

Incidents of Pioneer Life
on the
Nebraska Frontier

Stories by Edwin Jeffrey (E.J.) Babcock

Introduction and Notes by Bryce Babcock

January 1999

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Oscar Babcock



Edwin Jeffrey Babcock

INCIDENTS OF PIONEER LIFE ON THE NEBRASKA FRONTIER

Introduction and Background

by Bryce Babcock

In 1872 a group of families became the first non Native-American settlers in the North Loup River valley in central Nebraska. These pioneers were led by my great-grandfather, Oscar Babcock. Born on March 15, 1835, in Persia, NY, then a pioneer settlement, Oscar Babcock was the son of George C. and Almira Brown Babcock. Besides Oscar, there were two other children, Delia (born in 1838) and Heman A. (born May 19, 1842).

George was an ordained minister of a small denomination known as Seventh Day Baptists. Their belief that the proper day of worship was the "seventh day" (Saturday) set them apart from those they often referred to as "first day people", including other Baptists, and gave the denomination its name. The denomination was formed in this country when seven members of the First Baptist Church of Newport, RI, had broken away to organize the 1st Seventh Day Baptist church in 1671.

Migrating to frontier areas and starting communities was nothing new to those bearing the name Babcock, or Badcock as it had been spelled in England. The first immigrant of that name, James Badcock, arrived in this country, probably from Essex, England, sometime prior to 1642 and settled near Portsmouth, RI. At the age of 59 James Badcock had been baptized and united with the Seventh Day Baptist Church of Newport and Westerly, RI, in 1678. In 1662, he and his son, John Babcock, as he would come to spell the name, then a boy of 16, were among the first to settle at what became Westerly, RI. Three generations later, another John Babcock, moved to Brookfield, NY, in about 1796, and from there to Persia, NY, about 1831.

Finding themselves greatly outnumbered by "first day people" who also held most of the best land, a number of these Seventh Day Baptist (S.D.B.) families had moved in 1846 from Persia, NY, to the vicinity of Milton, Rock County, Wisconsin. Among the new arrivals was George C. Babcock's family. This area had already been settled by some members of the denomination, but again finding most of the good land already taken, several of the families, including the George Babcock family, moved north, probably about 1849, to locate a new S.D.B. colony at Dakota, Waushara County. Oscar, the eldest son, was about 14 years of age at this time.

On June 1, 1858, Oscar married Marietta Amanda (Metta) Bristol. He was "licensed to preach" by the S.D.B. church that same year, but was not officially ordained as a minister until 1872. Four children were born to Oscar and Metta Babcock: Edwin Jeffrey (May 14, 1860), Arthur H., (1865), Myra Henrietta (Aug. 6, 1869), and George Ira (1871). Oscar was elected to the Wisconsin State Legislature in 1863 and served two terms (1863-1866) during the Civil War years.

Unfortunately, the soil in the area proved to be rather poor and after a number of years was becoming exhausted, and with soldiers coming home from the war another move seemed to be indicated. A number of the Dakota families, including George C. Babcock, his son Heman and Oscar's and Heman's in-laws, Ira and Nancy Bristol, moved to Brookfield, MO, and others to a location in Minnesota, but neither location proved to be very satisfactory.

Meanwhile, Oscar remained in Dakota where, in 1871, he was instrumental in organizing a group interested in founding an S.D.B. "colony" in Nebraska. Oscar served as president and corresponding secretary of the group. A committee of four was appointed to go west and seek out a suitable location. They traveled to Omaha where they were told about the virgin country of the North Loup river valley. They proceeded up the Platte and North Loup rivers to the mouth of Davis Creek., climbed the Chalk Hills and looked down on a fine expanse of valley about the present towns of North Loup and Scotia. One member of this "scouting committee", Charles P. Rood, was particularly impressed with the beauty and apparent fertility of the valley as seen from the top of the Sugar Loaf, the highest point and closest to the river of the Chalk Hills.

(It is an impressive view. I remember first climbing it myself, with some of my Nebraska cousins, when I was a boy of about 10 years of age, visiting from my home in Wisconsin. We knew this high hill then, not as Sugar Loaf, but as Happy Jack, which had been the affectionate nickname of a lone hunter, scout and trapper, Jack Swearngen, who was living in the area when the first settlers arrived and aided them on many occasions. Even now, whenever I drive north from St. Paul, NE, to see the old homestead at North Loup, I never fail to stop at the foot of the Sugar Loaf -- or Happy Jack -- and climb to it's summit to take in that view. I can, for a brief moment at least, share the feelings of the little band of explorers. One of those moments came in 1999 when I could share it with my wife and son.)



North Loup Valley from "Happy Jack"

Returning to Dakota, the committee made a favorable report, and plans were put in motion to make a start on settling the new location. In the fall of 1871, another small party of four men returned to a location a few miles north of the Chalk Hills and entered claims, before returning to Dakota for the winter. The names of some of these early pioneers may be of interest: the original exploring committee consisted of C. P. Rood, Capt. N. B. Prentiss, C. H. Wellman and Amos Travis. The second party led by C. P. Rood also included Oscar Babcock's confidential clerk and associate, John Sheldon, Herman Rood, and Mansell Davis.

E. J. Babcock, eldest son of Oscar Babcock, in an Historical Address delivered to the S.D.B. General Conference on August 19, 1923, fifty years after the settlement of the North Loup area, described the next steps in these words:

"Elder (Oscar) Babcock, as president and corresponding secretary, spent much of the following winter in correspondence, first with his brother Heman at Brookfield, who at once joined the movement, with the two Johnson boys, Byron and Gib., and other Minnesota people, with the Humbolt people, a large party of whom agreed to join the movement early the next spring, with people at Welton, Iowa, at Milton and other Wisconsin points, and with very many others all over the denomination, sending them samples of the North Loup soil brought back by John Sheldon, and writing copiously for the public press upon the movement. So thoroughly did the colony function and the movement materialize, that on almost the same day in early May, 1872, settlers gathered in two camps at the new settlement.

"From Dakota came Elder Babcock, John Sheldon, C.H. Wellman, George B. and Charles J. Rood, Mansell Davis and Mrs. Sarah James and families; from Humbolt (though most of them very recently from Welton, Iowa) came Albert H. Davis, A.J. Davis, Jr., Austin H. Terry, Albert L. Clark, T.C. Davis, John Furrow, Martin Elliott and Garritt Maxon; from Welton, direct, came Wilson (N.W.) Babcock, and L.H. Babcock and families and others; from Brookfield, MO, came Heman A. Babcock, Ira S. Bristol, George W. Larkin and families, S.P. Horr and Frank Larkin and a very little later the Horr family; and from Milton came Dr. Charles Badger, Amos R. Burdick, and families; and from various points came D.C. Meryott and family, L.C. Jacobs and family, Albert E. Green and family, and several others.

