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## O'Neill, Nebraska the first quarter century

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*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

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O'NEILL, NEBRASKA  
THE FIRST QUARTER CENTURY

A THESIS  
Presented to the  
Department of History  
and the  
Faculty of the Graduate College  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

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

by  
Gregory R. Passewitz  
August 1973

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

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Chairman

July 26, 1973  
Date

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sincere appreciation is given to Dr. Frederick W. Adrian, the staff of the Nebraska Historical Society, and to the many people who were kind enough to assist me in the preparation of this paper. Also, grateful recognition is given to my wife, Darleen, who helped type and proofread this paper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . . 1

Chapter

    I. JOHN O'NEILL . . . . . 5

    II. THE EARLY YEARS . . . . . 15

    III. HOLT COUNTY ORGANIZES . . . . . 30

    IV. RELIGION IN EARLY O'NEILL . . . . . 42

    V. THE RAILROADS AND O'NEILL CITY . . . . . 53

    VI. BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN O'NEILL . . . . . 63

    VII. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PROGRESS 1876-1900 . . . . . 77

SUMMARY . . . . . 96

APPENDIX . . . . . 98

BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . . 100

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. Map of Nebraska . . . . .	4
2. Map of O'Neill, Nebraska . . . . .	16
3. Map of Holt County . . . . .	32
4. Holt County in 1876 . . . . .	34
5. Map of O'Neill City . . . . .	38

## INTRODUCTION

A little less than one hundred years have passed since the founding of the present day city of O'Neill, Nebraska. Located in Holt County along the Elkhorn River this Irish settlement began as a dream of John O'Neill, its founder. From its conception the settlement grew in population and influence until it became the county seat as well as the center of a fine stock raising country.

The town of O'Neill had no special drawing card to lure settlers into the area. There were no valuable mineral deposits, the land was hard to farm and suffered from wind erosion and drought, and access into the region was by ox drawn wagons over the virgin prairie. In short, there was no easy road to success except the lure of cheap land and the idea of a new fresh start in life.

The identity of the first white man to have traveled in the region is believed to have been Father Pierre J. DeSmet, who worked among the Poncas which he called "the Flatheads of the Plains". During his layover of a few days Father DeSmet baptized several children and preached the word of Jesus Christ before several thousand Indians.<sup>1</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup>E. Laveille, The Life of Father DeSmet, S. J. (New York: P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1915), p. 208.



1846 and 1847 several groups of Mormons on their way to Salt Lake City camped for a few days near Oak Creek in north central Holt County.<sup>2</sup>

It was not, however, until the spring of 1870 that the first white settlers moved into what is today Holt County. Among them were M. Ford and Johnny Delvin.<sup>3</sup> They were followed in May of the same year by James Ewing, Calvin Gunter, J. M. Davidson, and C. Clemmens who settled near the same place. Ford died the next year and was the first recorded death in the county. The first recorded birth was Guy Davidson, February 21, 1872.<sup>4</sup> (Refer to Figure I, p. 4)

One of the first settlers to file a claim for a land purchase was William H. Inman. He erected a house on the banks of the Elkhorn River in 1871. Two years later on June 13, 1873, Henry H. McEvony, Frank Bitney, Eli Thompson, John T. Prouty, Eli and John Sanford from Wisconsin located claims a few miles northwest of Inman. Ten days later Herman Hoxie with his wife and two sons, Henry and Wilson, Samuel Wolf, and David Wisegarver settled near McEvony.<sup>5</sup> These settlers who numbered less than thirty constituted the

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<sup>2</sup>Atlas and Plat Book of Holt County (O'Neill, Nebraska: J. P. Golden, 1915), p. 3; Interview with Harvey Tompkins, July 2, 1973.

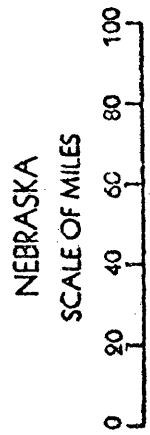
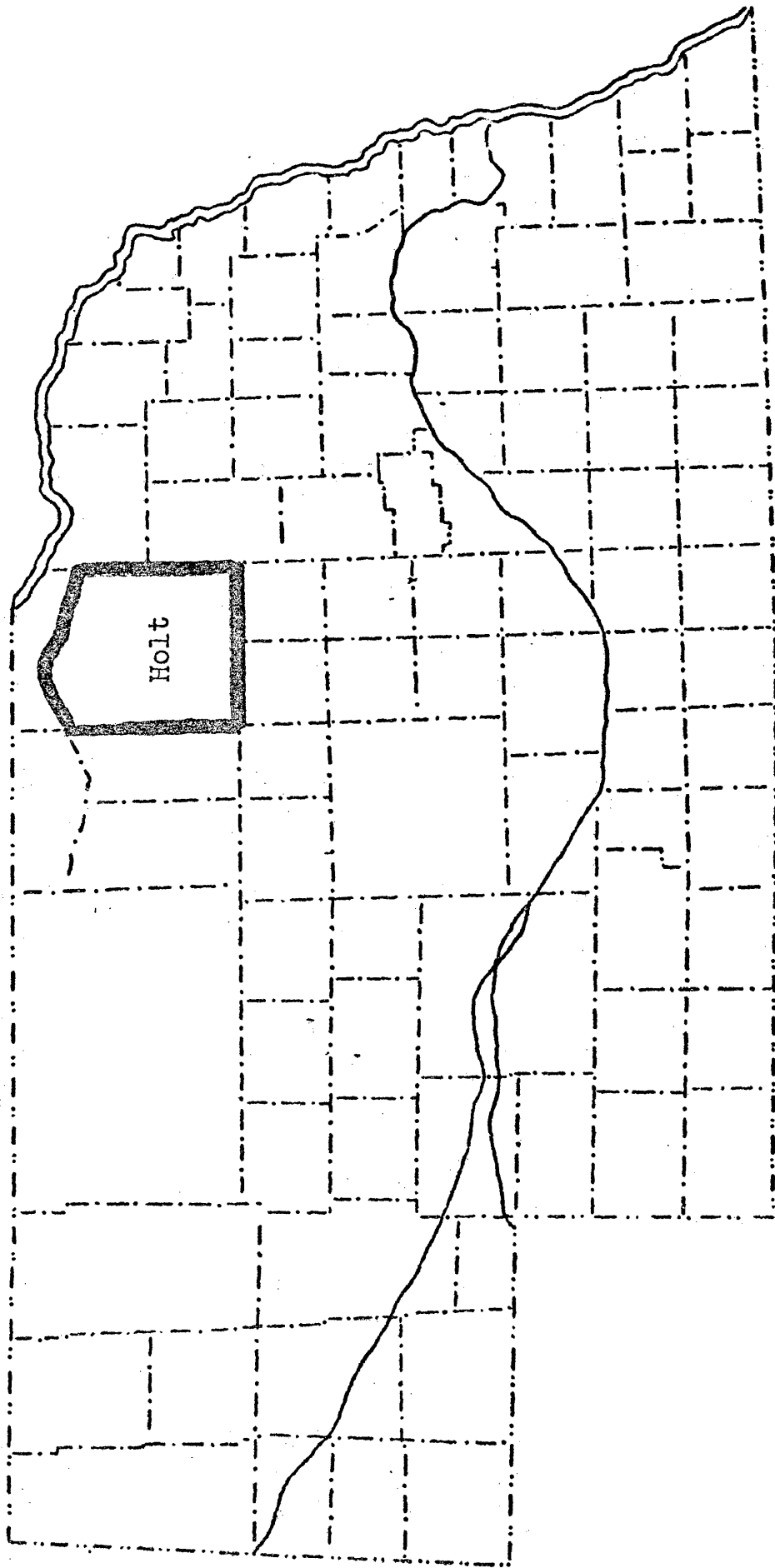
<sup>3</sup>Alfred T. Andreas, History of the State of Nebraska (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), p. 982.

<sup>4</sup>Judge John J. McCafferty, MSS, Archives, Creighton University.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

total white population of the region.

By the spring of 1874 additional settlers had moved into the area. These pioneers comprised the first group of colonists in John O'Neill's new settlement. Subsequent groups followed in 1875 and 1876 totaling over one hundred fifty people. It was, however, the first group of settlers that formed the nucleus of O'Neill City.



## CHAPTER I

### JOHN O'NEILL

The founding of O'Neill, Nebraska, was intricately woven with John O'Neill, its founder. O'Neill or "The General", as he was known to many of his contemporaries was one of the foremost proponents of the Irish cause in America. He was born in Drungallon parish of Clontibret in County Monaghan, Ireland, March 9, 1834.<sup>1</sup> Five weeks prior to John's birth his father died.

When O'Neill was six years old his family, including his mother, left Ireland and sailed for America leaving John at home in the care of his paternal grandfather.<sup>2</sup> As a young boy growing up in Ireland John received his rudimentary school training from his grandfather and then followed his mother to America meeting her in Elizabeth, New Jersey. There he continued his schooling for a brief time until he obtained a job as a clerk in a nearby store. It was there John learned

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<sup>1</sup>Judge John J. McCafferty, MSS, Archives, Creighton University. Hereafter cited McCafferty Collection.

<sup>2</sup>Henry W. Casper, The Catholic Church in Nebraska, Vol. III: Catholic Chapters in Nebraska Immigration 1870-1900 (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1966), p. 4. Hereafter cited as Casper, Catholic Chapters.

the principles of salesmanship which were to prove an invaluable tool in later life.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately the confinement of the store was not to O'Neill's liking and he became an agent for a publishing house. While traveling for the firm he made many friends and became very successful, but in 1855 he left the publishing business and established a Catholic book store in Richmond, Virginia. Business, however, was bad from the start due to the small proportion of Catholics in the area. While working in his bookstore O'Neill traveled throughout the region and soon became attracted to the military within the area.<sup>4</sup> In 1857 at the age of twenty-three he enlisted in the Second Dragons of which Albert S. Johnson was Colonel and Robert E. Lee was Lieutenant Colonel.<sup>5</sup> After a brief tour of duty in Utah O'Neill deserted and went to California to enlist in the First Cavalry.<sup>6</sup> By the time of the Civil War O'Neill had attained the rank of Sergeant Major. In 1862, his regiment was called from California to the East and placed under the command of General George McClellan. During the Peninsular Campaign he was cited for intrepid bravery. In 1863 O'Neill

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred T. Andreas, History of the State of Nebraska (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), p. 985.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.; Casper, Catholic Chapters, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Sister M. Aquinata Martin, "Irish Catholic Colonization in the Diocese of Omaha 1856-1890" (Unpublished Master thesis, University of Notre Dame, 1932), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Casper, Catholic Chapters, p. 4.

joined the Fifth Indiana Cavalry.<sup>7</sup> In a skirmish at Kettle Creek, Kentucky, John O'Neill with fifty men attacked two regiments and a body guard under the command of General John H. Morgan. This resulted in the release of a number of Union prisoners. For this action O'Neill was promoted to First Lieutenant. The following year, O'Neill, at his own request was appointed Captain of a black infantry unit.<sup>8</sup> The wounds he had received at the Battle of the Cumberland, however, forced him to resign his commission and return to civilian life. After his resignation he married Miss Mary Crow and lived in Nashville, Tennessee, until his call by the Fenian Brotherhood.<sup>9</sup>

O'Neill, like many Irishmen of his day, identified closely with Fenian ideals and activities. The Fenian movement was designed to secure Irish independence from England. In the United States the Fenians were led by several factions including a group by William Roberts who claimed that Canada should be seized and held as a home for the landless Irish Republic. It was with the Roberts group that O'Neill cast his lot.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Andreas, pp. 985-986.

