

The Drought of 1894

Contributed by Catherine Renschler

The 1890s, known in song and story as the Gay Nineties, were anything but gay in Adams County. At the decade's beginning commodity prices were low, property taxes were high and railroad freight rates were exorbitant. Nebraska was in the midst of a political revolution marked by agitation against railroads and large monopolistic corporations known as trusts. Dissatisfaction with the Democratic and Republican parties had resulted in the formation of several new political parties, among them the Anti-Monopolists, Prohibitionists, Fusionists, and the People's Independent or Populist Party. In 1893, a nationwide economic depression began; banks failed back east, money was tight, and farmers were unable to secure loans. Business failures and employee layoffs resulted in severe unemployment in urban areas.

The weather was also a problem in Adams County in the early 1890s. Rainfall was low and July, 1890 saw several days of 100-degree heat topped by 110 and 115 degree days. The corn crop was destroyed and several businesses failed in Hastings. Sufficient rainfall in 1891, was followed by three increasingly dry years and a drought, which peaked in July, 1894. Spring temperatures in 1894 were abnormally high, reaching 105 degrees in May. Some rain fell in June, but it came too late for the small grain. To make matters worse, a late frost on May 17 caused severe damage throughout the county. Trees along the Blue River, with their curled, blackened leaves, looked fire damaged. Corn which was already up had to be replanted. Wheat and oats already nearly destroyed by the drought were further damaged.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. A popular 1890s theory was that the detonation of explosives caused rainfall. The "concussion theory" was based on observation of rain following battles. Some went a step further theorizing that smoke particles blown into the clouds precipitate rain. In 1891 a Chicago man secured a patent for producing rain by use of carbonic gas blown into the sky. The citizens of Grand Island had established a precedent in 1892 when they hired an Australian rainmaker named Melbourne. His fee was \$2,500 for three-quarters of an inch within four days. Grand Islanders anxiously watched pots of chemicals brewing, producing a gas carried aloft by iron pipes. To everyone's dismay only a slight sprinkle fell. Melbourne packed up his equipment and reportedly left for Cheyenne, Wyoming.

In May 1894 Hastings citizens wrote a Rock Island, Illinois rainmaker for assistance. He was too busy to come. He said, however, that for \$700 he would furnish enough material for two good rains, and requested Hastings send two men, "Masons (who could keep secrets) preferred." To them he would entrust rainmaking materials and instructions for their use. On May 26 Hastings merchants purchased eight kegs of gunpowder and exploded it at the fairgrounds, testing the theory that heavy explosions will produce rain. A slight shower fell, but it only settled the dust.

By July Hastings businessmen were desperate enough to hire rainmakers Morris and Son of Iowa. At a meeting of a newly formed rainmaking committee, Wm. Dutton was elected president, A.H. Cramer secretary and W.H. Lanning treasurer. Mr. Morris, who was present, proposed that for \$600 he would, within five days, produce a half-inch rain over 300 square miles of territory in this vicinity. His guarantee: No rain, no pay. Mr. Morris read testimonials from various parts of the country. The committee then began collecting subscriptions, and Morris and son commenced operations. After five days there was no rain and no prospects.

While rainmakers efforts fizzled, the farmers' situation deteriorated. On May 31, the Hastings Weekly Nebraskan reported the small grain crop lost. The Axtell Republican later reported that not enough wheat had been raised in two Kearney County townships "to winter a chicken". In June the Nebraskan reported the first moving wagons passing through Hastings heading east from western Nebraska. They were "making their escape while they still had something to do it with".

May and June had been bad, but worse was to come. No rain fell during the long hot days of July, but farmers had hopes for a corn crop until July 26th when all hope was lost. For two days previous a hot wind blew dust from the southwest. Matt Trausch, who farmed with his father north of Roseland, remembered the day well. It was too hot to work, so he sat in the shade of the granary driveway. He later compared the hot wind blowing through to the heat from a blast furnace. By nightfall brown withered corn leaves were blowing in the roads, and the air was filled with the odor of parched corn.

The Juniata Herald called it "a day that will go down in Nebraska history with the most destructive scorching wind and dust storm ever known." The recorded temperature had reached 112 degrees. The Grand Island Independent warned "Ninety percent of the farming class will be compelled to draw aid from the county or starve before many more weeks pass." On August 9th the Hastings "Nebraskan" observed trees dropping their leaves and advised watering them. It also reported reduction of rents in Hastings as many laborers were without work, and told of cattle being shipped to market due to lack of feed. On August 16th in a column titled "Looking Toward Relief" the Nebraskan estimated "it will take more than \$20,000 for charity in Adams County this winter", and August 23rd called the Omaha World Herald to task for denying the plight of western Nebraska. The Nebraskan estimated thirty moving wagons per day were passing through Hastings headed east.