"Early the next spring, also came from Dakota, William A. Prentice, C.W. Hill and others; and from Berlin and other Wisconsin points soon came Henry T. East, A.F. Payne, William B and Morris T. Green, the Cottrels and a little later, Thomas O. Barker, T.P. Weed, Alonzo Collins Taylor, young D.A. Stewart, Solon C. Terry, Mary T. Babcock, all settling in Mira Valley, and Frank Watts and Alpha L. Crandall from Illinois, and a further strong contingent from Welton, Iowa, consisting of Jud (A.J.) Davis, William Stewart, Jesse Worth, George (N.G.) Clement and families, Peter O. Babcock and a little later John Hill Babcock and families and others; and soon also Herman (W.H.) Rood, returned to the settlement and in 1875, Charles P. Rood and Elder M.B.C. True and families came and settled in Mira Valley.

"A little later most of the rest of the Brookfield, MO, group, the aged Elder George C. Babcock, Henry A. Chase, Henry and George Thorngate, John Larkin, John Manuel, Ezra Brace, P.W. Crandall and families and Frank Larkin came."

Oscar Babcock had traveled to Nebraska with the first group of settlers, including his brother Heman. Heman and Oscar had married sisters, daughters of Ira and Nancy Warner Bristol. I've mentioned Oscar's wife Marietta Amanda (Metta) Bristol; Heman's wife was Theressa Oressa (Retta) Bristol. Another sister also came to North Loup; Dora Bristol, had married Henry Babcock, a cousin of Oscar and Heman's, but Henry had been killed at the Civil War battle of Shiloh in 1862.. After laying out his claim and constructing a "dugout" in which to house his family, Oscar returned to Wisconsin to prepare his family for the move to Nebraska that fall.

Originally, they had planned to make the trip using a team and wagon but the baby, George, was seriously ill and this delayed the start. Then suddenly Metta was stricken with typhoid fever. She died just three weeks later, and was buried in

Dakota, WI. George had recovered from his illness, but it was now too late in the fall to make the trip by wagon, so the grieving Oscar with the children, ranging from 12 year old Edwin to the baby George, just over a year old, traveled by train to Grand Island and then the last 50 miles to North Loup by wagon, arriving there in November, 1872, and moving into the dugout home where they would spend the first winter.

The first years of the colony were difficult ones. The stories that form the main part of this booklet relate some of the major events of those years. Before getting on with these tales, however, I want to add just a bit more background of the major players in these events. Oscar Babcock, went on to become the first postmaster of North Loup, a position he held for 27 years, and first pastor of the S.D.B. church, preaching the first sermon, performing the first marriage and conducting the first funeral in the new county. He played a major role in the organization of Valley County, laid out the townsite for the village of North Loup from a part of his homestead, was chairman of the village board, and a member of the school board for a number of years and served terms as Superintendent of Schools for Valley County, Immigration Agent and County Commissioner.

Oscar Babcock was elected as first County Judge of Valley County and, in 1878, was elected to the Nebraska state legislature where he served one term. Throughout his lifetime he took an active part in keeping saloons out of the community and maintaining North Loup as a "dry" community. He was also instrumental in persuading the railroad to build through North Loup and Ord, communities the original survey had bypassed. Oscar Babcock passed away in his 80th year, on October 9, 1914, following a brief illness, though he had been suffering from severe health problems for many years. He is buried in the North Loup cemetery.

In the summer of 1873, Oscar Babcock replaced the "dugout" with the first log house in the community, a structure built of red cedar logs hauled from over 30 miles away. He donated the dugout to the community to be it's first school house. The log cabin also served as the town's postoffice and later also as a schoolhouse.

Edwin Jeffrey Babcock was the eldest son of Oscar and Metta Babcock, having been born May 14, 1860, at Dakota, WI. Eddie, as he was known as a boy, was 12 years of age when the family moved to Nebraska, assuming heavy responsibilities for the motherless family consisting of his brother Arthur, 7, sister Myra, 3, and the baby George, just over one year old.

E.J., as he was generally known as an adult, wrote the following accounts of those difficult first years of the North Loup colony. They were written, in 1923 to help commemorate the 50th anniversary of the settlement of the community. He and his father are the major figures in the stories, but the reader will meet a number of the other pioneers mentioned in the foregoing account.

Like his father, E.J. Babcock, was to play a major role in the community of North Loup. He attended Hastings, NE, high school, Doan College, and graduated with honors from Alfred University in New York state. Having qualified to practice law, he intended to establish a practice in Omaha but gave up any larger ambitions and, as the dutiful eldest son, returned to North Loup instead, due to his father's health problems.

With limited opportunities as a lawyer in such a small community, he engaged in many other activities in order to eke out a living. He organized the irrigation company and was it's manager for three years, organized and was secretary of the Building and Loan Association, helped to organize the town's first telephone company, served as secretary of the school board, was one of the originators of North Loup's annual Pop Corn Days fair, was a leader of the Good Roads Movement, and during World War I served as the Food Administrator of Valley County.

Except for a few years away at college and university, E.J. Babcock lived his entire life, after his 12th year, in North Loup where he and his wife, Jessie True Babcock raised a family of 5 children, the eldest, Oscar True (O.T.) Babcock, being my father. E.J. died on December 28, 1925, at his home and, like his father is buried in the North Loup cemetery. His obituary stated in part, ".... (the) characteristic of always putting others ahead (of himself) was the leading one of his life.... he was the head and front of everything that tended toward bettering conditions in this valley he loved so well." My grandfather died 5 years before I was born and it's one of the great regrets of my life that I never knew him.

The stories that follow were preserved by my grandmother and have been in my possession now for many years. Periodically, I have taken them out and re-read them and have never failed to be moved by these firsthand accounts of early pioneer days. It seems time that they were shared with a larger audience.