<sup>8</sup>Casper, Catholic Chapters, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>Andreas, pp. 985-986.

<sup>10</sup>Mabel Gregory Walker, The Fenian Movement (Colorado Springs: Ralph Myles Publisher, Inc., 1969), pp. 56-61.

In May 1866, O'Neill, with a force of some 800 men under his command crossed Lake Erie near Buffalo, New York, and occupied abandoned Fort Erie. On June 2, 1866, O'Neill defeated some Canadian militia at the Battle of Ridgeway. Since supplies were running low and no more were available, O'Neill planned to return to the United States. While his ship was crossing Lake Erie it was intercepted by the Michigan, the only American warship on Lake Erie, and he was arrested. O'Neill and several of his men stood trial but were immediately released.<sup>11</sup>

The following September O'Neill was appointed Brigadier General of the Fenian Armies. It was at this time that the title of "General" was obtained. On January 1, 1868, he was elected President of the Fenian Brotherhood and immediately called for another invasion of Canada.<sup>12</sup>

In May 1870, O'Neill undertook his second invasion of Canada. This invasion, however, never materialized. The United States Marshall arrested O'Neill at St. Albans, Vermont, for violation of neutrality laws. O'Neill was sentenced to three years in prison but was released after serving three months by a presidential pardon on October 13, 1870.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>William D'Arcy, The Fenian Movement in the United States: 1858-1886 (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947), pp. 159-162.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 166, 279, 303-304.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 354-355, 366.

In spite of two failures O'Neill did not give up his plans to invade Canada. In October 1871 a third and final effort was planned. This effort was to take place in Manitoba near Fort Pembina. John O'Neill and his men were intercepted by American troops, detained for several days and then released.<sup>14</sup>

This final attempt to invade Canada marked the end of John O'Neill as an influential leader of the Fenian Brotherhood. Although he attained national identity few believed that new invasions of Canada were the answers to the problems of the Irish people.

The idea of establishing colonies on the western prairies for the Irish began after John O'Neill's last invasion of Canada. What factors contributed to his reaching this decision are not altogether apparent. The one factor that appeared in all of O'Neill's endeavors was his strong desire to help his countrymen and his native Ireland. The following quotation indicates O'Neill's concern for his people.

I have always believed that the next best thing to giving the Irish people their freedom at home, is to assist and encourage such of them as are here, or who may come here of their own free will in procuring homes for themselves and their children in this free land of their adoption and having tried to do the best I could to give them their freedom at home, and for the time being at least I failed I have now engaged in doing what I believe to be the next best thing.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 381.

<sup>15</sup>Michael F. Cassidy, "History of St. Patrick's Parish O'Neill, Nebraska", MSS, Archives of the Archdiocese of Omaha.



On another occasion he stated:

My heart is with the Irish people. My earnest desire is for the amelioration of my race. For this reason I urge you to colonize and possess the land, and all other advantages will follow. As a powerful means to that end I would indicate temperance and economy in order that you may save your money for this noble purpose.

It has been suggested that O'Neill's real motive for colonizing was not to help the Irish people in the cities of the East but to organize and prepare men for a fourth invasion of Canada. In a speech delivered December 8, 1876, in Philadelphia the General said:

I had a double object in encouraging our people to emigrate from the overcrowded cities and states of the east to settle upon the cheap and free lands of the west. The first was that they might better their own condition and that of their families and the second that they might be in a position, from their improved circumstances and their nearness to the contemplated field of future operations, to assist the cause of Irish liberty. I think I can safely promise from the colonies which I have already established at least some of the young men to assist on the battle field while the older ones are raising corn, flour, potatoes to help sustain them. And I know that there are many other settlements in the western states and territories ready and willing to do their share of the work. One correspondent writes to me from the Black Hills that he has enough of men there ready to inaugurate the movement whenever ordered to do so.

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<sup>16</sup>Gerald R. Noonan, "A Characterization of General John O'Neill, in the Light of his Colonization Efforts in the State of Nebraska 1872-1878" (Unpublished Masters thesis, St. Paul Seminary, 1961), p. 7.

The governing passion of my life, apart from my duty to my God, is to be at the head of an Irish army battling against England for Ireland's rights; for this I live and for this, if necessary, I am willing to die.<sup>17</sup>

In another address given by the General on Irish colonization he states:

We do not intend to forget the cause of Ireland but, desire to be in a better position to serve it when the opportunity presents. The prairies are wide and there is plenty of room for drill and instruction, and there is no law against shooting deer and antelope, in season which will be very good practice--until we can find better game.<sup>18</sup>

Immediately after O'Neill's release by American troops for his raid against Fort Pembina he set out in search of land for his colonizing scheme. Throughout 1872 and 1873 O'Neill traveled in the Midwest visiting the states of Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, and Nebraska.<sup>19</sup> After much consideration Nebraska was selected. In a letter to Bishop James O'Connor of Omaha he stated:

I chose Nebraska to settle because of a central location between two extremes of temperature, with a healthy climate, pure water and some of the finest land I ever saw . . . . We could build a young Ireland on the virgin prairie of Nebraska and there rear a movement more lasting than granite or marble to the Irish race in America.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Address given by General John O'Neill at the Headquarters of O'Neill's Irish American Colonies, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, December 8, 1876. Xerox copy of original in Henry W. Casper File, Archives, Creighton University.

<sup>18</sup>The Frontier, (O'Neill), July 24, 1924.

<sup>19</sup>McCafferty Collection.

<sup>20</sup>Letter from John O'Neill to Bishop James O'Connor, December 27, 1876. O'Connor, MSS, Archives of the Archdiocese of Omaha.

Good land and climate were not the only reasons that John O'Neill chose Nebraska. While traveling throughout the East lecturing, the General had no income and needed money to begin his colonization adventure. This source of income came from Patrick Fahy, a Lincoln real estate agent.

In November 1873 O'Neill met Fahy while on a trip to Lincoln. It was at this time that O'Neill became interested in the land of the upper Elkhorn Valley. A deal was agreed upon between Fahy and O'Neill that a town would be platted on 160 acres of land owned by Fahy, Stephen Boyd, William McLaughlin, and others with O'Neill to receive 150 dollars for four months and seventy lots when the town was surveyed. In return the General would bring twenty-five families from the East to colonize the area.<sup>21</sup>

Before leaving Nebraska to go back East O'Neill decided to examine the land personally to ascertain its value for future colonization. In late 1873 the General traveled to the Elkhorn Valley and stopped at the home of Henry H. McEvony, an early resident of the area. McEvony lived about one and a half miles from O'Neill's proposed townsite.<sup>22</sup>

The McEvony family was very helpful. During their discussions O'Neill discovered that the McEvonys were planning

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<sup>21</sup>McCafferty Collection, Biographical Sketch of Patrick Fahy; Sister M. Martin Langan, "General O'Neill, Soldier and Leader of the Irish Catholic Colonization in America" (Unpublished Masters thesis, University of Notre Dame, 1937), p. 22.

<sup>22</sup>Andreas, p. 984; The Frontier, June 30, 1949.

to establish a town. The McEvonys, being the first to settle the area, had the right to layout a townsite while other settlers would have to move several miles away. The General along with his promoters made several visits to the McEvony home explaining that it would be to McEvon's advantage to let the General build a town. The promoters stated that the General would be bringing more colonists to the town than McEvony would have and that new buisness would be started and this would encourage the railroad to come. This the promoters said would be better than the small community McEvony had planned. McEvony finally agreed and the matter was settled in a friendly manner.<sup>23</sup>

John O'Neill, now fully satisfied with the land, made preparations to return to the East and begin the job of luring Irishmen to Nebraska. Throughout the winter of 1873 he lectured in the coal mining districts of Scranton and Pittstown, Pennsylvania and the copper fields of Hancock and Red Jacket, Michigan.<sup>24</sup> In an address given many times he stated:

Why are you content to work on the public projects and at coal mining when you might in a few years own farms of your own and become wealthy and influential people?<sup>25</sup>

The majority of Irishmen who heard this lecture still remained skeptical. How did they know that this man was any

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<sup>23</sup>The Frontier, June 30, 1949; McCafferty Collection.

<sup>24</sup>McCafferty Collection, Biographical sketch of John O'Neill; Interview with John Harrington, July 2, 1973.

<sup>25</sup>Omaha World Herald, April 12, 1877.

different than the city swindlers they had heard in the past? Even if he were telling the truth why should they leave their homes and jobs and move to a land they knew nothing about.

These were just a few of the questions the General had to answer in order to win the faith and trust of his countrymen.

Convincing the Irish was not the only problem that John O'Neill had to face. Financial problems were increasing and the money promised by Patrick Fahy had not been paid. In an open letter to Fahy dated March 22, 1876, O'Neill wrote:

Both yourself and Mr. Boyd were fully aware of my financial circumstances, for I very candidly told you and you knew that I could not travel, or do anything unless you furnished the money as you had agreed to do. And yet to my utter astonishment, when you got me compromised in the business and started on the road, you treated me shamefully, allowing me to remain for weeks at a time, at Pittsburg [sic], Philadelphia, and New York, under expense, without a cent of money to travel and meet the engagements I had made for attending meetings ect. [sic], and would not even answer my letters or telegrams, but simply trifled with my time so that I was unable to do anything worth speaking of. Had it not been for the kindness of Mr. Ford, of the Irish World, who, when I explained to him the situation I was in, very kindly allowed me to use his columns to write the matter up, my first effort to organize a colony would have been a complete failure. Although the money which you agreed to pay me has all been paid, yet it was paid in such a way that it was of very little use to me.<sup>26</sup>

Evidently O'Neill faced serious problems and he placed most of the blame on Patrick Fahy and Stehpan Boyd. This setback, however, was not to defeat the General and he continued to travel and preach to the Irish on the advantages of moving West.

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<sup>26</sup>The Frontier, August 28, 1924.

## CHAPTER II

### THE EARLY YEARS

The years between 1874 and 1876 saw the dreams of John O'Neill begin to take shape. In these two years the town was platted and settled by three groups of colonists. During the winter and spring of 1874 O'Neill spent considerable time in the East recruiting and left the planting of the town to Patrick Fahy.

In May 1874, as John O'Neill was struggling to win Irish recruits, work on the proposed townsite began. Thomas J. Atwood, a civil engineer from Lincoln, platted the town in the center of Section 30, Township 29, Range 11 West. James Fahy, brother of Patrick, had just returned from college and helped in the survey.<sup>1</sup> (Refer to Figure II, p. 16) The name of Holt City was given to the new townsite but was afterwards changed to O'Neill City by Colonel James H. Noteware, immigration agent for the State of Nebraska.<sup>2</sup>

With everything going well O'Neill began making preparations to move his future colonists West. He had pamphlets printed giving information regarding items needed on the

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<sup>1</sup>Judge John J. McCafferty, MSS, Archives, Creighton University. Hereinafter referred to as McCafferty Collection.

<sup>2</sup>The Frontier (O'Neill), February 24, 1887.



HOLT CO. NEB.

Sec. 50. T. 29. N. R. 11. W.

Scale 600 ft. 1 inch.

