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A HISTORY OF BANCROFT NEBRASKA

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of History
and the
Faculty of the College of Graduate Studies
University of Omaha

374

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Donald Schnier
November 1967

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Accepted for the faculty of the College of Graduate Studies of the University of Omaha, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

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TO A CIVILIZED SOCIETY

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CHAPTER I

FRONTIER BACKGROUND

In the mid-nineteenth century, the land from the Missouri River to the ninety-eighth meridian was the home of the Omaha Indians who had roamed the hills of northeast Nebraska since the seventeenth century. The march of the whites, however, had in 1854 pressured the tribe into ceding all their land in Nebraska with the exception of 300,000 acres which they retained in the northeast section of the state.¹ This reservation bordered on the Logan valley in northeast Cuming County. The Logan Creek was surrounded by miles of rich prairie just as it had been for centuries. But all of this was to change. The virgin land was soon to feel the plow.

Bancroft Township had no magical magnet drawing settlers to its land. There were no rich mines, no valuable minerals, only the promise of back-breaking labor. There was no freedom from the whims of nature. The land was no more fertile than any other area in northeastern Nebraska, but the settlers came just as they did along the entire frontier. The first arrived as early as 1867-

¹James C. Olson, History of Nebraska (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), pp. 25-26.

1868.² By 1870 the names Schwedhelm, McLaughlin, McKeegan, and Buchholz³ were among those first families of what was to become the community of Bancroft, Nebraska.

These early pioneers found no tall stands of timber from which they could build homes. Consequently, their first homes were often dugouts⁴ or sod houses.⁵ The sod house was only temporary as most settlers built wooden homes as soon as they were established.⁶ In 1870 the neighboring hamlet of West Point had few stores, hence building material had to be hauled from Fremont⁷ to the south or from Decatur on the Missouri River.⁸ With most of the building supplies imported, it was no easy task to conquer the seemingly endless prairie. Payment for the land was small considering cash alone, but pioneer hardships made up the difference. Indians, grasshoppers, blizzards, and prairie fires put a high price on land which on the surface appeared inexpensive. The West Point Republican reported in 1870 that although all government land was taken, good land was still available. The price ranged

²C. H. Scoville, Ed., History of the Elkhorn Valley, Nebraska (Omaha: National Publishing Co., 1892), p. 456; Interview with Mrs. Charles Schwedhelm, August 4, 1966.

³The Bancroft Blade, April 28, 1949, p. 2. Hereafter referred to as The Blade.

⁴Interview with Mrs. Charles Schwedhelm, August 4, 1966.

⁵Scoville, p. 752. ⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid., p. 750.

⁸Interview with Mrs. Charles Schwedhelm, August 4, 1966. Scoville, p. 456.

from \$2.50 to \$8 per acre for unimproved land, while improved farms could be purchased for \$8 to \$16 per acre. The average price was reportedly \$12 an acre.⁹

The early settlers had few conveniences, and those they had were obtained in no easy fashion. One vital necessity was water, and the convenience of a well was desired by every pioneer family. In order to obtain this, one pioneer housewife and her oldest daughter dug the first well. It was twenty-five feet deep and was dug by throwing the dirt into a pail. The pail was tied to a rope pulled up by the daughter without the luxury of a windlass.¹⁰

One of the most feared dangers to the early settlers was the prairie fire. Ordinarily, not many lives were lost; but during the 'sixties four deaths resulted from prairie fires in Cuming County.¹¹ In the fall of 1871 the citizens of West Point discovered a prairie fire moving toward their village from the east. Immediately, men organized to plow fire lines and to set backfires.¹² It was an "unwritten law" that in the event of a fire everyone should help end the

⁹The West Point Republican, December 9, 1870, p. 1. Hereafter referred to as The Republican.

¹⁰Scoville, p. 533. The woman in question was Mrs. Patrick McLaughlin, wife of one of the earliest settlers, Ibid.

¹¹Everett Dick, The Sod-House Frontier (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1937), p. 216.

¹²The Republican, November 9, 1871, p. 3.

danger.¹³ The townspeople fought the blaze for over eight hours before it was extinguished. The editor commented, "Had it not been for the united labor of our citizens, West Point would undoubtedly have met the fate of the 'somewhat' [my quotation marks] more important city of Chicago."¹⁴

The 'seventies proved to be difficult times in other respects as well. The grasshoppers overran much of Nebraska; and Bancroft, Logan, and other neighboring townships proved to be no exceptions. It took a combination of money and courage to remain during these difficult years.¹⁵ When confronted with the problem of inadequate income from their farms, many settlers looked for employment elsewhere. Several worked on the railroads and on the bridge-building then in progress in the West. Men like John A. Creighton and John I. Blair employed many Bancroft settlers during the lean grasshopper years.¹⁶ During the winter months when most construction was at a standstill, many contracted to cut timber near Decatur. From this point on the Missouri, large quantities of timber were shipped down the river

¹³Dick, p. 219.

¹⁴The Republican, November 9, 1871, p. 3.

¹⁵Obituary, Henry Gatzemeyer, The Blade, May 7, 1909, p. 1.

¹⁶Obituary, Michael Kelly, The Blade, September 2, 1921, p. 1.

to be used in the construction of many early communities.¹⁷ Other settlers, being more adventurous, went to the new gold fields in the Black Hills. In 1876 a few farmers from the area journeyed to Dakota after being driven out by grasshoppers. The "hoppers," however, proved to be less dangerous than the Indians; and most farmers returned the following year.¹⁸

Indian problems were not restricted to the Black Hills. In 1870 a settler named Carl Munson was attacked by a group of Winnebago Indians. The attackers were as savage as the wildest Apaches. They killed Munson, beheaded him, and carried the head away. All of the settler's buildings were burned and his stock driven off.¹⁹ This startling event caused a great deal of excitement. Soon a posse was organized and captured the braves, four of whom were hanged²⁰ while two more were given imprisonment.²¹

¹⁷Ibid. ¹⁸Scoville, p. 750.

¹⁹Bob Kelly, "A Letter from Bob Kelly Reminiscing," The Blade, June 23, 1949, pp. 5 and 7. Hereafter referred to as Kelly, "Reminiscing." Bob Kelly was the son of Mike Kelly, early Bancroft pioneer. The Republican reported February 10, 1871, p. 3. The head of Munson "was found lying on the open prairie about three-fourths of a mile from the scene of the murder."

²⁰Kelly, "Reminiscing," The Blade, June 23, 1949; Scoville, p. 301.

²¹The Republican, August 13, 1874, p. 5. Four years after the crime Governor Furnas pardoned the two imprisoned Indians as they were nearly dead with consumption. Ibid.

This was the only recorded instance of violence between Indians and whites in the Bancroft area.

Living near the Omaha-Winnebago Reservation made peaceful relationships a necessity. The relationships might not have been very friendly had not the Omahas agreed to sell part of their reservation. The community had been growing in spite of the hard years of the 'seventies, and by the early 'eighties available land was becoming scarce.²² A bill authorizing the Secretary of the Interior to sell the southern part of the Omaha Reservation was introduced in the Congress. It was defeated, however, because it was feared to be too advantageous to land speculators.²³ Apparently, there was local reaction against these individuals as the Congressman from the district surrounding West Point (which included the future Bancroft area) reported his opposition to the first bill which was introduced. Furthermore, the editor of The West Point Progress stated:

The bill will be reintroduced at the next session, and as it provides that the land be sold in large or small tracts at its appraised valuation, we hope for its defeat, for the reason that if it carries, the land sharks will gobble it up, and the little fishes will be left with not as much as a smell.²⁴

²²The West Point Progress, April 21, 1881, p. 3. Hereafter referred to as The Progress.

²³Ibid. ²⁴Ibid.

In 1882 another bill was introduced which provided for the sale of land to actual settlers only. After debating the matter through the summer, Congress passed the bill on August 7, 1882.²⁵ The bill authorized the Secretary of the Interior to sell, with the consent of the Omaha Indians, 50,000 acres of their reservation. The land was to be appraised and surveyed after which it might be sold to the highest bidder. The sale of any tract was not to exceed one-hundred and sixty acres²⁶ to any one individual who intended to occupy the land. Payment could be made at once or in three equal installments--one-third at the time of purchase, one-third two years later, and one-third at the end of three years. Interest was to be paid at the rate of five per cent.²⁷

The Indians were to receive the proceeds on an annual basis. But they usually did not keep it long for most of the money was spent in the new towns and villages springing up along the borders of the reservation.

²⁵The Daily Nebraska State Journal, August 8, 1882, p. 1; U.S., Congressional Record, 47th Cong., 1st Sess., 1882, XIII, 6998.

²⁶Any person bidding for a quarter section containing a "fractional excess over 160 acres," provided the excess would be less than 40 acres, could purchase this excess for the appraised value "and in no case for less than \$2.50 per acre." The Republican, March 9, 1882, p. 2.

²⁷U.S., Statutes at Large, XXII, 341-3.

CHAPTER II

THE FOUNDING OF BANCROFT

While farmers were establishing the firm foundations of the farming community in Bancroft Township, there at the same time appeared the beginnings of the town of Bancroft. Among the town fathers was Ford B. Barber who became a resident of Omaha in 1867. A few years later he moved to the pioneer village of Lyons, Nebraska, where he maintained a store until 1872. Two years later Barber and his young family moved to Cuming County. He leased a quarter section of land in what was to become the village of Bancroft.¹ During the winter of 1873-74 Barber made his residence more permanent by moving from Burt County the first frame building into Bancroft Township.² During the next few years he expanded until he owned two-hundred and eighty acres.³ When it became evident that the railroad was coming through in 1880, the elements of a town began to form. The Omaha Indians called this pioneer

¹Obituary, Ford Barber, The Blade, November 1, 1928, p. 1. Hereafter referred to as Obituary, Barber, November 1, 1928.

²Scoville, p. 637.

³Obituary, Barber, November 1, 1928.

hamlet Unashta Zinga which means "Little Stopping Place."⁴ At first the inhabitants called the settlement Barberville in honor of its first resident.⁵ This was soon changed, however, to Bancroft in honor of George Bancroft, the most noted historian of the day.⁶

When the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Omaha Railway reached Bancroft in 1880, Barber deeded seventy acres for the townsite.⁷ In the same year on October 20, the village of Bancroft was platted by the railroad.⁸ By 1883 the village promised to be a thriving trade city as the opening of the Indian reservation brought thousands of land seekers to the community.⁹ Nothing could be done, however, until the Omahas would agree to sell that portion of their reservation which the bill of August 7, 1882, permitted.

In May of 1883 the Omaha Indians held a tribal council to determine whether they would sell. The head men of the

⁴J. F. Link, Origin of the Place Names of Nebraska (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1933), p. 129.

⁵Interview with Mrs. Martin Vogt, August 6, 1966.

⁶Lilian Fitzpatrick, Nebraska Place Names (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1925), p. 45.

⁷The Blade, April 26, 1934, p. 1. Note: The Chicago and Northwestern controlled the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Omaha as a trunk line. The Progress, September 11, 1879, p. 2.

⁸The Blade, April 26, 1934, p. 1.

⁹The Progress, May 31, 1883, p. 2.

tribe gathered around the council hall along with several hundred followers. The chiefs sat in front of Agent Major G. W. Wilkinson and his assistants among whom was the famous Indian maiden, Bright Eyes, daughter of Iron Eyes, the last head chief of the Omahas.¹⁰ The chiefs rose individually and made somewhat cautious speeches in giving their consent to sign. While this was in progress, two huge oxen were slaughtered beginning a two hour feast. This, however, did not have the expected good results as the Indians seemed sullen. Finally, the head men adjourned to meet in a dark ravine on Blackbird Hill. Early the next morning they had reached a decision. Soon thereafter, a messenger was sent to the Winnebago agency to deliver the news that the head men together with the leading men of the tribe had decided to sell. As soon as the agent arrived, there began another round of speech-making as each chief gave his consent to sell part of the reservation.¹¹

The result of this council certainly did not heed immigration to Bancroft as The West Point Progress stated, "Bancroft is filling up with strangers ready to pounce on the Reservation when it comes into market. The disappointed ones will run away up into the thousands."¹² Some acted to insure they would not be disappointed as there were several attempts to "jump the gun" and move in before the

¹⁰Ibid., May 10, 1883, p. 3. ¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., May 31, 1883, p. 2.

sale date was reached.¹³ By September of 1883 the survey and appraisal was completed;¹⁴ and on April 20, twelve o'clock noon, the Omaha Indian lands went on sale.¹⁵

Bancroft was in a boom period as both hotels built additions to accomodate the land seekers. The village was crowded with them for they hoped to acquire a good farm.¹⁶ The small hamlet was rapidly growing. If land was not available on the reservation, one could buy from what the local papers called private parties.¹⁷ Government land being already taken, there remained available in the Cuming County area some 180,000 acres valued at \$5 and \$10 each.¹⁸ On this soil one could raise many varieties of crops. The West Point market report, as corrected by one Otto Bauman, cited the following crops and prices:

Corn	\$.17	/ bushel
Rye	.47	"
Barley	.55	"
Oats	.20	"
Cattle	2.03	/ hundred weight
Chickens	.06	/ pound
Lard	.07	"
Butter	.15-.17	"
Eggs	.20	/ dozen
Hogs	3.50-3.75	/ hundred weight ¹⁹

¹³Ibid., August 23, 1883, p. 2.

¹⁴Ibid., September 6, 1883, p. 1.

¹⁵The Republican, May 1, 1884, p. 5.

¹⁶The Progress, April 17, 1884, p. 3.

¹⁷Ibid., September 30, 1880, p. 2. ¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., January 8, 1880, p. 2.

Ford Barber was aware of the potential of the pioneer community; for, as soon as the railroad arrived, Barber was a partner with the company in selling town lots.²⁰ By 1884 the majority of the inhabitants wanted incorporation, and it was granted on April 14 of that year by the Cuming County Commissioners.²¹ F. B. Barber, Warren Fales, James McKeegan, J. E. L. Carey, and C. A. Ramson were appointed as the first trustees until an election could be held.²²

The village boasted several business establishments by 1884. The first general store was opened by George Nowlin in 1880. Also in that year Peavy and Company began to handle grain, and Ransom Brothers started a lumber yard which was the first business house in Bancroft.²³ The fall of 1880 saw the establishment of a post office in the village with G. H. Ransom as postmaster.²⁴ In the following year postal connections with West Point were begun via an overland route. A gentleman by the name of Moenke was appointed to handle this route, but illness prevented him from continuing. But the mail route was not to be discontinued as Moenke's wife, Minnie, soon took over. As The Blade commented, "Twice a week she made the trip, no roads, no bridges, sometimes in storms,

²⁰Obituary, Barber, November 1, 1928, p. 1.

²¹Commissioners Proceedings, The Progress, April 14, 1884, p. 2.

²²Ibid. ²³Scoville, pp. 197-200. ²⁴Ibid.

sometimes in bitter cold which made no small undertaking."²⁵ The trip, which was never a short or an easy one, would begin at 7 a.m.; and many times it would be nightfall before the journey would end.²⁶

But postal connections were not the only progress. The year 1882 saw the addition of a physician, Dr. C. Cadwallader. Also J. H. Doshe erected the first hotel named "The Bancroft." Finally, in 1882 the Everett Brothers started the first farm implement firm. The next year marked the establishment of a hardware firm owned by James McDermont.²⁷ The competition was keen between the local communities as evidenced by the following advertisement McDermont placed in The West Point Progress: "I respectfully call attention to the fact, that in the town of Bancroft, Cuming County, all kinds of hardware can be bought cheaper than in any other place in this section, West Point not excepted."²⁸

Soon a drug store, meat market, millinery store, and harness-maker arrived. Finally, 1883 saw the first term of school in a building moved from the country to the village.²⁹ The year 1884 rounded out the picture

²⁵The Blade, April 12, 1934, p. 1. ²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Scoville, pp. 197-200.

²⁸The Progress, May 3, 1883, p. 2.

²⁹Scoville, pp. 197-200.

with the addition of the Bancroft Journal, a six-column folio paper started July 4 by W. H. Price who also conducted a paper at Lyons.³⁰ The Bancroft Bank made its appearance in that same year when J. E. Turner arrived and began his operation by renting a corner in a frame building and by buying a desk and chair.³¹ Seven years later the village's second bank was established when Citizens Bank began business in a small frame building. A brick vault was constructed on the back wall to provide a measure of security for the bank's early customers.³²

The first religious organization in the community was the Zion Lutheran Church which was founded in 1874 west of the future village by a group of German homesteaders.³³ The Baptists were organized in 1877 three miles east of town with nine charter members.³⁴ In 1883 Holy Cross Roman Catholic Church was formed having a congregation of twenty-five families.³⁵ The Presbyterians organized in the spring of 1886 completing the religious make-up during the pioneer years of the community.³⁶ These early churches provided much needed spiritual guidance

³⁰Ibid. ³¹The Blade, April 26, 1934, p. 1.

³²E. T. Rice, "How One Nebraska Bank Was Organized," Northwestern Banker, November, 1947, p. 38.

³³Ibid. ³⁴Scoville, pp. 197-200.

³⁵Ibid. ³⁶Ibid.

as the years of the 1880's and 1890's were not always prosperous ones.

E. T. Rice, an early resident, pointed out one year the price of corn, the cash crop, dropped to 12¢ per bushel. As a result farmers, and especially renters, were hard hit.³⁷ During one winter there were continual rains. Rice commented further, "Reservation farmers who had no cribs had to pile their corn on the ground where much of it spoiled. They were lucky to find a cattle feeder who would pay them 5¢ per bushel" for the spoiled grain.³⁸ As early as 1884 the settlers on the reservation land purchased from the Omahas were beginning to feel hard-pressed. Several of the farmers met to petition the government to extend the time for payment of the land.³⁹ Many farmers were unable to meet the demands of the original agreement where payments were to be made in three equal installments.⁴⁰ To remedy this situation, Congress in 1886⁴¹ and 1888⁴² had

³⁷E. T. Rice, "Reminiscing," The Blade, June 23, 1949, p. 4.