NOTES ON THE STORIES

By Bryce Babcock

I do not know the order in which my grandfather wrote down these stories, but I have chosen to arrange them chronologically as they actually happened. It seems to make the most sense, and I would not be surprised if that was, in truth, the order in which they were written. The first in the series, is a kind of introduction to the others and concerns itself mainly with a description of the new country and of the building of the first dugout home. It concludes with an anecdote which, I like to think, shows E.J. to not be without a sense of humor. The description of how the dugout was constructed is, I think, of particular interest.

The story of the Great Blizzard of April, 1873, is unusual in that it is written in a kind of blank verse style. I have no idea what possessed my grandfather to write it in that style, but am grateful that he abandoned it after that one effort. I think his narrative writings are much more effective. It has always been my thought that the Blizzard story was the first, and that my grandfather, also, decided that the style was not his strongest suit and never repeated it. Still, it is a story that grips me every time I read it and I marvel at the courage and fortitude of these new settlers in a strange land having to cope with such an event.

The brief but vivid account of the flood that almost ended the family's days in their new home is an exciting tale. Again, the matter-of-fact courage with which dreadful hardships are met is a tribute to all pioneers. The story is so graphic that when I read it, I can almost hear -- along with my grandfather -- little Myra scream as the dam gives way and the flood waters rush into the dugout. It is, I believe, also typical of Oscar Babcock's character that he spends over an hour in the water, swirling chest deep, salvaging first his important papers and documents, and only when that is done, turning to things like clothing, bedding and provisions.

More evidence of my grandfather's sense of humor is apparent in the episode of the coyotes, and the account of the real "Indian Scare" brings out one more element of the dangers and hardships that were almost everyday occurrences for these hardy pioneers. The description of how to jerk venison and the memory of how good this simple fare tasted to a very tired and very hungry 14-year-old, also helps bring the story alive.

The account of the great Prairie Fire of 1878 has, to me, always been the most thrilling and exciting of all these stories. The speed at which a prairie fire can travel and the ease with which it can jump fire breaks is almost beyond belief. This story, as well as an account of the great blizzard, are recounted in the book The Trail of the Loup, by H.W. Foght, 1906, but, in my mind at least, with much less impact. I can't help feeling a great sense of pride when I think of my grandfather's actions and narrow escape on that grim day. The losses suffered by so many of the settlers were severe, yet, as was true after each of the other natural disasters, they persevered and carried on. They met each test with courage, fortitude and determination. It is my hope that other readers will derive from reading these accounts a deeper understanding and appreciation of those remarkable pioneers who went before us.

Bryce Babcock

January, 1999

Incidents of Pioneer Life on the Nebraska Frontier

by Edwin Jeffrey (E. J.) Babcock

The Dugout Home

There is always a charm about pioneer life. It is always full of hardships. It is also rich in incidents of interest. Many of these came to all early settlers. Very many more came to me due to my father's official position. My father was Elder Oscar Babcock, a pastor of the (Seventh Day Baptist) church at Dakota, Wisconsin, organizer and President of the Colony and first pastor and first postmaster at North Loup and in Valley County and in all this upper North Loup Country. These positions and many others of prominence that he held led to very many such incidents.

This is the 50th anniversary of the organization of our S.D.B. church at North Loup, the first church of the county and of all this North Loup country, for many years the church home of all early settlers, first day people as well as Seventh Day. On Thursday afternoon at Conference an Historical program will be given. It is thought that a few preliminary items and a narration of a few early incidents and anecdotes may further the interest in Conference and in this Historical session, since nearly every church in our denomination was represented in this North Loup Church.

As one of the very few remaining first settlers of 1872, I have been asked to furnish the Recorder a few of these. They will be mostly personal incidents in my own and my father's life, but they will all be characteristic of the experiences of all old settlers. I shall attempt no literary style or finish, and will confine this preliminary item largely to a description of this new primitive country as it appeared to me, a boy of 12 years of age, as I now remember it.

I had come from a small village and a thickly settled country where all the cultivated fields were enclosed with log fences. All the houses and buildings were frame or log. There were no prairies. Nearly all the land had originally been covered by heavy forests of white oak, pine, tamarack and other large timber. In the North Loup valley and in much of Nebraska all was strikingly different.

As the first settlers forded Davis Creek and picked their way around and over the hills which at this point bordered the river and rounded the "Sugar Loaf", a vista of unexcelled loveliness opened before them. Here was a beautiful and fertile

valley 6 miles wide, skirted by low hills or bluffs. In summer it was carpeted with green but later, when killing frosts had browned the green and prairie fires had burned the carpet of grass, it was black and the charred blades of burned grass glistened like mirrors.

Disagreeable and dread was the day when a strong wind or gale would pick up the fine ashes and seared blades and fill the air. This was known as a dust storm. It cut into the very flesh, filled one's ears, nose, eyes and clothing. So dense would be this cloud of ashes and grass cinders that it was blinding. No wonder the early explorers caught in such a dust storm reported the country a veritable Sahara Desert. Thanks to civilization these prairie fires and dust storms are now entirely a visitation of the past. Our children know them not; they have never seen one.

So, too, this North Loup country was in reality on the extreme border of civilization. When C. P. Rood, the leader of the first committee that spied out the land, and we early settlers climbed the "Sugar Loaf" and viewed the landscape o'er, all was virgin wilderness. Not a human being, not a house, not a plowed furrow, not a road or fence met their view. Had the early settler started north toward and through Canada, toward and over the Arctic Ocean, toward and into the great Pacific, to the borders of Mexico, he would not have seen any of these things, unless perchance some poor Indian. Yes, we were on the border land, sure enough.

The valley was almost as level as a house floor. As I stood on my father's new claim on the present site of the town of North Loup, waiting for him to stake off his new Dug Out, only five trees or very small clumps of trees could be seen as far as the eye could reach. How different in this respect from my old Dakota home. How different from the North Loup of today, a veritable forest (by comparison), the home of more birds on one forty acres than on any equal area in the state or in very many other states, a bird paradise as Rev. Shaw and Dr. Burdick can testify.

Most of our early houses were either "Dug Outs" or sod. A very few were made of logs. None were frame. Mira Creek ran southeast through father's claim. Along it's margin were flats about 4 1/2 feet lower than the regular plane of the valley. Near the center, just back of the present parsonage, was a draw or ravine of about the same depth running onto the flat and on into the creek. The north bank or side hill of this ravine was chosen as the site for our house, the first in the present town, and later used as the first school house in this upper North Loup valley.

It was a typical location. As it was made, so were all the others.

