrs. F. kindly let us use her stove and furniture to cook with which we used after she had done as well as her table. . . . From the first we seldom eat by ourselves a single day.

In two opposite corners of the room were beds, one occupied by [our two girls and myself] and the other by Mr. F.'s two boarders and hired man. From under our bed was drawn out a trundle bed on which Mr. and Mrs. F. and child slept. The other side – or opposite at night I spread down our wagon sheet or cover laid my feather bed (the best one) on it and made a bed for Mr. G[ere], John and Georgie when no one else happened to want a place on it which was not often the case.

## To The Table Rock

A few weeks after arriving, Julia Marie went with others to see the Table Rock for which the town was named (according to a hard-to-read entry transcribed from a photocopy of the original 1857 diary).

Thursday, April 23 Mother, Sister and I with one or two more went to see Table Rock. It is the greatest curiosity in its way of any I ever saw and yet the lady who went with us had never seen it though was on her husband's claim. . . . The lower part of the rock is somewhat rounded and from its top rise 2 very small pillars of hard stone and these support a large mass (?), something the shape of an urn.

Two days later (according to the Griffing website) another family member wrote about taking a walk to see the Table Rock.

April 25 We have been to see Table Rock. As long as I have been in this place which took its name from it, I have not seen the curiosity before. It is nearly a mile and a half from this house, a long walk to browse, and I was very tired but will be repaid by the beautiful scenery of the place and the fantastic shape of the rocks which lie scattered over the bluffs which rise from a small but beautiful wooded plain on the Nemaha, which we crossed on a precarious footing of fallen trees, but by clinging to the limbs we made a safe passage.

The rocks are of sand-stone of different degrees of hardness, some parts of them so soft that one can pulverize them with the fingers. The Rock they call Table Rock has no resemblance to a table whatever, but a little like an urn.

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<sup>3</sup> I have used a copy of a typed transcription (without page numbers) made by Kim Vrtiska found at the Table Rock Historical Society's Museum. The original is at the Nebraska State Historical Society's archives.



### **What Did the Original Table Rock Look Like?**

It was believed that around 1869 the “Table Rock” for which the town was named was struck by lightning causing it to tumble. Five people who had seen the original formation and still remembered it were interviewed in 1933 by Elsie Pepoon Sutton.

The most complete description of the formation was given by Gabriel J. Morton, age 83, who said he had seen it a great many times. “The Table Rock was north of the mushroom rock and south of the cave, a flat rock on three legs.” According to him, “the table on top was round, as large or larger than an ordinary dining table, and thicker at the edge than towards the center. The legs were about as big around as a man could reach around.” There was room to sit under it, he said. But according to him, he “couldn’t stand up in it, even as a boy of eight or ten.” He also told of the beautiful pictures that were “all over the soft sandstone base. . . . The pictures were mostly of Indians on horses.”

Most of the others who were interviewed agreed the formation stood on a sandstone base, was flat on top and that there were three legs. Ann Dobson Wert said it “was flat as this table and round” as she laid her hand on her dining table. According to John R. Allen the back of the table “rested on the ‘seat’ with two legs in front.” Oscar Foale called them “three legs in depressions” and added that they “were not very solid in their depressions. Could shake one of them or turn it around.”

According to John R. Allen “there was a place maybe two feet square that I could stand up straight.” He also spoke of the pictures on the rock that included “Indians, ponies, deer, elk and buffalo.” Lydia Giddings Holmes said that it was high enough for her to stand under it. She also said “two couples could sit comfortably together in the space under the table and at picnics there was a scramble to [be] the first at the rock.” According to her “thirteen people climbed on top of the rock at one time and stood up on it.” This happened on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July of the first year that she was at Table Rock [1858].

### **One-Room Boarding House**

The Fleming family “removed” a few days before first of May. Mr. Davison, who had come to Nebraska about the same time as the Geres, came to board with them. More prospective settlers continued to arrive from Pennsylvania and New York and lodged temporarily with the Geres. They “found themselves running a boarding house in a one room cabin” (*Ostwald*). On one occasion, there were nineteen people spending the night in the cabin.

Pretty close times! But it defies description – the crowding between trunks, tearing our dresses on nails or torn up edges of the thin sheet iron that were nailed onto their corners to protect them and annoy us. So with our dresses hanging in tatters we threaded our way around the men over their feet . . . and thus with the upmost difficulty we managed to get up something to eat which with all the necessary clearing up afterward and fixing our beds were about all we tried to do. (*Juliana Gere*)

Juliana Gere wrote that their boarders were of “very respectable character and very agreeable (except one).” Elsewhere she wrote, “Conversation was free, pleasant, and intelligent. Our new boarders were religious and our evenings cheered by singing some familiar hymns or choice tune so we soon began to enjoy ourselves tolerably despite the untoward circumstances surrounding us.”

## The First Church

Beginning the first Sunday in May of 1857, church services were held at the cabin where the Gere family was living. In her account written the following spring, Juliana Gere wrote: “Mr. Davison preached in our house (the first sermon probably ever preached at Table Rock) Mr. Westfall exhorted. The congregation numbered 20 – no females except ourselves.” Later she wrote, “We had preaching at our house every Sabbath.”

It was late in June when Rev. Giddings arrived once again, accompanied by more prospective settlers from the East. On Sunday, July 5, 1857, Mr. Gere wrote in the diary: “Br. Giddings preached an excellent sermon. Subject: Christian Triumphs. The men built an awning over the back door and a good share of the congregation sat out of doors.”

According to Pawnee County history, the Methodist Episcopal Church at Table Rock was the first church to be organized in the county later that year by Rev. C. V. Arnold. There were forty members (*Andreas, 1254*). Years later Fannie Giddings Norris, daughter of Rev. Giddings, recalled, “Rev. Arnold was the first to organize a church. He later took typhoid fever and nearly died. He returned to Pennsylvania shortly after that.” A Sunday School was organized the same year with Horatio Gere serving as the first Sunday School Superintendent.

## Living in a Tent

In June of 1857, new arrivals at Table Rock included the Rev. George L. Griffing, his wife, Achsah Andrews Griffing, and their four young children. Accompanying them were Joseph Griffing, brother of George, and his twenty-three-year-old wife, Lydia Ross Griffing. Joseph and Lydia had been married for only three months. Thirty years later Lydia Griffing wrote about her early years at Table Rock.

My husband and I arrived at Table Rock, June 12, 1857. . . . The only building on the Town Site was one lone cabin [*occupied by the Gere family*]. There were a few white settlers along the streams a little way from Table Rock, who came the fall before. My brother-in-law bought one of these settlers out, who lived ½ mile south of Table Rock. This man – Coulter by name – had built a cabin 16x14 in size. Those 2 families, eleven in number, lived together in that small house 6 weeks. My brother-in-law’s wife was sick with consumption at the time.

We brought a tent with us and put it up near this house. . . . We had but little rainfall that summer, though I remember a few showers – one very distinctly. It came in the night with a heavy wind which loosened all the pegs that held our tent down but one. The tent blew from over us. We had no alternative only to go in the house where we could hardly find standing room, for all the spare room on the floor was taken up by the beds occupied by the two families. After about an hour, the rain ceased and the next morning was bright and clear, so we were able to get our things dried and the tent up again.

A few nights after this, I was suddenly awakened by something in our tent. I awoke my husband. He picked up one of his boots and threw at the object. It yelped as it went out. My husband remarked, “It is only a wolf.”

Julia Marie Gere made an entry in her diary on June 25, 1857. “This morning I went over to Mr. [Joseph] Griffing and had a very pleasant visit. I like Lydia G[riffing] very much and wish she were a single girl. She has been rather homesick and she talked of her school days.”