³⁸Ibid. ³⁹The Progress, October 2, 1884, p. 3.

⁴⁰L. Harrison, Acting Com. to C. F. Manderson, U.S. Senate, February 2, 1883, as printed in The Republican, February 21, 1884, p. 4.

⁴¹U.S., Congress, Senate, Letter from the Secretary of the Interior, in Response to the Senate Resolution of January 21, 1888, for Information Relative to Sale of Lands In the Omaha Reservation, 50th Cong., 1st Sess., 1888, Senate Executive Documents, No. 77, Vol. 7.

⁴²U.S., Congress, House, Report to Accompany H.R. 4988, A Bill for Extension of Time for Payment of Omaha

extended the time of payment to allow the settler an opportunity to produce the cash. It was pointed out after acquiring the land that it was two years before the settlers could realize income from their farms. Furthermore, low prices during the 1880's gave Congress an additional reason for extension.⁴³ In 1890 the question came up again,⁴⁴ but it was vetoed by President Harrison because of a tax technicality.⁴⁵ This was corrected and the extension was granted.⁴⁶ Finally, because of difficult times during the 'nineties, Congress granted a fourth extension making the first payment due December 1, 1897.⁴⁷

Hard-pressed farmers releasing their tensions often caused a mild uproar. The saloons were popular despite

Indian Reservation Lands, 50th Cong., 1st Sess., 1888, H.R., No. 564, Vol. 2.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴U.S., Congress, Senate, Report from the Committee of Indian Affairs Recommending Extension of Time of Payment on the Omaha Indian Reservation Lands, 51st Cong., 1st Sess., 1890, No. 1357, Vol. 8.

⁴⁵U.S., Congress, House, President Harrison's Veto Message of the Bill Authorizing Extension of Payment of Principle on the Omaha Indian Reservation Lands, 51st Cong., 1st Sess., 1890, Journal of the House of Repr., July 10, p. 847.

⁴⁶U.S., Congress, House, Report from Committee of Indian Affairs Recommending Passage of a Bill Extending Time for Payment of Omaha Indian Reservation Lands with President's Recommendations, 51st Cong., 1st Sess., 1890, No. 2684, Vol. 8.

⁴⁷U.S., Statutes at Large, XXVIII, 276-277.

hard times. An article in an 1883 issue of The West Point Progress stated that people in Bancroft called West Point a "rum hole." The editor replied, "Here in West Point it is the general impression that Bancroft is too moral a town to be located any other place than this side of Kingdom come. Which Kingdom, the Lord's or lucifer's is an open question."⁴⁸

Indeed, it was an open question. Although not mentioned in many county histories and business directories, Bancroft had a thriving saloon trade. This trade was perhaps the most prosperous in the village.⁴⁹ The saloon carried a liberal line of spirituous liquors. This attracted a wide range of customers including an occasional professional gambler. On some occasions rough characters would emerge from the saloons looking for trouble. One became very loud when under the influence of liquor. It would not take long for him to be arrested; and as an observer said, "He would then stand at the barred window and shout and curse with a voice that would match a Missouri hog-calling contest. He could be heard all over town."⁵⁰ Another fine fellow of the same caliber would not need many drinks to con-

⁴⁸The Progress, July 19, 1883, p. 3.

⁴⁹E. T. Rice, "Reminiscing," The Blade, June 23, 1949, p. 4.

⁵⁰Ibid.

vince himself that he was the toughest man in town. It would not be long before this "gent" would find a challenger and dare him into a contest. It was observed, "At one of these events the two belligerents battled away furiously with their fists for a while, then clinched. Soon one called out 'take him off! He is chewing my finger!'"⁵¹

The rough nature of these earlier days was increased when the reservation lands became the summer pastures for great herds of cattle.⁵² For many years before and during the turn of the century, great herds of cattle roamed over the wide acres of Indian land to the north of the village. Some of these were driven from the Nels Morris ranch near Herman, Nebraska,⁵³ to Bancroft which was the gateway to the large summer pastures on the reservation.⁵⁴ Later, a famous cowboy actor, Charles "Hoot" Gibson, rode on several of these cattle drives.⁵⁵ Gibson, it is told, received his nickname, "Hoot," during this time. The head rider, Fawney West, "was young Charley Gibson's idol

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Bob Kelly, "Now and Then," The Bancroft News, November 11, 1955, p. 3.

⁵³Interview with Will T. Minier, April 20, 1967.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Interview with Edward Hansen, long-time resident, August 6, 1966.

of a cowboy. Instead of the usual call, Fawney would shout at the cattle, 'Hoot, Hoot.' Charley took up his call and his friends nicknamed him 'Hoot.'⁵⁶

One of the most exciting events happening in Bancroft during the 1880's was the escaped elephant loose from a traveling circus then in Sioux City. Nothing had been heard of the animal for several days after the news reached Bancroft. Then, as one old-timer put it, men going to work one morning were astonished to see an "elephant pulling hay from the loft door of J. E. L. Carey's Livery Stable."⁵⁷ The news spread like wildfire through the town. Women and children were warned to keep in their homes. Men went for their rifles, and general chaos existed everywhere. The first thought was to kill the animal, but who had had experience hunting elephants? Most realized a wounded elephant would probably destroy the town. About this time a young stable boy called "Clum" offered a suggestion. This was a surprise as Clum was not exactly one of the leading citizens, and he was laughed off. Eventually, Clum simply walked up to the animal, talked to him, and finally let him sniff some water. He then led the animal to a corral where the beast had his fill of water and feed. When the owners

⁵⁶Kelly, "Now and Then," The Bancroft News, November 11, 1955, p. 1.

⁵⁷Ibid., July 1, 1955, p. 3.

came to claim the animal, they not only rewarded Clum but immediately hired him.⁵⁸

As the turn of the century was left behind, so was nickel beer, five cent corn, cowboys wandering through the streets, Indians camped near town, and large herds of cattle strung out over the prairie in drives to reservation pastures.⁵⁹ The village, indeed the nation, was hardly ever to see again,

The itinerant showmen walking from town to town with their performing bears, attracting a crowd with their chant of "Sometime I rattle the bear and sometime the bear rattle me." The wandering singers with hand organ and performing monkeys. The strong man lifting a barrel filled with water with his teeth. Foot races on main street. Running the harness races at the race track whenever two men met and both thought they had a good horse. The quack medicine vendors and their shows. The Elixir recommended to cure every ailment known to man . . . Gone with the wind.⁶⁰

⁵⁸Ibid. ⁵⁹Ibid., July 8, 1955, p. 3. ⁶⁰Ibid.

CHAPTER III

A THRIVING TRADE CENTER

Industry was not out of place in early Bancroft. At one time the village boasted of a steel plow manufacturing plant, a brick yard, flour mill, creamery, cheese factory, and wagon and tank manufacturing shops.¹ The plow factory, managed by Nels Helm in the 1890's, was truly fitted for the Nebraska prairie. Its interchangeable "shears" made it either a breaking or stirring plow.² The village was also something of a railroad center. There were four passenger trains and several freight trains each day stopping at the village. A large three stall engine house, shops, and a coal loading shop which elevated coal to bunkers for engine loading were in full operation. The operation and maintenance of this equipment was kept in good order by two section crews.³

In 1896 The Bancroft Blade attempted to sell the community on erecting a \$30,000 beet sugar factory. As the editor put it, "Bancroft is destined to become the

¹Bob Kelly, "Reminiscing," The Blade, June 23, 1949, p. 5.

²Kelly, "Now and Then," The Bancroft News, August 12, 1955, p. 4; The Blade, April 24, 1896, p. 8.

³Kelly, "Now and Then," The Bancroft News, July 8, 1955, p. 3; Interview with Edward Hansen, August 6, 1966.

most prominent city between Omaha and Sioux City." He went on to argue that "to those farmers struggling under mortgages, trying to pay them with 10 cent oats and 15 cent corn, this would be a great boom."⁴ Bancroft never did have her beet sugar factory, however, as this section of Nebraska never possessed favorable climatic conditions for growing sugar beets.⁵

Although Bancroft never achieved the boom she was hoping for in industry, there was considerable investment done in land around the village. Perhaps the most famous investor was long-time Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Joseph G. Cannon of Illinois. Cannon purchased several hundred acres of land north of town in 1901 and 1902.⁶ When the local citizenry went out to meet the gentleman as he arrived on the train for an inspection of his land, they completely missed him. Expecting Washington fashion, they did not recognize the gentleman coming off the train dressed in a hickory shirt, corduroy suit, knee boots, and a large hat. After his death his widow sold the land at a reasonable profit.⁷

⁴The Blade, April 24, 1896, p. 8.

⁵Henry T. Johnson, "History of the Beet Sugar Industry in Nebraska," (unpublished Master's Thesis, the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 1934), p. 5.

⁶Kelly, "Now and Then," The Bancroft News, October 14, 1955, p. 2; Numerical Index, Cuming County, Nebraska, A history of every transaction (recorded by the Clerk) in each section of Bancroft Township, 1901-1908.

⁷Ibid.

To work the land usually took more hands than the owner possessed. The Blade in 1902 gave some indication of the going rate of pay for the hired men as it remarked, "When in the history of this country was labor as well paid as now? From \$1.50 to \$1.75 is the regular price in this locality for daily labor. That surely means prosperity for the laborers."⁸ The highest paid employees during the early history of the village were the horse-shoers. Several, such as Francis Cabney, G. Meyers, and Herman Risse were employed at the local blacksmith shops.⁹ There were those who received little or no hard cash for doing perhaps the hardest work of all. The wife of the household did an immense amount of work compared with the modern housewife. For example, washing clothes was no simple task. A boiler was placed on the stove, and all white clothes were boiled. Next, the hot water was placed in a tub where the clothes were rubbed by hand over a scrub board and then run through a wringer also turned by hand. Of course, collars, cuffs, and other separate pieces were done first; then they went through the rest of the process of boiling and hand rubbing on a board. Another very difficult task was cooking for threshing crews sometimes as large as eighteen

⁸The Blade, April 11, 1902, p. 3.

⁹Kelly, "Now and Then," The Bancroft News, July 29, 1955, p. 4.

men. The turn-of-the-century housewife usually accepted her role, however, with the philosophy, "You really didn't think about it; it had to be done."¹⁰

The Bancroft Enterprise in 1895 gave an idea of the architecture of homes then being built as well as the prices. The price of the home illustrated below was \$1,527.53 with dimensions of 21½ by 24½ by 19 feet.¹¹



Fig. 1. Cooperatives Bldg. Plan
Architect N.Y. Exterior view

Home building was not the only activity as the village grew. Occasionally, The Bancroft Blade would give indication of a building boom. One such editorial was quite convincing. But after reading further, it was found the "boom" consisted of one Mr. Brooks building a

¹⁰Interview with Mrs. Frank Tighe, August 1, 1966.

¹¹The Bancroft Enterprise, June 14, 1895, p. 2.

hog pen sixteen foot square.¹² Aside from erecting hog pens, the village did progress with "modern" lighting with the construction of a gas manufacturing plant.¹³ The plant was built by Charley Winters. His operation provided lighting for several homes and many business places.¹⁴ Bancroft's earlier business establishments were lighted with glass lamps. As one of the oldtimers explained, they were "fastened along the wall or shelving. The reflector shade could be swiveled to any angle." In addition, there were large brass bowled lamps with large circular wicks. These like the glass lamps burned kerosene.¹⁵

The village also attempted to modernize sidewalks. The early 1890's saw the beginning of concrete walks.¹⁶ Main Street's first sidewalks were built of three twelve-inch planks. Cleated underneath, they were strung out end to end and included a walk to each business establishment's front door.¹⁷ Although wood walks gave way to the concrete sidewalk, as late as 1904 the editor of The Blade noted the village could use more cement walks.¹⁸

¹²The Blade, January 29, 1897, p. 5.

¹³Ibid., October 23, 1903, p. 1.

¹⁴Kelly, "Now and Then," The Bancroft News, October 7, 1955, p. 2.

¹⁵Ibid. ¹⁶Ibid., October 14, 1955, p. 2.

¹⁷Ibid. ¹⁸The Blade, October 14, 1904, p. 2.

Bancroft by 1910 boasted over thirty business houses including a newly formed Bancroft Telephone Company. These varied all the way from the Bancroft Opera House to four saloons to O. D. Bassinger's "The Cheap Store."¹⁹ The many items in these early establishments would not have great demand in a modern supermarket. Bob Kelly, a store operator during the early part of the twentieth century, recalls several now out-of-date items:

Felt boots, pommel slickers, half sleeves, bales of cotton batten, high buttoned shoes, copper toed boots, long red woolen underwear, cotton mosquito net, carpet slippers, wrislets, derby hats, fur caps, coon skin coats, sun bonnets, fans, bustles, and hoop skirts. Green coffee, scouring bricks, hoops of cheese, keg herring, soda crackers in bulk, tea in bulk, kerosene pumped from a barrel, wooden wash tubs, willow clothes baskets, lamp wicks and burners, mule matches . . . ²⁰

To protect the business establishments was no small task. In 1896 the Fred Singpiel Hardware Store was burglarized; the thieves were later captured near Sioux City, Iowa. All this pointed to a need for a night watch or a marshal.²¹ Perhaps additional reasons for more police protection were cited in various issues of The Blade. In 1896 the paper reported, "There is altogether too much

¹⁹Ibid., March 25 through December 30, 1910, May 17, 1907, p. 8.

²⁰Kelly, "Now and Then," The Bancroft News, July 29, 1955, p. 4.

²¹The Blade, May 8, 1896, p. 1.

rowdyism going on around Bancroft's saloons and the proprietors are getting a little tired of it."²² The following year The Blade noted, "The gang of toughs that are in the habit of running their horses up and down main street, yelling like a lot of Commanche Indians should be taught that they are in the midst of civilization."²³

Civilization can be a relative term as the village had no small amount of trouble from the local Indians and various whites. One Indian family named Prairie Chicken did its usual trading at Joe Schwedhelm's store. His wife doing the shopping, Prairie Chicken sat in front of the store asleep. Soon a pair of jokers snapped off the Indian's long braids. When Mrs. Prairie Chicken saw what was happening, she drew a hand ax and "went on the warpath" charging anyone standing nearby. As she hacked away, "she chopped out a piece of the pressed brick in front of the Citizens' Bank, thus leaving her mark for all time."²⁴ In addition to these disturbances, the village post office experienced two break-ins within one year. During the latter burglary, the robbers blew the safe open with explosives so powerful the force smashed a writing desk fifteen feet away.²⁵

²²Ibid., May 22, 1896, p. 5.

²³Ibid., August 27, 1897, p. 1.

²⁴Kelly, "Now and Then," The Bancroft News, July 8, 1955, p. 3; Interview with Alvin Browning, August 8, 1966.

²⁵The Blade, May 11, 1900, p. 5.

One of the most exciting events during the turn of the century was the capture and shooting of a suspected murderer near the village. One Sunday morning someone from Bancroft telephoned Desk Sargeant Havey of the Omaha police, and the following conversation ensued:

"What's his name?"

"Don't know. All I want is his description."

"Guess it must be Peter Olsen," said Havey, and then he read to the Bancroft citizen a description of the murderer of Mary Peterson.

Ten minutes went by; then the phone rang again.

"Hello Omaha; this is Bancroft. Just wanted to tell you that we killed that man."

"Good heavens; are you sure he is the right man."

"Don't know, but he fitted the description."

The gentleman from Bancroft then hung up "evidently not caring to speculate over a matter so unimportant as the dead man's identity."²⁶

The Blade reported Olsen was caught three miles from the village by a posse. When Olsen refused to halt and started to draw his revolver, shots rang out and Olsen was killed. The suspect was later identified.²⁷

While the village was having difficulty in law enforcement, there were fewer problems in arriving at a political philosophy. Bancroft and most of northeast Nebraska was

²⁶Omaha Daily News, as printed in The Blade, September 26, 1902, p. 1.

²⁷The Blade, September 26, 1902, p. 1.

Republican in political outlook.²⁸ Besides being a Republican, one additional important qualification for a potential candidate was the ability to speak German. In a local election in 1895, the candidates for county judge and treasurer advertised this linguistic ability, thus indicating the large German element in Cuming County and Bancroft.²⁹ As to the election, although Cuming County went Democrat in the local election of 1895, Bancroft Township voted almost solidly Republican.³⁰ In that same year The Blade sided with the Democratic administration in Washington in an editorial supporting Cleveland's stand on the Venezuelan boundary dispute.³¹ But foreign affairs did not hold the attraction of the election of 1896 when, much to the paper's displeasure, Bancroft's precinct by a majority of 16 votes went Democratic.³² William Jennings Bryan, being a favorite son, no doubt accounted for this. However, the editor of The Blade noted Nebraska should stop raising politicians and raise more corn.³³

²⁸The Enterprise, November 8, 1895, p. 1. See also James Olson, History of Nebraska, pp. 242-249.

²⁹The Blade, November 1, 1895, p. 3.

³⁰Ibid., November 8, 1895, p. 3.

³¹Ibid., December 20, 1895, p. 4.

³²Ibid., November 6, 1896, p. 4.

³³Ibid., November 24, 1899, p. 2.

Politics could not prevent the hard times of 1897. In that year the short depression was felt in the community. Very little coal was used, and most of the homes and several business establishments used corn as it was much cheaper.³⁴ The railroad companies were suffering as much as anyone else. The Blade reported, "For every ton of corn burned in Nebraska the railroad companies lose between \$7 and \$8 in the way of freight."³⁵

Soon the hard times lost out to important issues of the day. The Cuban issue reached the small villages of Nebraska just as it did the rest of the country. In 1896 The Bancroft Blade was quite opinionated regarding Cuba. No doubt in reference to the "yellow press," the editor wrote,

Every now and then some fool editor with a brain like a question mark, wants the United States to whip some nation. This country would do well to pay its present war debt before contracting another. If a law were passed drafting editors into the ranks first in case of war, we would hear more sense and less bragado from these boasters.³⁶

The sinking of the Maine two years later changed the attitude of the paper and the community. Yet no direct clamor for war came until after we were involved in the

³⁴Ibid., January 15, 1897, p. 7.