It was in this wise: Back about 10 feet from the bottom of the ravine on the high land a hole was dug 14 feet square and 4 feet deep. On the south side a door and passage way 3 feet wide was cut. On the same side a space about 2 feet square was leveled off, 4 boards were nailed into a square frame for a half sash, 4 light, window.

Then the walls were raised about 2 feet higher by laying up willow logs. Another log was laid across the middle for a ridge pole. Then willow poles were laid from this ridge pole to each side wall for rafters. Across these rafters were laid small willows and on top of these long blue grass was spread. The side logs were covered the same. The dirt taken from the hole was then piled back against the side logs and over the roof 'till all was completely covered. Not a vestige of anything could now be seen but a round smooth pile of earth and clay except on the door and window side. If a roof was desired to be extra good, fresh sod was broken about 3 inches thick, cut into 2 foot lengths and laid on top of the clay and enough more clay spread over the sod to well fill the cracks. (My father's) cash outlay for window, stove pipe, latch, nails and lumber for door and frames was \$2.78 1/2 .



Eld. Oscar Babcock's Old Dug Out

Oscar Babcock's Dugout Home

In this dug out, with no floor but mother earth, the President of the Colony and the first Pastor and his family and the family of his brother, H(eman) A. Babcock, afterwards prominent as Sheriff, County Clerk and Auditor of Public Accounts, 7 people in all, lived the first winter. How we were buried for three days in the greatest "Blizzard" which the west ever knew and how we were finally, a few weeks later, all drowned out like rats from a hole, I will narrate in a future item.

It was while working on this dug out the first day after reaching North Loup that I found my first game. I had carried a new shot gun all the way from Wisconsin and had it with me that first morning. Toward noon John Sheldon, who was helping father with others, hailed me and said he had just seen a badger coming down the ravine. Grabbing my good gun to protect our workmen I hurried to a side depression a few rods up the ravine, cocked my gun and waited, lying flat upon my face, for the badger to approach. The moment was tense. Wild animals were known to be fierce. Soon there came square upon me the Badger, sure enough. It was Miss Hattie Badger, daughter of Dr. Chas. Badger, just from Milton (Wisconsin), with dainty dress and parasol, aristocratic as always in bearing, unmindful of her dire danger. Suffice it to say, nerve failed the bold hunter and his quarry escaped unscathed, but not so the brave hunter from the jests of the men for many a long day.

The Great Nebraska Blizzard of April 13, 14, 15, 1873

E. J. Babcock

It was Easter Sunday of Eighteen Seventy-three.

It was warm and pleasant and sunny and fair as May.

Farmers were planting their early potatoes and gardens.

What an even climate was this Nebraska land.

How different from our old Wisconsin home;

No storms, no sleighs, no snow, no awful drifts,

Perpetual sunshine, the promised land, indeed.

Each morn was heard the sound of saw and hammer,

And merry and cheery was talk and song and jest.

First permanent house of this new town was building.

'Twas Elder Babcock's, leader and pastor, he;

Post-office, home and church it was to be;

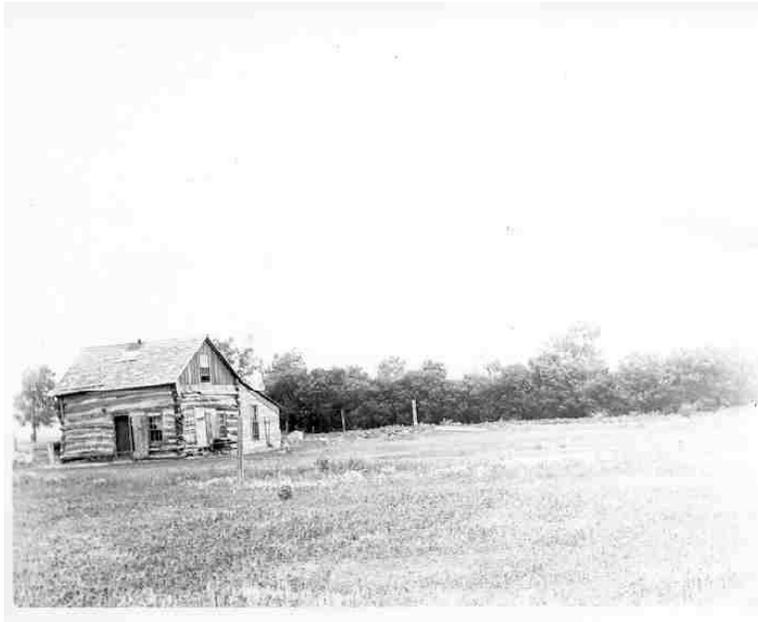
Court-room and County Judge's office.

Red cedar were the logs like Solomon's temple,

From cedar canyons thirty miles away.

Fragrant was the odor of resinous logs and chips.

No wonder they sang at their work that balmy day.



Oscar Babcock's Log Cabin

Toward evening a gentle mist from the north came down,

Just what gardens and grass were needing.

It dampened the odiferous chips and logs

Till sweetest perfume filled the balmy air.

The walls were up, the roof almost completed.

No joist was laid, but Mother Earth its floor,

No door nor window in, the gables open.

But with the weather calm, no storm, no wind,

Home went the men to beds of pleasant dreams.

The morning seemed to come and wakefulness,
But still the darkness brooded over all.
Another nap, another wakening, yet dark.
A match was struck, the clock showed after seven.
Springing from bed a window he sought.
Another match showed but a pane of white.
The door opened out upon a wall of snow
And thrusting out his good right arm
The snow wall stopped it like a wall of stone.

With poker and with butcher knife, toiling long,
Slowly a hole was burrowed through
Out to the blinding, raging storm.
The wet, gale driven snow filled ears and eyes,
Clung to their lashes, to beard and hair.

His shovel and ax he must get someway,
Left last night at the new log house,
Eighty and more long rods away.
And so he started, no danger fearing.
Knew not that so many that fearsome day
Would perish while going a few rods away.
Found the new house blown flat to the ground,
Found ax and the shovel among the debris

And soon he was back to his home in the ground.
Was it instinct or luck, or providence kind
That guided his steps through the snow and wind?

Breakfast over, the storm again must be braved,
Wood must be cut, stock fed and saved.
Again he crawled out through the snowy hole
And we filled it behind him with straw-tick, old.
And sallying forth once more in the storm,
He sought the stable built, too, in the bank.
But only a great white mound was there.
So he burrowed down through snow and roof
And slid down into the dark abyss,
And groping found horses and cow.
So filled was the floor with trampled snow
Their backs now rubbed the roof above.