## Buildings Going Up

During the summer of 1857 the town of Table Rock was beginning to sprout up on a hill a mile west of the Nemaha River. On his way to Nebraska in June of 1857, Rev. Giddings purchased construction materials in St. Louis, Missouri, which he had shipped by steamboat to Brownville, Nebraska Territory. From there it was hauled to Table Rock. Rev. Giddings contracted to have a two-story frame house built before bringing his family to Nebraska Territory the following year. He claimed that it was the first frame house to be built in Pawnee County (*J. Edwards, 23; Andreas, 1249*).

An entry made by Horatio Gere on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1857, said that “stars and stripes fly from the liberty pole which they have erected just at the corner of the Fremont boarding home which is going up now.” In her memoirs, Fannie Giddings Norris, called the building where she first lived when she came to Table Rock in 1858 a hotel. According to her, it was the first building to be erected by the Settlement Company and was built “on the site where the present Methodist church now stands.” She also added that her father loaned the money to build the hotel and later took it over on a foreclosure. It is possible that two other buildings were under construction during 1857. Fannie Giddings Norris recalled, “there were already three buildings when we arrived. Father built a store and post office.”

## Poor Health

“Our poor Hannah Jane enjoyed but poor health from our first coming here though at times she seemed pretty well,” wrote Juliana Gere. “She with the rest of us suffered most from the cold and crowded beds also from unsuitable foods we having no milk and butter but a short time which we brought with us. Her appetite was poor and she appeared to be laboring under a bad cold.” The following spring Juliana Gere wrote a number of pages about her young daughter’s illness.

In the early part of June she went with Pa and I to our claim and helped sow some garden seeds and she went about a mile to drop corn for her Pa half a day but she came home very tired and went no more.

## Platters vs. Planters

In 1857 Pawnee County was following in the steps of the counties along the Missouri River with the platting and selling of town lots at three locations: Table Rock on the North Fork, Cincinnati on the South Fork and Pawnee City on Turkey Creek. However, the buying of town lots did not prove to be nearly as popular as it was in the eastern-most counties. Most of those who made their way to Pawnee County pre-empted land for farming.

Analyzing census data, one finds that over 90% of the people who came to Nebraska Territory during the first few years remained in counties along the Missouri River. Many of them bought land for speculation rather than for farming. Many thousands of lots were platted and staked off in the river towns of Omaha, Bellevue, Plattsmouth, Nebraska City, Brownville, and in between.

The “speculative frenzy” that occurred during the mid 1850s was helped along by the Nebraska Territorial Legislature. During the first session in 1855, an insurance company was given a charter to do banking business in the territory. During the second session in 1856, five more territorial banks were chartered. They were allowed to issue their own money, or bank notes. They became known as “wild cat” banks because they were uncontrolled. As told by Addison Erwin Sheldon:

Five men could start a bank. They did not need to put in any money at the beginning. Each one promised to pay money at a certain future time. Then the bank opened. Thousands of dollars of bright beautiful bank notes were printed by each bank and loaned to those who wished to borrow. . . . Everyone soon had plenty of this kind of money. Everybody was willing to buy. Town lots rose rapidly in price. (*1914, 248-249*)

The last time she went to a neighbor with me was after that I think. We went onto Mrs. Andersons a ½ mile from here. . . . *[On the way back]* she looked so tired – she stopped and rested herself and came home at her leisure. Still she complained but little and then when she wiped the dishes would say her side hurt her. I told her she need not wipe them but she would frequently.

The latter part of June her symptoms grew more serious, her strength declined. . . . The weather became very warm and we had no water but creek water which was drawn in a barrel and it was not fit to drink. She suffered real much from thirst, her appetite for food failing almost entirely. Oh how she longed for pure water. Often crying when she attempted to drink the miserable stuff we had. But as good Providence would have it, Mr. Fleming [had] a well before she was confined to her bed so that she could have sufficient water. The symptoms getting worse fast. She had a good deal of fever nights – she would set her cup of water by the side of her bed and drink frequently.

The last Sunday in June, I walked with her. . . . I would go to Mrs. Fleming to get some milk for her. . . . I asked her several times if she was not tired? She would say no and so we kept on. . . . I supported her putting my arm round her and she put her arm round me (Oh that long to be remembered walk I can never forget it) and now when I go there she is grasping me with her frail arms for support. It was many weeks after this before I could go this same road again the ground was too sacred! The remembrance too painful!

It was a painfully pleasant time we had seated together on a log that lay in the shade near the brook – listening to the sweet birds and looking at the flowers which I had gathered for her – for she loved them to the last. . . . We returned slowly as we came and that was the last walk we ever took together – in the flesh – for I seldom yet walk out alone but my mind is with her and I see her tripping along as she used to. . . .

*[In July]* after she had a very sick night I said to Julia I think Hannah stands a chance to die. . . . She was shocked. . . . She went down to Mr. F. and found Dr. Cromwell there and asked him to come and see her sister. He came – he pronounced her very sick and said . . . that he thought she was in great danger – he prescribed for her and the next morning she appeared better. . . . She was now for a few days able to set up part of the time and be dressed and her hair combed. . . .

For some time we had set up with her all night and I have become so worn out. . . . Julia supplied my place by Hannah Jane. . . . Poor Hannah whose fever returned in spite of the Doctor medicine was much worse of a night she would be delirious – and her moanings were heart rending in the extreme. She would call on me and on Julia almost constantly and yet could not tell what she wanted. . . .

Generally towards morning her fever would abate and she rest a little and through the daytime she would be rational though her mind became weaker. . . . Sister Lydia Griffin[g] came and stayed all night and helped take care of her a few nights before she died. . . . We bathed her much with cold water wetting cloths especially and laying them on her head. . . . She had a dreadful night. I think she never was so delirious before. . . . For a number of hours in the morning we supposed her dying – she was not conscious and had every appearance of death but she finally aroused and seemed better and was entirely rational though very weak. Then it seemed to me that she might recover. Oh for the blessing of God on medicine still at hand! But such a boon was not ours. . . .

Well the next night passed better than the previous one and that day the Dr. came again. He seemed surprised to find her apparently better. . . . He said if we could prevent the fever from rising and she lived till past 2 p.m. the danger would be over she might yet recover! Julia fully believed it – I had my doubts. It was anxious hours we sat by her bathing her and watching every symptom. . . .

Just at dusk we took her on the sheet and lifted her back to her bed. In a few minutes I perceived a change over her features of deadly paleness. . . . We could not arrest death! It would come in spite of our puny efforts! Oh the agony of that moment when hope gave up to despair. But why attempt description – Language fails at such an hour – From 8 [p.m. to] 2 a.m. for six long hours that spirit hovered in its frail tenement before it took its final leave.

During those 6 hours her features settled into the most beautiful calmness – not the least contortion – not the least visible sign of pain – and when the spirit had fled I never looked upon so beautiful a face. Mrs. Griffin[g] assisted in putting on her burial dress and she combed her hair which she braided in two braids and wound them around her head and fastened on the top. . . . Julia put flowers in her hair and in her hand with a stem of cherries. She had held a stem of cherries in her hand but a day or so before her death.

Hannah Jane Gere died on July 18, 1857. On the following day, the Sabbath, she was buried.

Mr. Griffin[g] preached an excellent discourse from these words “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away blessed be the name of the Lord.” Our room was well filled with sympathizing neighbors and all our acquaintances. . . . Nearly every person present followed her dear form to its final resting place which is about ½ mile distant and is as lovely a spot as I could have selected. Hers was the third grave in the new burial ground on the Town site.  
(*Juliana Gere*)

## **The First School**

In September, 1857, Lydia and Joseph Griffing moved into their house after living in their tent for three months. Their small house, only 11 x 13 feet, was located about a mile southwest of Table Rock. Her husband had bought the rights to eighty acres of land south of his brother’s claim. She wrote:

The house was a log cabin, built without a board. The roof was covered with clapboards, split from blocks of wood. The floor was the ground. The doorway was closed by hanging a quilt up. There was a place for a window and the cracks between the logs were large enough to throw a cat through.