³⁵Ibid., January 29, 1897, p. 4.

³⁶Ibid., May 22, 1896, p. 4.

conflict.³⁷ Many citizens of the community contributed to the local Cuban relief committee, for nearly twenty-five dollars in cash and much flour was raised in this effort.³⁸ Although Bancroft's contribution to the Spanish-American War was not a determining factor, several individuals saw action, especially in the Philippines.³⁹

The social life during the 1890's and early twentieth century was at times quite active. In 1892 Bancroft had a big Fourth of July celebration including an interesting parade. Taking part was the brass band followed by the city officials in carriages, civic societies, trade displays, etc. After the parade the program included music, speaking, and the reading of the Declaration of Independence.⁴⁰ In the afternoon the excitement was continued by several races at the driving park. There was a purse of \$100 for the free-for-all running race, and \$30 for the pony race. This was in addition to the purses given for the foot race, egg race, wheel barrow race, greased pig event, and baseball games. The day was climaxed by a "grand" dance in the evening.⁴¹

³⁷Ibid., February 24, 1898, p. 1; April 1, 1898, p. 4.

³⁸Ibid., April 1, 1898, p. 5.

³⁹Ibid., May 27, 1898, p. 5; Kelly, "Now and Then," The Bancroft News, July 22, 1955, p. 3.

⁴⁰The Bancroft Independent, June 17, 1892, p. 8.

⁴¹Ibid.

Through the 'nineties and on into the turn of the century, the village organized various recreational clubs and civic events. The lawn tennis club,⁴² Indian powwows,⁴³ dramatic clubs,⁴⁴ Chautauqua groups,⁴⁵ and the opera house⁴⁶ provided no small amount of entertainment. Probably one of the greatest moments of entertainment came from the search for the large snake which escaped from a wagon show but was located on the school grounds and killed. It was over sixteen feet long and measured six inches in circumference.⁴⁷

More important to the life of the German Lutheran element of the village was the establishment of a Lutheran church. Zion Lutheran was located several miles from town making it difficult to attend services. Finally, in 1905 St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, was organized in the Methodist Church building. The Methodists later merged with the Presbyterians as their number declined. The Lutherans, however, continued to grow and in 1910 were able to secure the services of Walter E. Homann who

⁴²The Bancroft Enterprise, June 14, 1895, p. 1.

⁴³The Blade, July 21, 1899, p. 4.

⁴⁴Ibid., December 27, 1907, p. 1.

⁴⁵Ibid., June 28, 1912, p. 5.

⁴⁶Ibid., November 17, 1911, Supplement to The Blade.

⁴⁷Ibid., October 10, 1902, p. 3.

was to serve the Bancroft community for over fifty years. His salary was set at twenty-five dollars a month plus an allowance of twelve dollars a month for room and board. The year 1910 also saw the completion of the Lutherans' first church at a cost of twenty-one hundred dollars for a twenty-six by forty-eight foot building.⁴⁷

Church construction was not the only activity, however. An amusing comment was made by the paper on a new dance then becoming popular. Both contestants closed their eyes and fell into each others arms, and then wrapping arms around each other,

The male animal assumes a position that makes him resemble a bear with a bad case of indigestion and the female gets in shape to be carried down the fire escape with the least possible resistance. Then both wiggle their hips and act just like people who have put on roller skates for the first time. With eyes still closed and fondly breathing various kinds of disease germs into each other, they launch out on the floor and wiggle through the bout. If the position becomes popular, a leg hold may be added this fall.⁴⁸

The village social life seemed apart from the reality of every-day life. There was little mention of the Indian and his problems at any Chautauqua or movie house.

⁴⁷"St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church Fiftieth Anniversary, 1905-1955," pamphlet, pp. 3-5.

⁴⁸The Blade, August 9, 1907, p. 8.

CHAPTER IV

LIFE IN A RESERVATION TOWN

The reservation Indian had few opportunities to live the life his white neighbors knew. Most Red Men no longer were allowed to roam as their ancestors did; they simply lived on government annuity payments. Each government payday brought large numbers of Omaha and Winnebago Indians to Bancroft.¹ Many, if not most, were honest and paid their debts. One Indian, having an unpaid account of \$1500, paid his bill in full.² On the other hand, most merchants realized the average Indian was a poor risk. Therefore, when the Indians received their government money, many local businessmen would hurry to the agency to see what they could get on Indian accounts.³ The businessmen were not greedy; they realized the "bootlegger" would soon take any cash the Indians had. Although not all Indians drank, a good many did. All this amounted to prosperity for the "bootlegger."

When the Indians came to town, their first stop was usually the livery barn. They did this not only to feed

¹Rice, "Reminiscing," The Blade, June 23, 1949, p. 4.

²Interview with Clement Ward, August 1, 1966.

³The Blade, May 25, 1900, p. 5.

and water their horses, but the "hangers-on" would be waiting there to sell them firewater. The price was usually not high at the outset; but as the demand increased, so did the cost.⁴ The firewater furnished by the "bootleggers" was so powerful the consumer would soon pass out if he drank too much.⁵ Occasionally, when the Indian's source of alcohol was exhausted, he would turn to lemon extract which was eighty per cent alcohol. As one old-time merchant put it, the Indian would enter the store and grunt "lemon extract." The businessmen had a standing rule that they would sell only one small bottle at a time. But the Indian would simply make the rounds and get a large enough supply to do the job.⁶

It was difficult to understand the motives for getting liquor, especially extract. Usually after drinking the latter, the Indian would get so sick he would roll in pain.⁷ More often he would pass out. One brave, left in his tent drunk, provides a sad illustration. The intoxicated Indian "flopped about" until his foot rolled on hot coals in a fire. Then as one old-timer recalled, "His stupor was so complete that he let it cook until

⁴Interview with Clement Ward, August 1, 1966.

⁵Rice, "Reminiscing," The Blade, June 23, 1949, p. 4.

⁶Interview with Clement Ward, August 1, 1966.

⁷Ibid.

someone came to the tent and rolled him over. An amputation was the result."⁸

Passed-out Indians in their tents did not particularly bother any of the white community. But when the Indian picked the street on which to pass out, it became a different question. It was not good for the town or business with too many drunk Indians lying around. To meet this problem the village organized a "dray patrol." They patrolled the street with a wagon designed with the front wheels underneath enabling a sharp turn. When a passed-out brave or squaw was located, the wagon would pull along side and a long plank would be laid against the edge of the wagon. The next step was to roll the drunk onto the lower end of the plank. Finally, a few men would lift the plank letting the poor fellow on the end slide into the wagon. The drunk would then be deposited in the local jail.⁹

Perhaps for the above reasons the government called off a large payment for the Omaha Indians in 1905.¹⁰ The Blade commented, "The 'bootleggers' and dealers would have it all in thirty days."¹¹ Lax enforcement of the "bootlegging" laws contributed in no small way to the sit-

⁸Rice, "Reminiscing," The Blade, June 23, 1949, p. 4.

⁹Interview with Clement Ward, August 1, 1966.

¹⁰The Blade, June 23, 1905, p. 3. ¹¹Ibid.

uation. In one community The Blade reported that men convicted of breaking "bootlegging" laws were sent to the county seat for punishment. While there they were treated royally, living at county expense. They took their meals at the best hotels; and labor consisted of playing hard at chess, checkers, and cards.¹²

While this was certainly not typical, events such as these angered the local citizenry. In 1897 "bootleggers" were not by any means popular. The Blade reported that "there are several 'bootleggers' in this town and surrounding country that have survived their usefulness and it would be doing a good turn for someone to wipe them from the face of the earth."¹³ This proved difficult; for although United States marshals frequently visited Bancroft,¹⁴ they rarely were able to find culprits; and then it was difficult to obtain a conviction.¹⁵ Occasionally, someone was given accommodations at the "Hotel de Cooler" and was brought to trial.¹⁶

A great many individuals were financially involved in each transaction involving the sale of whiskey, legal

¹²Ibid., January 18, 1907, p. 3.

¹³Ibid., February 26, 1897, p. 5.

¹⁴Ibid., May 14, 1897, p. 1.

¹⁵Ibid., January 15, 1897, p. 7; June 2, 1899, p. 5.

¹⁶Ibid., August 9, 1901, p. 3; September 20, 1901, p. 3.

or illegal. Out of each bushel of corn the distiller produced four gallons of whiskey. Four gallons usually retailed for sixteen dollars. Of this the government received four dollars; the farmer who raised the corn, fifty cents; the railroad, fifty cents; the manufacturer, four dollars; the retailer, seven dollars; the consumer got drunk.¹⁷

The village did not witness drunkenness by Indian or white without desiring to put an end to it. There was a demand for another marshal who would lock up all drunken Indians, and in some people's eyes that would solve the problem.¹⁸ There were undercurrents of something more basic, however. This was the rise of the temperance movement in the 1890's. At first there was no demand for absolute prohibition. Indeed, as late as 1908 the Temperance Union stated it did not wish to abolish saloons. Their objective was to see the law enforced on such matters as Indians and minors.¹⁹ It should be pointed out, moreover, saloons paid no small amount in village taxes.²⁰

¹⁷Ibid., April 11, 1902, p. 3.

¹⁸Ibid., June 23, 1905, p. 3.

¹⁹Ibid., May 3, 1908, p. 3.

²⁰Ibid., May 8, 1896, p. 1.

As early as the spring of 1897, the forces of prohibition began to move toward their objectives.²¹ In that year the village nearly went dry as the vote was 62 against and 60 for prohibition.²² Three years later the Anti-Saloon League was founded giving new emphasis to the fight against "demon rum." This organization pointed out its objective was not to fight the saloons as it stated, "a law-abiding saloon keeper has nothing to fear."²³ But as the village moved into the twentieth century, the days of the saloons were beginning to be numbered just as they were across the nation. At first the published aims of the temperance organizations differed little from the tone of the 'nineties.²⁴ Then the picture began to change as the complaints about saloons took on more pointed attacks. An article in The Blade stated, "If drunken Indians are allowed here, and if other forms of lawbreaking are allowed, it will have the effect of putting our town in bad repute and driving business away from us."²⁵

John Barleycorn received the final nail in his coffin when the Bancroft Social Improvement League was formed in

²¹Ibid., April 9, 1897, p. 5. ²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., April 28, 1899, p. 5.

²⁴Ibid., May 8, 1903, p. 3.

²⁵Ibid., May 1, 1908, p. 3.

1913.²⁶ The following year it expanded and began a publicity campaign to make the town dry. In a letter from the League published in The Blade, the words cast a dire warning not only for Bancroft but for the entire nation. It stated,

The American people will not much longer tolerate the saloon, for nothing good has or ever will come from it. The saloon is doomed and the time is not far distant when it will be out-lawed not only in Nebraska, but soon in all of the United States.

Let us help to save the man the saloon has ruined.²⁷

The militancy now in the campaign won out. In April, 1914, Bancroft went dry by a vote of 97 to 76.²⁸ For some time each issue of The Blade carried the Social Improvement League's long and clever arguments against the saloons, but no one appeared to defend the liquor establishments as they appeared complaisant. In fact, prohibition came as quite a shock to many, leading to some dissension.²⁹ No doubt many more wondered how it could have happened.

Perhaps they could have answered by pointing to the publicity campaign of the Social Improvement League. In addition, there were excellent speakers on evils of drink.

²⁶Ibid., May 2, 1913, p. 1.

²⁷Ibid., March 27, 1914, p. 8.

²⁸Ibid., April 10, 1914, p. 1.

²⁹Ibid., June 5, 1914, p. 1.

One was Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte, one of the La Flesche sisters. The speaking ability of Dr. Picotte had few equals, especially in temperance work. John G. Neihardt, an acquaintance of Dr. Picotte and later Nebraska's state poet laureate, described her techniques. She would stop speaking suddenly at a high point and stand completely still for several moments. "She vibrated as she stood and a change came over her face. Then she would speak the final words and the effect was great indeed."³⁰

In one such speech Dr. Picotte pointed out that much of the responsibility for the degrading of the Indian lies at the door of Bancroft. She concluded by making a strong plea for the termination of saloons.³¹ Thus, Picotte and others like her contributed very much to the fall of the saloon in Bancroft. This in combination with a national trend marked the end of the saloon in Bancroft, at least temporarily.

Prohibition did not end the Red Man's plight anymore than it stopped a nation from drinking during the 'twenties. The attitude of the white community was one of indifference blended with a good part of disrespect. An illustration of this can be found in one Judge Munger's solution to the social problems of the Red Man. He stated in the

³⁰Letter from John G. Neihardt to author, June 22, 1966.

³¹The Blade, April 8, 1908, p. 8.

Omaha World Herald, "I don't know but it would be a good idea to run them [Indians] into a corral with a high and tight fence, and give them a knife, an ax and a gallon of whiskey apiece."³²

With opinions such as the above, it is not difficult to understand the continual cheating of the reservation Indians by white men who rented their land. The Indian land-leasing scandal occurred in the 1890's after a Senate investigation found a good deal of fraud concerning the leasing of 24,531 acres of land in the reservation. Most of this land was rented for eight cents to twenty cents per acre. Moreover, a good many renters never paid any money at all. One individual named Nicholas Fritz fenced some 6,000 acres of Indian land for which he paid no rent.³³ The result was the continual degradation of the Indian. Many, after leasing their lands, were idle and were only able to eke "out a miserable existence." Furthermore, those who were more advanced and attempted to make a decent living were not able to succeed as the white man's cattle roamed at will destroying crops and breaking fences.³⁴

³²Sunday World Herald as printed in The Blade, January 5, 1900, p. 5.

³³U.S., Congress, Senate, Letter From the Secretary of the Interior Transmitting in Response to a Resolution a Copy of a Communication from the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, in Regard to Leases in Severalty on the Omaha and Winnebago Reservation, 51st Cong., 2nd Sess., 1891, Executive Document 73, Vol. 1.

³⁴Ibid.

The leasing of Indian land was just one problem. There was the buying of supplies from the Indians at prices far below value. In addition, many whites loaned money at ridiculously high interest rates.³⁵ Thus, the Red Man, in turning to drink, had reason enough. It provided an escape from the harsh reality of life.

But not everyone had turned his back on the Indian. There was a young writer who increasingly began to capture the respect and the mind of the Red Man. His name was John G. Neihardt. The future poet was born on a farm in Illinois, January 8, 1881. These were humble times for the family who were descendents from Palatinate nobility. The farm was rented; his home unplastered. In 1887 the Neihardt family moved to Kansas where they resided until 1892.³⁶ While in Kansas young Neihardt exhibited a talent for inventiveness. Desiring a steamship, the lad realized he would have to make his own engine. Not having the material or money for a conventional engine, the lad conceived the idea of forcing steam against a fan. The work progressed until he saw the need for fans. They were enclosed in a funnel-shaped chamber placed in a graduated series. Thus, the steam's decreasing power operated on a leverage which was steadily increasing. The turbine

³⁵Letter, Neihardt to author, June 22, 1966.

³⁶Julius T. House, John G. Neihardt, Man and Poet (Wayne, Nebraska: F. H. Jones and Son, 1920), p. 1.

engine had been invented.³⁷ The engine, however, never was constructed for there was no money for it.³⁸

The year 1892 found the family in Wayne, Nebraska, where four years later young John completed the teacher's course at the Normal College. The following year he received the degree of Bachelor of Science.³⁹ The next summer and the succeeding years saw the young man employed as a teacher, stenographer, office boy, clerk, marble polisher, farm hand, and hod-carrier.⁴⁰ John Neihardt arrived in Bancroft in 1901, his family having moved there the previous year.⁴¹

The young poet was employed in many literary circles while in residence in the village for some twenty years. In 1901 Neihardt began working for The Bancroft Blade where he continued to work for the next few years.⁴² That same year the newspaper began to recognize the talent of its new employee.⁴³ Neihardt had been writing verse since 1893, his first major work being "The Divine Enchantment" written in 1900.⁴⁴ The first money he received for

³⁷Ibid., p. 5. ³⁸Ibid. ³⁹Ibid., p. 2. ⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.; Letter, Neihardt to author, June 22, 1966.

⁴²The Blade, June 21, 1901, p. 5; Interview with John G. Neihardt, August 8, 1966.

⁴³Interview with John G. Neihardt, August 8, 1966.

⁴⁴House, p. 2.

writing was for a poem written in that year. It was entitled "The Song of the Hoe" which fitted the work quite well. A potato patch was the poet's office; the back of a hoe was his desk.⁴⁵ These literary accomplishments did not make John Neihardt loved by all. Many hard-working, thrifty farmers were a little suspicious of the young man who rarely held a steady job. Some thought him a loafer. But the young man showed no outward side of dismay as he liked to talk to people; he was considered quite a mixer.⁴⁶

Neihardt exercised a great deal making him a fine physical specimen.⁴⁷ Perhaps this physical attraction of the poet led to the organization of the "S.O.P.H." Club in Bancroft in the spring of 1905. The club was organized by seven pretty young women. The initials stood for "still on papa's hands." The Blade reported that Mr. Neihardt suggested he would marry the girl the club voted to be his wife. Accordingly, the young ladies in secret voted. As a result of seven votes cast, each girl received one vote. Neihardt remained a bachelor, and the girls became "mortal enemies."⁴⁸

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁶Interview with Edward Hansen, August 6, 1966.

⁴⁷Ibid. ⁴⁸The Blade, May 12, 1905, p. 1.

