



PAWNEE COUNTY History

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The Bunker Hill School Neighborhood *by Elsie Pepon Sutton*

The 1939 Recollections of:

Elsie Pepon Sutton

[Henry Oren Boone](#) | [Edmund Dudley Howe](#)

[Albert J. Kovanda](#) | [Anna Wopata Stanek](#)

[Matilda Werner Fitch](#)

My parents, Joseph Benedict and Bessie Shaw Pepon, left their home in Jo Daviess County, Illinois, on the 4th of February 1867, expecting to reach their destination - "somewhere in Pawnee County, Nebraska" -- before the end of the month. Heavy rains and flooded streams are not usually encountered in Iowa during February but that was their experience. They crossed the Missouri river at Nebraska City March 8, 1867, having been delayed ten days or more by floods on the Des Moines, Coon and Nishnabotna rivers. Mrs. Pepon's brother, John Wesley Shawn and wife, her nephew, William G. Lyman, and Eli T. Boone, brother in law of J. B. Pepon, came at the same time.

From Nebraska City they went directly to Brownville where they got from the land office a plot of all government lands in Pawnee county, then went to the home of a former Jo Daviess county neighbor, Almon S. Davis, on the Richardson-Pawnee county line where they stayed during a three days blizzard. Then the men started out to find land. A man by the name of Armstrong, living in a log house on the creek on what is now Rudolf Vrtiska's farm, was a sort of land locator and helped them select their lands.

They rented farms for that summer and after crops were laid by broke prairie on their own land, built their houses, and in the fall moved into them. That fall father says in his memories, "Countless myriads of locusts descended upon Nebraska from the northwest and eggs hatched and the young locusts did some damage to growing crops until they got their wings, when they left." This was before the great grasshopper invasions of the Seventies.

When Mr. & Mrs. Pepon settled in Bunker Hill neighborhood there were living there a Mr. George McMahan and family on land he sold in 1869 to Theodore W. Pepon. His log house was situated in what are now the farmyards of Rudolf Wopata's home. As a girl I remember the cellar hole in a plum thicket close by the railroad track and just south of the creek. There were tales of ghostly happenings supposedly connected with that cellar; of footsteps following you down the track and other weird occurrences. As his ghost ship's habitat was Uncle Theodore's farm, we were inclined to think of him as our special -- well, property is scarcely the word. Retainer, perhaps, would be better. We were always on the lookout for some manifestation of his presence, but he was on the whole a modest ghost. Aunt Susie had to keep a box of extra lamp chimneys on hand, for those on the hanging chandelier or even on the lamps standing on the shelf, covered to keep out the dust, would suddenly snap. The door at the east end of the up-stairs hall would open and shut when we were all down stairs, footsteps would sound along the hall, step down onto the landing and down a couple of steps, then stop to start all over again a little later, but we could never see anything if we rushed to open the stair door to look up as we frequently did. Anyway he was the one and only ghost I ever heard of in Bunker Hill.

Alexander Allen and family lived in a log house on the land purchased from him by O. D. Howe, Sr., in 1871. Will Lyman Married his daughter Sophie Allen. Peter Foale lived in a log house near the mouth of Howe's creek where it flows into the Nemaha River. North of Peter Foale, across the line in Johnson county lived James and Thomas Robison, both bachelors then, in a one room cabin. Peter Foale had come in 1856 and the Robison's in 1861. Henry Cooper homesteaded the family later at the farm now owned by A. J. Kovanda. Bill Mac Clure homesteaded that quarter originally according to John Allen, then sold his "right" to someone who sold it to Johnson. It was rather the custom in those first years of homesteading for a man to take a claim, relinquish it to someone for a consideration, and take another for himself. Thus many of the farms in Bunker Hill neighborhood were "owned" by several different men before they were finally proved-up on and real title secured, but the Pepoon, Shaw and Boone homesteads were original and only. Will Lyman was under twenty-one so father was appointed his guardian and the land he bought with agricultural script stood for nearly ten years in father's name. After Will came of age, father urged him to go to Pawnee City and they could straighten up the title but Will always answered: "You're honest. No hurry." One day father drove over to Will Lyman's, told him to get in the wagon and then drove to Pawnee City and made the necessary transfer.