City Limits

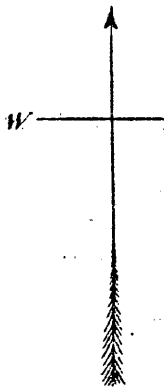
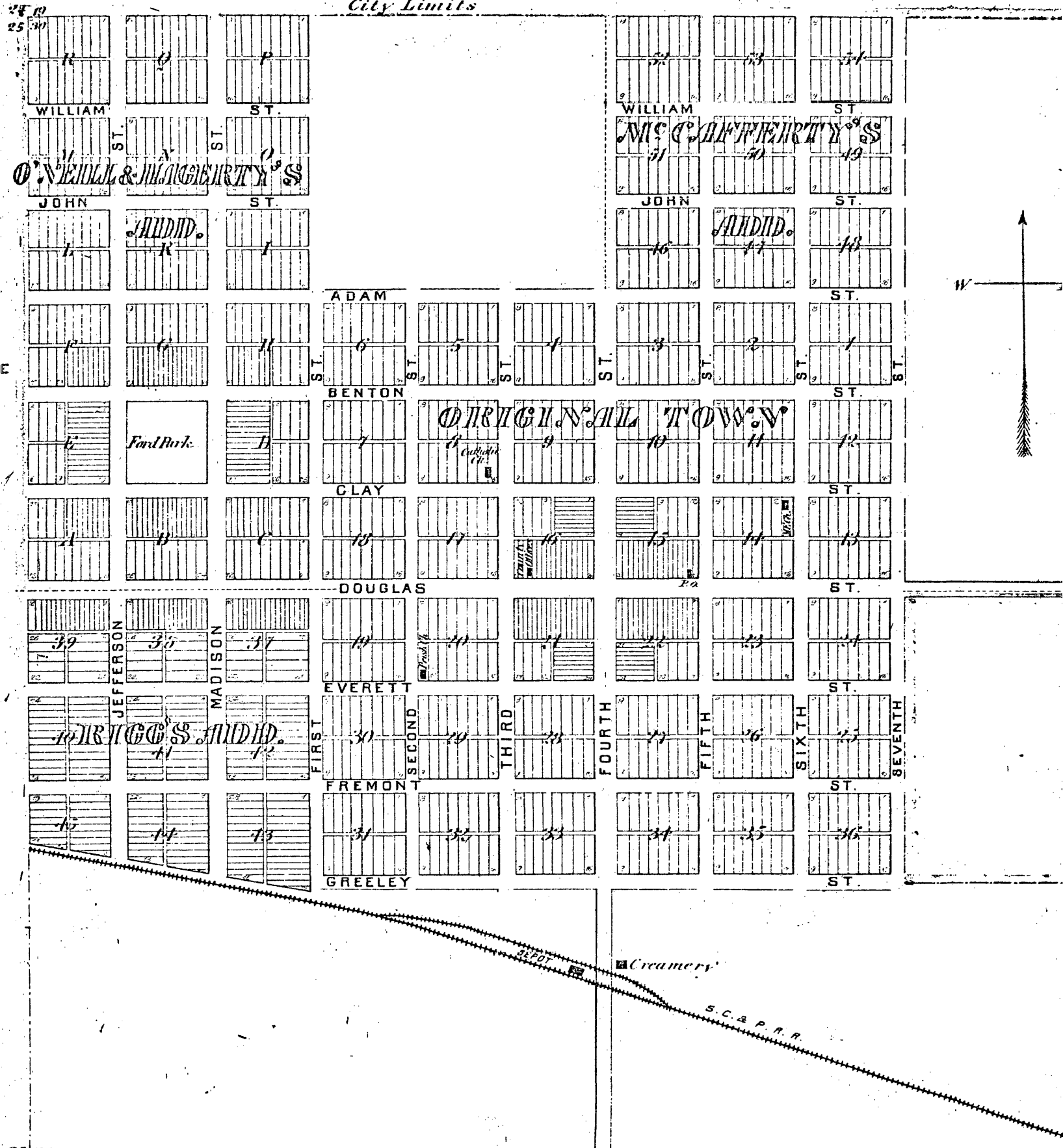


Figure II

(From the Atlas and Plat Book of Holt County)

25 30  
36 31

trip and the amount of money that would be required to begin farming. He estimated the initial cost for the first year as follows:<sup>3</sup>

Temporary house	\$50 to 75	Stove	\$ 24 to 30
Team of oxen	80 to 125	Cooking utensils	10 to 20
Breaking plow	24 to 30	Cheap furniture	20 to 30
Corn planter	2 to 3	Cash for expenses	50 to 100
Other tools	10 to 15	Total	\$270 to 428

In early April the first group of colonists headed West toward Nebraska and their future home. The advance party passed through Omaha on April 29, 1874.<sup>4</sup> From Omaha they traveled on the Omaha and Northwestern Railroad to Blair, Nebraska, some twenty-nine miles away. There they boarded the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad to Fremont and then to Wisner on the Elkhorn Valley Railroad. After arriving at Wisner they went by stage to Neligh and finally on to O'Neill City by whatever means available.<sup>5</sup>

The first colonists arrived at the new site on May 12, 1874. Those included in the first group were Neil Brennan, Patrick Hughes, Timothy O'Connor, Henry Cury, Thomas Connolly, Michael H. McGrath, Thomas N. J. Hynes, Michael Dempsey, Thomas Kelly, Robert Alsworth, Ralph Sullivan, Patrick Brennan,

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., July 31, 1924.

<sup>4</sup>The Daily Herald (Omaha), April 30, 1874.

<sup>5</sup>John O'Neill, Northern Nebraska As a Home for Immigrants Containing a General Description of the State, Sketch of Northern Counties and Answers to Correspondence of Intending Immigrants (Sioux City, Iowa: Sioux City Press, 1875), p. 93.



Thomas Cain, Henry Carey, and Patrick Karney. Together with these men were two women and five children.<sup>6</sup> The first major task for the colonists was to provide immediate shelter for themselves and their families. Together they constructed a crude sod house thirty-six by eighteen feet. As soon as the basic structure was in place, six of the original party left for Red Bird Creek and the nearest timber. They took with them a wagon load of willows which were driven into the ground at intervals to provide markers so that the party could find their way back to the settlement. When the timber was procured a roof was placed on the sod house and the residents moved in on May 19, 1874, one week after their arrival. The first dwelling in O'Neill was the home for thirteen men, two women and five children and was dubbed the "Grand Central Hotel".<sup>7</sup>

After establishing somewhat adequate housing the settlers next task was to plant crops. Even before they began planting they faced serious problems. It was already late in May and the ground had to be broken and prepared for the planting of corn. To further compound this problem the colonists lacked practical farm experience. Having lived in the eastern cities the methods of prairie farming

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<sup>6</sup>John O'Neill, MSS, #1047, Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>7</sup>McCafferty Collection.

were new to them. It is little wonder that the first results of their efforts showed little bounty.<sup>8</sup>

After the crops were planted the settlers again turned their attention to housing. Not wanting to live in the "Grand Central Hotel" any longer than possible new dwellings were constructed. These were dugouts carved into the ground usually four feet deep and ten by sixteen feet long. The dugouts were then covered with limbs and plastered with mud, grass, and sod.<sup>9</sup> Later when time permitted the dugouts were replaced by cabins. The logs for the cabins were cut on Eagle Creek by Patrick Hughes, Timothy O'Connor, and M. H. McGrath and hauled a distance of eighteen miles to O'Neill City.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of the severe droughts and other hardships, by the end of the summer more than half of the original party remained. Those who stayed included Patrick Hughes, Neil Brennan, Timothy O'Connor, Thomas Connally, M. H. McGrath, Thomas Hynes, and Robert Alsworth.<sup>11</sup> The few who

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<sup>8</sup>Verna Lee Tubbs, "Settlement and Development of the Northeast Sandhills" (Unpublished Masters Thesis, Department of History, University of Nebraska, 1957), p. 10.

<sup>9</sup>Henry W. Casper, The Catholic Church in Nebraska Vol. III: Catholic Chapters in Nebraska Immigration 1870-1900 (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1966), p. 4. Hereinafter referred to as Casper, Catholic Chapters.

<sup>10</sup>McCafferty Collection.

<sup>11</sup>Sister M. Martin Langan, "General O'Neill, Soldier and Leader of the Irish Catholic Colonization in America" (Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Notre Dame, 1937), pp. 22-30.

left went back East or settled in towns of Nebraska and Iowa. On November 1, 1874, Rody J. Haynes, James Ryan, and John Reedy joined the little band at O'Neill City.<sup>12</sup>

As the first colony was preparing for the coming winter of 1874-1875, John O'Neill went back East and began preparations for a second colony to Nebraska. The General soon found that many of the people had already heard of his colony and the problems the settlers were facing. In an effort to minimize these problems and to tell of the advantages of moving West, O'Neill in several of his addresses quoted sections of a letter from Patrick Fahy dated January 1, 1875:

The country, for several miles around the town, is now thickly settled, and my brother James, who had just returned from there, informs me that settlers are coming in rapidly even at this season of the year; and undoubtedly by next summer there will not be a claim untaken within eight miles of the town. When you return in the spring we will have the county organized, with O'Neill City as the County Seat; and as there will be a large hotel and a number of business houses and other buildings put up in the town in the spring and summer, lots will become valuable and command a ready sale.<sup>13</sup>

With this strong letter of recommendation from Fahy, John O'Neill was able to attract future colonists. In a short time all preparations were made and the second group left for Nebraska in April 1875.

During their layover in Omaha in late April, O'Neill and the colonists were met by Patrick Fahy who presented them a

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<sup>12</sup>Alfred T. Andreas, History of the State of Nebraska (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882, p. 984.

<sup>13</sup>John O'Neill, Northern Nebraska, pp. 82-83.

copy of the official proclamation organizing Holt County. The new settlers soon discovered that fraud had figured in the organization of the county and the election of its officials. The settlers also discovered that certain bankers in the East were offering O'Neill City and Holt county bonds for sale. General O'Neill often wondered aloud how such a thing could have happened to Patrick Fahy, the titleholder of most of the city, without his knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

When the second group of colonists arrived at O'Neill City they were amazed at what they saw. There were no buildings, no businesses, and certainly no thickly settled countryside as Fahy's letter had indicated.<sup>15</sup> The General somewhat bewildered at this sight soon began to receive criticism for not fulfilling his part of the contract. O'Neill then took action to prevent further damage to his already tarnished reputation. In a letter to Fahy the General stated:

Being satisfied that I could no longer depend on you for doing anything, and feeling heartily ashamed of not having a single house in O'Neill City, notwithstanding that there was a good settlement around it, which was constantly increasing, and feeling that in justice to myself and my family, I no longer had any right to continue working and spending money in enhancing the value of your property, I joined Mr. Patrick Hagarty last July in locating a soldiers additional eighty as an addition to O'Neill City, which we intend building up or having it built up

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<sup>14</sup>C. H. Scoville, History of Elkhorn Valley Nebraska (Chicago: National Publishing Company, 1892), p. 282.

<sup>15</sup>McCafferty Collection.

as the principle part of the town. This of course was a bank movement which you did not expect for you seemed to have acted all along as if I was at your mercy, and that I must continue to work for and build up O'Neill City, because my name happened to be connected with it. Well, I shall continue to work and do everything that I possibly can to build up O'Neill and Hagerty's addition to O'Neill City, and I shall give every man who bought of me in O'Neill City a deed of an equal number of lots in this addition.<sup>16</sup>

After knowledge of this letter became public by its printing in the Irish World many settlers gained renewed confidence in the General and his motives for settlement. At a meeting of the O'Neill colonists held on August 22, 1875, the following resolutions showed evidence of their support:

Whereas, We have been fortunate beyond our expectations in securing our homesteads in the locality chosen by General O'Neill, for the establishment of his Irish American Colony, and--

Whereas, We entertain a profound anxiety to urge upon our countrymen the necessity of improving this opportunity of securing homes for themselves, an opportunity which will be irretrievably lost in the near future, and--

Whereas, We know from experience that no part of the West offers so many advantages to settlers and particularly to Irish Americans as the O'Neill settlement, in Holt County, Nebraska. Splendid land, pure water, and a healthy climate, therefore; be it

Resolved, That first we hold ourselves in readiness to furnish all necessary information about the Colony to those desirous of obtaining it.