A little hay was put in the racks
And with more hay he caulked the cracks
And sealed it over with heavy snow.
Then sought with his ax the near-by tree.
Hard snow was drifted to near the top
To where a deadened limb he found
From which he cut a few sticks of wood.

With wood and ax and clothes wet through
He started again for his buried home.
But hampered by ax and arm full of wood
He missed his course and was lost on the plain.
Stopping, he questioned his quickened wits.
Turned his other cheek to the cold north wind
Retracing his steps to the known creek bank.
Two times repeated until he found
Upon the third, his dugout mound.

For three full days and nights the wild storm raged.
Our small supply of oil must soon be gone.
To husband it we sat in total darkness,
Two families huddled in this one small room.
Each day another trip was made,
To care for stock and bring supplies of wood.
Toward Wednesday night he burrowed out again, and lo!
This time the snow and wind had both abated.
Quicker than I can tell, the boys and I
Crawled through the hole into the welcome light.
The storm was over, and we dug away the snow
Letting the family out and the daylight in.

Although it snowed so furiously and long,
The prairie land was still all bare and black.
The streams and canyons caught the snow
Full to their level, and so hard packed,
A crow-bar would not pierce it.
Full twenty feet in Mira Creek it lay,
And Mrs. Shepard tells us how
In solid bank it bridged the river
For man and beast to travel over.

Many and sad are the tales that are told
Of this fearful blizzard in the days of old.
How Austin Terry, resourceful and strong,
Worked like a slave the whole day long
To save his team; and still he tries
'Till they perish before his very eyes.
How L. C. Jacobs saved team and cows
By driving them into his new log house.
How thousands of cattle, like panicked troops
Found watery graves in the Platte and the Loups;
And many brave men of stalwart form
Lost limb or life in this demon storm.

The Great Flood of the Spring of 1873

E. J. Babcock

Old settlers are often asked why the storms and the floods of pioneer days were more serious and more tragic than in later years. Great storms and floods, they tell us, are nothing uncommon, even in these later days. Why the interest, then in these early ones? I answer, that now we are prepared for them, with better buildings and improvements and built in safer locations. Now we know what to expect, then we did not. Now we have near neighbors, and good roads and bridges, then we had none. Now we have telephones, then they were unknown. Now we have other property, goods and effects with which to repair and replace. Then we often had none other. Now we have railroads and near towns where all kinds of supplies can be had. Then, the nearest railroad and city was Grand Island, fifty miles away, with no public road for most of the distance, and not a single bridge, except one over the South Loup River near St. Paul.

These conditions often made an unexpected storm a real and living calamity, long to be remembered.

And so now in the new settlement, winter had gone, the big blizzard was past. Now, we said to ourselves, we have nothing more to fear, except Indians. After all, our good old dugout, even if it could be buried in absolute darkness for three long days and nights by snow, was now light and safe. Nothing more could trouble our night's rest, nor our work by day. Even during the blizzard, we had kept warm and dry. Now we knew our sturdy neighbors had chosen for their pastor, a warm and dry abode. The weather was warm and dry. If Nebraska was not such a dry country, if it could only rain and start the new grass, all would be merry as a wedding bell.

And sure enough, all things come to those who wait. It has commenced to rain this spring afternoon. Light at first, then harder and harder all the afternoon; but we were dry and safe for once, and all rejoiced in the needed rain. Toward night, the creek, a few rods away, commenced to rise. By dark, the banks four or five rods wide at the top, and about twenty feet deep, were half full and the water still rising. It was great fun to run out through the rain and watch the black whirling and eddying water.

At bedtime the banks were full, but we were surely safe because, even if it continued to rise, it would soon spread out over the entire flat or first bottom,

which was ten or fifteen rods wide. Soon this happened, and water trickled into the three foot trench, cut for a doorway into the dugout. So father told me to take a spade and make a low dam across the narrow passageway. I then threw up a few inches of dirt, packing and trampling it down. Very soon the water was up to the top of my little dam, and taking my spade, I built the dam still higher. But (with) the water still rising, father came and soon had built a good wide substantial dam about two feet high, tamping it and tramping it well.

The water had now spread out over the entire flat, and was running with a strong current, which father said must soon carry it away. Harder and harder however came the rain, and still the water raised, and with it father raised the dam. He was now becoming uneasy and worried. It was nearly eleven o'clock. Our team, which after the blizzard, had been kept at John Sheldon's was three and a half miles away. Our two nearest neighbors, Dr. Badger and Bert Davis, both lived across the creek, and could under no possibility be reached.

We were now surrounded by this flood of water, the draw or ravine in front of the dugout being also filled with water. Hurriedly, we built the dam up a foot higher till father could take the table, and a straw tick filled with straw out over the dam to where a big dry goods box stood, placing the straw tick on top of the table and box for a roof. Coming back, he feverishly placed two heavy board trunks on top of the bed, one on top of the other, and placed sister Myra, three years old, on top of the trunk. Then telling me to watch her, he took baby George, about a year and a half old, in his arms, stepped onto a chair, from the chair to the top of the dam, and from the dam to the solid bank, and followed by Aunt Retta, went through the pouring rain to the box, and left them. He got back just as the dam gave way, and the water was pouring into the dugout. The lamp had been set on a high shelf, and I remember yet very distinctly how Myra screamed as the water broke through before father returned, and how we waded, and slipped and fell, and finally crawled out over the slippery bank, and how I saw the two trunks, then turned bottom side up, with all their contents, whirling around in a mad eddy of water, mud and debris.

When father went back the water was just up to his upper vest pocket. For nearly an hour yet he worked gathering up first his most valuable legal, business and family papers and records, old day books, ledgers and legislative documents from the water, then clothing, bedding, provisions and other personal effects, carrying and towing some to our rendezvous on the bank and piling some on shelves and on tops of boxes placed on the bedsteads and stove.

All the long night the rain fell in torrents. Aunt Retta, baby George and Myra sat in the dry goods box under the straw tick. Father and I sat under the table.

Brother Art happened to be staying at Grandfather Bristol's for the night and did not get home till morning, missing a part of the experience. All night long, however, vivid flashes of lightning would disclose the dark, ominous and raging water about 20 feet away as we sat in silence, since the incessant roar of the waters drowned our voices if we assayed to talk. Even when daylight at last came no escape, or fire or food was available till father had gone to John Sheldon's, three and a half miles away, and back for a team.