A trip to Pawnee City by wagon was a journey in those days and you took the day for it. Even when we grew prosperous and had a buggy and special driving team it took two to three hours to get there, depending on the condition of the roads. Now you can arrive to Lincoln by auto in less time but I am not sure you are as well off. At least farmsteads are not so well kept neat and prosperous looking as were the personality of those people from Illinois. They took personal pride in their homes and there was a happy rivalry among them as to which should have the most attractive place. The women all loved flowers, the men were interested in fruit raising, so beside the vegetable gardens there were on each place flowering plants and shrubs, small fruits, orchards and fine groves. The roads were kept mowed, as well as orchards and dooryards. Their example was followed by more and more until the neighborhood was famous for its spruce ness and thrift.

Those earliest homes were mostly log houses though there were few dugouts. The James Dobson family lived in a dugout for several years. Will Lyman's first house was half dugout with a log top and the Wendover house was also half dugout. Others dug a cellar and lived in it until the house could be built over it. Some of the early cabins were one room, 12 X 16 feet, or even smaller. Our houses were one and a half stories, about 16 or 18 by 24 feet, half of the first floor a living room, with bedroom and cellar way in the other half. As soon as able the up-stairs was finished off into two or more bedrooms, and an ell added on one side for a kitchen. There were no dining rooms. Every body ate in the kitchen. Lumber for the houses had to be hauled from the Missouri river and were generally cottonwood lumber, awful stuff to warp. Mrs. Boone wrote with pride to her people in Illinois that their window and doorframes were of walnut. Boone was a carpenter by trade but the others were not, though every trade was represented among the settlers. There were carpenters, coopers, wheelwrights, masons, and cabinet-makers -- there were millers, shoemakers, blacksmiths, well diggers, and surveyors. Everybody "changed work" in those days so many tasks were really community affairs.

The first schoolhouse was such an affair. The first school meeting in District #35 was in 1868; the district at that time comprising what was afterward the Bunker Hill Foale and the Morton districts. (E. D. Howe gives an account of the division of the districts in his paper.) They wanted to build their schoolhouse on the northwest corner of Wesley Shaw's land but he couldn't give title. Someone suggested that they go ahead and build and if Shaw refused to give title when he proved-up they could all turn out and move it off. "Build it of cottonwood and it will warp off," said Hiram Billings. The district was known as the Pepoon School for sometime but finally at the school meeting the name of Bunker Hill was officially established.

I do not know who were the first teachers but my father was one of them. He had been a teacher in Illinois and his Nebraska certificate, which I still have is dated Aug. 5, 1871 and issued by John M. Osborn, Co. Superintendent. I suppose he taught the following winter. I have an old record book of the district, which gives the teachers from 1882 to 1888. They were:

1882, Della Nims 3 Months from April 7th @ \$22.00 1882, Horace H. Young, 5 Months from October @ \$33.50 1883, Mrs. M. S. Mumford, 3 Months from April 23, @ \$29.00 1883, Chas. M. Wheaton, 4 Months from Nov.12, @ \$33.00 1884, Mary E. Allen, 1 Months from April 15, @ \$30.00 1884, Kate Pepoon Allen, 2 Months from May 15, @ \$30.00 1884, Hohn L. Young, 5 Months from Oct. 20, @ \$45.00 1885, Chas. M. Wheaton, 3 Months from April 13, @ \$33.33 1885, O. D. Howe, 5 Months from Oct. 26, @ \$45.00 1886, May Barnett, 3 Months from April 12, @

\$30.00 1886, Lina West, 5 Months from Oct 11 , @ \$40.00 1887, Lina West, 3 Months from April 11 , @ \$30.00 1887, Edmund D. Howe, 5 Months from Oct. 10 , @ \$45.00 1888, Myrta E. Howe, 3 Months from April 8, @ \$25.00 1888, Mollie C. Moore, 5 Months from Oct. @ \$40.00

The record book also contains the school census for April 1st, 1883 and later dates. Below is the record for the year of 1883.