Our furniture consisted of stove, a homemade bedstead, water bench made of a puncheon, two chairs – the frames bought from a neighbor. I put bottoms in them of hickory bark, which was very substantial. . . . Our table was a dry goods box which my husband afterwards made into a table. Some of the box he used to make window frame and sash.

After she was settled in her house, Lydia Griffing told her husband she was wanted to hold school for some of the children in the neighborhood. Her husband laughed at the idea of her teaching school in their small house, but he finally consented.

The 1<sup>st</sup> of October [1857] my school commenced. The first day 11 pupils came. To find seats for them I put the water pail upon one end of the table, the other end served for a writing desk. Two sat upon the pail bench, two the wood box, two occupied the chairs, and

the others sat upon two trunks while I sat upon the bed. . . . After a few days, two more came. I was obliged to turn them away for want of room.

When noon came, my pupils had to go out of doors to give me room to get dinner for my husband and myself. One day two Indians came. Finding no room to enter, they laughed and one said to the other, "Ugh! Heap white papoose!" They went away that time without asking for something to eat.

I taught school during that fall and winter, excepting two weeks vacation in the fore part of December while my husband put a floor, door, and window in our house. He had chinked and plastered it before on Saturdays. After living upon a ground floor for six months, you may well believe I appreciated a real board floor and door.

Lydia Griffing's pupils included her five-year-old nephew, William Griffing. It was during October of 1857 that William's mother passed away from "consumption." On October 24, 1857, Julia Marie Gere wrote in her diary: "This morning Mr. [George] Griffing came over after me to help lay out his wife who died about 4 this morning. She has been sick with consumption a long time. She leaves 4 small children, 3 of whom are unwell." Mrs. Griffing's funeral was held the following day.

### Winter Approaches

The first frost of the fall occurred on October 16<sup>th</sup>. The Gere family continued to live in the one-room cabin. The boarding house was not finished "for the want of lumber and one hindrance and another," according to Juliana Gere. "We had to suffer very much with the cold during the month of Nov."

In December, Rev. Giddings returned to Table Rock. During the year the hard economical times had become the "Great Panic of 1857." The financial support coming from the backers of Nebraska Settlement Company had dried up. Still Julia Marie Gere wrote in the diary, "Mr. Giddings appears as enthusiastic in his praises of Nebraska as ever. It seems good to see him here again." Two days later she wrote, "Brother Giddings went over to Mr. [George] Griffing's and stayed so late. Things have not gone exactly to suit him since he was here. He thinks the agents of the company have not done exactly right here."

### The Great Panic of 1857

In the early 1850s there was widespread economic prosperity in the United States. It was a time of growth. California had just become a state. Folks were flocking to the west. The railroads were doing a lot of business. Mining companies were booming. Banks were making a lot of loans to the railroads and other industries to finance expansion.

By 1857, however, the number of people migrating west had slowed and the value of western land was falling. Profits for the railroad and mining companies showed a decline. With the end of the Crimean War in 1856 the European market for American grain and goods had declined as well.

Then within a few weeks, two unforeseen events occurred which were recognized as sparking the panic of 1857. On August 24, the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company with offices in Cincinnati and New York City, failed because of poor investments and embezzlement. Within hours, there were other banks that closed resulting in public distrust and loss of confidence. In September, a \$2 million shipment of gold bouillon and 550 lives were lost when the *SS Central America* sunk in a hurricane off the coast of the Carolinas. The banks of New York were awaiting this shipment of gold to renew their reserves.

During the panic of 1857, all of the "wild cat" banks in Nebraska Territory closed their doors. Their paper money became worthless.

## Chapter Four

### At Table Rock—1858

Winter turned severe during the early months of 1858. It was remembered for being very hard on stock “owing partly, to be sure, to the want of shelter and scarcity of feed as well as the severity of the winter” (*J. Edwards, 20*).

In their small log cabin near Table Rock, a baby girl was born to Joseph and Lydia Griffing during February of 1858. They named their daughter Sabrina.

When spring came, it was remembered as a wet one. After writing an account of her family’s first year in Table Rock, Juliana Gere continued entering information about 1858, their second year at Table Rock. She often commented about the weather.<sup>4</sup>

April 8 We have had the greatest rain we’ve had since we came to Nebraska – it commenced raining yesterday and we had shower after shower accompanied by the most vivid lightning and thunder. It rained powerfully in the night and some today.

April 10 Still raining. The streams are much higher than they have been during the past year. Mr. Alexander carried the mail day before yesterday but could not cross South Fork; banks full, the crossing all covered, canoe carried away, and so we get no mail this week.

April 12 We have quite a snow storm, ground considerably white this morning and still is snowing – on the whole it has been one of the worst – yes, one of the worst storms particularly for the length of its duration, we have had since we came to the Ter[ritory].

April 25 Today is the third Sunday in succession it has rained – tho but little today but few went to Meeting. Br. Westfall preached.

May 2 First Sunday in the month – very rainy and cold – wonder if all the Sundays will be rainy? A part of last week the weather was warm even for summer weather – the contrast is unpleasant.

In the midst of this inclement weather, Juliana Gere also recorded that covered wagons passed through the town of Table Rock.

April 28 Today another covered wagon drawn by three yoke of oxen passed here for Turkey Creek, a number of families have gone there this spring and only one (a man and his wife) have come to this neighborhood.

May 4 Cold and very rainy. Four emigrant wagons passed by on their way to Fort Kearney some hundred miles west.

As the wet season continued, some of the people started to suffer from chills and fever as indicated by Juliana Gere’s entries.

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<sup>4</sup> I have used a copy of a typed transcription of the entries written by Juliana Grant Gere during 1858 found at the Table Rock Historical Society’s Museum.

May 18 Last Friday it was very warm. Saturday very cold. Sun. cold and rainy. . . . There was no [church] meeting. I was sent for to visit Mrs. L[ydia] Griffin[g], who is quite sick. I was not well. I had a slight “chill”. . . . The sick children are getting some better.

## Visited by Indians

Encounters with Native Americans seemed to have been common occurrences. On April 25, 1858, Juliana Gere added the following to her account:

Yesterday 5 Indians called here who were “Hung-ry” as usual – I fed them as usual for which the Missouri Chief put a bracelet off his own wrist on to each one of mine. . . . He complimented me on being good “Momma” as he always does when I feed them. Pretty dear we have to pay for their compliments as they all to often and are always “hung-ry.” The chief “Harichicuff” has called five times. They generally come in bands of five or six or so. If I could talk with them I would not mind it, but that is out of the question.

Lydia Griffing wrote about “frequent callers” in her memoirs:

I must confess to being afraid of the Indians when I was alone, for they were frequent callers and look for them as we might, we seldom saw them until they stood in the door or were looking in at the window. One morning after breakfast, I looked out and saw 17 coming down the road toward the house. They rode up and dismounted. Seven of them stood their guns outside the door and came in. The old chief said they were the white man’s friends. They were the Kaw Indians going to fight the Pawnees and they wanted something to eat. Their faces were painted and their hair put back in long braids. I put such things as I cooked on the table. After they had eaten, they wanted me to cook more for those outside. I would not, so they wanted some meal. My husband gave them some and I had to bake bread for them. I gave them some milk. . . . The old chief asked for salt. I gave him some. He wanted me to do it up in a cloth, so I did. The other six made me understand that they wanted salt too. I gave each of them some. As they were leaving, they all shook hands with me saying, “good white squaw.” I never was so glad to have anyone go as I was to see them ride away.

I did not leave my babe in the house alone five minutes. When I went for water, or milked the cow, or tended garden, I took her with me. There were times when I was alone that I was not afraid; when we had heavy storm, the harder [it rained] the more secure I felt for I thought the Indians would not come during the storm.