But what was then a rather strenuous and somewhat dangerous experience comes back to me now as a very pleasant and agreeable remembrance of pioneer days. Such floods were much more common in earlier days than now, due to the fact that our prairie would burn over in the fall and winter leaving nothing to absorb or check the flow of the water. Now grass, crops, shrubs, trees, forests and plowed fields take up and absorb the water and check its flow until much of it settles into to soil.

Chapter 3 - Indians, Indian Scares and Incidentally Coyotes

E. J. Babcock

The North Loup settlement was made just after the frightful Indian massacre in Minnesota, where many of our people had lived. This North Loup settlement was the hunting, fishing and trapping ground of the Pawnees, whose reservation was about fifty miles southeast of us. The bloody and treacherous Sioux were northwest of us and continuous horse stealing, raids and warfare were carried on between the two. These Sioux on their expeditions never failed to steal the horses of white settlers nor to commit any other depredations, when there was any chance of their escape, and woe to the poor settler whom they caught away from home and unprotected.

They too, however, had real grievances against unprincipled trappers, hunters and other whites. An Indian swing in a tree top, used as a grave, and another grave, probably of a chief, on the top of a high hill, had been violated and robbed by white ghouls, and many a lone Indian had been picked off by a hunter with his new long range needle gun. An unprincipled horse dealer at Grand Island had even penetrated the Bad Lands, and had run off an entire drove of several hundred Indian ponies, and many fights were had between Indians and settlers and between the Indians and the soldiers.

It was fifty miles to the nearest railroad, and 25 miles to the nearest small camp of soldiers to the southeast, and no protection for thousands of miles to the north and west. The settlement was on its nerves all the time over Indians. Any untoward noise or light at night meant an Indian scare.

I remember during the summer of 1873, someone saw a flaming beacon light on the hills or bluffs away to the north; then they saw (or thought they saw) one, miles to the west. By noon next day scores of settlers imagined, or thought they had seen, similar ones in other directions and had heard strange noises or calls. Soon all had gathered at father's (Eld. Oscar Babcock's) log house, for a grand council.

Many were in favor of abandoning the new settlement for good and all. Others wanted to withdraw down the valley toward the older settlements and wait for soldiers. But to do either and leave their homes and crops would be suicidal to the new colony. When this latter course seemed likely to prevail, Eld. Babcock proposed that a sod fort be built on his farm. The clearer headed ones at once fell in with the plan.

The hot heads reluctantly acquiesced, but insisted that all other work should be entirely dropped, and that work on the new fort should commence early the next morning. But father, and these clearer headed ones, soon devised ways to postpone the building from day to day 'till the excitement died down and it was never built. Father always thought that had they yielded to the moving plan, the new Seventh Day Society would have been irretrievably crippled if not entirely lost.

My first Indian (?) scare was the same fall. Cold weather and several light snows had come upon us, and I had no shoes and was still going barefooted. Thomas McDowall had started the first shoe shop over on the corner of Dr. Badger's claim, and was making me a pair of boots. With my brother Art and my cousins Ernie, Evie and Laudie, we started a little after dark across the prairie to the shoe shop about half a mile away toward the hills. It was snowing again and I wanted and needed my new boots.

We were about halfway over when, through the still night air, there came a blood curdling, hair raising yell, and a quick succession of war whoops, from just over behind the hill, such as we had never heard before. It was as though ten thousand demons were gloating over some victim in their wild orgies. An Indian war dance, we were sure. To our heels, to our heels, and back we raced, wild with fright and fear. Father, too, had heard it and with Myra and little George had rushed out of doors and they were listening with drawn and anxious faces.

There came another wild and continuing yell, and howls of rage, and our fear was unspeakable. But suddenly father's face relaxed, a twinkle showed in his eye, and he commenced to smile as we crowded about with the smaller children clinging to him. Why this change in his demeanor? "Coyotes, only coyotes," he told us and tried to quiet our fears. We could not believe it, and even were it coyotes, there were at least ten thousand in the pack we tried to tell him, and they would soon be upon us.

Later, during the winter months, we became used to them, and their yells and howls, and learned that a half dozen coyotes on a clear night could make the noise of several hundred men, and that one coyote on a hill top, the noise of twenty five or thirty people. It seems unbelievable, but such is the fact.

My next personal scare was not due to coyotes, nor to any freak of the imagination, but was a real live, honest to goodness, Indian experience.

George Larkin needed a new house. He had outgrown the old dug out, where the first election in Valley County was held, and wanted to build a log house. The government gave the early settlers permission to cut timber in the cedar canyons, not only for their own use but to sell at Grand Island and other settlements for a little ready money or in trade for their supplies. One can scarcely tell what this meant to the new settlement in the (North) Loup valley.

Few if any of the early settlers had the money to buy lumber, and even if they had the money, it must be brought from Grand Island fifty miles away, through sand, mud and streams, and over the Chalk Hills, with no regular road and but one bridge. Sod houses were comfortable in many ways, but they had their drawbacks, and so the aristocracy of the valley sought to build log houses of oak, cottonwood and preferably cedar, and for strength, durability and beauty, the red cedar of the Loup valley vies with the famous Cedars of Lebanon.

Mr Larkin's team had been stolen some time before by a noted outlaw band. So he arranged to go ahead on foot and cut his logs, and in about a week, my uncle H(eman) A. Babcock and myself were to drive up with two teams and haul the logs down for him. Mr. Larkin was one of the best hunters in the settlement, and had found a new canyon, about fifty miles up the river and about 30 miles above the farthest settler, filled with the very finest cedar trees. So, taking his two guns, a rifle and a shotgun, his ammunition, a blanket, an ax, a butcher knife, a little flour, a skillet, some salt and matches, he started on foot to find and cut his logs. Like most hunters he could walk with such a load all day with a long and well remembered stride.

At the appointed time, uncle Heman and I, a boy of 14, started with our two good teams and the running gears of our wagons, carrying our grub boxes, blankets, guns, lariet ropes and other acouterments tied and strapped onto the back axles and hounds of our wagons, we sitting on top. We camped at noon, at the last dugout in the settlement, but no one had occupied it for many weeks. Beyond, there were no more settlers, and not a sign of civilization, only bare prairie. As we went further up the valley, even green grass disappeared and we could see nothing but ashes for our horses to eat except close to the river.