John & Josephine Vrtiska Joe 10, John 7 Anton & Anna Stanek Joe 13, Albert 10, Frank 7, Fannie 5 John & Margaret Hollenbeck Walter 20, Columbia 14, Rose 11, Anton Krofta 15 Peter G. Foale Champier Mertes 18 Albert & Mary Wopata Anna 8, Albert 6 Anton & Josephine Strejc Anthony 18, Joe 13 Joseph & Matilda Werner Frank 12, Mary 10, Emma 7 Mose & Susan Johnson Fred 18, Edna 14, Claude 12, Maud 10, Murray 8 G.B. & Mary Johnson M.B. , 14 Frank 12, Eva 9 James & Sareana Dobson Joe 18, Nellie 12, Lily 10 Frank & Anna Kovanda Mary 16, Albert 12, Frank 10, Anna 8 J.W. & Maria Shaw Allie 14, Henry 10 E.T. & Eunice Boone Harry 17, Gertie 15, Fred 12, Bert 9, Frank 6 J.B. & Bessie Pepon Elsie 10, George 8, Philip 7 O.D. & Mary E. Howe Edmund 20, Myrta 14 W.G. & Sophia Lyman Edwin 10, Ashley 7

Out of the sixteen families on this list are Bohemian: Vrtiska, Stanek, Wopata, Srejc, Werner and Kovana.

The Kovandas and Mr. Werner were early settlers, coming in 1867 I think, but later in the year. I do not know when the others came. They bore their American language and customs and methods of farming, but they were sturdy and intelligent, among the finest of a fine race, and they and their children became an integral part of our neighborhood, and never considered as separate from us.

Peter Foale served as director of District 35 for many years. He told us that he had gone to school for only three months, but in that time learned to read and write and went through fractions in arithmetic: something that seems impossible. He had the most amazing intellect I have ever known, and a marvelous memory. He used to say he knew all of Burns poems by heart and could recite Tam O' Shanter's Ride backwards. He was a prodigious reader and never forgot anything he read. I remember Mrs. Howe's asking him if he knew who wrote "Though the hills of God Grind slowly yet they grind exceedingly small. Though the patience he stands waiting, with exactness grinds he all." A quotation she had been looking for but had not found. Mr. Foale thought a moment, and then said, "Longfellow, wasn't it? One of his translations." Mrs. Howe took down her volume of Longfellow and found it at once. Mr. Foale said he had not seen a copy for 20 years and went home with the book in his pocket to reread. There are many stories of the kindness of Peter Foale and his wife to the early settlers. Mrs. Johnson said they would have starved one winter if it hadn't been for Mr. Foale and added, "That is what I call being a Christian." "Ha!" said Peter who was a free-thinker, "That is what I call being a man!"

Although it was not included in the subjected suggested by the Pawnee County Historical Society, I wish to add a little about the amusements at Bunker Hill. In the 1870's activities centered around the meetings of the Grange and the Good Templar Lodge, both of which met upstairs at O. D. Howe's residence. The social hours following were always the chief attraction of these gatherings. A "local" paper was issued at some of these meetings, the locals consisting mostly of jokes on the various members. Occasionally poems, parodies, or so-called "parables" were inserted, usually referring to some of the members, or some amusing happening. By 1880 the Bunker Hill Literary Society, which met at the schoolhouse, had taken the place of the lodges and continued for several years. Everybody belonged and everyone took part. A selection from "The Literary Gem", issued by the society, is entitled:

Names in Our School by Mary E. Howe

*"Now Joe", the teacher said, "be still"
And four boys straight replied, "I will".
"Now Frank", the teacher's voice was heard,
And five boys started at the word.
We've Nellie, and we've Eva true,
Of Anna's and Emma's we have two.
We've Mary and Elsie, and Lily and Gertie,
And Georgia and Harry, and Walter and Myrta.
We have Little John, and Albert's three,
Fred, Phil, Ashley, and Eddie you see.
And don't let us forget M. B.
And Anthony comes in as well,*