Second. That we will extend a welcoming, and so far as lies in our power, a helping hand, to those who come here to settle.

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<sup>16</sup>The Frontier, June 26, 1924. The O'Neill and Hagerty addition of eighty acres was bought July 17, 1875 from C. C. McNish of Wesner, Nebraska. Letter from Ruth O'Neill to Archives, Creighton University.

Third. That we return our warmest thanks to Gen. O'Neill and shall ever feel grateful for the untiring zeal manifested, and the selfsacrifice endured for the welfare of the colonists.

Fourth. That a copy of these resolutions be sent to the Irish World for publication.

Patrick Hagerty, Winona, Minn., John Reddy, Lacon, Ill., Patrick S. Hughes, Dover, N. H., Thomas Connolly, Manchester, Vt., Thomas Harrington, Ansona, Conn., Michael H. McGrath, Brooklyn, N. Y., Patrick Murray, M. Y., Edward Gallagher, Barclay, Penn., Wm. Joyce, Hazleton, Ohio, Tim O'Connor, Chicago, Ill., Patrick Barret, Tennenville, Mich., John Fallon, St. Louis, Mo., Joseph Kresser, Dubuque, Iowa, Thomas Gallagher, Ottumwa, Iowa, Michael Dillon, Granier C., Texas, Neil Brennan, Peabody, Mass., Charles Donnelly, Port Huron, Michigan.--  
Committee on Resolutions.

I most cheerfully endorse the foregoing resolutions.

P. J. BEDARD, Pastor.<sup>17</sup>

The actual construction of permanent buildings in O'Neill City was not begun until October 1875. The first frame building was erected by a carpenter, John Maybury, under contract to Patrick Fahy. The new structure was a general merchandise store which Patrick Hagerty rented from Fahy. Prior to occupying the building, Hagerty used part of the cabin of Mrs. John O'Neill for his store from May 1875 until the new structure was completed.<sup>18</sup>

Almost immediately upon moving into his new store Hagerty had a thriving business. The gold rush to the Black Hills of South Dakota was beginning and O'Neill City was the last place where gold seekers could buy provisions.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., July 3, 1924.

<sup>18</sup> McCafferty Collection.

Business at Hagerty's store was so good that at its peak it was necessary to employ ten to twenty clerks and profits reached one thousand dollars per day.<sup>19</sup>

With the continuous traffic moving through O'Neill many stories began to circulate about the easy money to be made in the Black Hills. Many of the residents of O'Neill thought seriously of leaving. The General realizing that this could possibly be harmful issued advice against moving to the Black Hills. In an article of the O'Neill Frontier written by the General he stated:

Although I do not advise any one to go to the Black Hills, at least for the present or until we have a little more positive information as to the existence of gold, in large or paying quantities there, I have no hesitation in advising persons to join the colony, and go out and take up 160 or 320 acres of government land. After they have secured their claims and put in a crop, all of which can be done in about three weeks then, if they feel disposed they can go to the Black Hills which will only be about two hundred miles from the settlement; and work there all summer leaving their crops in charge of those who remain behind. They can be absent from their claims six months, and if the Hills should not prove profitable they will have something to fall back on. Besides, I believe that the men who will raise produce to sell to the miners and get the highest prices for it will make more gold in the end than those who dig for it in the Hills; and the land which can be had for nothing today will be very valuable in a few years.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Casper, Catholic Chapters, pp. 14-15; Langan, "General O'Neill", p. 30.

<sup>20</sup>The Frontier, July 24, 1924.

As it turned out such prosperity was of short duration and interest soon wained.

Having successfully established the second group of settlers in O'Neill City the General immediately returned East to begin preparations to secure a third group of colonists. The exact date that the third group arrived in O'Neill City is not known but from all available information it was in late April or early May 1876. The group consisted of one hundred and two, men, women, and children.<sup>21</sup> Unlike settlers in groups before them these colonists saw some tangible results of O'Neill's efforts. They viewed a town which had been laid out and buildings under construction. Although it did not have everything the settlers expected it did provide the essentials to start a new life in the West.

To the O'Neill homesteaders all nature seemed hostile. Struggling to wrest a living from the virgin prairie was almost impossible. Prairie fires were feared by the early pioneers. Prairie fires were common in regions where wild grass grew abundantly. On October 7, 1880, the Holt County Commissioners offered a reward of twenty-five dollars for information that would lead to the conviction of any person for maliciously or carelessly setting fire to prairie grass from October 7, 1880, to May 1, 1881.<sup>22</sup> On November 24, 1892,

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<sup>21</sup>McCafferty Collection.

<sup>22</sup>Holt County Commissioners Records, October 7, 1880.



a fire was started from the spark of the chimney of a farm house located one and one-half miles south of Bassett. It burned over a strip of land fifty miles in length. Barns, stock, and tons of hay were lost.<sup>23</sup>

In 1899, a prairie fire brought death and destruction to a vast area in Holt County. Three families lost nearly everything they had, while others in the fire's path lost hay, sheds, and machinery. Mrs. Ingersall, a resident of the area, whose husband was away from home when the fire broke out, told a dramatic story. While at home with her three small children Mrs. Ingersall saw the fire heading across the prairie toward her house. She immediately and "with difficulty escaped to a patch of prairie that had been burned, and here in those gruesome surroundings saw their home and fireside go up in flames."<sup>24</sup>

Aside from prairie fires, insects were the most feared by the farmers on the plains. They flocked to the scantily cultivated patches of the homesteaders and greatly damaged or completely destroyed the crops. Grasshoppers or Rocky Mountain locusts, as they were called, rained havoc throughout the Western prairies during the years 1874, 1875, and 1876. John J. McCafferty, a local resident, described the devastation as follows:

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<sup>23</sup>The Frontier, November 10, 1892.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., May 4, 1889.

I went to the house of Mrs. Patrick Murray whose claim later comprised the McCafferty addition to O'Neill. We were all bachelors and most of us got our washing done and our bread baked by her as she was the nearest woman. As I passed south of her home I saw a field of corn on second breaking, of the most luxuriant growth that I have ever seen. I may have been in the house ten or fifteen minutes when all of a sudden everything became dark and when we rushed out the door, we were ankle deep in a mess of grasshoppers and they were still alighting. We were all awed and dumb-founded when we cast our eyes in the direction of the beautiful and healthy field of maize which I had just passed a few minutes before. Not a vestige of green growth, not even a stalk was left, all were downed in less time than it takes to tell the dismal story. The hoppers continued to alight for hours 'till the ground was covered to a depth of 4 to 6 inches. The aerial flight of the insects was about one and one-half miles to two miles wide and lasted for nearly two days.<sup>25</sup>

As a result losses to crop and livestock amounted to over 50 per cent for the settlers of the Elkhorn Valley.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to this calamity of nature, the settlers had to live with the ever present danger of Indian attack. The O'Neill and Holt County area was not inhabited permanently by any one Indian tribe but was considered a valuable hunting ground. The area was claimed by the Pawnees.

On September 24, 1857, a treaty had been signed at Table Creek, Nebraska Territory between James W. Denver, Commissioner, acting for the United States government and

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., July 3, 1924.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., June 30, 1949.

the chiefs and headmen of the four confederate bands of Pawnee Indians. The four bands included the Grand Pawnee, Pawnee Loups, Pawnee Republican, and the Pawnee Teppahs. In this treaty much of the present day Holt County was ceded to the United States in return for a payment of forty thousand dollars per annum for five years and thirty thousand dollars per annum as a perpetual annuity. It was also stated that at least half of the money should be expended on goods and articles as deemed necessary.<sup>27</sup>

The widespread Indian attacks which occurred on the Northern Plains during the 1860's and 1870's kept many people from settling in the area. For several years the pioneers had to remain on their guard. One early pioneer described her travels to O'Neill City as follows:

One night, I remember so well, (it was the night before we reached O'Neill) we stayed all night at what was then called Frenchtown at the home owned by some French people by the name of Putroyes. They lived in a long log house and not long before this the scene of an Indian battle and many of the arrows were still sticking in the logs on the outside of the house and on the roof they showed us where the Indians had tried to set fire to the house by shooting burning arrows.<sup>28</sup>

Although attacks of this nature were unusual, they no doubt kept many faint-hearted persons away from O'Neill City and

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<sup>27</sup> Charles J. Kappler (ed.), Indian Affairs Laws and Treaties, Vol. II: Treaties (First AMS edition, New York: AMS Press Inc., 1971), p. 764.

<sup>28</sup> Grace McCoy Hummel, "Early Days in O'Neill 1875 to 1876." MSS, Nebraska State Historical Society.

Holt County. Many of these reports were not based on personal or local experiences but taken from colorful stories in dime novels and newspapers. The few personal contacts that the early settlers had with the Indians were of a friendly nature. In one instance a party of forty Indians visited the home of John P. O'Donnell and demanded something to eat. Mrs. O'Donnell, who was at home alone at the time with her children, gave them some food. The Indians showed their gratitude by giving her a large quantity of buffalo meat.<sup>29</sup> On another occasion the daughter of a local family said that her family was always friendly to the Indians and they in turn kept them in fresh meat. "Indian scares were very common, but we were never troubled by hostile tribes."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> John O'Neill, MSS, Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER III

### HOLT COUNTY ORGANIZES

On January 13, 1860, the territorial legislature of Nebraska marked out a county called, "West". This county comprised the area located at the mouth of the Niobrara River. The county, however, never developed beyond the paper stage. Holt County was blocked out of unorganized territory by an act of the legislature and approved by the territorial governor on January 9, 1862. It was not organized at that time and was attached to Knox County for judicial, tax, and election purposes.<sup>1</sup>

As people began to move into the area, agitation for county organization began. After Nebraska became a state a law was enacted which required that there be a population of at least two hundred inhabitants in the proposed boundaries of the new county with ten residents being taxpayers. When these conditions were fulfilled a petition was presented by three freeholders to the Governor, Robert W. Furnas. Governor Furnas on April 24, 1873, issued a proclamation organizing the county. The proclamation stated that an election was to be held in the unorganized territory of Holt County, "at a

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<sup>1</sup>Manuscript of Holt County, Nebraska State Historical Society.

place or places to be designated by three judges here in after to chose the following officers [sic] viz: three commissioners, clerk, treasurer, sheriff, coroner." The three judges selected to preside over the election were William Barnes, William S. Bowles, and Henry Martin, with the clerks being George White and Charles Howard.<sup>2</sup>

Immediately, county and school district bonds were issued amounting to several thousand dollars. These bonds were sold mainly in the East, some as low as thirty and others as high as eighty cents on the dollar. The bonds bore six per cent interest payable semi-annually.<sup>3</sup>

The first county election to determine the county seat was held May 27, 1873. The vote was as follows:<sup>4</sup> (Refer to Figure III, p. 32)

Section 30 Township 29 Range 11 West	19 Votes
Section 2 Township 28 Range 11 West	4 Votes
Section 30 Township 29 Range 9 West	4 Votes

The organization and election, however, was declared null and void by the Secretary of State of Nebraska. This was due to the falsification of eligible voters.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Nebraska, 1854-1941, Works Progress Administration (Lincoln: The Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1941), p. 442.