After 1907 Neihardt appeared to devote more time to his writing. "The Lonesome Trail" appeared in 1907 followed by "A Bundle of Myrrh" the next year.⁴⁹ The next years saw one work, then another being completed. Among them were "The River and I," 1910; "The Stranger at the Gate," 1912; "The Song of Hugh Glass," 1915; "The Quest," 1916; "The Song of Three Friends," 1919; and "The Splendid Wayfaring" in 1920. These were only some of the works which increasingly became well-known.⁵⁰

While living for a twenty year period in Bancroft, John Neihardt came under the influence of the nearby Omaha Indians. He was employed by an Indian agent, and through this job the young man became acquainted with many "old timers" in the Omaha tribe.⁵¹ His interest aroused, Neihardt attended many Indian functions. One night while at a dance, eating soup and listening to the music and dancing, Chief White Horse stopped the proceeding. He then pointed "with great deliberation" at the poet, the only white man in the camp, and said, "This is a good young man. He does not laugh at us. He respects us. He has come to eat with us. He is a good young man."⁵² The respect was mutual as the Omahas called

⁴⁹House, p. 2. ⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Letter, Neihardt to author, October 31, 1966.

⁵²John G. Neihardt, "Remarks at Bancroft," Nebraska History 46 (September, 1965), p. 255.

him Tae-Nuga-Thinga (Little Bull Buffalo).⁵³ Soon Neihardt was writing of the Omahas and understanding them as no writer had before. Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte became interested in this young man. She read his work while some were still in manuscript form.⁵⁴ Her remarks gave Neihardt much encouragement. On one occasion she said, "Everything written about Indians from Cooper to Remington was offensive to me until I read Neihardt's stories."⁵⁵ In short, she was amazed that a white man could penetrate the consciousness of the Indian world.⁵⁶ The writing of the epic, "Cycle of the West," was influenced much by these early years with the Omahas. Neihardt worked hard in studying his subject--the West. The Indians were an important part of this study.⁵⁷

The poet did not limit his study to the West during the Bancroft years. He did not ignore his own environment, a small country village. In his "Poet's Town" he wrote of the Poet, his art, and his village.⁵⁸ The opening lines capture the quiet beauty of the Poet's surroundings:

'Mid glad green miles of tillage
 And fields where cattle graze,
 A prosy little village
 You drowse away the days.⁵⁹

⁵³Ibid. ⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Letter, Neihardt to author, June 22, 1966.

⁵⁶House, p. 79. ⁵⁷Ibid., p. 78. ⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 53-54.

⁵⁹John G. Neihardt, Lyric and Dramatic Poems (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1954), p. 101.

But there was more to this work than quiet beauty. There existed the struggle of a man surrounded by those who could not understand. Neihardt sensed this quiet hostility as he described the Poet in the poem as "King of a Realm of Magic." Yet, "he was the fool of the town."⁶⁰ On the other hand, there is no bitterness in "Poet's Town." Neihardt does not strike back at those who felt he was wasting his life.⁶¹ As Julius T. House wrote, the Poet "merely feels the beauty and cries unto the world: 'see! oh see!'"⁶²

Neihardt was not necessarily writing of Bancroft. As he put it, "The Poet in the 'Poet's Town' could be any poet in any time or town who, in his idealistic boyhood, is compelled to live in the necessarily materialistic world about him."⁶³ His peers did not understand; they could not see the beauty that surrounded them.⁶⁴ And so he left Bancroft in 1921 in search of a more favorable environment and better opportunities elsewhere. Nonetheless, years later this "prosy little village" would invite him to return and boast to the world that he was her son and the State poet laureate.

⁶⁰Ibid. ⁶¹House, p. 53. ⁶²Ibid., p. 56.

⁶³Interview with John G. Neihardt, August 8, 1966.

⁶⁴House, pp. 55-56.

CHAPTER V

BANCROFT IN ITS "HEY-DAY"

On May 17, 1907, the headline of The Bancroft Blade read, "Double Murder Near Bancroft. W. F. Copple and Wife Killed on Their Farm 12 Miles East of Here."¹ The Copples were a farm family who like most farmers had need of a hired man. The "man," Loris Ray Higgins, who went by the name of Fred Burke was responsible for the crime.²

The murders were committed with little or no motive. Copple had quarreled with Higgins over working on Sunday but not so much as to provoke the shooting. Higgins arose in the night and called his employer outside. Copple, rising to check the noise, was met by a blast from a shotgun as he walked out the front door. Immediately, his wife arose; and as she left the house, she saw the body of her husband. Higgins quickly fired both barrels at her point blank. He kept firing to insure her death. Next, he took a club and beat the bodies almost beyond recognition.³

¹The Blade, May 17, 1907, p. 1.

²The Lyons Mirror, May 16, 1907, p. 1.

³Ibid.; The Blade, May 17, 1907, p. 1.

The noise had awakened the seven children, but Higgins came in and calmed them. He told the children their parents were out in the hog shed watching for burglars, and he would guard the house. After the children had returned to bed, Higgins stole a mule and escaped.⁴ When the oldest girl went out the door the next morning, there was a sight beyond imagination.⁵ Hogs were loose and had eaten much of the bodies, making them unrecognizable. She went for help, and soon a posse was organized and the search began.

The community was outraged. Revenge was demanded. Many futile searches took place in order to carry out this "justice." The next few days saw over one-hundred people travel toward the Zion Lutheran Church southwest of the village. It was reported that a suspicious-looking man was seen. There proved to be a man, but the wrong one. The unlucky fellow, probably amazed at the "new law" against tramps, was carted off to jail for a short time.⁷

The search rapidly spread over northeast Nebraska. A tramp was seen leaving a barn in Wayne and boarding a train bound for Carroll. A call was quickly placed to the town marshal who stopped the man described as an itinerant peddler. After the marshal told the suspect

⁴The Blade, May 17, 1907, p. 1. ⁵Ibid.

⁶Interview with Charles Conn, August 6, 1966.

⁷The Blade, May 17, 1907, p. 1.

to stop, the peddler "suggested to the marshal that he should go where they don't travel by rail." The peddler was then convinced of his error by a round of bird shot fired into his left leg.⁸

While several innocent people were being arrested, Higgins was traveling south near Uehling, Nebraska. After abandoning the stolen mule, he walked until he reached a farm where he obtained food and rest. The next morning as he boldly walked into Hooper, he was spotted by bridge workers outside the town.⁹ They quickly notified the marshal who arrested him in a saloon. He was then placed in an automobile; and as The Lyons Mirror pointed out, sent to the Douglas County jail in Omaha for security reasons.¹⁰

The need for a safe place for Loris Higgins was not because anyone was afraid he might escape. It was to keep anyone from getting to him. Moreover, when the hearing was held at the Thurston County seat, little time was wasted. It did not take long for Higgins to admit his guilt and to waive reading of the complaint. During the hearing it was clear the suspect was scared to death.

⁸Ibid., May 23, 1907, p. 2.

⁹Interview with Charles Conn, August 6, 1966.

¹⁰The Lyons Mirror, May 16, 1907, p. 1.

Apparently, the talk of lynching had reached his ear.¹¹ The Blade throughout the summer months consistently denied any possibility of a lynching.¹² On June 7, the editor commented, "By all means hold the Higgins preliminary on a train, or up in a balloon, or any other place where we can't get at him. But we don't want to get at him, anyway."¹³ He went on to say there are not a dozen men who would take part in a lynching. "We are proud of the fact that we are law abiding . . . citizens of Bancroft."¹⁴

One can imagine the embarrassment of the editor when he learned of the action of Bancroft citizens when they took Loris Ray Higgins from his train two months later. The prisoner was being taken to Pender for a second hearing. As the train pulled in at the Bancroft depot, a group of masked men charged the train from the Saunders-Westrand Elevator. Everything had been carefully planned. One group ran for the engine and uncoupled it from the train. The badly frightened engineer was instructed to couple and leave quickly after they took Higgins.¹⁵ While this was going on, a larger group rushed

¹¹The Blade, July 19, 1907, p. 2. The crime was committed in Thurston County. Therefore the hearing was held at the Thurston County seat, Pender, Nebraska.

¹²Ibid., May 31, 1907, p. 2. See also Ibid., June 7, p. 3, July 5, p. 1.

¹³Ibid., June 7, 1907, p. 3. ¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., August 30, 1907, p. 3.

in both ends of the car in which Higgins was being held. Sheriff Sid Young, realizing what was going to happen, started for the baggage car with Higgins. Before this could be done, the masked men were on him and his deputy, backing up their threats with gun barrels. A rope was put around Higgins neck, and he was dragged outside. Then immediately, the train was recoupled and quickly started for Pender, preventing the sheriff and his deputy from getting off of the train.¹⁶

The frightened suspect was pushed north of the depot where the trembling man confessed to the murder. After this, one of the masked men told Higgins, "You now have a minute to prepare to meet your God."¹⁷ Higgins quickly pleaded,

Oh, for Christ's sake, men don't,
don't hang me. I'll tell you all, whis-
key did it. Whiskey did it. Don't kill
me. Don't kill me. Ain't any of you
got a mother? Ain't anyone going to
help me?¹⁸

His plea fell on deaf ears. There was to be no mercy as Higgins "dropped to his knees." As the minute for prayer ended, the prisoner was dragged to a dray wagon in which the doomed man was led to his own hanging.¹⁹ The wagon carried Higgins to the Logan bridge north of the village.

¹⁶Ibid. ¹⁷The Lyons Mirror, August 29, 1907, p. 1.

¹⁸Ibid. ¹⁹Ibid.

Arriving at the bridge the noose was thrown over his head and he was put up, to jump off or be thrown over. The bridge is almost eighteen feet above the water at this point. Just as he was ready someone fired at the man, clipping off two fingers. Another gun cracked, and the prisoner, apparently preferring hanging to be shot to death, leaped over the edge of the bridge.²⁰

As the condemned man swung, the lynchers shot him full of holes and then slowly faded away into the fields.²¹

The local coroner then had Higgins' body cut down. The body was placed in William Bechenhauer undertaking firm's basement where many viewed the remains.²² An inquisition was held in the same basement, the executed man's body lying on a cot nearby.²³ The coroner's jury found "L. R. Higgins came to his death by strangulation done by a mob unknown to this jury, at the Logan bridge, one and one-half miles north of Bancroft on August 26, 1907."²⁴

This mob action was not evidence that Bancroft was still in the frontier stage of development. On the contrary, the community was as civilized as any established village. Moreover, the area had an orderly process for dealing with lawbreakers. Bancroft had no need for vigi-

²⁰Ibid. ²¹Ibid.

²²The Blade, August 30, 1907, p. 8. ²³Ibid.

²⁴Oakland Independent, August 30, 1907, p. 1.

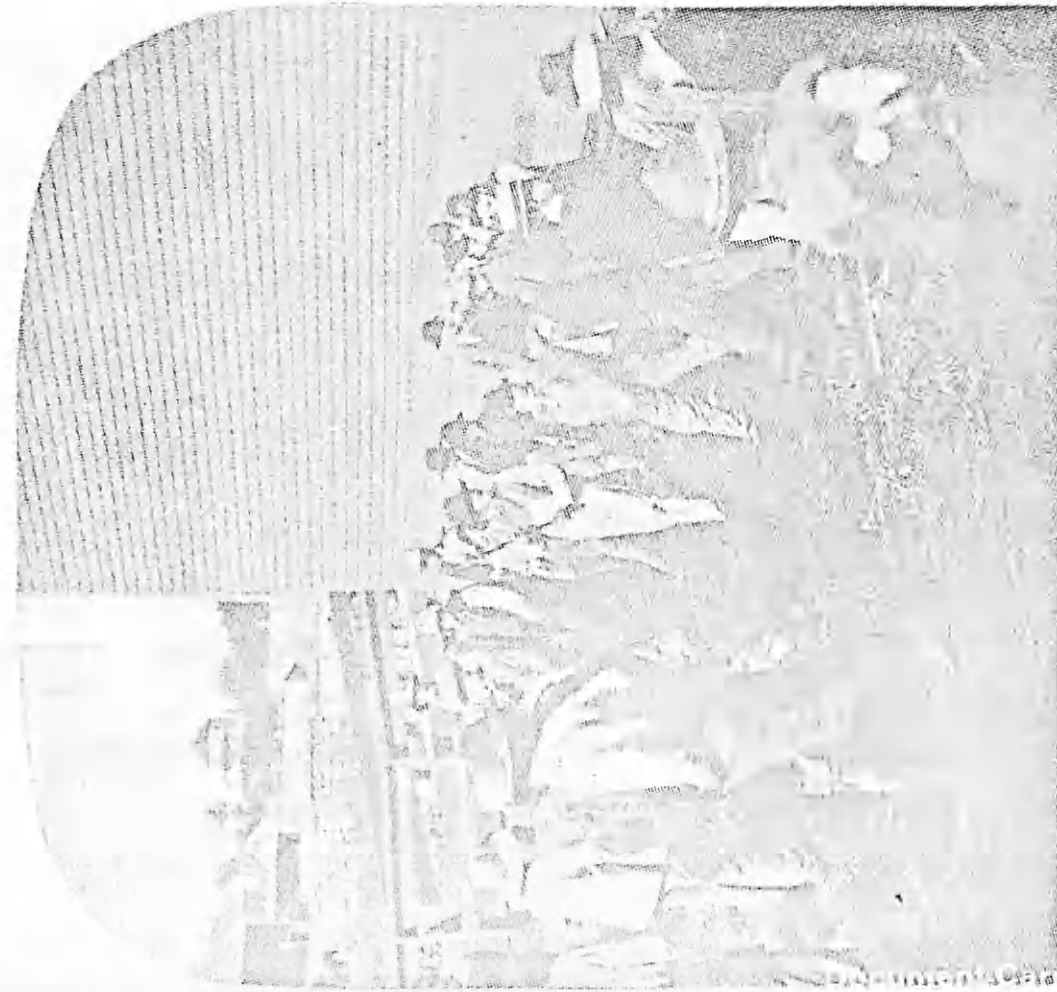
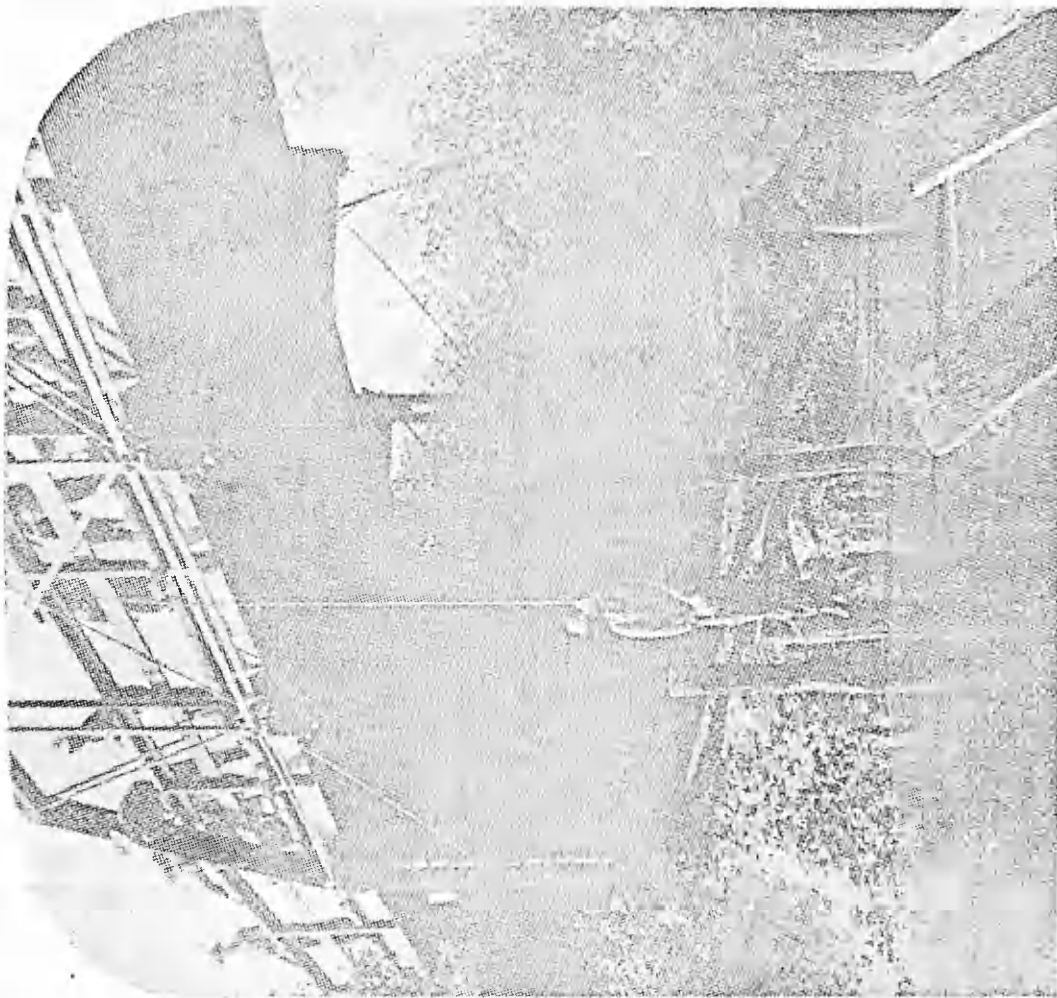


Fig. 2—Before-and-after pictures of the lynching of *Lorris Roy Higgins* in Bancroft, Neb. in August 1907 were made by an unknown Bancroft photographer for sale as stereo views. Above, posse of nabbed farmers gathers at the station to await



train carrying Higgins from Omaha to Peader, where he was to stand trial for the murder of a Bancroft farmer and his wife. The mob extracted a confession from Higgins, then strung him from a railway bridge just outside town.*

lance committees as did many frontier mining camps. But the decision was made to act outside the law. The action was probably a great surprise to a majority of the local citizenry; however, it was universally condoned perhaps as much by apathy as by agreement with the deed. No attempt was made to punish the lynchers or even their leaders. No doubt these men were acting on the premise that Higgins might receive extensive legal aid and go free. Thus, vengeance was an important motive for the worst crime in the history of Bancroft.