*Columbia and Rose our numbers swell,
And these are all the names I can tell.*

The Bunker Hill items in the Table Rock Argus for January 12, 1882, states: "At the Bunker Hill Literary Society, the tobacco and whiskey questions were debated with much spirit. Last Friday the debate was: "Resolved: that metal is more valuable than wood." C. G. Merry was leader for the affirmative, O. D. Howe in the negative. The arguments on both sides were astounding and brought down the house. The subject for the next meeting is Women's Suffrage. O. D. Howe and J. B. Pepoon are the leaders.

School exhibitions were popular, and also spelling bees and ciphering matches. Quite elaborate programs of dialogues, recitations, essays, vocal and instrumental music were given at the exhibitions and would pack the schoolhouse to capacity. Later the Bunker Hill Bohemian band was a feature. These exhibitions might be in honor of some poet's birthday, or that of Washington or Lincoln. Nearly always there was a Christmas program, and the last day of school was celebrated. Spelling Bees and ciphering matches led to contests with neighborhood school districts. Several winters there were Singing Schools, either at Bunker Hill or adjoining districts and they were well attended. They always closed with special concerts.

We had play parties on occasions, but most of the people of Bunker Hill enjoyed dancing and dances were frequent in our neighborhood. They were always held in our homes and Gabe Morton was our beloved fiddler. He was never too busy nor too tired to play for us, and we were very proud of his playing. There was none of the ridiculous haste of the dancing today. Rather its tempo gave time for dignity and grace. And oh the lilt of it! I have heard many of the great violinists of the past thirty years but never one that could get into dance music with just the right rhythm and cadence that Gabe Morton could put into even the simplest dance music.

The first dance I can remember was in my father's house on the Fourth of July when I was four years old, and I still have the plaid ribbon sash I wore on that festive occasion. That was a "big dance" with all the neighbors invited, and friends from other neighborhoods attending too, but we also had family dances, especially at Thanksgiving and Christmas, at which older people taught us children, so I cannot remember when I learned to dance. We seem to have always danced. The larger the neighborhood dances were, in my opinion, one of the strongest influences which welded our neighborhood into a congenial whole, and especially after the young people began growing up. Because of this frequent and most pleasant association, the Bunker Hill neighbors have seemed always almost as members of one big family to me.

Until the railroad came to Table Rock in the winter of 1871-1872, the market for farm products was the Missouri river towns, but Brownville especially. It was a two or three day's trip there and back and only undertaken by necessity. The chief aim was to raise sufficient food for men and animals with something left over to buy food to buy sugar and other necessities the farm could not produce. Root and vine crops grew prodigiously on prairie sod and that had been turned under the fall before, yet I remember the folks tell that one winter they all lived almost entirely on cornbread and molasses. Aunt Eunice Boone used to say scornfully when anyone complained of hard times in the drought years of the 1890's, "They don't know what hard times mean". Peter Foale worked as a stones mason at Oregon, Mo., and used to walk home ninety miles to his log cabin near the Nemaha River and carry a sack of flour on his shoulder. Mr. Dufack was a blacksmith and worked in a shop in Nebraska City, walking there Monday morning and home Saturday night to his farm northeast of Table Rock. Once he picked up a plow lay Will Sutton wanted sharpened, carried it with him and when he came back Saturday night charged 25 cents for the job.

The great grasshopper invasions were in 1874, 1876 and 1877. A story has been told to me concerning these visitations. "When the grasshoppers came in 1874, the people were stunned by the calamity, but they rallied and planted late corn and forage crops. Some of the corn matured and all of it made good forage. The hoppers, which hatched from the eggs next spring, were earlier and disappeared sooner so more corn matured that year. 1876 was another crushing blow. In the spring of 1877 the churches held days of prayer, for the people felt only God could save them. And then came the miracle. About the time the first grasshoppers were hatching it turned cold and a slow steady rain fell for two days and it continued cold for a day or so longer. Ten days later the same thing happened, and ten days later it happened again. The ended that series of infestations.