Another story that has been preserved tells about a band of Indians who dropped in on Caroline Dimon southeast of Table Rock when her husband was away.

Seating themselves around the fire [*they*] made themselves quite at home, much to Mrs. Dimon’s alarm. When the fire needed replenishing she did not dare to go for firewood, fearing that her unwelcome guests would steal something while she was away. But when the temperature of the room became too cold for Messrs. Lo they found their way to the woodpile, and returned to the house laden with fuel, and rebuilt the fire themselves, and prolonged their visits for some time. (*Chapman Brothers, 527-528*)

## Coming West

During the spring of 1858 the Reverend Giddings and his family were on route to Nebraska Territory from Pennsylvania. His family included his wife, Clarissa Griffing Giddings, and their four daughters:



Fannie, age 17, Lydia, about 15, Sarah, age 13 and little Mary, not yet two. Many years later Fannie Giddings Norris described their trip to Nebraska.

The first of May, 1858, we started west. . . . We traveled by train to St. Louis. This was the farthest point west the trains ran at that time. There were only four cars on the train and they were very crowded. We had to sit three and four in a seat. And we had to sleep that way on the train for three different nights. Our train was detained at one place in Indiana where high water had washed out the tracks. They had to build a narrow board bridge so that the passengers could be unloaded and taken to dry land until the high water receded. This was the only time we were off the train during our journey. . . .

We spent about two days in St. Louis. During this time, Father bought a horse, wagon, and some supplies to take with us. Our furniture was shipped from Scranton. We took it up the river and stored it at Aspinwall<sup>5</sup> until we had a place for it. Later we returned with ox team and took our furniture to Table Rock.

We arrived in St. Louis about a week after leaving Pennsylvania. Mother's brother, Uncle James [Griffing], who lived in Topeka, a missionary working with the Indians, met us at St. Louis and went part way with us up the river. The boat went up the river once a week from St. Louis to Omaha. Boarding this riverboat at St. Louis, we started up the Mississippi [and Missouri Rivers] toward St. Joseph. All went well until the boat struck a snag and tore off one of the big water wheels. It also rammed a big hole in the prow of the boat. This happened just a short distance from St. Joseph. We were stranded here nearly a week awaiting repairs. We stayed right on the boat most of the time. We took one trip to see an Indian camp, but rest of the time we just waited on the boat. At that time, St. Joseph was just a few little old shacks. Indians would flock around the bank of the river begging from the passengers on the boat, but the Indians were not allowed on deck. . . .

Landing at Aspinwall the remainder of the journey was to be made by team and wagon, and afoot. Father, Mother, and four of us children made the trip together from Aspinwall. I walked behind the wagon, holding on to it to keep from stumbling and falling. This was during the rainy season and in some of the bottom lands, we had to wade through water from shoe top deep to deeper.

The Giddings family reached Table Rock at midnight on May 25<sup>th</sup>. Back at Table Rock the Gere family had much to do to get the nearly finished boarding house ready for the Giddings, even though they were not feeling well. On May 23<sup>rd</sup> Juliana Gere wrote, "Continues showery and cold till this PM. South wind blows strong and weather grows warm. We have had a longtime of stormy weather. I have been quite unwell [and so] has Mr. Gere. I am very busy putting the house in order for Mr. Giddings and company but they will not come this week."

On May 25<sup>th</sup> she wrote about the "hardest shower we have had since we came here." It was six days later before Juliana Gere had time to write again.

O what an eventful week has just passed. . . . I am too sick to work and so I can write a little. A week ago last night – at midnight – Mr. Giddings and family (and a boy) arrived here. . . . I found them tired, wet, cold and hungry. I got a fire and prepared supper as soon as I could. Then ousted the family and prepared beds for them (every bed was occupied when they came). I finally got them all to bed and went to bed myself. There were seven of them.

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<sup>5</sup> A defunct river town south of Brownville, Nebraska just north of the Nemaha-Richardson County line.

Next day a number more came to dinner and in an hour six men came. That night I reckoned up 27 in all stayed with us. . . . I cannot describe the labor and confusion of that day. I divided the beds and spread them over the floor. I slept on a husk bed without any pillows. Several of the men made themselves beds on the floor of their wagon on bags and cushions. Next day Mr. Giddings sent to the river after his goods and the women. That night we had 16 men (all newly arrived) with us.

Next night (Thursday) Mr. Giddings came back. . . . Mr. Giddings put up their beds [that they brought with them] and so helped to lodge a [few of the boarders]. It is very hard work to lodge them. It was harder to get their meals. During the first 24 hours there were about 50 meals (counting every time a person ate) besides our own family which would make 15 more! Thursday night we had 27 to supper besides our usual family. Oh the weariness, the confusion. I never experienced anything like it before.

What made it inexpressibly annoying and disagreeable was that the people for whom I had to nearly sacrifice life certainly its comforts treated us with the greatest indifference looking upon us in the light of common tavern keepers and not even trying to conceal their sneers at the meager fixing of this unfinished home. . . .

## **The Summer of 1858**

There are no further entries for June and the first half of July. There is a note that Juliana Gere wrote to her son, [*Charles*] Henry, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July: “We still live in the Boardinghouse with Mr. Giddings and keep part of the boarders and callers. I long for a little more rest and quiet but must wait. Our house is not begun yet, tho several are commenced” (*Griffing website*).

Nearly thirty years later, Lydia Griffing still remembered the 4<sup>th</sup> of July that summer. “In 1858, the first Fourth of July celebration in Pawnee County was held in Table Rock. It was a grand success, for nearly everyone on the County was present.” A little earlier she had commented, “The people of Pawnee County were all neighbors.”

Fannie Giddings taught school during her first summer at Table Rock which she recalled in her memoirs.

Father fixed up some seats in the front of the house, and I was the school teacher for the neighborhood children. I started with fourteen pupils. Some of my pupils were older than me. School lasted all during the three summer months. The only books we had to use were those we could gather up from the families there. Some had brought a few books with them. Pupils studied together out of the same books. We studied reading, writing, and arithmetic. First we learned the A, B, C's and multiplication tables. We learned the times tables by singing them. One of my pupils did not know one letter from another. He was older than me.

## **Inundated**

During the summer of 1858, the streams of Pawnee County “were the highest ever known,” Joseph Edwards wrote in his *Centennial History* (20). In Nemaha County, Kansas, the Nemaha River was reported to be a mile wide (*Culter, Nemaha County, Part 2, p. 3*). To the north, across the border in Nebraska, it flooded the new little town of Cincinnati. It was remembered as the “flood that all others were measured by. The flood left logs in fields that were the subject of comment for many years” (*Ord, 1962*). In Richardson County, “the Nemaha and its tributaries burst over their banks, and inundated all of

the bottomland of the county. The bridges on all of the streams were swept away, and Falls City left isolated and cut off from connection with the rest of the county” (*L. Edwards, 711*).

The early histories of Pawnee County include C. W. Giddings’ description the wet season of 1858 in the Table Rock area.

The season of 1858 commenced wet, the rains continued, increasing until about the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, when the waters suddenly rose in the night several feet above the banks of the streams. The valley was inundated, and the cultivated lands, being on the bottoms, and the cabins of the settlers on the banks of the streams, much damage was done and great suffering prevailed. This wet season was followed by various forms of bilious diseases, of which the chills and fever was the most formidable. . . . (*J. Edwards, 21-22; Andreas, 1254*)

The accounts written by Juliana Gere and Lydia Griffing give more personal insight to the hardships of 1858. During July, Juliana Gere wrote:

July 18 We have just had second freshet, the water has been over the banks steep as they are. The second coming soon after the first which covered our garden for the most part of it and much of it several feet under water – it is not yet off and most of our garden vegetables are spoiled. We had a fine prospect for abundance of vegetables but alas nothing is certain here. Many acres of the flats have been covered with water. The bridges are all carried away on the river and creeks. Mill dams washed out and it will take many hundred dollars and much time to repair the damage. Mr. Fowler’s family moved into Sanford’s house last night. Several of the family had been sick and their shantee leaked badly. . . . I do not wonder that the people are sick. Such a bad smell arises from the decaying vegetables in the black stagnant pools.