Not every farm suffered a total loss. E.A. Philleo raised corn and vegetables on his irrigated land along the Blue River. Some farmers raised a few bushels of corn in low areas. Overall, however, lack of water was fatal to area crops. This fact filled newspapers throughout the year with editorials promoting various irrigation canal schemes. The incorporators of a canal project to carry water from the Platte River into Adams County asked the Hastings City Council for bonds to finance the project. However, a large group of citizens disapproved public funding for a private enterprise, and the canal never materialized.

In September the Kerr Opera House closed indefinitely and some merchants also closed shop. During the fall and early winter not one car load of grain was shipped out of Hastings, but nearly 200 cars of hay and grain were shipped in. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that Nebraska corn averaged only six bushels per acre; but in western Nebraska many fields produced nothing, not even fodder for starving livestock.

The Co-operative Relief Society opened an office in the Lincoln Avenue Building in Hastings in December. Its purpose was to coordinate relief efforts between public authorities, societies, lodges, churches and individuals. The secretary, through visits and inquiries was to maintain a list of those in Hastings receiving relief. Samuel Alexander, secretary, requested old clothing for the poor be left at the office. A charity concert at the Presbyterian Church raised \$300 for the city relief fund. It would be a bleak Christmas for many families. Mary Gauvreau Pigeon, age thirteen in 1894, recalled that each child in her large family received only an orange that Christmas. Years later Mary remembered making that orange last all day.

The Hastings Daily Nebraskan succumbed to hard times in January, 1895 and the Hastings relief committee, with seventy families on their list, was again requesting old clothes, especially old shoes. In Nuckolls County the commissioners halted roadwork designated to provide poor relief on the grounds money was going to the wrong people. February dust storms combined with zero temperatures to produce the worst month in settlers' memories. Gauvreau & Bergeron, grocers in the Stone Block, and the Galbreth saloon on Hastings Avenue, closed their doors. The Hastings Military Band gave a charity concert, but funds for the needy were still in short supply. The Nebraska Legislature finally passed a statute allowing county relief committees and County Clerk, C.B. Bigelow, organized one consisting of J. Wooster, A.V. Shockey, D.M. McElhinney, Wm. Lowman, C.C. Rittenhouse and A.V. Cole. In March the Nebraskan estimated 35 percent of Adams County farmers needed aid in the shape of seed and feed, and admonished "Plow deep and trust in Providence" and later "Nebraska's hopes are founded on irrigation and immigration." And finally in March Hastings Mayor, McElhinney, chairman of the county relief committee wound up its affairs and declared its mission ended.

No one living today remembers 1894, but local families have kept alive stories of the hardships suffered then. Catherine Kaiser Trausch, age eleven in 1894, often spoke of the heat and dust. She made her First Communion that year at Assumption Church, north of Roseland. She and her sister, Mary, walked barefoot--carrying their shoes to save the soles--three miles in the heat and dust to catechism classes during the summer. Catherine remembered that her mother, Susan Kaiser, who hadn't had a new Sunday dress for several years, took her old one apart, turned and restitched it. It was almost like new. Her father, Nicholas, was ready to give up on Nebraska and return to family in eastern Iowa, but her mother refused to leave, insisting they had a home here and they would get by. For several years the Kaisers paid only the interest on the farm mortgage, but they persevered and their descendants still farm in the Roseland area.

John and Bertha Kline, who lived north of Trumbull in Hamilton County, raised only one crop in 1894, bushels of turnips. On July 23rd, John broadcast turnip seed in a draw on his farm. An early August rain produced a bumper turnip crop. That winter the large Kline family survived on cornmeal saved from the year before, a beef they butchered and turnips. They considered themselves lucky and shared the turnips with their neighbors who had only cornmeal. Later their daughter, Kate, blamed her foot problems on the fact she wore two handed down left shoes until the next year's crop

came in.

Crops were better in 1895 and by year's end things were looking up in Adams County, but the drought's effects would linger for several years. Adams County's population in 1890 had been 24,303; in 1900, after several years of recovery, it was 20,900 a loss of over 3,400. It has been said those who had money left during the 1890s and those who didn't stayed and eventually became prosperous. In many instances this was literally true.

The 1890s drought pointed out the need for improved dry land farming methods, the value of diverse crop planting to decrease reliance on corn, and the advantages of irrigation. Technological advances during the twentieth century would meet many of those needs. A hundred years later, Adams County would be a national leader in irrigated farming and manufacturing of irrigation equipment. But foreshadowing the Great Depression of the 1930s, the harsh weather of 1894 took its toll on the region's settlers and city-dwellers alike.
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