<sup>3</sup>Alfred T. Andreas, History of the State of Nebraska (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), p. 984; C. H. Scoville, History of Elkhorn Valley Nebraska (Chicago: National Publishing Company, 1892), p. 281.

<sup>4</sup>Election Returns of Holt County Secretary of State of Nebraska, May 27, 1873, Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup>McCafferty Collection.

Three years later on June 29, 1876, Governor Silas Garber issued a second proclamation temporarily organizing Holt County for the purpose of effecting a permanent organization. This proclamation stated that:

Whereas a large number of the citizens of the unorganized County of Holt have united in a petition asking that said county be organized and that Elijah Thompson, J. B. Berry, and James Ewing be appointed Special County Commissioners and W. H. Inman be appointed Special Clerk of said County, and Twin Lakes situated on the Northwest quarter of Section number Twelve in Township Twenty-Eight, North of Range number Eleven West, at the home of H. W. Haynes, be designated as the temporary County Seat; and it appearing that said County contains a population of not less than two hundred inhabitants, and that ten or more of said petitioners are tax payers and residents of said County. . . .<sup>6</sup>

With the requirements for organization fulfilled, Governor Garber declared the county temporarily organized for the purpose of permanent organization. At the first county commissioners meeting on July 13, 1876, Holt County was divided into three precincts--Ford, Paddock, and Center, in which the town of O'Neill was located.<sup>7</sup> (Refer to Figure IV, p. 34) On August 26, 1876, a special election was held for the purpose of electing county commissioners and choosing a county seat. The results of the election were as follows: Ryland Parker, Judge; M. H. McGarth, Clerk; Henry H. McEvony, Sheriff; Herman Strasburg, Coroner; and Patrick Hagerty,

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<sup>6</sup>Holt County Commissioners Records. First item on County Records.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., July 13, 1876.

Jacob Shrob, and Austin Haynes as Commissioners. O'Neill City was chosen as the county seat by a three-fourths majority.<sup>8</sup>

When the results of the election were known, W. H. Inman, an early resident who favored Twin Lakes for the county seat, left the county and moved to Ohio taking with him the election returns.<sup>9</sup> This left the validity of the election in doubt.

At a meeting of the county commissioners on October 28, 1876, a decision was reached to hold a special election on December 27, 1876.<sup>10</sup> The residents of O'Neill were angry and many believed that the departure of Inman was a trick to gain a new election and take the county seat away from O'Neill. On election day the citizens of O'Neill did not vote.<sup>11</sup> The results of the election were: John Cronin, Judge; John T. Provty, Clerk; I. R. Smith, Sheriff; Joseph Estep, Coroner; Superintendent of Public Instruction; and James Ewing, Harry Spindler, and H. W. Haynes, Commissioners.<sup>12</sup>

In the selection of a county seat Paddock received three-fifths of the votes. The results were Paddock 41 votes;

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<sup>8</sup>Judge John J. McCafferty, MSS, Archives, Creighton University. Hereinafter referred to as McCafferty Collection.

<sup>9</sup>Letter from John T. Prouty, Special County Clerk, to Bruno Tzachurch, Secretary of State, January 4, 1877. Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>10</sup>Holt County Commissioners Records, October 28, 1876.

<sup>11</sup>McCafferty Collection.

<sup>12</sup>Holt County Commissioners Records, January 2, 1877.



Northeast 1/4 of the Southeast 1/2 of Section Two, Township 32, Range 11 West, 10 votes; Rockford, 12 votes; Frank Britney home, 1 vote; and Rockford Britney claim, 4 votes.<sup>13</sup>

For the next two years Paddock remained the county seat of Holt County. When the first regular election was held in November 1877, the O'Neill City residents still bitter over the previous election, refused to vote. Realizing that the county seat would not change unless a special election was held, one of the residents, John J. McCafferty, made a trip of one hundred and twenty miles by mule to Ponca, Nebraska. In Ponca he conferred with Judge E. K. Valentine on the matter of obtaining a special election. The Judge asked McCafferty many questions including how many votes O'Neill and Paddock each had and what were the political leanings of each town. After the meeting McCafferty returned to O'Neill City and stated that there would be a special election.<sup>14</sup> On May 12, 1879, the election was held to determine the location of the new county seat. The results were as follows: O'Neill City, 279 votes; Paddock, 37 votes; Atkinson, 1 vote; Red Bird, 1 vote; geographic center of Holt County, 2 votes; Northeast ¼ Section of Section 25, Township 31, Range 13 West, 62 votes; Northwest ¼ Section of Section 7, Township 28, Range 10.

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<sup>13</sup>Letter from John T. Prouty, Special County Clerk, to Bruno Tzachurch, Secretary of State, January 4, 1877. Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>14</sup>McCafferty Collection.

West, 9 votes.<sup>15</sup> (Refer to Figure III, p. 32).

With the election returns legally validated the county seat was moved from Paddock to O'Neill City on August 1, 1879. The first temporary office for the county officials was a building owned by D. J. Sparks located on lot twenty-six block fifteen.<sup>16</sup> From this establishment they moved to a new store owned by B. J. Campbell in late November 1879. The following year Neil Brennan, senior member of the O'Neill hardware firm of Brennan and McCafferty, built a house on lot fourteen block twenty-four. The county commissioners rented it for six months at twenty-five dollars per month. The first important legal proceeding transacted was the indictment of William Reed for murder. On March 28, 1881, a quarrel between Bernard Kearns, sheriff of Holt County, and William "Kid" Reed ensued with the sheriff being shot by Reed. The Coroner's jury brought in a verdict that Kearns was feloniously shot by Reed. John C. Cowan, attorney for Reed, succeeded in obtaining a change of venue and the trial was changed to Oakdale. Reed was acquitted with the jury stating that the shooting was done in self-defense.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Election Returns for Holt County Secretary of State of Nebraska. Dated May 15, 1879. Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>16</sup>Holt County Commissioners Records, August 4, 1879.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., October 7, 1879, November 26, 1879, February 20, 1880.

<sup>18</sup>McCafferty Collection; Andreas, p. 983.

O'Neill City 1879-

Court House  
Built here in 1885.

Block 10

Street

Street

Block 16

Block 15

leased from Niel Brennan  
front room, ground floor for  
Clerk of District Court Dec. 31st  
1885.

O'Neill City 1879

BMS  
14

Street

Alley

Street

13 14 15 16 17 18

Douglas Street

1st Court House

County Records moved here from  
Paddock August 4th 1879.

Co. Rec  
Decem  
Bank

Block 21

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18

19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28

X

X

X

.05 11

With O'Neill City as county seat the town enjoyed many advantages that it would not have otherwise had. Aside from the prestige and added business O'Neill City was the first town to have public improvements. The first bridge built in the county at public expense was constructed at O'Neill City. It spanned the Elkhorn River at Fourth Street and was constructed by Fox and Canfield and Company at a cost of \$448.28.<sup>19</sup> The first fireproof safe in the county was also located in O'Neill City. It was used for keeping county records and money and cost \$457.00.<sup>20</sup> Prior to the purchasing of a safe county funds, according to J. T. Prouty, County Treasurer, were kept in a hollowed out receptacle of a cottonwood board in the sheeting of a shingle roof.<sup>21</sup> The Holt County Record published in O'Neill was the first newspaper in the county. It was used for the publishing of county commissioners reports, tax delinquency lists, and other official material.<sup>22</sup>

During the first ten years, the commissioner type of government served Holt County, but in 1887 the township type of government was adopted by a vote of 2,164 to 619. This, it was believed, would allow more local participation in government because each township would send a member to serve

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<sup>19</sup>Holt County Commissioners Records, July 17, 1878.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., November 26, 1879.

<sup>21</sup>"Holt County's First Safe," Nebraska History and Record of Pioneer Days, Vol. I, No. 7, (1918), p. 4.

<sup>22</sup>Holt County Commissioners Records, January 11, 1881.

on the county board of supervisors. This arrangement fit well with the Grange and Alliance movements of the time.<sup>23</sup>

In 1883, O'Neill did \$653,850 worth of business, and it was generally agreed that its continued prosperity rested on retaining the county seat.<sup>24</sup> On February 26, 1884, Center precinct in which O'Neill was located voted \$8,000 worth of bonds for the purpose of building a court house. Eight bonds of one thousand dollars each were transmitted by the Clerk to the Auditor of Public Accounts for registration as required by law. The auditor returned the bonds refusing to register them. The clerk then directed that the bonds be deposited for safekeeping to await further developments.<sup>25</sup> Again on June 19, 1885, Center precinct voted bonds totaling \$10,000 for the building of a courthouse. On September 4, 1885, the clerk was instructed to credit Center Precinct courthouse and jail bonds with \$10,000, the amount which had been realized from the sale of bonds voted for that purpose.<sup>26</sup>

A courthouse building site was obtained from Patrick and Sarah Fahy and G. M. Cleveland.<sup>27</sup> Later that same year the courthouse was erected and presented to the county by Center

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., November 11, 1887.

<sup>24</sup>The Frontier, (O'Neill) January 10, 1884.

<sup>25</sup>Holt County Commissioners Records, July 26, 1884.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., June 23, 1885, September 4, 1885.

<sup>27</sup>McCafferty Collection.

Precinct. Residents of Center Precinct believed that the erection of a courthouse could establish O'Neill permanently as the county seat.<sup>28</sup>

At the time the courthouse was completed O'Neill had a population of one thousand inhabitants, more than ten times the number present when it was first platted eleven years before.<sup>29</sup> It was the largest community in the county both in area and population and was the leader in many county projects. The citizens of O'Neill were proud that their city was the county seat and were determined to lead the way into the 20th century.

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<sup>28</sup>The Frontier, March 11, 1886.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER IV

### RELIGION IN EARLY O'NEILL

The earliest churches established on the frontier were Presbyterian, Baptist, Catholic, and Methodist. The Methodists usually were the first to actively operate in a given area. Their movements can be traced more easily than most other denominations because of their great activity and ample records. In many rural communities of the West it was customary to hold services in private homes. All the worshipers of a given area crowded into a cabin, dugout, or sod house. Frequently the meetings rotated from house to house in the community. When a minister was not available, a member of the congregation read the Bible and closed the service with a prayer.<sup>1</sup>

The first record of a Sunday school service in Holt County was on December 14, 1873, at the home of J. P. Prouty of Rockford. One week later the local residents held a prayer meeting at the same place. Sunday school and prayer meetings, under the leadership of the local residents, were held regularly until the spring of 1875, when the Reverend S. P. Van

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<sup>1</sup>Everett Dick, The Sod House Frontier 1854-1890: A Social History of the Northern Plains from the Creation of Kansas & Nebraska to the Admission of the Dakotas (Lincoln: Johnsen Publishing Company, 1954), pp. 332-335.