Flood on the Nemaha River at the site of old mill near Table Rock (circa 1915)

July 28 Weather rainy the streams have risen much in a few days so that it is difficult going from one home to another. The sickness increases tho some are better. Julia went yesterday to Mr. [George] Griffin[g] to nurse the sick but she could not find the crossing of the creek. The bridge had been washed away with all the rest. . . . She attempted to wade but could not

but got very wet and today an annoyance has kept her *[in]* bed. . . . She is better tonight. (Mr. Griffin[g]s children are alone though are having the ague more or less. He is away electioneering for himself.)<sup>6</sup>

## **To the Land Office**

The U. S. Land Office for the Nemaha Land District was opened in Brownville, Nebraska Territory, in September of 1857. However, not many folks living in Pawnee County made the trip to Brownville that year or the next spring to enter their claims. “A great many settlers found it more convenient to hold their claims as squatters than to raise the money to pay the government” (*Shelton 1904, 86*).

To the alarm of many settlers, in May of 1858 Washington gave notice that “all lands not entered by September 6 would be offered for sale. This meant . . . that the squatters would be obliged to raise the money to enter their claims before that date or lose their land, with all its improvements, to any speculator who had the money to buy it” (*Shelton, 1904, 86*). To pay for their land, many of settlers used land warrants bought from former soldiers.

On the last Sunday of August, Juliana Gere wrote about the trip to Brownville that week by the men of Table Rock to enter their claims.

August 29 The summer is nearly gone but not so the sickness. . . . Mr. Giddings has not a well boarder! . . . Nearly all the male population of Table Rock that were any way able . . . went to the Land Office to enter their land or await Mr. Muirs arrival [*the treasurer of the Nebraska Settlement Company*] who had promised to bring many of land warrants. It was expected he would be there when they arrived. . . . To the great disappointment of many he did not arrive. Mr. Giddings went to enter the Townsite. . . . They went Tues. and waited till Sat. then however made out to enter it without Muir. Several are waiting there yet as the offices closed this week I believe. Mr. Gere found a letter there containing a Land Warrant from Br. John (for which we all feel very thankful). He entered his claim in about 2 hours after arriving so our anxiety is over about securing our claim at present.

During the summer of 1858, “a delegation of leading citizens” had gone to Washington to urge the president to revoke the order to offer public land for sale in the Nemaha Land District. “The result of their mission was announced in the Brownville Advertiser of September 2, 1858 . . . under the startling headline, ‘Nebraska Saved’” (*Shelton, 1904, 86*). Land sales were postponed for one year.

## **The Sickness Continues**

Lydia Griffings included in her memoirs a description of the ordeal that they endured after the rains subsided.

The autumn of 1858 is well remembered by every old settler who was in Pawnee County at that time. We had a great deal of rain during the summer. In the fall, nearly everybody had ague and fever. Many suffered for want of care because there were not enough well ones to take care of the sick. Some died. Perhaps they might have lived if they had a more comfortable place to live in.

I remember one day of intense suffering. My husband had been confined to his bed about week when I was taken sick. We lay there nearly all day, neither of us able to help the other

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<sup>6</sup> George Griffing was twice elected as representative to the Nebraska Legislature (*Andreas, 1255*).

to a drink of water. How parched our tongues were with fever. Our babe so sick, yet we could not care for her. Oh how I prayed that the Lord would send help in some way. Toward night, Julius Tyler came. He seemed like an angel of mercy sent to us. . . . He staid a week. By that time I had succeeded in breaking my chills by taking Quinine. I managed to care for my sick husband and babe and to do what had to be done. . . . My husband was confined to his bed the greater part of the time for three months. I had the chills all winter, only as I broke them with Quinine.

According to C. W. Giddings, many folks were so greatly discouraged “that at the end of the year 1858, out of 150 families who, during the eighteen months preceding, came to make themselves homes in Table Rock and vicinity, but fifteen families remained.” A few paragraphs later, however, Giddings listed the names of thirty-seven men, “nearly all having families” who came before the fall of 1858 and “bravely and nobly bore the hardships and endured the toils of frontier life” <sup>7</sup> (*J. Edwards, 22; Andreas, 1254*).

## Gatherings

The new little town on top of a hill a mile west of the Nemaha persevered through the storms that flooded the lower areas and the sickness that followed. Perhaps the little town acted as encouragement to those who remained, some of them too poor to go elsewhere. “We held services every Sunday at our house,” Fannie Giddings Norris recalled. “We had several ministers in our company, so we had no trouble in getting leaders for our meetings.” In addition to public worship services, there were Sunday School classes, prayer groups, weekly meetings of the literary society and other gatherings in the Giddings’ front room for nearly four years. C. W. Giddings wrote, “Such was the zeal manifested in these gatherings that some kind of meeting was held nearly every night in the week” (*Andreas, 1254*).

The literary society was formed the fall of 1858. “At the meetings, the first part was devoted to literary work, and the rest of the time was spent socially,” according to Fannie Giddings Norris. In the spring of 1859 her young sister, Sarah, described the meetings in a letter to her Aunt Augusta Griffing in Kansas.

We have a literacy society here now and they meet every Wednesday evening to have meetings. One week they debate and the next the Ladies around Table Rock get up a paper and read it and the gentlemen speak pieces and sing songs and I think they improve a great deal (a “heap” as the natives say) in this way.

Lydia Griffing also remembered the meetings. “We also had social gatherings – our literary societies, where nearly everyone who was old enough took a part in the exercises. These were both enjoyable and instructive.”

On December 25, 1858, Juliana Gere wrote on a separate piece of paper perhaps her last entry for the year.

Mr. Gere and myself went to Mr. Giddings to a Christmas party. About 50 in all were there. In the evening was meeting. Mr. Westfall preached a short sermon. Mr. [George] Griffin[g] followed with some good remarks. Then Mr. Giddings’ Liddia [Lydia] closed the entertaining meeting after which we had much good singing. (*Griffing website*)

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<sup>7</sup> Giddings’ list included men who came to Table Rock before 1857 and from states other than Pennsylvania and New York.

## Chapter Five

### Darkest Before the Dawn

The first part of 1859 was a trying time for the early settlers of Pawnee County. In addition to the hardships suffered the previous year, the spring was late in coming. “It was near the middle of May before cattle could live up on the prairies. Late seasons, especially a late spring,” Joseph Edwards explained, “was a far more serious misfortune then, when the settlers had barely enough to winter their stock” (20).

By the end of 1859 there were some who later wrote that a new day had dawned. Unfortunately, one who had come to “the City of Table Rock” two years earlier hoping that she would be happy in a “log hut in the wilderness” did not live to see that new day. In the back of his 1858 diary on a page marked “Memoranda” Horatio N. Gere wrote the following words: “Wed. April 13, 1859 Tonight no meeting. Julia instead of meeting with the rest as formerly was finishing up her brief life. She expired about 8 o’clock Thursday a.m. Dear Julia’s death has made a great impression upon her friends. May it be lasting.”

Juliana Gere wrote about her daughter’s battle with diphtheria on unused pages in Julia’s small 1857 diary. After Julia’s April 9<sup>th</sup> entry written in pencil (see page 19), her mother penned the following:<sup>1</sup>

April 10 Two years from the time the above was inserted in this journal – the owner and writer of what is contained herein was taken sick from the effects of a violent cold and had to take her bed. First she had a fever which from its symptoms appeared to be of the bilious type accompanied with a very sore throat. She ate nothing this day but a little custard. The fever abated at night and she rested tolerably well.