The lynching was not a product of hard times; in fact, prosperity abounded everywhere. By 1910 the village had reached her peak as a trade center. Several articles appeared in The Bancroft Blade promoting the town and boasting of her business community during the pre-World War years.²⁵ One write-up was particularly inviting. It seemed there was no place on earth quite as beautiful, prosperous, and distinguished as the village of Bancroft. Furthermore, with the documentation somewhat in doubt, it was noted that Bancroft had more "cement sidewalks than any other town of equal population in the entire West."²⁶ The end of the article carried an important "if," however. Prosperity will continue only if the money is kept at home.²⁷

²⁵The Blade, September 27, 1907, p. 3; October 27, 1911, p. 5.

²⁶Ibid. ²⁷Ibid.

As the village moved deeper into the twentieth century, it became more apparent that the small-village economy was slipping away. The Blade in 1911 cried out for more public-spirited businessmen who would attract trade.²⁸ No doubt on the surface this was a clever appeal for advertisement, but it went deeper than that. There was quiet alarm concerning new competition in the community. The mail-order houses were beginning to reach into the town, thus hurting business.²⁹ In addition a new enemy was making its presence known--the automobile. Now those who could afford one could drive to neighboring towns easier and faster than before. As bad roads slowly disappeared, so did local business.³⁰

The decline of village trade was not all due to outside influence such as mail-order houses. In a letter from a farmer the business houses of Bancroft were given some justifiable criticism. Most farmers came to town with eggs and butter to sell. When taken to a store, the merchant gave his customer trade checks instead of cash. Thus, it was argued that the merchant received two "rake-offs." One profit was made when he bought the produce

²⁸Ibid., October 20, 1911, p. 7.

²⁹Ibid., February 7, 1913, p. 1; November 20, 1914, p. 1.

³⁰Interview with Clement Ward, August 1, 1966; The Blade, May 21, 1915, p. 1.

and later sold it. A second profit was made when the trade checks, which could not be used anywhere else, were spent in the store. If the farmer needed supplies at another store (harness, implement, etc.), he had to produce cash. This practice along with higher prices was inviting many to order from mail-order houses.³¹

The reaction to this was never printed; however, the business community rarely was unilateral in anything. Dissension among the businessmen was certainly always present in this period probably as much or more than at any other time. The Blade was aware of the situation as it wrote, "Ask and get a legitimate profit, do away with cut-throat methods and work congenially with each other for the betterment of business."³² Thus, before World War I the rural-oriented village of Bancroft was becoming aware that the twentieth century was bringing a challenge to its existence.

But in 1914 few people worried, except several newspaper editors. It was obvious to everyone that Bancroft was growing. Before the war, the village boasted forty-seven business houses and a population of over 800.³³ Its business establishments included two banks, two dr^gBlade.

³¹"Letter to businessmen from a farmer," The Blade, May 22, 1914, p. 1.

³²The Blade, August 12, 1915, p. 1.

³³Ibid., special edition.

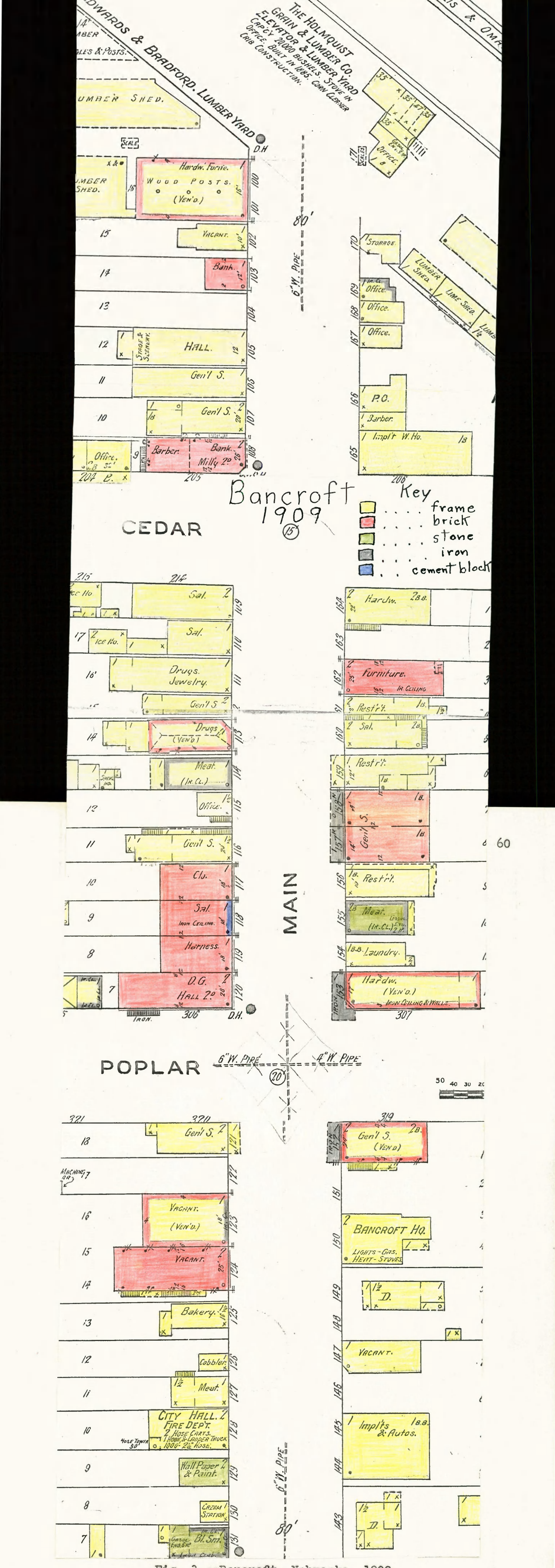
stores, six general stores, one harness shop, one hotel, two lumber yards, one millinery store, one livery barn, one panatorium, one wagon shop, two barber shops, four saloons, one stock buyer, one dentist, two physicians, one independent telephone system, two implement houses, two blacksmith shops, two furniture stores, four elevators, two hardware establishments, two jewelry stores, two meat markets, four saloons, one photographer, two garages, one shoemaker, one pool hall, one attorney, four real estate dealers, and one newspaper.³⁴

The village school was supervised by ten teachers who were in charge of 314 students. A special edition of The Blade reported that the building had seven "school rooms, a class room, laboratory, library, and superintendent's office."³⁵ Normal training which prepared graduates for teaching was in operation producing several elementary teachers for the area.³⁶

While Bancroft was advertising the extent of her expansion, a war began in Europe which soon found its way into the hearts and minds of the people of northeast Nebraska. In August, 1914, The Blade made a plea for peace while at the same time condemned the kings and emperors whom the editor believed started the war.³⁷

³⁴Ibid. ³⁵Ibid. ³⁶Ibid.

³⁷The Blade, August 14, 1914.



THE HOLMQUIST
GRAIN & LUMBER CO.
ELEVATOR & LUMBER YARD
CAPACITY 20000 BUSHELS. STORE IN
OFFICE. BUILT IN 1885. CORN CLEANER
CRIB CONSTRUCTION.

EDWARDS & BRADFORD. LUMBER YARD

...POLIS & OM...

UMBER SHED.
SCALE
UMBER SHED.
15
14
13
12
11
10
9
204 B. x
205
D.H.

35' x 35' x 35'
35' x 35' x 35'
OFFICE.
18
17
16
15
14
13
12
11
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
STORAGE
LUMBER SHED
LIME SHED
LUMBER
P.O.
Barber.
Implt W. Ho. 13

Bancroft
1909
⑮

CEDAR

Key
frame brick
brick
stone
iron
cement block

215
214
17
16
15
14
13
12
11
10
9
8
7
5
ICE HO.
Sal.
Drugs. Jewelry.
Gen'l S.
Drugs (VEN'D)
Meat. (R. CL.)
Office.
Gen'l S.
Clo.
Sal. IRON CEILING.
Harness.
D.G. HALL 20
IRON.
306
D.H.

168
163
162
161
160
159
158
157
156
155
154
153
Hardw. 2B.B.
Furniture. IR. CEILING.
Rest'r't.
Sal. 2B.
Rest'r't.
Gen'l S. 1B.
Rest'r't.
Meat. (R. CL.)
laundry.
Hardw. (VEN'D.) IRON CEILING & WALLS.
307

MAIN

POPLAR

6" W. PIPE 4" W. PIPE

50 40 30 20

321
18
MACHINES 7
16
15
14
13
12
11
10
9
8
7
320
Gen'l S. 2
VACANT. (VEN'D.)
VACANT.
Bakery.
Cobbler.
Meat.
CITY HALL & FIRE DEPT.
2 HOSE CHARTS.
1 HOON & LADDER TRUCK
1000' 2" HOSE.
Wall Paper & Paint
CREAM STATION
Bl. Sm.
131
D.H.

319
151
150
149
148
147
146
145
144
143
Gen'l S. 2B. (VEN'D.)
BANCROFT HQ.
LIGHTS - GAS.
HEAT - STOVES.
D.
VACANT.
Implts & Autos. 1B.B.
D.
D.

Fig. 3.--Bancroft, Nebraska, 1909



Fig. 4.--A View of Main Street, 1907



Fig. 5.--The Livery Barn, 1907

In 1916 William Jennings Bryan made his second appearance at Bancroft.³⁸ Although speaking mainly on prohibition, he attacked the idea of preparedness, perhaps enforcing the local idea of keeping out of war.³⁹

But speeches could not keep the United States out of war. In the early fall of 1917 the citizens of Bancroft watched four trainloads of soldiers pass through the town. The editor commented, "It sure looks more and more like Uncle Sam means business in the big scrap across the pond."⁴⁰ Soon it appeared the village would not neglect Europe as well as it was caught up in a frenzy of home-front activity. Bancroft had its full share of patriotic rallies, Liberty-bond drives, and general denouncement of the Kaiser. The bond drives were quite successful; in one alone over \$85,000 was raised.⁴¹ The methods used were quite clever, among them a slogan, "If you don't come across, the Kaiser will."⁴² In addition, the large German-American populace of the area was often strongly persuaded to purchase bonds as indications of its loyalty.⁴³ Another way of demonstrating one's

³⁸Ibid., October 16, 1908, p. 1.

³⁹Ibid., April 20, 1916, p. 1.

⁴⁰Ibid., September 13, 1917, p. 1.

⁴¹Ibid., October 25, 1917, p. 1. ⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Interview with Clement Ward, August 6, 1966.

loyalty was by joining the local Home Guards. This group was organized early in 1918 to "protect" the home front from sabotage.⁴⁴

Perhaps the community needed protection more from the overdone advertising of patriotic motion pictures. The Draw Theater was quite enthusiastic about winning the war and, incidentally, having full attendance at the showing of films. Titles like "The German Curse in Russia" were common. If you were fortunate enough to get in, you could witness the struggle "of brave men" who "hopelessly fought and terribly died, betrayed and destroyed by German infamy and intrigue!"⁴⁵ Hate is a natural by-product of war as is super patriotism. Much of this is illustrated in the rather pointed advertisement of the Draw Theater which stated the following question: "Are you a patriotic American or have you a yellow streak?"⁴⁶ Logically, following this, if you were a patriot, you would see the film. If you were yellow, you would stay home. The paper never stated how many cowards or patriots the village had.

All of this soon became meaningless for the village rang out with joy as it learned of the armistice. A Main Street celebration was held, and workers quit their jobs

⁴⁴The Blade, January 31, 1918, p. 1.

⁴⁵Ibid., March 21, 1918, p. 3.

⁴⁶Ibid., June 13, 1918, p. 8.

for the day to celebrate.⁴⁷ With this climax World War I in Bancroft came to an end.

⁴⁷Ibid., November 14, 1918, p. 1.

CHAPTER VI

THE 'TWENTIES NOT SO GOLDEN

The World War had brought unprecedented prosperity to Bancroft and the surrounding area. Upon the arrival of the 'twenties, few noted the beginning of general decline. The people had fixed their attention on barbeques, music, and the now traditional chautauquas. The chautauqua was always welcomed and enjoyed. A typical event covered two or three days of lectures, music, and a variety of entertainment.¹ One event featured "Signor Tassoni" and "The Imperial Guards Band" from Italy, "J. Everett Cathell on Abraham Lincoln," and "Halwood Robert Malone, the man of many faces," to mention a few on the entertainment schedule.² Moreover, the chautauqua attracted many visitors from neighboring towns who joined the local citizens to make large attendances.³ Gradually, the chautauquas disappeared; and in their place came the harvest festivals and free barbeques. One of these in 1925 began with a band concert followed by a picnic dinner in the city park. The afternoon activities were lively and included horseshoe and

¹The Blade, September 17, 1923, p. 1.

²Ibid., June 28, 1912, p. 5.

³Ibid., September 17, 1923, p. 1.

other contests.⁴ The big event usually proved to be the ball game, and this case was no exception. The Bancroft team defeated the neighboring village of Rosalie⁵ which usually had few losses. The local ball club was quite good and proved to be a worthy opponent to any challenger.⁶

The village was also notable in another area as one of the local citizens, Charles Graff, filed for the Democratic nomination for Governor of Nebraska in 1924.⁷ Being a poor year for Democrats, Graff, a former State Legislator, was defeated in the primary.⁸ In 1925 another Bancroft resident won the office of Speaker of the House of Representatives in the State Legislature. Representative Allen G. Burke served the Legislature for over thirteen years as well as participating in other Republican party functions.⁹

While the village noted with pride her prominence in local politics, little boasting was done over the many

⁴Ibid., August 21, 1925, p. 1.

⁵Ibid., August 28, 1925, p. 1.

⁶Interview with Martin Vogt, August 8, 1966.

⁷The Blade, February 29, 1924, p. 1.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Obituary, The Bancroft News, July 8, 1955, p. 1.

acts of thievery and burglaries during the 'twenties. One farmer was fortunate in locking the transmission in his car, or he would have been minus an automobile.¹⁰ Another farmer woke up one morning to find all his chickens stolen.¹¹ But this hardly compared to the number of break-ins the village suffered. Usually, burglars would rob three or four business houses in one night as illustrated in the summer of 1924. In July, thieves robbed Wallace's Drug Store, entered the doctor's office, and broke into the Farmers' Elevator.¹² By far the unluckiest business establishment was Koepnick Brothers' Clothing Store which was robbed six times during a period of a few years. One break-in netted the burglars over forty-five hundred dollars in merchandise.¹³ Another robbery cost the firm twenty-five hundred dollars in stock. The thieves who accomplished that deed next stole a brand new automobile and followed through by breaking into a service station for a supply of gas and oil.¹⁴ A few months later these thieves were caught; however, this proved to be a rare occurrence.¹⁵

¹⁰The Blade, October 15, 1926, p. 1.

¹¹Ibid., October 7, 1927, p. 1.

¹²Ibid., July 4, 1924, p. 1.

¹³Ibid., March 25, 1927, p. 1.

¹⁴Ibid., October 16, 1928, p. 1.

¹⁵Ibid., December 6, 1928, p. 8.

Burglaries were not the only law-breaking activity as prohibition brought the need for another form of illegal enterprise--"bootlegging." The "bootlegger" had been traditionally active during the whiskey trade era, but now his market expanded enormously. One of the village's local whiskey peddlers, Earl Hughes, was constantly getting himself into trouble. The county sheriff caught him in the process of using his still in 1928 which gave him time in jail to consider mending his ways.¹⁶ That apparently did little good because the following year State prohibition officers raided his home. Hughes quickly locked the doors, but the officers forced their way in and caught Mrs. Hughes in the act of pouring liquor through a hole in the floor.¹⁷ After spending ninety days in jail, Hughes returned to Bancroft only to be stopped by the village marshal for being drunk. Hughes made his escape by dodging several shots fired by Marshal Bob Brummond. His wife was then caught trying to sneak out of town, but later she also made her escape.¹⁸ No doubt there were a few local citizens who missed the Hughes family, and probably their product a good deal more.

¹⁶County Judge's Criminal Docket, Cuming County, Nebraska, October 6, 1928, pp. 334-335.

¹⁷The Blade, November 7, 1929, p. 1.

¹⁸Ibid., February 13, 1930, p. 6.

Life in the 'twenties seemed carefree and easy on the surface, but underneath the village experienced difficulties which were directly related to the agricultural problem of rural America. The farmers of the Bancroft community had long been fortunate in possessing some of the richest soil nature could provide. The fertile chernozem found in this part of northeast Nebraska is regarded as almost ideal.¹⁹ This soil was put to the test during World War I when the demand for farm produce pushed the price of grain higher and higher. Corn, the basic grain in the Bancroft area, was priced at sixty to sixty-five cents per bushel in the years prior to the United States' entry into the War.²⁰ Then suddenly in 1917 the price rose to over one dollar and sixty cents per bushel.²¹ The sudden high prices promised prosperity for everyone; incomes were doubled and tripled. Immediately, the demand for land was rapidly climbing. Farms which sold for thirty or forty dollars per acre in the 1890's²² were sold for over four-hundred dollars per acre by 1919.²³

¹⁹Fred A. Shannon, The Farmers Last Frontier (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., 1945), pp. 12-14; Olson, pp. 9-10.

²⁰The Blade, various issues, 1912-1917.

²¹Ibid., January-December, 1917.

²²Ibid., November 15, 1885, p. 1.

²³Ibid., June 26, 1919, p. 1.