Doozer, a Methodist circuit rider, came to Rockford. He preached the first sermon by a minister on April 20, at the home of Eli H. Thompson. During Van Doozer's stay in Rockford, a church was organized by five members. These included: Frank Bitney, class leader; Clara Bitney, his wife; M. S. Prouty, Will Dickerson, and Jennie H. Shultz. After Van Doozer left Rockford the community was regularly visited by a local preacher from Oakdale once every three weeks. In the summer of 1876, the Reverend J. B. Maxwell, the residing elder of the district, came to Rockford and held the first communion service. While Maxwell was in town plans were made to build a log church and subscriptions were raised. At that time, however, the townsite of O'Neill was taking shape and many of the members of the Rockford church moved, thus the enterprise was dropped.<sup>2</sup>

Even with the addition of some of the Rockford Methodists no attempt was made to organize a permanent church in O'Neill until 1883. In March 1883, Dr. T. B. Lemon, Missionary Superintendent of the Regional Methodist Church, called on all ministers in Holt County to meet in Atkinson for the purpose of selecting a preacher for O'Neill. The ministers who attended came from Inman, Ewing, Stuart, Keya Paha, Middle Branch, Scottsville, and Atkinson. The Reverend Bartlett

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<sup>2</sup>Judge John J. McCafferty, MSS, Archives, Creighton University. Hereinafter referred to as McCafferty Collection; Reverend Leo D. Carpenter, "Early Methodism in Holt County", Holt County, MSS, Nebraska State Historical Society. Hereinafter referred to as Carpenter, "Early Methodism".



Blain was selected to work in O'Neill. Later that March Dr. Lemon and Blain went to O'Neill where they found that a number of Methodists, for want of a church, had joined the newly created Presbyterian church in order to attend a Protestant service. They stated, however, that if a Methodist church could be organized they and others would join. After considerable effort a church was organized by three members. They included Dr. S. M. Brenner, his wife, Flora, and Mrs. Sara Caykindall, from Middle Branch, who was working in town. Later in the same year Ellen Patterson, Mary Sarkett, and Alberta Uttley joined the congregation. The Board of Trustees included Brenner, David Darr, J. R. Kennedy, Andrew Stewart, and F. M. Phelps, the last three being members of the Middle Branch charge.<sup>3</sup>

Immediately after the organization of the church Blain began to plan for the erection of a parsonage and church. A loan of five hundred dollars and several lots were secured along with donations totaling two hundred and fifty dollars of which twenty-five dollars was given by Patrick Fahy, a leader in the Catholic Church of O'Neill.<sup>4</sup> When bids were called for only one was received and that bid was for labor.

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<sup>3</sup>Carpenter, "Early Methodism"; The Frontier, August 25, 1881.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., Interview with Clay Johnson, July 2, 1973. A sum of two hundred and fifty dollars was obtained from the Methodist Board of Church Extension, but it is not known whether it was in the form of a loan or donation.

Blain on the following day began to erect the parsonage himself. He employed his married daughters as housekeepers, his son, Will, and son-in-law as laborers, and three carpenters who resided outside of the city. In a day and a half a frame house with a board roof, floor, two benches, stove, table, and beds for the housekeeper, her husband, and baby were built. All this was set up in a twelve by sixteen foot house. The next day the church was begun. On December 16, 1883, the first Methodist church in O'Neill was dedicated with a total construction cost of one thousand eight hundred dollars. The dimensions of the church were thirty by forty feet.<sup>5</sup>

The Presbyterians were conducting services in O'Neill as early as 1878. Missionaries and evangelists rode circuit and preached in the town on several occasions. It was not, however, until 1883 that a permanent Presbyterian church was organized. On January 16, 1883, the church was established with seven persons present and thirteen subscribing. Elders included: Andrew Milligan, S. M. Brenner, and John H. Riggs. The pastor was J. Sylvanus. Services were held on the first and third Sundays of each month.<sup>6</sup>

By March 1883, the congregation had grown until the erection of a church was justified. Plans were made and approved and on June 10, 1883, construction began. On February

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., February 24, 1887; September 4, 1890; McCafferty Collection.

<sup>6</sup>Holt County Banner, January 16, 1883, June 12, 1883; Item (O'Neill), January 9, 1883.

10, 1884, the church was completed at a cost of two thousand dollars. The Reverend James H. Riggs, a former elder, had replaced Sylvanus as pastor.<sup>7</sup>

Riggs remained pastor of the church until August 1886, when he was replaced by the Reverend N. S. Lowrie. He was one of O'Neill's most popular ministers and came from New York state in early 1886. From his parsonage in O'Neill, which operated as a headquarters, he served Northern Holt County preaching in churches, school houses, and private homes. In many of these homes planks were brought in for benches, hymn books were distributed, and a sermon followed. Frequently the meeting place was rotated from house to house around the neighborhood.<sup>8</sup>

Lowrie, aside from his clerical duties, took an active part in many social activities in O'Neill. He helped in the church Sunday school and was a leader in the town's temperance movement. At one time he ran for governor of Nebraska on the Prohibitionist ticket.<sup>9</sup>

The Catholics of O'Neill comprised the largest and most influential denomination in the city. The early history of the church can be traced to the summer of 1875 when the first service was given by Father J. P. Bedard. The service was

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<sup>7</sup>Holt County Banner, February 12, 1883, June 12, 1883; The Frontier, March 29, 1883, September 4, 1890.

<sup>8</sup>The Frontier, June 3, 1949.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

conducted at the home of John Hannigan.<sup>10</sup> Father Bedard was a pastor, doctor, and homesteader in the French Canadian Colony at Frenchtown in Antelope County. From all indications Bedard's visits to O'Neill were infrequent and caused some concern among the early residents. They had been promised a resident priest by General O'Neill before they moved to O'Neill City. When this promise was not fulfilled they appealed to Bishop James O'Connor, Vicar Apostolic of Nebraska, for help. O'Connor sent Father John Curtis of Lincoln to look into the matter.<sup>11</sup> On November 23, 1876, Curtis arrived in O'Neill and immediately sent the following report to O'Connor:

I have only just arrived here. Three hard days staging, and I think I ought to sent you immediately information, such as I have been able to obtain, concerning Rev. Bedard. He has not been here since spring of this year. He was in Frenchtown, where he has a homestead of 160 acres of fine land, on which he has built a log church and a cabin to live in, about a month ago. I was told by

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<sup>10</sup>Henry W. Casper, The Catholic Church in Nebraska, Vol. III: Catholic Chapters in Nebraska Immigration 1870-1900 (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1966), p. 17. Hereinafter referred to as Casper, Catholic Chapters. Michael F. Cassidy, "History of St. Patricks Parish O'Neill, Nebraska" Cassidy MSS, Archives of the Archdiocese of Omaha. Hereinafter referred to as Cassidy, "History of". When reading the manuscript history there appears to be several inaccuracies which leave some doubt as to the papers correctness. The Frontier, June 1949, states that the first mass was held at the Thomas Kane [sic] home adjoining the Tom Connolly claim on the West.

<sup>11</sup>Casper, Catholic Chapters, pp. 17-18; John O'Neill, Northern Nebraska as a Home for Immigrants Containing a General Description of the State, Sketch of Northern Counties and Answers to Correspondence of Intending Immigrants (Sioux City, Press, 1875), p. 91.

the postmaster in Frenchtown that he, the priest, had gone to Sioux City, whence he intends to return to his claim in spring next. Here I have learned that he is in Yancton [sic]. So he is likely to be found in one or the other place . . . . It appears to me that it is rather a disagreeable surprise to see a priest sent here to investigate. A nice little church is nearly finished here which is in itself almost a contradiction of the report. The Elkhorn Valley is the most beautiful country in Nebraska. The O'Neill colonies are particularly beautiful in location. I will tell you more when I return.<sup>12</sup>

It is apparent from the letter that a church was under construction at the time of Curtis' visit. The location of the church and adjoining grounds were on lots one through four, eleven, twelve, and fourteen through sixteen on block four. The land was donated by Patrick Fahy.<sup>13</sup> A church committee to oversee the construction and operation of the parish was also organized. The members included: John Grady, Patrick McCoy, John Cronin, James Enright, and a party referred to as Kelley.<sup>14</sup> John Maybury, the only carpenter in O'Neill, was contracted to build the church. When completed the building measured eighteen by thirty-six feet and was without seats or pews and had no bell.<sup>15</sup> Building material

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<sup>12</sup>Letter from Father John Curtis to Bishop James O'Connor, O'Neill City, November 23, 1876. O'Neill MSS, Archives of the Archdiocese of Omaha.

<sup>13</sup>McCafferty Collection.

<sup>14</sup>Letter from John Maybury to Bishop James O'Connor, O'Neill City, February 6, 1877. O'Neill MSS, Archives of the Archdiocese of Omaha. Hereinafter referred to as, "Maybury to O'Connor".

was expensive and had to be hauled by oxen one hundred and thirty-five miles from Wisner, the terminal of the F. E. and M. V. Railroad.<sup>16</sup> The cost of erecting the church was five hundred and thirty-five dollars which Maybury had difficulty in collecting from the congregation.<sup>17</sup> On May 21, 1877, he secured a mechanics lien against the church, the first lien ever issued in the county. Several months later he sent Bishop O'Connor a letter asking for his intervention in helping collect the money due him. Whether or not O'Connor intervened is not known.<sup>18</sup>

The official organization of St. Joseph Parish was accomplished in 1877 when two trustees were appointed by Bishop O'Connor. The parish extended to the county lines on the east and south, on the north by the Niobrara River, and by a line running from north to south through the middle of range thirteen on the west. Father John T. Smith was appointed first permanent pastor of the parish in August 1877.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Cassidy, "History of"; Reverend A. M. Colaneri MSS, Archives of the Archdiocese of Omaha. Hereinafter referred to as Colaneri Collection. Colaneri states that the church building was twenty by thirty-eight feet.

<sup>16</sup>"Maybury to O'Conner"; McCafferty Collection.

<sup>17</sup>McCafferty Collection: Casper, Catholic Chapters, pp. 18-20.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>McCafferty Collection; The Frontier, June 3, 1949; Cassidy, "History of"; Catholic Directory 1878. The Catholic Directory states that John T. Smyth was pastor of the parish in O'Neill. This could be a typographical error.

When Father Smith arrived in O'Neill there was no rectory or adequate housing quarters in the city. He lived temporarily at the farmhouse of John Cronin four miles from O'Neill and later with the families of Dennis Daly and J. P. O'Donnell. The rectory, which was completed in 1879, was located on the same block as the church and was a frame structure eighteen by thirty-six feet and one and a half stories high.<sup>20</sup>

The first Episcopal visit to O'Neill City occurred in the summer of 1880. Bishop O'Connor administered confirmation to ninety-one persons on September 5, 1880.<sup>21</sup> By the following year church attendance had reached a point where there was a need for the building of a larger church and rectory. The old church was sold to the school district and construction was begun on the new one. The cost of the church was estimated at six thousand dollars with the money raised by subscription. The dimensions of the structure were forty by eighty feet with an adjacent room fourteen by twenty feet.<sup>22</sup> The church, completed in 1884, contained four hundred seats and was equipped with a hot air furnace. Twice during its construction the building was damaged by storms.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>McCafferty Collection; Casper, Catholic Chapters, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup>Cassidy, "History of"; Colaneri Collection. Colaneri states that the number confirmed was ninety-three.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.; McCafferty Collection; The Frontier, May 18, 1882, February 24, 1887. Cassidy states the first church was used until 1884. The O'Neill school district also conducted classes in the same building from 1882 until 1885.

<sup>23</sup>McCafferty Collection.