April 11 Today, April 11, 1859 Her throat got much worse. She could swallow with the utmost difficulty and it causing excruciating pain. Her neck though extremely sore to the touch was not swollen on the outside but seemed fast filling up within. Every thing was done for her relief that maternal care and solicitude could devise but seemingly to little purpose. Her throat ached constantly and her breathing was difficult and tho thirsty and compelled often to drink, it gave excruciating pain to do so. . . .

April 12 She had to have the closest attention by night and day as she could get but a few minutes rest at a time and had to make almost constant effort to throw off the phylum that was accumulating in her throat. The remedies were chiefly applied to her throat on the outside as she could take nothing into her mouth that would irritate her throat without nearly strangling her.

April 13 Previous to this day she had taken a little thin milk porridge but today her fever increased. The inflammation seemed to extend to her stomach or breast and she coughed some with a hoarseness and with difficulty expectorated a thicker matter than before which would almost strangle her. We had sent for the Dr. the day before but he did not come. Now she took no nourishment but a little water sweetened with molasses. At night she could breathe more easily and sleep lying down. Before she had to be propped up by pillows or sit in an easy chair. . . . She suffered less pain than usual drank with less difficulty and thought

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<sup>1</sup> I have transcribed these entries from the original diary at the Nebraska State Historical Society’s archives, and photocopies thereof, with the help of my sister, Sylvia Moore.

herself better. At early dawn we sent again for the Dr. He arrived some after sun up – or nearly eight o'clock. He gave her a little stimulate and for a few minutes appeared better – but when she again attempted to raise she suffocated and in a moment apparently all was over – the spirit had fled. . . . Thus died our beloved daughter after an illness of 4 days. Aged 18 years and 6 months and 9 days.

In addition to Horatio and Juliana Gere, Fanny and Lydia Giddings spent that last night near Julia's bedside. It may have been sometime later that Juliana Gere added more about Julia's last night using both sides of five additional pages in the small diary. (Some pages from August were removed and pinned in among the April pages to provide enough space.) Starting a new paragraph she wrote:

I felt pretty sure some time before morning that her end was nigh. I called her Father. . . . We broke our fears to her as gently as we could. First I asked her if she should never see [Charles] Henry again what should I tell him from her. Said she, "Tell him I love him" and immediately added, "tell Br. Gee and Sister Gee [Rev. and Mrs. Giddings] that I loved them till I died." This she said with much emphasis.

I enquired what her prospects beyond the grave should she not get well? She said she did not know. We wanted her to feel different from that and urged her to seek a full reconciliation to God immediately. Although she did not think herself worse she could not help but perceive our anxiety for all around her bed were in tears. And she soon seemed fully roused to her situation. Her disease had not greatly prostrated her strength and now she did not suffer much which seemed favorable to the full exercise of her mind which soon became apparently so vigorous as when in health. She listened and replied to our earnest entreaties to cast herself just as she was upon the merits of her Saviour. She said it seemed to her like presumptuous. We told her it was Sinners not the righteous He came to save. She must believe in His power and willingness now to save her.

She asked us to sing the Hymn "Arise my soul arise. Shake off thy guilty fears." We afterwards sung "In Jordan's stormy banks I stand." She then asked me to kneel beside her bed and pray – which I did her Father following. (John now got up and joined the sorrowing group.) Now she asked us to sing a favorite hymn of hers: "I thirst Thou wounded Lamb of God. To wash me in Thy cleansing blood."<sup>2</sup> . . . While we were singing that beautiful hymn her mind became clear. She could embrace the Saviour as her Saviour – could venture fully upon Him for salvation.

Death had no terror for her now, but she looked forward to her Heavenly home with as much pleasure apparently as one ever manifested in starting for their earthly home to rejoin friends from they had been long separated. A most Heavenly smile lit up her countenance and one could hardly suppose she was conscious of the presence of disease or suffering.

She spoke most affectionately to John, urged him to prepare to meet her again in the better world. And looked at us all and says "I shall see you again."

After bequeathing some of her possessions to those around to her, Julia asked:

"If I die what shall I be buried in?" After mentioning several garments without fixing upon any, Fanny said, "You shall have my white dress" one Julia had embroidered for her. "Oh no I will not take that – but I will take that white cassock you had of Mrs. Chambers and you

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<sup>2</sup> The words to this hymn were written by John Wesley.

shall take my lawn shirt she gave me in return. Told us to choose between two linen shirts she mentioned to wear with the cassock. Then she gave us to understand that we knew her feelings about strangers washing or dressing her person for its last repose – “None but one of you must do it” addressing Fanny & me “especially the washing.” After her mind was satisfied in the adjustment of these things – she again expressed her joy at the prospect of being so near her better home – of her reunion with her friends who had gone before. Mentioned Sister (?), a beloved Sunday school Teacher and eminent Christian. “But Jesus, Jesus is better than all the rest.” This blessed name was often upon her lips. . . . She could now speak with difficulty and not much above a whisper.

Georgie got up at the dawn of day. His feelings were such that I could hardly persuade him to go to the bedside to speak to his sister. He went crying as tho his heart would break. She spoke very affectionately to him – told him she was sorry she had plagued him so much but he must forgive her. I told her I hoped she would forgive me if I had at any time been unkind to her. She raised her hand and said, “Oh dont Ma dont. You have been one of the best Mothers to me.” I told her she knew that I had told her when her sister died that I hoped I should never be called to bury another child but should be taken first. “Oh Mother,” said she, “I could not possibly have done without you.” Thus while we were all overwhelmed with anguish at the thought of parting with her, she only thought of words of affection and comfort. Oh how it seemed all the rest in tears and her face clothed in smiles.

Mrs. and Mr. Giddings both came in and stayed each in turn a few moments. Br. G. prayed. The Dr. came about 8 o’clock. He gave her a cordial which seemed to revive her a little – some one said you may get well. Then said she, “I might miss Heaven.” Even Mr. Giddings went home and told them he thought she would get well. . . . But as soon as she attempted to cough she motioned to be raised up and immediately suffocated or strangled. Oh the agony of that brief struggle – tho but momentary – during which she looked and pointed upward! Then settled back upon her pillow again. She was gone.

Julia Marie Gere was buried on April 15, 1859. According to a note probably written by her father, there was a large congregation. “Mr. George Griffing preached from James IV:14, a very impressive sermon.”

Four months later Mr. Gere entered another sad note. “Sun, 21 August 1859: Mr. J[oseph] Griffin[g]’s only child died. . . . Buried in the afternoon.”

During the 1860s and 1870s, Joseph and Lydia Griffing would have six more children—three of whom would survive to adulthood. “When my children were taken,” Lydia Griffing wrote, “I felt that my grief was more than I could bear. . . . Had it not been for God’s precious promises, sorrow would have crushed my heart.”

### **Living off of the Land**

In July of 1858, Brownville’s *Nebraska Advertiser* reported that year’s wheat crop was a total failure due to “so much rain of late” (*Danker, 49*). There was no wheat on the market at Brownville for the next year. When there was flour, it was very expensive. In August of 1858 Juliana Gere wrote, “There has been no flour in Brownville even long back for sale – our man went with his team . . . and got one sack only for which he paid \$7. Today we have heard that one or two boatloads have landed there and was bought for \$3.50 a sack.”

According to Joseph Edwards, “The money brought in by settlers who had been here for as much as a year was about expended for the necessities of life while opening up their farms” (*18*). This was echoed



by Fannie Giddings Norris. "The second year out here [1859] was a hard one. For three months we had no sugar or flour. Most everyone had enough money they brought with them to last through the first year. . . . But the second year, no one had any money, and crops were very poor." However, she added, "We had lots of fruit, and got along as best we could."