With corn at two dollars per bushel on the local market,²⁴ it was no risk at all to pay high interest rates for a farm loan. No one would think twice about a man putting his life savings into a four-hundred dollar per acre farm; mortgages could be easily repaid. Bancroft was no different from any other part of the farm belt. The American farmer naturally thought the wartime market would continue. Thus, he made no effort to curtail production.²⁵

But the end came just as rapidly as prosperity had arrived. In 1919 corn sold locally for one dollar and sixty-five cents per bushel.²⁶ In 1920 it slipped to one dollar and ten cents.²⁷ The following year it hit bottom at forty cents per bushel.²⁸ Abundant crops were pouring into a smaller market in 1921 beginning a long depression in rural America.²⁹ The farmers who risked everything to buy a farm now lost them. Their unpaid bills and accounts gathered dust in many rural communities. It would have

²⁴Ibid., July 26, 1917, p. 4.

²⁵Theodore Saloutos, John D. Hicks, Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), p. 93.

²⁶The Blade, May-September, 1919.

²⁷Ibid., January-December, 1920.

²⁸Ibid., January-October, 1921.

²⁹Saloutos, Hicks, p. 100. See also The Literary Digest, January 26, 1924, p. 66, for a Department of Agriculture survey which studied the effects of the Depression.

been difficult enough to keep operating and meet mortgage payments, but now the farmer had new expenses. Taxes continued to rise, and agriculture had become mechanized forcing farmers deeper into debt to buy equipment. Moreover, prices received by the farmer for his goods went down while the prices he had to pay for goods and services went higher.³⁰ The Bancroft farmers could take little consolation in the fact that they were not alone in their troubles. In 1919 Charles Schwedhelm was a victim of the land boom when he purchased a farm for over three-hundred and thirty dollars per acre. In 1919 that was a fair price, but by 1927 the low prices for farm products could not meet mortgage payments and pay ever increasing expenses. As a result, Schwedhelm and other victims of the World War I land boom were forced to quit farming and move to town.³¹ The farmer also had to meet an increasingly higher standard of living. One notable example of this was the automobile.³² The technological revolution also brought in radios, washing machines, and electric refrigerators. The rural families desired these widely advertised goods as much as anyone, but they had less and less money with which to purchase them. A good picture of rural prosperity can

³⁰Saloutos, Hicks, pp. 100-107.

³¹Interview with Mrs. Charles Schwedhelm, August 4, 1966.

³²Kenyon L. Butterfield, "The Farm Problem Made Clear," Current History, XXIX (November, 1928), p. 268.

be observed by examining the corn market for this commodity was the cash crop of most of northeast Nebraska. The graph noted on the following page shows the sudden rise and fall in corn prices in the Bancroft area. Generally, this parallels national prices because what happened in Bancroft was nation-wide. As indicated by Graph 2, in 1916 the annual gross value of farm products for the United States was thirteen and one-half billion dollars. By 1919 it had risen to almost twenty-four billion dollars. The following year saw a decline; the gross value slipped to eighteen billion dollars. In 1921 the annual gross value was twelve and one-third billion dollars.³³ This parallel is obvious.

The effect of these agricultural difficulties on Bancroft was far-reaching. Rural towns and villages had been for a decade or more experiencing their own problems. Frontier towns were usually small centers of industry, producing flour, making wagons and even plows as in the case of Bancroft. But local manufacturing declined rapidly after the turn of the century with the development of larger centers of capital. As the World War drew to a close, many if not all small towns faced a new situation with the development of mail order firms which seriously competed for local merchants' profits.³⁴

³³"The Course of Agricultural Income During the Last Twenty-Five Years," American Economic Review, XIII (March, 1923), p. 153.

³⁴Saloutos, Hicks, p. 26.

Fig. 1. Graph 1
Market Reports From The Bancroft Blade, 1890-1930

Price of
Corn in
Dollars

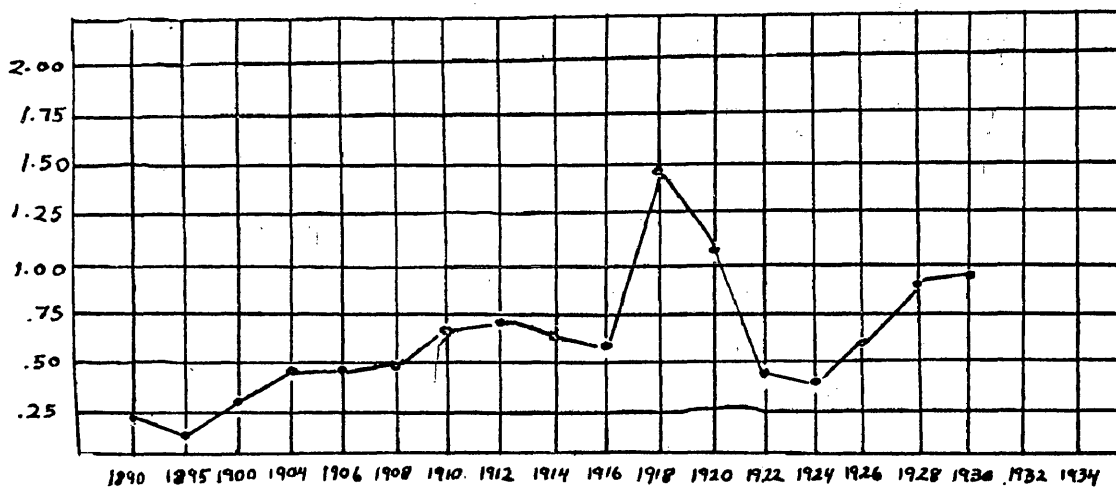
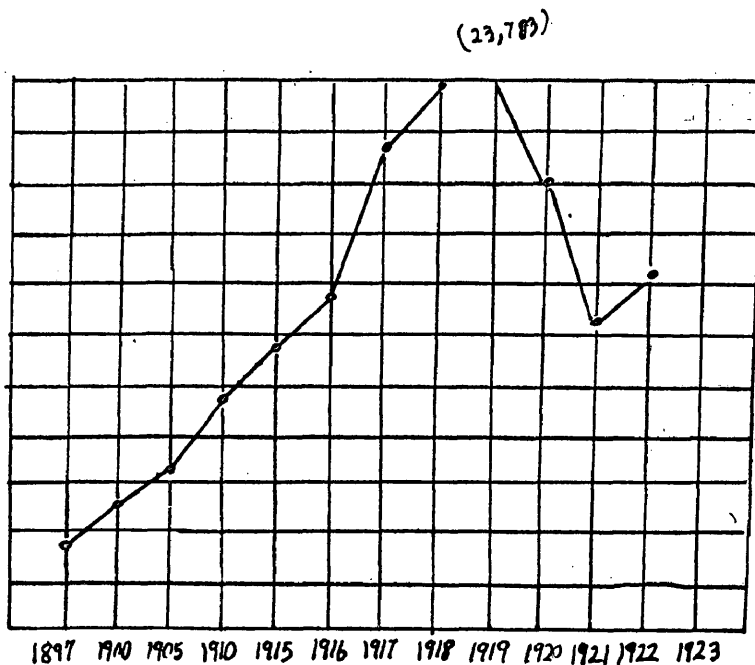


Fig. 2. Graph 2
Annual Gross Value of Farm Products in United States^a

In Billions
of Dollars

Twenty-
Two
Twenty
Eighteen
Sixteen
Fourteen
Twelve
Ten
Eight
Six
Four
Two



^a "The Course of Agricultural Income During The Last Twenty-Five Years," American Economic Review, XIII (March, 1923), p. 153.

The editor of The Blade noted many of the economic ills as he made the following remarkable accurate prediction:

The next ten years will seal the doom or make the future of the average small city or town of the Midwest, or for that matter of any community in our country. The automobile and truck, coupled with the extensive program in good roads, will have more of a tendency to draw people to the larger cities as time progresses.³⁵

The problems were especially acute for rural America. The agricultural depression quite naturally hurt rural villages and towns. Communities such as Bancroft depended upon the farm trade to a large extent for its existence. With the farmer receiving less for his corn than it cost to produce, he could not purchase new products or perhaps even necessities. Although market prices as indicated on the chart on page 73 slowly climbed back to the pre-War level, agriculture had been seriously hurt; and as a consequence so were the rural towns.

Bancroft attempted to increase its trade by organizing in 1922 the Chamber of Commerce. Its purpose was the traditional one of commercial organizations, namely, to pump business and money back into the local economy.³⁶ The organization set out to accomplish this by organizing the chautauquas and free barbeques mentioned earlier.

³⁵The Blade, August 1, 1924, p. 1.

³⁶Ibid., July 21, 1922, p. 1.

Moreover, the Chamber of Commerce was instrumental in placing electric lights at various places in the village, building improvements in the city park, and accomplishing other community betterment projects.³⁷ No organization, however, could stop the trend of economic decline in the village economy. In spite of hard effort and limited success, it could not bring prosperity to the village of Bancroft. On the other hand, it should be noted that Bancroft was not in a period of financial chaos; however, there was constant agitation for discovering why business was in a state of decline. In one editorial, The Blade struck out against those whom it believed was destroying the town. The editor commented,

The man who sits back and waits for the city to become a bigger and better city is as wise as the fabled weasel that ate until he could not pass through the crack by which he came and was caught by the fox. He will advance about as fast in making his city a better city as the rustic who waited for the rivers to get by.³⁸

Although lacking elegance, the point was clearly made. There would be no sympathy for a community slacker. The fact that difficulties continued became apparent when The Blade headlined an editorial in 1929 with the question,

³⁷Ibid., July 27, 1923, p. 1.

³⁸Ibid., October 5, 1923, p. 1.

"Is the Local Merchant Doomed?"³⁹ Quite obviously, this was recognition of the fact that the competition faced earlier had become worse. The chain store, the larger cities, and mail order houses were hosting the challenge. Bancroft, however, was to meet a more serious opponent. In the fall of 1929 the bottom dropped out of the stock market, and a world wide depression began.

³⁹Ibid., June 13, 1929, p. 1.

CHAPTER VII

THE FARM PROBLEM WORSENS, 1929-1932

The beginning of the great depression was not sudden in Bancroft. The news of trouble on Wall Street and crashing stock values did not panic the village. The suicides on Wall Street were not repeated in Bancroft as the big Bull market had only indirect influence on the economy of the community. There were no bankruptcies, no run on the banks; life just continued on its usual, one-day-at-a-time course. Depression? No one realized the next ten years would be the leanest in the community's history.¹

The previous decade had certainly not been prosperous. Some indication of local unrest with the Coolidge Administration could be seen in the election of 1928. Although Nebraska went Republican, Bancroft Township voted for Al Smith by a majority of thirty votes.² Further evidence of dissatisfaction with the Republican Congress and the Hoover Administration could be observed in the consistent election of a Democratic Congressman from this third district. Representative Edgar Howard, one of the most colorful men in the state, had a large personal following. His election

¹Interview with Clement Ward, December 3, 1966.

²The Blade, November 6, 1928, p. 1.

and re-election in a normally Republican state, however, indicated some doubt that the Republicans could solve farm problems.³ Moreover, the farmer's plight was becoming worse. In 1930 the first of many droughts hit Nebraska. This, combined with declining grain prices, began to again seriously undermine the farmer's position.⁴

With little money to spend the farmers were unable to purchase anything but the bare necessities, and much of that was done on credit. Money, now being a rare commodity, forced most merchants to cut down on expenses such as the number of employees.⁵ By 1930 The Blade was referring to the hard times as a "depression" as the newspaper attacked people for buying outside the community and, incidentally, those business concerns not buying advertisements in The Blade.⁶ It was two years since the stock market crash, but slowly the depression found its way to Bancroft. The situation was complicated by droughts, a troublesome factor throughout most of the 'thirties.⁷ Emergency relief was doled out to many northeastern Nebraska counties by order of the Governor of Nebraska. The extent and depth of the situation was not yet apparent as The West

³Olson, pp. 302-303. ⁴Ibid., pp. 300-301.

⁵Interview with Clement Ward, December 3, 1966.

⁶The Blade, March 6, 1930, p. 1.

⁷Olson, pp. 300-301.

Point Republican proudly declared that local aid would take care of any emergency; federal aid was not needed.⁸

This confidence was not to last for long, however, as on December 17 the West Point National Bank closed its doors.⁹ One month earlier Wisner's bank had met the same fate.¹⁰ The two largest towns in the county were illustrating the gravity of the situation. Nineteen thirty-two opened with Bancroft still boasting of two banks in operation. This was due in part at least to good management and those few wealthy farmers who kept their money in the banks allowing them to remain in business.¹¹ But the picture was getting darker. The Village Board of Trustees was concerned enough over back taxes to send the village clerk on a special trip to West Point, the county seat, to check the delinquent tax list as far back as 1920.¹² The county board was now not only providing relief but practicing its own economy measures. On January 14 it announced a ten per cent salary cut.¹³ Wage cuts were only one measure taken to remedy the

⁸The Republican, December 3, 1931, p. 1.

⁹Ibid., December 17, 1931, p. 1.

¹⁰Ibid., November 19, 1931, p. 1.

¹¹Interview with Clement Ward, August 1, 1966.

¹²Minutes of the Village Board of Trustees, March 7, 1932, Bancroft, Nebraska. Hereafter referred to as Minutes.

¹³The Republican, January 14, 1932, p. 1.

situation. In the spring a normally Republican area recorded a Democratic primary election victory. The West Point Republican noted, "some precincts recorded less Republicans than a person has thumbs on his hands."¹⁴

Republicans were not the only ones blamed for hard times. If a person would be caught purchasing from a mail-order catalog, buying out of town, or committing similar crimes, condemnation would follow. These practices, traditionally condemned, were termed "community suicide." Many of the local businessmen were angered by seeing money which could have remained locally going to the cities. Furthermore, the life-blood of the community itself would be destroyed by those who instead of setting an example allowed thoughtlessness and apathy to govern their financial outlay.¹⁵

It was easy to blame Herbert Hoover, mail order houses, and citizens stealing out of town to spend their money elsewhere. Few cared to investigate the agricultural depression of the 1920's, the causes for it, the dry years, or the relationships between agricultural villages and their economic dependence on the price of corn, wheat, or oats. In 1931 Cuming County produced 3,649,120 bushels of corn for about thirty-five cents per bushel. In 1932,

¹⁴Ibid., April 14, 1932, p. 1.

¹⁵The Blade, May 5, 1932, p. 1.

a somewhat wetter year, over six million bushels were produced; but the law of supply and demand had pushed the price down to twenty-five cents per bushel.¹⁶ Oats told a similar story. Nineteen thirty-one saw 2,106,040 bushels harvested at twenty-four cents per bushel. The price had gone down to twelve cents per bushel in 1932 while only producing 2,327,760 bushels.¹⁷ These statistics paint a clear picture of what was happening to the farmer and the towns where he spent his money. Grain, stock, and other receipts declined two-thirds between 1929 and 1933. On the other hand, living and operating expenses had shrunk merely one-third.¹⁸ What was being done about it?

The Hoover Administration inaugurated a new farm program unmatched in the history of farm subsidies. Although millions were spent coordinating, consolidating, and stabilizing, farm problems remained unsolved.¹⁹ It was previously noted that as early as 1928 local farmers indicated their dissatisfaction by moving away from Republican voting habits. By 1932 token opposition had

¹⁶Nebraska, Department of Agriculture and Inspection, Division of Agriculture Statistics, Annual Reports, 1931-1932, p. 4. Hereafter referred to as Nebraska Agricultural Statistics, Annual Reports.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁸T. J. Woofter, Seven Lean Years (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1929), p. 2.

¹⁹Saloutos, Hicks, p. 404.

evolved into almost complete dissatisfaction with the Farm Board's attempts. It was time for farmers to act, and act they did. In Iowa, militants under the leadership of Milo Reno organized what was termed a Farm Holiday Association. The closed banks had termed their actions a "holiday." The farmers concluded that if the bankers deserved a "holiday" so did they.²⁰ Their cause was richly spread by their slogan:

We've paid our taxes right and left
Without the least objection.
We've paid them to a government
That gives us no protection.

Let's call a "Farmers' Holiday"
A Holiday let's hold
We'll eat our wheat and ham and eggs
And let them eat their gold.²¹

The Farmers' Holiday sought to raise farm prices to a cost of production figure by withholding farm products from market. This was to be accomplished by persuading members not to sell their goods; if that failed, force was to be used.²²

The first awareness of the Holiday movement at the local level occurred in the late summer of 1932. A West Point trucker en route to Omaha with a load of cattle encountered a group of pickets. The incident occurred as the trucker, Tom Strehle, approached "Dead Man's Curve"

²⁰Ibid., p. 442. ²¹Ibid., pp. 442-443.

²²Ibid., p. 435.

one and one-half miles from Omaha's city limits. The Republican stated, "the pickets jumped on the running board of the truck, asked him what he had, and then told him to take it back where he got it."²³ Upon hearing this, Strehle pointed to a rifle by his side (which was unloaded) and told the farmer-pickets to get out of the way or he would shoot. The trucker then quickly shifted down to low gear and pushed through to Omaha in spite of railway ties thrown in front of his truck.²⁴

No local organization of the Farm Holiday was formed until a month later when more than two-hundred farmers met at a general store called Aloys to form an association.²⁵ The Cuming County Farmers' Holiday Association soon had some notoriety as Milo Reno himself appeared at one of the meetings. Reno declared that the "remedy . . . to the situation was organization and a proper understanding of the conditions."²⁶ Apparently, his remarks were well heeded. The Cuming County Association met early in 1933 and voted to extend the organization to the township level.²⁷ Another more moderate farm structure was the Farmers' Union. This organization, although not as

²³The Republican, September 1, 1932, p. 1.

²⁴Ibid. ²⁵The Blade, October 6, 1932, p. 1.

²⁶The Republican, December 1, 1932, p. 1.

²⁷Ibid., January 12, 1933, p. 1.

colorful, had a large following in Cuming County, perhaps illustrating the division among the farmers themselves in finding solutions to their problems. In membership the Farmers' Union may have been a competitor to the Farmers' Holiday, but in publicity it ran a very poor second.