Upon reaching the mouth of the canyon, we left the valley and drove up it for several miles. We reached the Larkin camp a little before dark and found that he had his logs cut, trimmed and piled ready for hauling, but we could not well camp for the night since there there was no grass nor water for the horses. So, although we had already driven over fifty miles and were very tired and hungry, we loaded up and drove down the canyon to the valley and on to the low river bottom where we found a little green grass and could get water, and camped under the high banks of the second bench, picketing our horses.

I never was so hungry in my life. Mr. Larkin had shot a deer and a young elk and had jerked the meat which he had cut in strips. For a part (of the meat) he had dug a narrow trench in the ground, built a fire in it, raked out the ashes, put in his strips of venison and then covering it all over, had allowed it to cure. The other part he had likewise cut into strips and hung up high in the trees, curing it in the air. As we started down the canyon with our loads, he gave us each chunks of this dried or jerked venison, which we sliced and ate. I thought I had never tasted anything so good in my life, and I have ever since remembered that jerked venison as the best meal I ever ate. One who has never tasted dried venison, jerked and cured in this manner, cannot appreciate its juicy and fine flavor. After making camp, we built a fire, ate our further supper of bread and more venison, spread our blankets upon the ground, and being very tired and weary, were soon sound asleep.

I don't know when it was that I woke up in the night. Everything was still, so still it seemed uncanny. Even the horses had finished cropping the witch grass and were also quiet. But I had suddenly wakened and had a strange feeling that something special had roused me. I lay there for what seemed half an hour wondering about it, when I noticed one of the others moving and we soon discovered that we had all awakened in the same way and at about the same time. We lay there a while longer, discussing the strange occurrence, when there was gradually borne in on our consciousness a faint rythmic throbbing of the earth. This throbbing gradually became heavier and soon we began to hear, as well as feel, a faint beat, beat, beat,

like the hoofs of a galloping horse. We put our ears to the bare ground and then to the wagon wheel, and listened. The sound grew gradually louder and nearer, beat, beat, beat, 'till we felt sure that it was either wild elk or horses.

They were coming from the direction of the settlement. What could it be? There were no settlers nearer than our own, thirty to fifty miles away. No soldiers were known to be in that part of the country. We soon concluded that this must be a band of Sioux Indians returning from a hunt or from a raid on the settlement. Would they discover us? Would our horses whinney or keep still? Would the Indians attack us? There we were, two men and a boy, alone, and many miles from the nearest settlement, with a band of Indians between us and the settlement, bearing down upon us.

The very least they would do would be to run off our horses, but that was more than enough. We got our guns ready, crouching under our wagons, and prepared to defend ourselves and our horses if necessary. The Indians seemed to be coming directly at us, but there was nothing more we could do. There was no timber we could hide in. To get on our heavy farm horses and try to ride away would be suicidal in the bright starlight.

Finally, we saw a faint blot down the valley that resolved into dots, that grew into forms, while the steady thud, thud, thud, became louder and closer until they were almost on us. We held our breath for fear the horses would whinney to their passing brothers on the bank above. The whole band swept by so close that we could almost count them, could see the starlight glint on their rifles, could hear their voices and almost see their eyes.

Had their course been only a few rods closer to the river they must have noticed the black bulk of our wagons and our horses below the bank. Some instinct of danger must have kept the horses quiet and not a whinney or noise escaped them. Soon the band had swept by and finally disappeared in the west. So we lay down again and listened to the thud, thud, thud, fade into a beat, beat, beat, and that into a throb, throb, throb, 'till silence reigned again.

We found it hard to sleep again that night. We reached home next day and soon Mr. Larkin's fine log house replaced his little old dug-out. The dug-out fell into disuse and disappeared, and so what might have been one of the landmarks of the county went "down into the vile dust from whence it sprung, unwept, unhonored," but not entirely "unsung" and our Indian fright becomes only another pleasant memory. But nevertheless our danger had been real and our escape and safe return home a great relief at the time.

Chapt. 4 - The Great Prairie Fire of October 12, 1878

E. J. Babcock

Only a few weeks ago, a very intelligent acquaintance from the east, who had read many accounts of prairie fires, listening to an anecdote about one, commenced to question me about them. Just what do you mean by prairie fires running, he asked me? Why, I explained, when a fire starts in the dead prairie grass, even if there is no wind, it will burn and move out further and further in a sort of circle. If there is a little wind it will burn faster, and in the direction the wind is blowing. It will even creep up and toward a wind. That is what is meant when one says a prairie fire runs.

But why is there always a wind when there is a fire, he again asked? Because, when even a small fire is started on a still day, the hot air rises, and in a prairie country in a very few minutes cold air rushes in and the wind commences to blow, increasing with the extent of the fire.

What is the fire guard you speak about? Anything that stops a fire, such as a stream or a steep bank where there is no grass to burn. Early settlers would break, or plow, a few furrows around their buildings or hay and grain stacks. Then they would plow a few more three or four rods farther away and burn the grass between them. These two strips of furrows and the burned space between was the common fire guard made by early settlers. Any wide strip or field of breaking, or plowing, of course was a good fire guard.

Why would some fires burn over the entire country and others only burn strips or a part of the country? When a fire started on one side of a stream or a fire break and had to run slowly against the wind, it might die out, or could be whipped out easily. If it started on the other side with nothing to check it, a strong wind would often carry it faster than the best horse could run, and it would jump over all narrow fire breaks.

In the fall the thin Buffalo grass on the tops of the hills would ripen and become dry first, while the heavy grass in the bottom of the canyons, or along the banks of a stream would still be green and would not burn. In such cases a fire would follow and run along the tops of the hills and ridges, but not in the canyons. This would then leave these ridges as great fire breaks for the rest of the season.

What do you mean by whipping the fire? We would take any old sack, coat, garment or blanket and wet it, and swinging it like a flail, pound out or smother out the long trail of fire, commencing at one end or at some fire break, and try to whip it out to another fire break.

How high and wide would a line of fire be? From a few inches or perhaps a foot high, and about as wide when the grass was small or damp, to twenty-five or thirty feet high and about as wide, when there was two or three years of old grass and a strong wind.

How fast would a fire run, he finally asked? From merely creeping up against the wind, to fifty or sixty miles an hour when wind and grass were favorable.

The greatest fire of all the early days was on October 12, 1878. Father and brother Art with our team, and cousin Ev with Uncle Heman's team, had gone to Grand Island freighting. Upon getting up in the morning, we found a strong wind blowing from the southwest. Soon we could see a cloudy appearance in the direction of the wind, and gradually it began to spread, and to reach our vicinity and we could smell smoke.