I have heard it stated that until the prairies were broken up, there were no floods on the Nemaha River, but that seems to be a mistake. At least that is what Joseph Edwards says in his Centennial History of Pawnee County in the part devoted to Table Rock and which he credits to C. W. Giddings, quotes as follows:

"The season of 1858 commenced wet, the rains continued increasingly until about the first of August when the waters suddenly rose in the night several feet about the banks of the streams. The valley was inundated and the cultivated fields being on the bottoms and the cabins of the settlers on the banks of the streams, much damage was done and great suffering prevailed. So greatly discouraged were the settlers that at the end of the year of 1858, out of the 150 families who had come to make themselves home in Table Rock and the vicinity only 15 families remained."

There certainly were floods in the 1880's when I begin to remember them. There was a flood in June of 1880, and again in 1882. There is recorded 17 inches of rain and two floods in June of 1883, one of them said to be the highest known to that time. On June 8th, 1884 Charlie Wheaton in endeavoring to cross the river at the MacMahan fiord on Uncle Theodore Pepoon's land was swept downstream by high water and had a narrow escape. In 1885 bridges were washed out on the smaller streams and the fiord damaged so badly that the first bridge over the Nemaha River was put in that fall at T. W. Pepoon's place. 1889 was the Big Flood, and is said to have been two feet higher than that of 1883, and in consequence the railroad was moved to higher ground all down the Nemaha Valley. These "freshets" were continued with more or less frequency until it was decided to straighten the Nemaha River, but that was after my days in Bunker Hill.

The folks used to tell of Indians coming through the country once in a while, and I remember some of them, but they were peaceful, begging visits from the Indians from the reservation down beyond Falls City. However, I remember one visit to our house, which has seemed more and more remarkable as I think back over it. I was a small child, not more than five or six, for I was young enough to hold fast to my mother's skirts. That would make about 1877. One-day mother was alone with us children, for father had gone somewhere and taken the dog with him. We saw a man coming up across the lawn and as he came nearer, we saw he was an Indian wrapped in a blanket. I do not know the time of year, but it was warm and the doors stood open. He asked for a drink of water and when mother had given it to him, he asked if he might rest. Mother gave him a chair by the west door and sat down herself, across the room by the east door, and I stood behind her. He was an old man, eighty years old he told mother, a Pawnee who had come back from Oklahoma to visit the scenes of his earlier days. He was alone and on foot. Mother offered him food, but he refused it, saying that he carried his own food. He spoke very slowly and brokenly, with long silences. He said he had hunted all over the prairies and wanted to see it again before he died. Not much left, as he knew it. He called me "papoose" and said I must not be afraid. Though I was shy enough to stay behind my mother, I was not afraid because my mother was not. He stayed a long time -- 2 or 3 hours it seemed to me, and when he left, Mother gave him another drink, whether coffee or milk, I do not know. He thanked her very gravely and said goodbye with great dignity. He made a deep impression on my mother and I presume my memory is mostly from hearing her talk of it, but I can still distinctly see him sitting across the room from us, and the way we watched him as he went slowly back across the lawn to the road. Our house set back rather far from the road and I have since wondered why he passed Mr. Dobson's and Uncle Wesley Shaw's houses without stopping and came to ours. Perhaps it was because our dog was gone. I have never found any one else who had ever seen this old Pawnee Indian. He left an impression of profound sadness with my Mother, which as I grew in understanding has remained with me. If my memory serves me right another Pawnee Indian from Oklahoma visited Pawnee County in recent years to "see the land of his fathers", but there was none of the poignancy of this earlier visit in the latter one as reported by the papers. Rather it was a sightseeing expedition such as you or I might take, but that earlier visit was a remembering and a farewell.

Elsie Pepoon Sutton - February 1939