It seems that some of the farmers had managed to harvest some corn in the fall of 1858, or had corn left from the year before, or were able to buy some. Lydia Griffing wrote in her memoirs:

Many times have I ground corn in my coffee mill to make bread or mush and my neighbors did the same. In 1859 there was a mill at Table Rock. That year there was no wheat nor flour to be bought. Our obliging Table Rock miller, Mr. Fleming, bolted our meal for us when we wished it. Out of that we made piecrust, biscuit, fried cake, in fact all kinds of cake almost that could be made from flour.

God had provided for our wants by permitting wild plums and grapes to grow abundantly. Some of the plums were as large as peaches, and the grapes were more plentiful and nicer than they are now. We preserved grapes and plums in sorghum molasses and also dried them. These were good for winter use.

James Rist, the youngest son of Christian and Kathrina Rist, born the following decade, had often heard his parents talk of the early years at Dry Branch.

Money was scarce. Practically all the living came from the land. Guess that is the reason most of the first settlers settled near the streams where there was abundant timber, water and fertile soil. In the timber were black walnut and hickory nut trees, with Hazel nut bushes on the slopes. We always had a supply of nuts to carry through from one season to the next. The land was bountiful, the native prairie had patches of wild strawberries, they were small but what they lacked in size they made up with a tangy flavorful taste unequalled by the domestic varieties. A pail full of the dainty fruit sent a pungent aroma all over the house. Wild goose berries grew in most of the timbered areas.

My father had his trusty muzzle loaders, a shot gun and rifle, which provided wild game, quail, prairie chickens, squirrel, rabbit and an occasional deer and buffalo. I remember the powder horn, always kept dry, the molds for molding bullets. Those pioneers had to be good shots as the fast moving game would get away before a reload could be made. (*Humboldt Standard, 18*).

In his booklet about Pawnee County, A. Besom wrote, "In those days game was abundant. . . . As late as 1860 to 1862 buffaloes were plenty in the western part of the county, and 'jerker' buffalo hams eked out the scanty stores of many a settler" (17).

Some of the settlers were facing an additional problem. Those who had not yet entered their claims at the land office were in danger of losing their claims, with all of the improvements they had made, to land speculators when public land was offered for sale. In 1859 many of them were no better prepared to enter their claims than they had been the year before. Some of them "were ultimately driven into the borrowing of money of these same land speculators, at enormous rates of interest to save their homes. For 160 acre land warrants bought by the 'land sharks' for \$125.00, the settler was obliged to give his obligation of \$200.00, and pay or promise to pay 25 per cent interest on that sum" (*J. Edwards, 18*).

**“The Prairie Plow Was at Work”**  
**Excerpts from J. Sterling Morton’s 1859 Address on Nebraska Agriculture**

The spring and summer of 1855 were seasons of intense anxiety to the first tillers of this soil, but the harvest sun shone propitiously, and the benignant rains and the growth-giving dews were plenteous, and when the autumn came with its sear and yellow leaf, the great experiment had been successful. To the questions—Can Nebraska ever be settled up? Can she ever sustain any considerable population?—the joyous fields of golden grain nodded in indisputable affirmative and gracefully beckoned the weary emigrant to a home of healthfulness and abundance.

The greater portion of the summer of 1856 was consumed in talking and meditating upon the prospective value of city property. . . . The mere mention of using such valuable lands for the purpose of agriculture was considered as evidence of verdancy wholly unpardonable and entirely sufficient to convict a person of old-fogyism in the first degree.

Farms were sadly neglected in the summer of 1856 and there were not as many acres planted that season, in proportion to the population, as there were the year before, but the crop of town plats, town shares, town lots, and Nebraska bank notes was most astonishingly abundant.

In the midsummer of 1857 . . . the financial horizon began to darken. At once hope whispered that it was only a passing cloud, but judgment predicted a full grown storm. . . . Again and again came the thunderbolts, and the crash of banks and the wreck of merchants, the fall of insurance companies, the decline of railroad stocks, the depreciation of even state stocks, and finally the depletion of the national treasury.

The season of planting in 1857, like that of the year previous, had slipped by almost unnoticed and unimproved by a great many of the people of Nebraska. We had not raised enough even to eat; and as for clothing, it looked as though nakedness itself would stalk abroad in the land.

There were at least one million of town lots in towns along the Missouri River . . . but where was the demand? It had ceased! It had blown away in the great storm. . . . We had nothing else to offer for sale except real estate, and even that, of a very

doubtful character. We were yet a colony of boarders, and had nothing to pay board with, and very little valuable baggage to pawn for the same.

There was one small class of individuals who, although they may have been sadly pinched by the pressure of the times . . . when winter set in, were comparatively well off. . . . They were the very few farmers who had passed through the era of speculation untempted by the allurements thereof. They who had followed the plow steadily and planted their crops carefully. They, and they alone, of all the people of Nebraska, could board themselves.

The spring of 1858 dawned upon us, and the icy hand of winter relaxed its hold upon the earth, and the prairies were once more clothed in sunshine and emerald. The clouds were breaking. . . . Labor at once began. . . . All about us, on every side, the prairie plow was at work, turning over, as it were, the first pages in the great volume of our prosperity.

Seed had been sown, farms opened, and every energy had been taxed to make the Territory of Nebraska self-sustaining. It was the first genuine effort in the right direction. . . . As you well remember, the season was favorable, the crops were heavy. We had enough, aye more than enough and the last spring witnessed our first shipment of a surplus production of grain to a foreign market.

The first steamers that came up the Missouri in 1857 brought us corn to keep us and our stock from perishing by hunger and starvation. But now, by the energy of our farmers, Nebraska in less than two years has been transformed from a consumer to a producer. And the steamboats of the old Missouri bore away from our shores in the spring of 1859, hundreds of thousands of bushels of corn to the southern and eastern markets, which we did not need for home use, and for which, at the rate of forty cents per bushel, we have taken more money than we have for town lots in the last eighteen months, or will in the next twenty-four.

Let us continue the good work; let every heart’s aspiration, every thought and effort be to make each succeeding fair give better and stronger testimony in favor of the resources and wealth of our vest and beautiful domain.

## Turning Point

James Rist remembered being told that the first corn was shipped to market in 1859. “This year, father said was the turning point as there was no longer any doubt this was a farming country. He made the trip to Nebraska City that year to help celebrate the first territorial fair” (*Humboldt Standard*, 18).

James Rist’s words sound similar to those found in a history book.

1859 was an eventful year in Nebraska history, for in that year the first corn was shipped to market. Through all the season, steamboats were carrying the golden grain from the towns along the Missouri River, where it had been hauled in wagons by the settlers. From that year there was no longer doubt that Nebraska was a farming country. In September of that year, the settlers’ victory over the great American desert was celebrated at Nebraska City by the first territorial fair. (*Shelton, 1914, 252-253*)

The first Territorial Agriculture and Mechanical Fair was held at Nebraska City on September 21, 22 and 23, 1859. It was sponsored by the Nebraska Territorial Board of Agriculture. Premiums were given for the best exhibits of livestock, farm products, mechanisms, works of art, and more. (The president of the board, Robert Furnas of Brownville, was awarded several of the premiums). “The attendance on the last two days was especially large—all classes were there, from the chief executive to the humblest citizen” (*Morton & Watkins, 277*).

The “most notable feature of the fair.” it was reported, was the address delivered by twenty-seven-year-old J. Sterling Morton, the founder of Arbor Lodge at Nebraska City. He had served in the territorial legislature (where he had been one of the few who opposed the chartering of “wild cat” banks). In 1858 he was appointed secretary of the territory. At the fair, he spoke from “the improvised rostrum of a farm wagon, placed in the shade of this native oak tree” (*Morton & Watkins, 277*). The topic of his speech was the history and development of agriculture in Nebraska during its first five years as a territory. The address, “The Prairie Plow was at Work,” was later published by the Board of Agriculture. (The address, edited by James E. Potter, appeared in *Nebraska History* in 2003. Excerpts from the address are shown on the previous page.)