"Mob rule" had only a small role in the history of Bancroft and the Cuming County community, but in 1933 The Republican proclaimed that "Mob Protests Sale at Wisner Friday."²⁸ An estimated eleven to fourteen-hundred farmers descended on the old Parody farm and prevented an execution sale against the tenant.²⁹

All of this indicated the desperate situation of local agriculture. Bancroft, which depended upon the farmers in large part for its income, was by now severely hit. Much buying was done on credit as there was no money to exchange. Many came to town with produce to barter for a week's supply of groceries if they were lucky enough to own produce.³⁰ The people began to look for their "white knight;" they had nothing else to do. Franklin D. Roosevelt was the only hope in many minds. Indeed, by election day it seemed that there was no other candidate as Roosevelt swept Cuming County just as he did the nation.³¹ Of the

²⁸Ibid., January 26, 1933, p. 1. ²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Interview with Clement Ward, December 3, 1966.

³¹The Republican, November 10, 1932, p. 4.

499 votes cast in Bancroft precinct, Roosevelt won 375, Hoover, 121, and Thomas, the Socialist, only three.³² In the county as a whole, the Democrats were successful from the office of President of the nation to county treasurer in this normally Republican stronghold.³³

One resident of Bancroft recalled waiting for the election returns on the radio with a small group of friends. "I will never forget how jubilant we were when we heard the election returns."³⁴ Jubilance would soon turn into hope and then into action. But for the present the town continued to slip.

In 1933 the village budget was one-half that of the preceding year and was yet to reach bottom.³⁵ Not only was the village income down, but normally secure families began to feel the "pinch." Garden plots grew in number, and canning increased in volume although items that required sugar were dropped because of cost. Anything that was not a necessity was discontinued in use. Farmers raised practically everything they needed, weather permitting. Cows were milked, hogs and chickens were raised, the meat was butchered at home, and so on. To avoid the cost of

³²The Blade, November 10, 1932, p. 1.

³³The Republican, November 10, 1932, p. 4.

³⁴Interview with Mrs. Martin Vogt, November 25, 1966.

³⁵Minutes, April 28, 1932 and June 26, 1933.

buying seed corn, the farmer picked his own in the fall as the corn husks were drying. The selected ears were hung on a nail in the barn or other shed. When the corn supply dwindled, cattle were fed chopped cornstalks or "anything" they could digest.³⁶ Help was on the way, however, in the form of a "New Deal" for Bancroft and the rest of the nation.

³⁶Interviews with Charles Conn, November 25, 1966 and Mrs. Martin Vogt, November 25, 1966.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DEPRESSION, NEW DEAL, AND BANCROFT

The inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt brought great changes for the United States; Bancroft, Nebraska, not excluded. No longer was the community to think of national disasters as events which were only read in the newspaper. Now they were in the worst economic crisis in the nation's history. In the middle of March, 1933, the village learned the good news that both banks were allowed to reopen at the end of the Bank Holiday.¹ The good news was followed by the announcement that four boys from Bancroft were selected to go to the reforestation camps recently formed.² Moreover, in West Point the Emergency Welfare Committee disbanded for it believed the local emergency had passed; and instead of relief the Committee would encourage and promote the "spirit of self-help."³ The concept of "everyone for himself" was returning, although this concept was not the only returning "institution." Beer was coming back. In one evening the Bancroft Village Board accomplished three readings of

¹The Blade, March 16, 1933, p. 1.

²The Republican, May 4, 1934, p. 1.

³Ibid., June 22, 1933, p. 1.

Ordinance 52, permitting 3.2 beer. This was completed without opposition. Within one week five applications for beer licenses had been approved.⁴

The National Industrial Recovery Act also gave indications of the influence of the Roosevelt victory in Bancroft. The N. R. A. strictly regulated hours and wages not only in large cities but also in thousands of small villages such as Bancroft. For example, mechanical workers or artisans were not to receive less than forty cents an hour or work more than thirty-five hours a week. If, however, the employer was paying less than forty cents to mechanical workers on July 15, he could pay less than thirty cents an hour.⁵ These bureaucratic-sounding regulations did influence the village, for not only were workmen's hours and wages helped, but store hours were also closely regulated. A locally organized N. R. A. meeting in the village ruled "stores will open at 7 A.M. and close at 6 P.M. on all week days except Saturday when they close at 11 P.M. Stores will be closed all day Sunday."⁶ There was no recorded opposition to this measure which was generally approved by most businessmen. As a result of this, one businessman's wife realized she now had time

⁴Minutes, July 26, 1933; Board of Trustees, Municipal Code of the Village of Bancroft, Nebraska, 1941, pp. 30-33.

⁵The Blade, August 21, 1933, p. 1.

⁶Ibid., August 24, 1933, p. 1.

at home as before the stores were open at "all hours" to attract customers.⁷ Women's N. R. A. work was also organized in the county, but nothing was done in Bancroft.⁸

Something was being done, however, with the Civil Works Administration, a New Deal agency under the administration of Harry Hopkins in late 1933 and one-half of 1934.⁹ The West Point Republican on November 23, 1933, stated that two-hundred and thirty-five men were given employment in Cuming County. There was an estimated one-hundred and seventy-five to two-hundred unemployed in the county. The C. W. A. Committee was the agency charged with supervision of all C. W. A. projects in the local area. The immediate allotment for Cuming County was \$25,000. Of this amount only ten per cent was to be spent for materials used in projects; the remainder was to be used for labor which was to be as much hand labor as possible.¹⁰

Soon the C. W. A. was making progress in Bancroft as a request of \$3,798 was applied for by the village in

⁷Interview with Mrs. Martin Vogt, November 25, 1966.

⁸Interview with Mrs. G. H. Harms, December 19, 1966; The Republican, September 14, 1933, p. 1. The Republican announced Mrs. Harms to be in charge at Bancroft.

⁹James MacGregor Burns, Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), p. 196. The C. W. A. was mostly concerned with "quicky" projects to meet immediate emergency situations to tide country through winter of 1933-34.

¹⁰The Republican, November 23, 1933, p. 1.

late November, 1933.¹¹ This money was to be used for waterworks and village street improvements. By March 1, 1934, the project had been approved and work had begun.¹² The women were not to be left out since Cuming County was allotted \$1,468 to be used for the most part in sewing projects. Bancroft received \$250 of this money.¹³ The effect the C. W. A. had on Bancroft was certainly positive. This was the only means of employment for many, thus allowing the unemployed an opportunity to keep their self respect by working for their money instead of waiting in a bread line or receiving a dole. The enormity of the project can be told with figures. During the winter of 1933-34, \$23,247.87 of C. W. A. funds was spent in Cuming County.¹⁴ Bancroft employed some fifty-five men, eight women, and two clerks under C. W. A. or 15.34 per cent of the total employed of the village. It is interesting to note that the comparable figure for West Point was 37.94 per cent, Wisner, 26.99 per cent, and Beemer, 19.73 per cent. Thus, Bancroft had the smallest rate and number employed under C. W. A.

¹¹Ibid., November 30, 1933, p. 1.

¹²Ibid., March 1, 1934, p. 1.

¹³Ibid., December 14, 1933, p. 1.

¹⁴Ibid., February 1, 1934, p. 1.

than any other village or city in the county.¹⁵ This perhaps indicated that unemployment was less severe in the Bancroft community.

The C. W. A. was only a stop-gap measure. It was not designed to reform conditions to prevent the future occurrence of another depression. The Agricultural Adjustment Act was such a reforming act especially for rural America. The bill had passed Congress by May 10, 1933; and two days later the President signed it. Basically, its objective was to save the farmer by refinancing farm mortgages and raising farm prices accompanied by government controls.¹⁶ This program was to have a tremendous influence on the rural areas and also on the towns and villages where the farmer spent his money. One objective, therefore, of the Roosevelt farm program was basically to provide the farmers with more money to spend. The long range plan was to enable farmers to remain in possession of their land and to give assistance to those who no longer owned a farm or hoped to own one. In order to accomplish this, the new Democratic administration realized the farmers would need "parity prices." Noted national historians, Hicks and Saloutos, define parity as "a price that would give the producers of a particular commodity a purchasing power

¹⁵Ibid., February 15, 1934, p. 1.

¹⁶Saloutos, Hicks, p. 468.

equal to that which they enjoyed during some base period in the past, generally from 1909-1914."¹⁷

To achieve this parity price it was necessary to lower production of crops and livestock. In Cuming County, corn was the major grain crop while hogs were a major form of livestock. Therefore, the A. A. A. program most common was the corn-hog reduction system. This program attempted to end over-production by paying farmers not to raise certain crops and livestock. This was begun early in 1934 with a county committee.¹⁸ Basically, in signing up for the government program, the individual farmer agreed to reduce his hog production and corn acreage below the average production of the last two years.¹⁹ Later in the New Deal, the farmers were to receive aid from the Government which put a "floor" on the price of certain crops. These were price supports. The price support was called a loan because the price (forty-five cents per bushel in 1934) was paid to the farmers in the form of a loan. If the farmer had two thousand bushels of corn, the Government would "loan" forty-five cents a bushel or nine-hundred dollars to the farmer with the corn as the Government's security. When the loan period

¹⁷Ibid., p. 557.

¹⁸The Republican, January 4, 1934, p. 1.

¹⁹Ibid., January 18, 1934, p. 1.

came to an end, the farmer could pay off the loan and thereby regain possession of his corn if the local market was above the price support (in this case forty-five cents per bushel). If the price was lower, the farmer would let the Government take his corn.²⁰

Any Government program of this size was bound to have complications. The farmer producing over his quota would have to destroy the surplus whether it be corn or livestock. To avoid this, someone having a surplus of hogs would simply have them "disappear." This could be done by bringing them to a neighbor not in the program or selling them secretly to those who needed pork. To the farmer there was something wrong with a program that ordered food destroyed while people were starving in the cities. As a result very few farmers were troubled with their consciences after having some of their surplus "disappear."²¹

The very complexity of the program proved too much for many farmers, and The West Point Republican warned of a racket being worked in the new Government programs. In one incident a stranger drove onto a farm with a truck. After informing the farmer that he was a government agent who was sent to pick up the farmer's surplus pigs, the

²⁰Saloutos, Hicks, pp. 468-469, 486-487.

²¹Interview with Alfred Canarsky, December 3, 1966.

farmer was convinced. So convinced was the farmer that he helped the man "load up the pigs and haul them away. Now the farmer is looking for both the stranger and the pigs."²²

Early in 1934 loans totaled 327 in Cuming County with 465,403 bushels "locked up."²³ In the summer of the same year the county corn-hog committee had to "adjust" the contracts resulting in lower benefit payments. The Federal Government lowered the quota of hogs to 142,157 and corn acres to 120,752 for the state of Nebraska. The State statistician was then ordered to divide the quota among the counties.²⁴ Lowering benefits did not increase the popularity of the Government program in Cuming County. As a result, the farmers in Cuming County voted down a proposal to have a program in 1935. Bancroft Township, however, had a favorable vote as did the State and nation.²⁵

In 1935 the same proposal carried Cuming County almost two-to-one while Bancroft voted "yes," sixty-two to sixteen.²⁶ The same trend was followed by the nation

²²The Republican, June 21, 1934, p. 1.

²³Ibid., February 1, 1934, p. 1.

²⁴Ibid., June 28, 1934, p. 1.

²⁵Ibid., October 11, 1934, p. 1; Saloutos, Hicks, p. 497.

²⁶The Republican, October 21, 1935, p. 1.

as farmers coast to coast voted six to one in favor of a corn-hog program in 1935.²⁷ Many factors accounted for this overwhelming approval; one was the entrance of corn-hog checks in the rural economy. The Republican reported, "Cuming County has received the largest number of checks and the largest amount of corn-hog money of any county in the state."²⁸ In the first payment, \$278,064.70 was distributed, \$195,088.53 in the second, and \$187,996.98 in the third and final Government price support payment.²⁹ While Government checks helped the situation, so did the reduction of acreage and livestock. The shortened supply was a major factor in the general rise of corn prices during the 1930's. For example, it has already been noted that in 1932 corn was selling for twenty-five cents a bushel in Cuming County while in 1933 it rose to forty cents and in 1934 it was eighty-two cents.³⁰ The Roosevelt farm program could not take full credit for the shortened supply, however. The years 1930-39 were among the driest in the county's history, but nature did not turn the county against the Democrats.

²⁷Saloutos, Hicks, p. 497.

²⁸The Republican, August 9, 1934, p. 1.

²⁹Ibid., August 9, 1934, p. 1; December 20, 1934, p. 1; April 18, 1935, p. 1.

³⁰Nebraska Agricultural Statistics, Annual Reports, p. 4.

When the elections were held in 1934, no one forgot the New Deal of the Democrats. Nearly six thousand votes were cast in the biggest election ever held in the county.³¹ As in 1932 the vote leaned toward the Democrats, although the margin was not as large in the village or the county at large. Moreover, a Republican, Karl Stefan, was sent to Congress; he remained in Congress throughout the 'thirties and 'forties. On the whole, however, it was a Democratic year down to the office of State Representative.³²

In spite of a successful celebration of Bancroft's fiftieth birthday in 1934,³³ the village was still experiencing hard times. The Board of Trustees agreed to turn off the water in the homes of those persons who would not or could not pay their water bill.³⁴ While this appears to be cruel, the village treasury was in dire straits. The general appropriation ordinances for 1934 and 1935 were the lowest ever levied.³⁵ In the fall of 1935 the situation went from bad to worse. The general fund had no money left to pay the village bills. The Board then transferred the "warrants" to the water works fund from which future bills were to be paid. This, of

³¹The Republican, November 8, 1934, p. 1.

³²Ibid., p. 8. ³³The Blade, May 3, 1934, p. 1.

³⁴Minutes, September 5, 1934.

³⁵Ibid., July 2, 1934; May 9, 1935.

course, put the water works fund in a poor financial condition; and a special meeting had to be held to work out the new problem.³⁶

A cartoon in The West Point Republican illustrated the local viewpoint on the financial situation as it pictured John Q. Public staring at the following:

M stands for money with which debts are paid
 O stands for ore from which money is made
 N stands for "not much" which we have on hand
 E stands for economists with their "Supply and Demand"
 Y stands for you'n me who wonder what it's all about.³⁷

Confusion probably mounted on January 6, 1936, when the United States Supreme Court declared the production-control activities of the A. A. A. unconstitutional. Although much of the nation seemed to oppose the first A. A. A., the second one was not long in coming.³⁸ Now the emphasis shifted from production-control to soil conservation; however, the farm subsidy remained.³⁹ A subsidy was certainly needed when 1936 hit the farmer not only with drought but grasshoppers and dust storms as well. In the early spring The Blade reported some dust storm activity. The editor commented, "we would rather

³⁶Ibid., October 7, 1935; October 21, 1935. The water works fund was the largest in the treasury.

³⁷The Republican, February 28, 1935, p. 6.

³⁸Saloutos, Hicks, p. 501. ³⁹Ibid., p. 557.

the weatherman would turn on a lot of moisture so that we would not have to wash our necks and ears quite so much."⁴⁰

Grasshoppers had been a part of life throughout the community's history as was periodic drought. By 1936, however, the State was entering the war against the "hopper."⁴¹ The State aid consisted of poison bran which seemed to attract large numbers of hoppers. The farmer would plow a furrow and then sprinkle some poison bran inside. When the farmer was dissatisfied that the bran would not kill them, the next step was to drive a tractor wheel down the furrow just after the hoppers (usually large numbers) had crawled in to eat the bran. Thus, by crushing the insects, many were killed; but grasshoppers still remained.⁴¹

The most serious problem, however, was drought. Rainfall was lacking in most years during the 'thirties. On the Fourth of July, 1934, rain poured down on beautiful green acres of corn; but after the Fourth dryness hit. In July and August, when corn needed moisture the most, very little was available. Now the farmers watched as the rich, green fields of corn turned into coarse, dry,

⁴⁰The Blade, March 28, 1935, p. 1.

⁴¹The Republican, July 2, 1936, p. 1.

⁴²Interview with Charles Conn, November 25, 1966.

brown stalks.⁴³ In 1936 there was hardly any rain at all. In that year corn was selling for \$1.18 a bushel in Cuming County, but few farmers had any to sell. The average yield was 3.3 bushels per acre.⁴⁴ Some farmers fought back; for The West Point Republican reported that Bancroft farmers were among those who resorted to irrigation, although this was limited to those living near Logan Creek.⁴⁵ But nature could not be defeated; by August, Cuming County was eligible for emergency drought aid. The Resettlement Administration had the responsibility for aiding the farmers. The Republican stated as soon as Cuming County was declared a drought area, the R. A. would approve farmers and farm laborers to work with the Works Progress Administration.⁴⁶

By September, Cuming County was a drought area; thus, the W. P. A. began providing jobs for drought-stricken farmers.⁴⁷ These were times when those few farmers wealthy enough to hire help did not have to beg as there was a steady demand for jobs. When a farmer needed help, he

⁴³Interview with Harold Schnier, December 18, 1966.

⁴⁴Nebraska Agricultural Statistics, Annual Report, 1933, p. 4.

⁴⁵The Republican, July 30, 1936, p. 1.

⁴⁶Ibid., August 6, 1936, p. 1.

⁴⁷Ibid., September 24, 1936, p. 1.

could find it on any terms. Upon arriving in town in the morning, the farmer could hire a man for the afternoon. Many times the hired hand would offer to work free in the morning just to get the noon meal and then work all afternoon for fifty cents.⁴⁸

On election day Bancroft voters returned Franklin D. Roosevelt to the White House by a vote of 304-190.⁴⁹ This vote indicated approval of the New Deal which had not ignored Bancroft. In 1938 the village received one of twenty-four grants received by the State. This was the first major grant from the W. P. A. Some \$2,523 was to be spent for street and city park improvements.⁵⁰ The W. P. A. was not the only New Deal agency active in Bancroft as the Public Works Administration provided a grant for the school building.⁵¹ By 1939 the village had approved and was ready to begin construction on a new school auditorium financed in part by the P. W. A. Thus, the village found the Federal Government active in a heretofore prohibited area. No longer were local affairs, purely local, including the construction of a high school gymnasium.