In 1886, Father Smith, who was transferred to Cheyenne, Wyoming, was replaced by the Very Reverend Michael E. Cassidy from Rawlings, Wyoming. Father Cassidy immediately began to increase the seating capacity of the church by one hundred people. During the same year a tower twelve feet square and ninety feet tall was erected and a bell weighing four thousand pounds was installed at a cost of \$1,719.<sup>24</sup> On November 9, 1886, St. Joseph Parish was incorporated under the laws of Nebraska. The incorporators included: the Very Reverend R. A. Shaffal, Vicar General; Bishop O'Connor, the Reverend M. F. Cassidy, Patrick Hagerty, and John McBride. The officers selected were Bishop O'Connor, ex-officio president; Father Cassidy, treasurer; and Patrick Hagerty, secretary. The name of the parish was changed to St. Patricks Parish. In 1888, membership had reached two hundred families.<sup>25</sup>

By the early 1890's the Catholic, Presbyterian, and Methodist congregations had considerable membership. The women and youth of these churches began to organize into auxillary bodies such as ladies aid societies and youth groups. These groups not only contributed to the support of the churches but enlivened the community's social life. The Ladies Aid Society of the Methodist Church was one of the first groups organized in O'Neill and held many church fairs and dinners.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid.; McCafferty Collection.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.; The Frontier, June 1949.

<sup>26</sup>The Frontier, May 15, 1890.



The women of the Catholic church raised money by holding dances at McCafferty's Hall. The Young Peoples Society of Christian Endeavor, a youth group of the Presbyterian Church, held a variety of fund raising projects including festivals and Sunday afternoon lunches.<sup>27</sup>

Among the most common and widely known activities of the Protestant churches were the revivals and camp meetings. These activities were attended by entire families and were eagerly awaited by everyone. Picnic baskets were prepared in advance, tents were erected and everyone looked forward to the fellowship. The camp meeting combined a vacation with a period of spiritual refreshment.<sup>28</sup>

O'Neill's religious foundations were well laid by the turn of the century. Several churches had been established and their growth recorded. The influence exerted by these religious institutions were an integrated part of community life. The societies of these churches also lent support to the town's social life. All indications gave O'Neill as having a well rounded community as the town moved into the twentieth century.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., March 11, 1886, September 4, 1890.

<sup>28</sup> James C. Olson, History of Nebraska (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), p. 104-105. McCafferty Collection.

## CHAPTER V

### THE RAILROADS AND O'NEILL CITY

The decade between 1880 and 1890 experienced a tremendous increase in growth and prosperity for Nebraska and residents of O'Neill City. One reason was undoubtedly the railroad. Everyone wanted it to come through their town or near his farm. Naturally the settler was ready to assist in securing this benefit. The history of the railroad in O'Neill City began in 1881 with the Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad which later became part of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad Company.

The discovery of gold in the Black Hills stimulated the construction of the railroad into O'Neill City. With the mining of gold the town suddenly noticed an increase in traffic by prospectors moving North. This increase created a need for improved transportation facilities to O'Neill and the Black Hills region. The Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad was the first to meet this challenge.

The Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley unlike other railroads in the state received no government land grants. Land grants were becoming unpopular and Congress discontinued the policy. The Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri

Valley adopted a policy of settling the land instead of selling land from the government grants as its southern neighbor, the Union Pacific, had done. In the homestead region where the railroad was building anyone could obtain one hundred and sixty acres of free land as a homestead. This policy differed from the Union Pacific and Kansas Pacific railroads where a person could only homestead eighty acres of land under the government land grant system. The Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad operated upon the theory that the land was worth twice as much inside a railroad land grant and that possibly farmers would move north to buy the cheaper lands of the F. E. & M. V.. In addition, since the railroad had no land grants, more than eighty acres of land could be purchased adjoining the railroad line which was not true for a land grant railroad.<sup>1</sup>

The Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad Company was organized in January 1869. It began actual construction at Fremont after the completion of the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad to that point in 1869. The following year the company built to West Point, and in 1871, the line was extended to Wisner, where the terminus remained until 1879. In May 1880, the railroad was graded to a point fifteen miles north of Norfolk, and continued

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<sup>1</sup>Chicago and Northwestern Railroad, MSS, Nebraska State Historical Society.

toward Neligh, Nebraska, at a rate of one and one-half miles per day.<sup>2</sup>

While the contractors were engaged in building the road to Neligh, S. H. Thatch, a representative for the company, was securing the right-of-way in Antelope and Holt Counties. He found it very difficult to deal with some of the residents. Many of them were cattlemen who although seeing the advantages of having a railroad to the eastern market, also saw in the railroad the beginning of an influx of settlers who would take from them the huge cattle ranges for which they had paid little or nothing. In one instance Thatch was assaulted with an iron bar and was beat until unconscious. He remained this way for three days before recovering satisfactorily.<sup>3</sup> As soon as the right-of-way was secured to Neligh, Thatch obtained a deed for eighty acres in O'Neill. The eighty acres was purchased by the Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad from John T. Prouty, David Wisegarver, Patrick Hagerty, and Patrick Fahy. Each of these men sold twenty acres. The right-of-way through O'Neill was secured at a cost of three to ten dollars per acre.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Albert Watkins, (ed.), Illustrated History of Nebraska, Vol. III, (Lincoln: Jacob North and Company, 1907), pp. 447-454.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 457.

<sup>4</sup>The Frontier, (O'Neill), September 30, 1880, September 3, 1881.

The grading from Norfolk to Neligh progressed rapidly during the summer and by the winter of 1880 track had been laid to within five and one-half miles of Neligh. Throughout the winter it was rumored that a line would be constructed from O'Neill to Niobrara, Nebraska, but such a proposal did not seem practical. Construction material was brought to Neligh whenever the weather permitted. Large quantities of ties and rails were also brought to Norfolk so that any competition from the Omaha and Northwestern, Union Pacific, or the Covington, Columbus and Black Hills railroads could be met. Besides bringing construction supplies West, the Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley cooperated with the Sioux City and Pacific to bring supplies to the sufferers of the spring floods in Nebraska and Iowa. The floods were created by the sudden spring thaws.<sup>5</sup>

By June 1881, the company was ready to continue construction. The grading Northwest of Neligh required the hauling of very little dirt and already had been completed as far as O'Neill City.<sup>6</sup> The road bed was constructed to O'Neill as rapidly as money and labor permitted. Men and trains of supplies came to the front every day throughout

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<sup>5</sup>Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad, MSS, Nebraska State Historical Society. Jay Van Hover, "History of the Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Railroad. 1860-1903" (Unpublished Masters Thesis, Department of History, University of Nebraska), pp. 37-40.

<sup>6</sup>The Frontier, May 19, 1881.

the early part of June so that construction could be as rapid as possible. The competition of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul, which had surveyed from Niobrara to O'Neill, tended to make the officials realize the necessity for even more rapid construction.<sup>7</sup>

The heavy losses suffered by the railroad during the winter retarded construction somewhat throughout the summer. Heavy losses between Oakdale and Neligh accounted for much of the damage but supply trains were running between these towns by the middle of June. By August 1881, most of the flood damage had been repaired and trains were running into O'Neill City. On August 13, 1881, the last rail was laid to connect O'Neill City with the remainder of the Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley system.<sup>8</sup>

With the railroad already completed to O'Neill City and the land purchased to Long Pine, Nebraska, the Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley decided to create an interest in the region and develop it. The slogan, "Free Homes for the Millions", was originated by the railroad. John Ross Buchanan, general passenger agent from 1881 to 1903 said:

It headed every circular folder and poster which I issued, and I issued them by the millions. I spread them over Iowa, Missouri, Illinois,

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., June 12, 1881.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., August 18, 1881.

Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio and even worked some in New York and Pennsylvania. Everywhere, and in every possible publication and newspaper printed in black, blue, and red ink, in the English and German languages, was this sentence, "Free Homes for the Millions."<sup>9</sup>

There is some confusion in the various references as to the name of the railroad that built in the O'Neill, Nebraska region in 1881. Sometimes it is referred to as the Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad, and in other instances the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad is mentioned. Since there was only one railroad in the area in 1881, the Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley and Sioux City and Pacific were used interchangeably. In 1884, the Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad was sold to the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad Company which has retained it to the present time.<sup>10</sup>

In the spring of 1888, a meeting of business men from Sioux City, Creighton, and O'Neill was held in Creighton for the purpose of increasing trade for their respective towns. The O'Neill representative was John J. McCafferty. The result of the first meeting was that a resolution be adopted stating that a company would be formed to build

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<sup>9</sup>Verna Lee Tubbs, "Settlement and Development of the Northeast Sandhills" (unpublished Masters Thesis, Department of History, University of Nebraska, 1957), p. 57.

<sup>10</sup>Watkins, p. 448; McCafferty Collection.

a railroad from Sioux City to O'Neill via Creighton. The railroad was to be known as the Sioux City, Creighton, O'Neill and Western Railroad. The name was later changed to the Pacific Short Line.<sup>11</sup>

In October 1888, a second meeting was held at the Garretson Hotel of Sioux City in which a committee was organized to form a stock company to build the railroad. Those members from O'Neill included McCafferty, Patrick Fahy, and Moses P. Kinkaid. An organization was effected on paper and a resolution passed that the road was to be completed during the summer or fall of 1889. It was also agreed upon that preparations should be made to commence grading from Sioux City as soon as the conditions of the ground would permit. John J. McCafferty was selected in charge of advertising and was given the task of presenting the railroad properly before the public.<sup>12</sup>

Apparently the advertising by McCafferty achieved its purpose for it attracted Donald McLean, an engineer who had built a railroad in Mexico for President Diaz. It was thought that McLean was a wealthy man, however, he owed numerous debts and according to McCafferty came to Sioux City with only ten dollars in his pocket. McLean upon arriving in town immediately inquired into the cost

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<sup>11</sup>McCafferty Collection.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.



and topography of the country through which the railroad was to be built. He then conferred with several Sioux City businessmen about obtaining city securities for the railroad. Obtaining these securities McLean left for New York City and secured a loan from the Manhattan Loan and Trust Company. McLean returned to Sioux City and became the principal owner in the railroad. The trust company put up the money for the railroad on the bonds of the railroad and certain Sioux City securities of inflated value.<sup>13</sup>

By late 1889, the road was under construction. It was found, however, impossible to build the railroad by way of Creighton so it was constructed through Plainview.<sup>14</sup> On July 10, 1890, the Pacific Short Line entered O'Neill. The newspapers of the town said it marked "the beginning of an era of prosperity, advancement and development". The railroad built in O'Neill a large roundhouse of fifteen stalls which included an extensive yard, water tank, coal shed, and several buildings. The depot for the railroad measured twenty by ninety feet with sixty feet of the structure being two stories tall. The first agent was J. W. Firebaugh.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., The Frontier, March 14, 1889.

<sup>14</sup>McCafferty Collection.

<sup>15</sup>The Frontier, July 10, 1890, August 21, 1890, September 4, 1890.

Originally the line was planned to extend to Ogden, Utah, and link up with the transcontinental system. Plans were made on several occasions for this extension but money could not be raised. The western terminus of the Pacific Short Line, now part of the Burlington Northern, remains at O'Neill.

With the completion of the Pacific Short Line the residents of O'Neill confidently expected that additional railroads would be built through the city. In June 1887, the Burlington and Missouri Railroad Company surveyed a line through O'Neill. Three years later the company had completed a branch line to Erickson, Nebraska, forty-five miles south of O'Neill. The line many residents thought would soon turn north and link up with the Pacific Short Line in O'Neill. The branch line, however, was never built north to O'Neill and the residents soon forgot about the Burlington.<sup>17</sup>

The building of the railroad was of the utmost importance to the development of O'Neill and the surrounding area. The interest created by the development of these lines was constantly revealed in contemporary newspapers. The O'Neill Sun, Tribune, and Frontier contained many articles covering the benefits the city and its residents

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., August 21, 1890, September 4, 1890; McCafferty Collection.