We knew a prairie fire was raging and, with the wind increasing, it would soon work around and jump all guards. The many guards might check it and turn it, and hold it in places from running with the wind, but nothing could now prevent it from soon creeping over the entire country. Much of the prairie had not burned off the previous year, and there was two years crop of grass in most localities, and dry as tinder. The wind had now risen to a gale of over sixty miles an hour.

Everybody was watching the drifting smoke. The air was becoming filled with ash cinders, pricking like needles. The sun commenced to darken, first like Indian Summer, until it was nearly hidden from view and everyone was scanning the southwest sky. Soon everyone was out with team and plow, making and burning (more) fire guards. But the wind was shifting back and forth all the time and no one could tell from just what quarter the fire would first reach him.

Cass and Eva Hill were staying with us children, and Cass and I jumped onto his two fast horses and rode to Watts Hill, a mile away, to see from which direction it was coming. Reaching there, we could see dark black smoke and flashes of fire on Boettger's Hill eight miles farther west. Cass started for his claim and sod house, and I back home to try and burn fire guards on our north line where we had three furrows plowed.

We had a good field of breaking, which acted as a fire guard, west of the house. It was only a mile back, and the horse ran at wild speed up and down the hills and ravines, never checking for a moment, 'till I slid off at the house where Eva and the small children were waiting for me. I had watched the head fire over my left shoulder, and as my feet touched the ground and I turned to look north, I saw the head fire reach the river northeast of us. It had run something over nine miles while I was racing on a fleet footed horse at top speed for one mile.

Grabbing a wet gunny sack and a handful of matches that Eva got for me, I ran to the north line where the few furrows intersected the creek and started my fire break. If I could burn out the corner of dead grass, weeds and underbrush of several years growth, and then back a few rods along the furrow, I might even yet check the approaching fire, now running more slowly and not directly with the wind.

But I had only burned a few rods when the wind changed, veering the fire directly toward me. I turned to run west and get out of the matted weeds, old grass and underbrush, where I might hope to meet the fire and run through it (where the grass was shorter) without tripping, but it was too late. Turning back I had barely time to jump into Mira Creek, six or eight feet wide, containing about a foot of water at the time. The fire, forty or fifty feet high and several rods wide, in the old, heavy and tangled grass, weeds and underbrush, was upon me.

I rolled in the shallow water to soak my clothes, submerging what little I could, and crawled furiously down stream toward and into the fire to allow it to pass over and by me, 'till I could hold my breath no longer. Popping up my head I drew in a mouthful of hot air, smoke and cinders. Then I ducked and crawled on and finally crept out into the heat and smoke. With hair and eyebrows singed and clothes soaked and plastered with mud, I hurried back to the house. The wind had shifted and I could now easily run through the fire line. My clothes and back and ears were badly burned. I remember I went to Hastings to High School that fall and I did not get rid of my worst scabs 'till midwinter.

I found our house, stable and bin of rye still unburned but still threatened by a side fire creeping up. Leaving these for the time, I joined George Clement and H. T. East and we hurried to Jud Davis'. He, too, was away freighting with Father. He had the only frame house in the valley, cows, hogs and large bins of wheat and oats. We worked hard and feverishly to save these but in vain. Another change of wind and all was gone except the house.

Retracing our steps to our place, now with these two men to help me, we again worked furiously for another hour, sometimes gaining a few rods, then losing it all again as we tried to whip out the remaining side fire creeping down between the creek and the road, a distance of only ten or twelve rods. Finally, after the fire had burned through one corner of our cottonwood grove and yard, and we thought everything lost, the wind shifted away from the premises for only a minute. Redoubling our efforts, we barely whipped out the remaining short line just as the wind shifted again for the last time toward us and our place was saved.

The next morning, somewhat recovered, I started as soon as it was light up the valley to find out what had befallen my uncles and grandparents. I met Uncle Heman (H. A. Babcock) coming on foot to hunt for Aunt Retta (his wife), Aunt Dora and baby Roy, who had started before the fire with a horse and buggy to visit Mrs. Travis up Mira Valley.

A more anxious man I never saw. He soon told me, as we hurried back, how he had lost his barn, cows, hogs and all his grain stacks and had barely saved his log house after the fire had caught inside; how Uncle Plummer Horr, the largest farmer in the valley, whose wheat field was one and a half miles long, had lost every stack, but Grandfather Bristol had saved his little house and belongings. He found later that my two aunts, with the horse and buggy, had been suddenly warned to drive to a nearby field of breaking, how they had run the horse at top speed and barely reached it as the flames licked the hind end of their buggy.

This is merely my personal experience. I cannot recount the thrilling experiences of many others. I cannot refrain, however, from barely mentioning the story of two heroes of that fearful day. Will (W. B) Green and Morris (M. T.) Green and their brother-in-law, Albert Cottrell, were up Mira Valley building a sod house. Ordinary furrows had been plowed and fire guards made. As they saw the mountain-like wall of flame approaching they attempted to burn additional guards, but the wind veered and the fire leaped all guards and was upon them. Their only recourse was to run through it. This they attempted to do and Will and Morris found themselves safely through but Cottrell had fallen in the fire.

If one needs run through a fire he always runs, if possible, directly towards the fire and against the wind. In this way he passes through it much more quickly and with more safety than in any other manner. The most dangerous and difficult way, is to run after and into it.

But there was no other alternative for the Green boys if any attempt was to be made to save Cottrell. Without hesitating a moment, both turned back into the fire and dragged out their companion, but it proved too late to save his life. Both (Green boys) were fearfully and frightfully burned. Will had on no shoes at the time and his feet were so badly burned that he could not move nor rise from the ground. Morris, who had his shoes on, managed to get up and attract the attention of Dan Fossey, a neighbor.

I well remember sitting up with them a few nights later. It seems to me as I now look back on it, there was hardly a spot on their bodies that was not a festering scab. I have never seen anyone so frightfully burned or suffering such excruciating pain. Both finally recovered, but Morris' hands were shriveled and drawn at right angles the rest of his life. Will is still with us (in 1923), having held many positions of honor and importance.

The many tales of the speed of this fire and the fire breaks that it jumped seem almost incredible. One would almost think that the parties overestimated or even exaggerated the width of these fire breaks and fields that the fire jumped, were it not known that it jumped the North Loup River at, at least, two points and that the river is about 60 rods wide.

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