## Like the Shining of a Clear Sun

In 1858 gold was discovered in Colorado (then a part of Kansas and Nebraska Territories). In the spring and early summer of 1859, it is estimated that 100,000 people took part in the “Pike’s Peak Gold Rush,” one of the greatest migrations in North American history (*Wikipedia*). Many of the 1859 gold seekers turned around after hearing rumors that there was no gold. Perhaps one third of them returned before ever catching sight of the mountains and another third after spending a few days in the mountains (*Gehling, Chapter 9*). However, there were thousands who stayed. Even more came the following year after reading more reliable newspaper reports by Horace Greeley and others who had visited gold digging sites. By 1861, there were enough people living at Denver and other mining towns to create the Territory of Colorado.

In the late 1850s, it occurred to some of the men living in Pawnee County to head west with their produce instead of taking it east to the Missouri River. C. W. Giddings’ account of the history of Table Rock that he contributed to Joseph Edwards for his *Centennial History* included the following:

During the first three years of our history our market was in the towns on the banks of the Missouri River. The streams not being bridged, the hauling of our surplus produce was attended with great inconvenience and expense, greatly discouraging to the farming interests

of the county. The developing of the mining interests of the Rocky Mountains and opening of the freighting business westward gave a new impetus to the farming interests of the settlements furnishing a ready paying home market for every thing we could produce. (*J. Edwards, 24, Andreas, 1255*)

It was then, according to Giddings, that “the day of prosperity dawned upon us like the shining of a clear sun after a long and dreary storm.” He claimed that Table Rock had “the honor of opening the first road west, and of sending the first load of grain to Fort Kearney. This was done by C. W. Giddings, in 1859. The load consisted of eighty bushels of oats” (*J. Edwards, 24, Andreas, 1255*).

It seems there was a trail followed by early freighters from Brownville to Fort Kearney and further west that went directly across the town of Table Rock. Tracks, almost a foot deep, were said to still exist decades later (*Brand Irons*). There were a number of men from the Table Rock area who took part in freighting trips. William Fellers, who came to the Table Rock area from the Pennsylvania-New York area, “freighted with an ox team from Brownville to Denver” (*Brand Irons*). Mr. Fellers would be gone for three months at a time and “his wife would not know till he returned that he was alive, for there was great danger of attack by Indians. They tried as much as possible to travel in caravans but there were times when that wasn’t possible” (*Brand Irons*).

Russell H. Samson, another early pioneer originally from Pennsylvania, also hauled loads of freight and produce further west. Years later he talked with a reporter about his experiences as a freighter.

Usually we went to Fort Kearney . . . but sometimes we went as far as Denver. Very little money was in circulation in those days, all business being done by trading, and those trips were the only means of obtaining cash. The loads usually consisted of corn, butter, eggs, meat, etc, and we sometimes cleared only a small amount from eight to twenty dollars above the expenses of a trip. . . .

My most profitable trip was in the winter of 1864 when I sold my load at a trading station in what is now Adams County, getting twenty cents for pork, eighteen cents for lard, and sixty cents for butter.

We always made these trips in quite large parties, and while we were never molested by the Indians, we often saw the marks of their depredations, where they had burned property after having murdered the settlers or teamsters. (*Table Rock Argus*)

Details about some of Mr. Samson’s trips also can be found in the *Biographical Album* by Chapman Brothers.

One summer he drew his corn to Denver, driving six yokes of oxen ahead of two wagons that were fastened together, being encouraged to undertake the trip from the fact that the year before corn had sold there for \$15 a hundred pounds, but he was not repaid, as he received but \$4.75 per 100 pounds for his load. (559)

There were others in the county who also made westward freighting trips. For several years Joseph Steinauer, who had settled on Turkey Creek in the north central part of the county, “made good money hauling his cured pork by wagon to sell it to the Government at Fort Kearny” (*Miles, II*). The Hunzeker brothers from the Dry Branch area also took “produce, usually bacon, to Denver, where it brought much higher price, the time of making the round trip having been three months or more” (*Chapman Brothers, 491*).

## Clouds Have Not All Cleared Away

For some in Pawnee County, it would take somewhat longer for doubts about the success of farming to be put to rest. Joseph Griffing wrote a letter to Robert Furnas of Brownville about the farming situation in the Table Rock area that was later published in the first issue of the *Nebraska Farmer* in October of 1859. His letter included the following remarks:

We have scarcely commenced farming. Our means being generally limited, and our subject at present being to secure our farms and get ready to do something. Farming interests have suffered from the hard times but we look for improvement in that respect.

Many of our farms are making additions to their cultivated fields, and preparing for more extensive farming operations another year. On the whole we are making some improvement but wish it were greater. Our prospects are rather more cheering for the future, though clouds have not all cleared away.

Our markets are not very well defined and our facilities for transportation are not what might be desired. The want of good bridges is severely felt by those who have a surplus of farm products to carry off. A railroad up the Nemaha would eventually remedy that difficulty. (*Danker, 47-48*)

Although there were those who produced a surplus in 1859, it would take a few more years before the “day of prosperity” would truly dawn for many of the farmers of Pawnee County. Joseph Edwards commented, “What little surplus was produced found a very poor market. Corn ran in price so that when there really was a surplus it would bring but little more than ten cents a bushel. But the truth was that not until 1861 did the farmers produce enough to supply more than their own wants” (18).

It was June of 1860 when Joseph Edwards first arrived in Pawnee County, a time he remembered well.

By the middle of June, crops presented very encouraging prospects. A better stand of corn will seldom be seen, and its growth and color was never more flattering; but alas, the dry weather! This was the terrible dry season . . . the year of famine in Kansas. . . . By the tenth of July the farmers knew they were to have no corn that year—none of consequence. . . . The wheat was better; it yielded half a crop. But little oats were sown. Potatoes were almost an utter failure. . . . The cry went out over the east that the seasons here were too dry, the soil too parched, to be inhabited. The theory of the great American desert was revived. . . .

But there were sturdy men here; men not to be easily turned from the purpose for which they came—to make them a home, to build up a country. There were stout-hearted men at Table Rock, along the Nemaha; on the South Fork, in the west and south, all along the streams in the county—men who were willing to work and to wait. . . . And these brave souls, men and women, lived to see . . . Pawnee county filling with settlers; being beautified and developed even beyond their most sanguine expectations. (27-28)

Those who worked and waited were rewarded. The following year, 1861, turned out to be a good year for the folks along the Nemaha. And at Table Rock, the little town on top of a hill a mile west of the Nemaha, a “good substantial” stone schoolhouse was built during 1861-62 under the supervision of Peter Foale. It became the community meeting place. At the time of its erection, it was claimed to be “the largest and finest in Southern Nebraska, and probably the best in the State . . . a monument to the enterprise and zeal of the first settlers.” (*Edward, 22; Andreas, 1254*).

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Doralyn Steiner graduated from Table Rock High School in 1958 and from the University of Nebraska in 1962. She and her husband, Wayne Cheney, have been married for more than 50 years. Before the birth of their son and daughter, Doralyn taught high school mathematics and science, and worked as a computer programmer.

The Cheney family moved to central Texas in 1978. Doralyn attended graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin where she received a master's degree in social work. She worked for several non-profit organizations before retiring in 2000. Thereafter, Wayne and Doralyn built their retirement home beside Lake L.B.J. in the Texas Hill Country. They also made a number of trips to Nebraska to visit family and for Doralyn to do family history research. During the process, she also gathered information about the area where she had grown up.