⁴⁸Interview with Alfred Canarsky, December 3, 1966.

⁴⁹The Republican, November 5, 1936, p. 7.

⁵⁰The Blade, February 3, 1938, p. 1; The Republican, February 3, 1938, p. 1.

⁵¹The Republican, January 14, 1937, p. 1.

⁵²Ibid., April 29, 1937, p. 1; January 19, 1939, p. 1.

The Bancroft Chamber of Commerce, known as the Business and Professional Men's Club, did not rely upon outside aid alone to better the community. An editorial on the front page of The Blade indicated its support of the Business and Professional Men's Club by criticizing those who would not join the club.⁵³ The businessmen were active. In 1939 The Blade noted, "the Leimer brothers . . . walked away with the first prize money in the amateur contest . . . which opened the free street programs sponsored weekly by the Bancroft Business and Professional Men's Club."⁵⁴ These programs were an attempt to attract out-of-town buyers. Their quality varied, but many were quite good as was pointed out by The Blade.

One of the best of the summer series of free programs was presented Wednesday evening featuring the team of Jerry and Fita, formerly with the Robert F. Ripley Shows at the Chicago World's Fair. Nearly 800 people enjoyed an hour's entertainment which was featured by an exhibition of glass and fire eating. Included in the acts was lighting of cigarettes from a flame issuing from the mouth of Jerry, the fireeater, the consumption of a major part of a 150 watt light bulb and a human pin cushion act in which buttons were sewed to the flesh of the stomach and needles were driven into the arms and legs.⁵⁵

One can almost sense the excitement, feel the pushing and justling, and see the crowded streets. The 1930's were

⁵³The Blade, May 26, 1938, p. 1.

⁵³The Blade, June 15, 1939, p. 1.

⁵⁴Ibid., July 13, 1939, p. 1.

near their end, and with them would go the hunger and want of the depression. Things were already getting better despite a slim corn crop in 1939. Most businessmen began to do better as early as 1938, but no sizeable profits were to be made until the 'forties had begun.⁵⁶

The 'thirties had left their mark on the community of Bancroft. Few had more material wealth than in 1929. Many more had experienced the lack of basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter. As the depression began, some predicted the exit of the rural village from American life. However, the village adjusted to the situation and remained a significant part of the national scene.⁵⁷ Bancroft is only one village in a huge nation; therefore, one cannot study it alone and discover the significance of the 1930's in rural America. But the village is "typical," and the 1930's had perhaps a "typical" effect on it. The village neither prospered nor disappeared. One could say that the village was a success in that it remained nearly at the same population level that it was in 1929,⁵⁸ but this would be misleading. What the village

⁵⁶Interviews with Clement Ward, December 3, 1966, and Alvin Browning, December 3, 1966.

⁵⁷Edmund de S. Brunner, J. H. Kolb, Rural Social Trends (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933), pp. 299-300.

⁵⁸United States, Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930. Population, I, 27-11; Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940. Population, I, 27-11.

did prove was that by a combination of local determination and Federal aid, Bancroft, Nebraska, could ride out the depression years of the 1930's.

CHAPTER IX

WORLD WAR II AND THE POST-WAR AGE

While the 'thirties were nearing their end, attention began to be devoted to the foreign scene. Discussion over events in Europe and Asia began to take precedence over whether or not a business would be able to continue for one more year. In the autumn of 1939 The Blade carried a cartoon reflecting the mood of the people not only in Bancroft but very likely in the entire nation. The caption read, "We neutrals, hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil, but we may think as we like." Above stood a drawing of a man holding a newspaper describing the bombings and other horrors of war.¹ But the war in Europe was not all horror for America. To fight a modern war required enormous amounts of equipment and food. Jobs were beginning to appear. The Federal Government was again a factor, for in 1941 a provision was made for the education of out-of-school youth in industries of a national defense character. Classes were soon organized in the Bancroft school district.² Furthermore, the rains began to fall

¹The Blade, November 2, 1939, p. 1.

²Ibid., March 20, 1941, p. 1.

again, partly accounting for increased agricultural production.³ But the relative prosperity was not blinding the people to the fact of war in Europe. In the summer a collection of scrap aluminum was another sign of preparation for war.

Still, when the conflict arrived, few were mentally prepared. The Blade sadly reported to the local citizenry the "dastardly assault" by the Japanese, along with the command that the home front back up the campaign against the Axis.⁴ The activity was quickly under way. Two months later the local home front organizations were in operation.⁵ The role of Bancroft like most of the state was food production or one of "defense through agriculture."⁶ Gardening was emphasized in order to cut down home consumption of canned goods, thereby allowing more food to go overseas. In Bancroft a committee was organized to get garden pledges.⁷ Moreover, Savings Bonds and Stamps were once again widely advertised and sold; rationing was begun;⁸ and the Advisory Defense Committee was organized.⁹

³Olson, pp. 336-337.

⁴The Blade, December 11, 1941, p. 1.

⁵Ibid., February 5, 1942, p. 1. ⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., March 12, 1942, p. 1.

⁸Ibid., February 5, 1942, p. 1.

⁹Ibid., March 19, 1942, p. 1.

Bancroft was the first town in the county to exceed its quota in the 1943 war fund drive by collecting almost six-hundred dollars in less than a month.¹⁰ The following year the village made its assigned quota. Many citizens worked in door to door campaigns for not only war bonds, but for Navy relief and other worthy causes as well.¹¹

Rationing was a part of war that was unpleasant for all on the home front. In 1943 a total of 1,683 ration books were issued to citizens of the Bancroft area.¹² Sugar, fuel oil, shoes, gasoline, coffee, and tires were a few of the goods taken for granted during normal times that were quite difficult to obtain during war years. But there was always the black market. Although a majority of the citizens never participated in this crime, the author recalls hearing many parlor conversations of the black market which allowed one to purchase his need if he had the money. Perhaps The Blade was indirectly referring to this unpopular crime when it condemned chiseling on rationing regulations which would knife one's neighbors and friends. This note was one of "ten ways to help Hitler," and the letter

¹⁰Ibid., October 21, 1943, p. 1; October 12, 1944, p. 1.

¹¹Ibid., May 7, 1942, p. 1; November 19, 1942, p. 1; October 18, 1945, p. 1.

¹²Ibid., February 25, 1943, p. 1.

was signed "Adolph Schlickelgruber," "Hairy Feeto," and "Ben Mussylino."¹³

In the spring of 1942 the Victory Belles were organized. These ladies made no small personal effort to aid the home front. Besides assisting in bond drives, they held card parties and served luncheons; the money they raised was used to purchase gifts for soldiers overseas.¹⁴ Several issues of The Blade carried "thank you" letters from grateful soldiers. In the fall of 1942 the Belles helped sponsor one of thousands of junk rallies held across the nation during the war. This particular event was also a social occasion as there was a community sing in the evening.¹⁵

The village voiced little outward criticism of regulations and rationing while the conflict was in progress. But as soon as the war ended, the regulations¹⁶ were too heavy to bear. It seemed as the Democrats were blamed for the inconvenience. Prosperity had returned and with it a rise in Republican political victories. In the election of 1946 the Republicans had little difficulty

¹³Ibid., April 2, 1942, p. 1.

¹⁴Ibid., March 19, 1942, p. 1; April 20, 1944, p. 1; May 25, 1944, p. 1.

¹⁵Ibid., September 24, 1942, p. 4.

¹⁶Ibid., September 28, 1944, p. 1.

in carrying Bancroft. The only Democrat elected on the local ticket ran unopposed.¹⁷

The Republican years of the later 'forties in Nebraska were prosperous ones for the farming community, but not so rich as to eliminate the motive for robbery. In the spring of 1951 five business places were burglarized, and the number would have climbed to six if the burglar would not have been chased away by the store owner. The owner, living in the back of the store, was awakened by the sound of breaking glass. He arose; and looking through the curtains which divided the living quarters from the rest of the store, he observed a man going to the cash register. The owner then called out,

"What do you want here?"

The surprised burglar stammered back, "I'm the night watchman."

"You can't be. We don't have a night watchman."

Again the man replied stammering, "My name is J. P. Guggenheimer. I'm with the F. B. I. I'll show you my credentials. If you don't come down to the corner with me, I'll have to put you under arrest." Then he warned, "Don't get me cornered," and ran out the door.¹⁸

The Blade never reported the capture of the fast-talking burglar.

¹⁷Ibid., November 7, 1946, p. 1.

¹⁸Ibid., May 10, 1951, p. 1.

Although the above noted break-in was exciting, the village had other forms of "entertainment." In 1949 Bancroft celebrated her seventy-fifth birthday with the traditional midway shows, pageant, and whisker club contest.¹⁹ The big annual event was the Bancroft Rodeo which entertained many during the 'fifties. Usually, it lasted for two days, attracting many champion cowboys trying to win cash prizes. There were few worries about empty seats as the bull riding and brave rodeo clowns provided a variety of entertainment. In addition, the Bancroft Saddle Club presented fine exhibitions of horsemanship.²⁰ The Thomas Shows on the midway seethed with activity²¹ as boys young and old fought to see who could spend their money the fastest. But the rodeos died, for the later 'fifties were not prosperous enough to allow the community enough money to spend on such rollicking events.

The prosperous 'forties were not without limitations. The depression years had cut deep into the agricultural economy. After twenty years of bad prices and crops no one could suddenly become a rich man. The ranks of farmers, slowly at first, then rapidly, became thinner. Modern machinery and the lure of the city influenced a marked

¹⁹Ibid., June 30, 1949, p. 1.

²⁰Ibid., June 11, 1953, p. 1. ²¹Ibid.

decline in the rural population. The rural towns likewise declined, and Bancroft was no exception. In 1920 its population was almost seven-hundred;²² by 1950 it was six-hundred;²³ and by 1960 it had declined to five-hundred people.²⁴ With the decline in numbers came the inevitable decline in business establishments. The Bancroft Blade, a strong business under the management of Ross Cates for forty years, became less able to support itself after his death in 1948.²⁵ Inside of five years the paper had four owners until it died in 1953. The Blade had no easy death; its last issues cried out for public support and community effort. In 1949 the editorial read, "Could it be that we of Bancroft are in a rut? Maybe Bancroft is dead!"²⁶ By 1953 the maybe was no longer in doubt; for a somewhat untactful editor stated, "Again this Sunday evening Bancroft was a ghost town. There wasn't a creature stirring, probably not even a mouse. No wonder it is called a 'hick town.'" He then concluded, "A few

²²U. S., Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920. Population, I, 251.

²³U. S., Bureau of the Census, Seventeenth Census of the United States: 1950. Population, II, 27-19.

²⁴Nebraska, Legislative Council, "Nebraska Incorporated Cities and Villages," Nebraska Blue Book (1962), p. 475.

²⁵Obituary, Ross E. Cates, The Blade, March 4, 1948, p. 1.

²⁶Ibid., January 13, 1949, p. 1.

years from now where will Bancroft be? It won't even be a broad spot in the road."²⁷ The cold fact was simply that there were not enough people left to support the same number of businesses which in turn bought advertisements in The Blade.

In 1949 the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Omaha Railroad was losing \$50,000 a year; and, therefore, they discontinued passenger service.²⁸ In 1961 the tracks were torn up and the road bed was sold.²⁹ The trains were no longer to pass through Bancroft. The story is the same for other businesses unable to support themselves with the decline in trade. In 1954 the movie theater closed.³⁰ In 1957 the International Harvester Implement dealer quit business,³¹ and a few years later the John Deere Implement Company left Bancroft.³² This in turn took away a good part of the farm trade, for most farmers in coming to town for machinery parts and repairs would also purchase groceries and other items. In 1953 Alvin Browning, who had been in business since 1911, stopped selling auto-

²⁷Ibid., October 22, 1953, p. 1.

²⁸Ibid., October 6, 1949, p. 1.

²⁹Interview with George Fox, August 1, 1966.

³⁰Telephone interview with Myron Vogt, July 19, 1967.

³¹Telephone interview with Mrs. Fred Louis Vogt, July 19, 1967.

³²Interview with Alvin Browning, August 8, 1966.

mobiles. He had already stopped his implement business. The automobile manufacturers were forcing their dealers to take a certain number of cars each year whether the dealers could sell them or not.³³

Bancroft like the rest of rural America was caught up in the dilemma of the population movement to the cities. This was and is an urban age; a rural community cannot exist as it once did. Modern transportation and good roads have brought competition not only from surrounding communities but also from area cities as well. The old rural economy was a self-sufficient unit with flour mills, small factories, and many shops. Furthermore, it is obvious that a rural economy does not support nearly as large a population as does an urban one. After close observation few could look at Bancroft, Nebraska, or any of her neighbors and see a rapidly rising growth rate. These small mid-western towns cannot expect huge populations without large investments by an urban industry. If by some miracle fifty-thousand people moved into the village of Bancroft overnight, one would not be surprised to find most of them gone in a short time. This is not to say Bancroft is an evil place in which to live, but it could not support a sudden influx of increased population. Where would the people live? What would support them?

³³Ibid.

This is not to say Bancroft and the surrounding area will completely fade away. On the contrary, in recent years the village has started to come alive. Local interest in advertising Bancroft as the home of John G. Neihardt has resulted in the construction of a prayer garden commemorating the poet's gift to the literary world. Moreover, since the farming community today is highly complex and much more extensive in terms of investment in equipment, there is a continual need for farm services ranging from mechanical repairs to fertilizer application and sales. In 1966 two new fertilizer plants were constructed in Bancroft which point up its new role as a rural service area. The agricultural industry needs banking services and repair shops as well as grocery stores. These needs will continue and no doubt expand. Although an agricultural service area does not promise a sprawling population center, one cannot measure the quality of a community by size alone. The people of rural America are providing themselves a good way of life and performing a vital role in a highly complex society. The village of Bancroft has adapted to this new role as part of a rural economy in an urban age.

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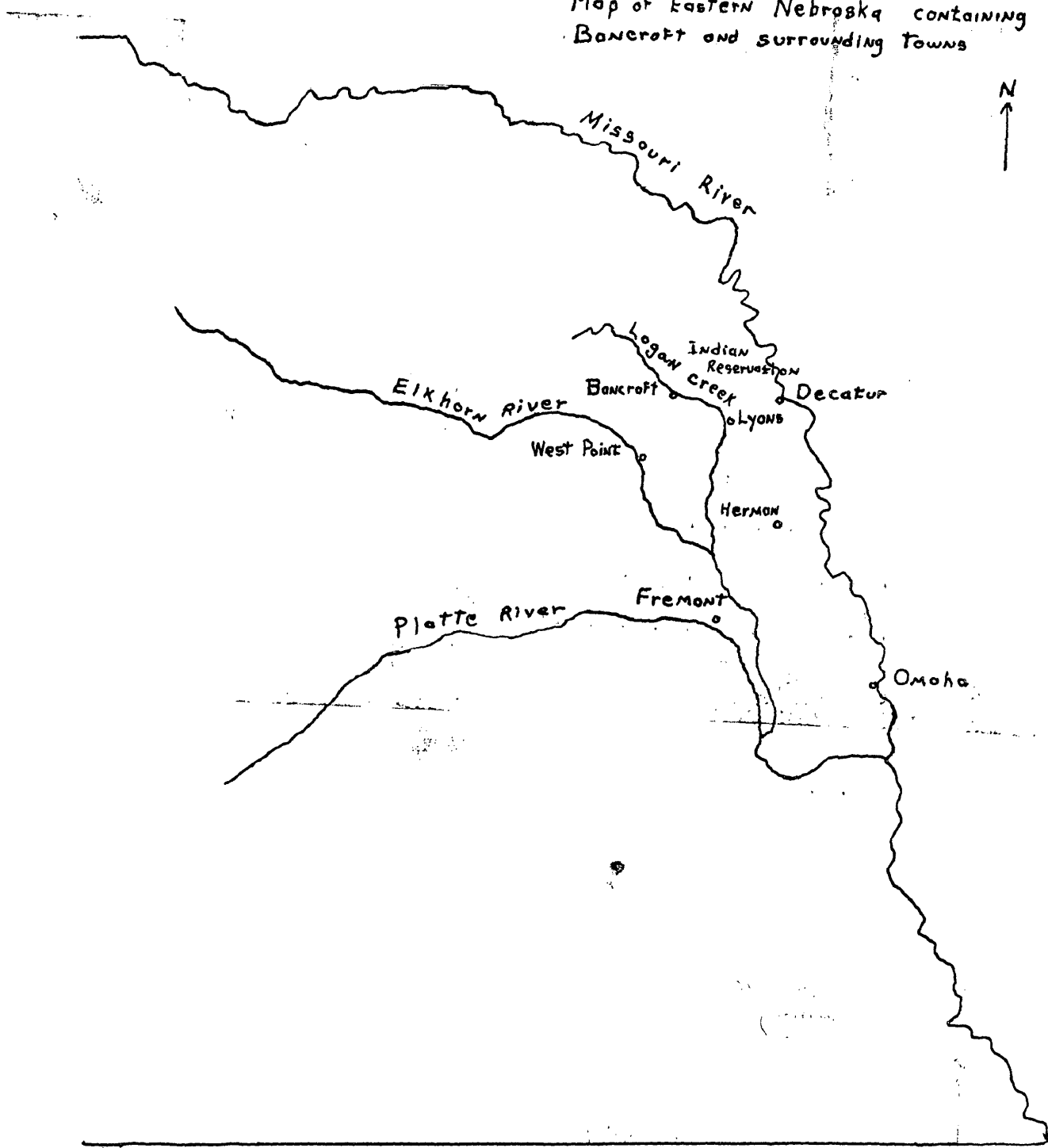
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Map of Eastern Nebraska containing Bancroft and surrounding Towns



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