<sup>17</sup>The Frontier, September 4, 1890; O'Neill Tribune June 9, 1887.

could receive. As the decade of the 1890's drew to a close O'Neill's two railroads proved the papers correct. They gave the town increased business and provided a means of transporting goods and passengers.

## CHAPTER VI

### BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN O'NEILL

The first twenty-five years of O'Neill's existence witnessed its greatest development. An era of electric lights, telephones, and Saturday night concerts had begun. The combination of railroads, farms, and local industry instilled in the town an energetic atmosphere, with the residents enjoying the luxuries it brought. This era proved to be a time of growing affluence for the citizens of O'Neill.

Prior to the building of the Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad through O'Neill, the town's growth was slow. The village listed only a few business establishments. The first general store began operation in 1874, under the direction of Patrick Hagerty. Four years later in 1878, a tailor and clothing shop was established by Donald J. Stanton. The same year a general merchandise store was opened by J. Daley and John P. Purcell on Douglas Street. The first hardware store west of Norfolk was established by Neil Brennen and John J. McCafferty in February 1879. Late in the same year B. J. Capwell opened a general country store in the Bently building. He carried a wide assortment of dry goods, clothing, cured meats, and

"wet goods", which included beer and whiskey.<sup>1</sup>

The discovery of gold in the Black Hills in the late 1870's gave impetus to the economy of O'Neill City. The location of O'Neill City made it an important stopover for travelers on their way to the gold mining regions. Several freight companies were organized, among them Sam Farrer's line which extended to Niobrara.<sup>2</sup> Hotels, eating houses, and liveryies also developed quickly. The first hotel in O'Neill City, Valley House, was a crude building of logs and rough lumber. It was opened for business in 1878 under the direction of John P. O'Donnell. In 1879, Darwin J. Sparks, who came from Pennsylvania, established the second hotel. The City Hotel, later renamed the Arcade House, operated for many years and was one of the town's better establishments. The cost of a single room was one dollar per night in 1886.<sup>3</sup>

In the fall of 1876, a post office was established in Hagerty's store with Patrick Hagerty as postmaster. In the beginning mail was delivered to O'Neill City by whatever means available, but in 1880 five stage lines

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<sup>1</sup>Judge John J. McCafferty, MSS, Archives, Creighton University. Hereinafter referred to as McCafferty Collection; Alfred T. Andreas, History of the State of Nebraska (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), p. 985.

<sup>2</sup>Holt County Record, June 16, 1879.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., September 30, 1880; The Frontier, March 11, 1886; McCafferty Collection.

were in operation carrying mail to Keya Paha, Paddock, Brazille, Creighton, and Niobrara.<sup>4</sup>

As the gold rush to the Black Hills wained, O'Neill City began to feel the influence of an even greater economic stimulant--the railroad. The newspapers predicted great things when the railroad arrived. In August 1881, the railroad finally reached O'Neill City and its benefits soon became evident. A comparison of census returns illustrates the growth that O'Neill City experienced. In 1879 the census listed Center Precinct as having a population of five hundred and sixty people with O'Neill City claiming fifty residents. Included in O'Neill City's population were five merchants, two blacksmiths, an attorney, carpenter, doctor, tailor, and machinest.<sup>5</sup> In contrast 1883 gave Center Precincts population as eleven hundred and nineteen with O'Neill totaling two hundred and fifty-five. Included were nine merchants, three blacksmiths, eight attorneys, seven carpenters, three livery men, three saloon keepers; as well as a shoemaker, tailor, doctor, watchmaker, butcher, stage driver, milliner, barber, and housekeeper. Although the railroad was not entirely responsible for this increase, it undoubtly played a major role.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Holt County Banner, February 10, 1884; The Frontier, April 21, 1881.

<sup>5</sup>Report of State Officers 1883-1884. "Secretary of State Report on Population." Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

By August 1882, the community had grown to a point where many of the citizens felt the town should be incorporated. A petition was circulated and presented to the Holt County Board of Commissioners at their first meeting in September 1882. The commissioners acted favorably upon the petition and the village of O'Neill City was given official recognition on October 7, 1882. The commissioners appointed the O'Neill Board of Trustees which included the following: John J. McCafferty, E. E. Evans, W. D. Mathews, Patrick Hagerty, and Sanford Parker. Other village officials were M. D. Land, clerk; David L. Darr, treasurer; and John C. Smoot, marshal. The territory forming the village included the original town-site, McCafferty Addition, Hagerty Addition, Wisegarver Addition, O'Neill Addition, and the Prouty claim south of town. The word "City" was dropped and the name became O'Neill.<sup>7</sup>

(See Appendix page 98 and 99.)

On January 9, 1883, the Board of Trustees elected C. C. Millard as Chairman Pro Tem. Also a date in April was designated for the first election of a Board of Trustees. As election day approached, articles began to appear in the newspapers alerting the citizens of the election and the political views of the candidates.<sup>8</sup> On April 3, 1883, the first election in O'Neill was held with a total of one hundred twenty-five votes

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<sup>7</sup>Holt County Record, October 7, 1882; The Frontier, October 12, 1882; Holt County Banner, January 30, 1883.

<sup>8</sup>The Frontier, January 11, 1883.

cast. Those receiving votes included: C. M. Cleveland, twenty-four votes; C. C. Millard, twenty-three votes; W. D. Mathews, twenty-three votes; Heshier, twenty-four votes; Flannigan, fifteen votes; O'Donnell, nine votes; Evans, three votes; Ellen, three votes; and Smoot, one vote. On April 19, 1883, the first meeting of the newly elected Board of Trustees chose Cleveland as Chairman. Also included in the meeting was the passage of several ordinances covering city regulations and the building of wooden sidewalks.<sup>9</sup>

In the meantime, the residents of O'Neill had begun a campaign to entice new citizens and industry into the town. They placed considerable emphasis upon the fact that O'Neill was an incorporated town and the county seat of Holt County. One of the first results of their efforts was the establishment of a creamery. On February 20, 1883, the Holt County Creamery and Cheese Association was organized. The stock assets totaled two thousand five hundred dollars with Patrick Fahy owning one thousand four hundred dollars in stock. The Board of Directors included: W. E. Adams, Patrick Fahy, M. W. Flannigan, G. M. Cleveland, and John Dwyer. The creamery was housed in a three story building located on Fourth Street near the railroad depot. It was said to be the third largest creamery in the state and cost twelve thousand dollars. H. M. Uttley was the first president. In March 1883, the name was changed to

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., April 12, 1883, April 19, 1883.



the Holt County Creamery Company. On July 1, 1883, the creamery produced the first cheese with an estimated production of two hundred pounds per day. By January 1884, the daily output had reached five thousand pounds of butter and one thousand pounds of cheese.<sup>10</sup>

The O'Neill Packing Company was the second major industry to be established in O'Neill. The pork packing operation began in November 1885 with three acres of land donated for the site. The foundation was built upon an old grit mill. This enterprise was of no small influence to the farmers of the area. It offered an inducement for the raising of swine and gave the farmers a cash market and a better price than Eastern packing houses could offer. J. E. West was the plant's first manager. The capacity of the plant was one thousand hogs per day.<sup>11</sup>

In December of the same year, the O'Neill Pop Company was organized by Elmer Merriman and J. L. Mack. The company manufactured pop, soda water, and a variety of temperance drinks. The pop company had a thriving business and was frequently visited by many of the children in the town.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>The Frontier, January 5, 1882, November 12, 1884, March 11, 1886; Holt County Banner, February 20, 1883, February 27, 1883, July 3, 1883.

<sup>11</sup>The Frontier, November 12, 1884, November 26, 1885, March 11, 1886.

<sup>12</sup>Interview with George "Hurley" Jones. July 2, 1973. The Frontier, March 11, 1886.

Two years later a roller mill for the making of barrels was started in O'Neill. The cost of the plant was fifty thousand dollars and had a production capacity of three hundred barrels per day. Unfortunately that fall the mill burned and was never rebuilt.<sup>13</sup> In December of the same year the citizens of O'Neill created a Board of Trade with forty-six active members. Its first president was J. P. Mann, a leading merchant, and its secretary was G. C. Hazeltt, the county clerk. The duties of the Board of Trade included furnishing information to parties who desired to know the "character" of the town and to advertise whenever possible the advantages of living in O'Neill.<sup>14</sup>

In 1889, the O'Neill Brick and Tile Company was organized with a capital of ten thousand dollars. Articles of incorporation were formed with incorporators being D. L. Dow, secretary; Barret Scott, president; and W. D. Mathews, treasurer. The company was located on land owned by Mathews. When operations began the firm had only one kiln but soon expanded operations to include several ovens. Clay used in the brick was secured from the east.<sup>15</sup>

By 1890, numerous businesses were established in O'Neill. Among those listed in The Frontier, September 4, 1890 edition

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., February 24, 1887, September 4, 1890.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., April 18, 1889, September 4, 1890.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., June 12, 1890, September 4, 1890.

were: six grocery stores, three dry good establishments, two drug stores, three barber shops, three harness shops, three meat markets, six hotels, six livery stables, three doctors, two bakeries, and two shoe shops. Also included were five blacksmith and two wagon shops, five saloons, one laundry, five hog buyers, and two agricultural implement dealers.<sup>16</sup>

The Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad was also doing a large business by the late 1880's. During the spring of 1889 the railroad transported for the farmers of the area 117 carloads of swine, 81 carloads of cattle, 4 carloads of sheep, 9 carloads of potatoes, 5 carloads of flour, and 294 carloads of home products.<sup>17</sup>

To a large extent this bustling prosperity depended upon the fortunes of agriculture and during the 1880's agricultural production was successful. Favorable weather gave the farmer a good crop yield and the railroad provided the transportation to market. The farmers, encouraged by good crops, tended to increase production. By the mid 1880's, however, prices began to fall and continued to fall into the early 1890's. Agricultural areas throughout the nation soon began to display unrest as the Populist revolt began to take hold. The drought

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., September 4, 1890.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., April 18, 1889.

of 1894 gave intensity to the farmers' agitation. In Nebraska the 1894 rainfall total was less than half the average figure for the preceeding year. Many farmers left O'Neill and Holt County because of lack of water.<sup>18</sup>

As people began to leave the area civic leaders in O'Neill launched a campaign to attract new settlers. An article appearing in the Omaha Bee stated that much of the land in the Holt County area would soon be irrigated and that the farmers would do well to come back to their farms. It was reported that the Elkhorn Irrigation Company had just completed a thirteen mile trench south of O'Neill which would reclaim over nine thousand acres of fine farm land. The article further stated that the farm land to be reclaimed by the project was at one time settled, but because of the drought, the land had been abandoned. Much of the land largely owned by non-residents, could be bought at a reasonable price at the district land office in O'Neill.<sup>19</sup> In March of the same year, The Frontier reported that contracts had been given for the construction of buildings and the drilling of wells. The buildings were to be occupied by the parties who had signed the contracts with the company to break and

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<sup>18</sup>James C. Olson, History of Nebraska (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), p. 203, 205, and 216.

<sup>19</sup>Clarence Selah, "Bring the Settlers Back," Omaha Bee December 4, 1894, Holt County Scrapbook, Nebraska State Historical Society.

crop three thousand acres of land that season. Besides furnishing the land, seed, and water, the company paid one dollar cash for each acre of land broken. The company in turn received one-half of the farmers crop.<sup>20</sup>

Further references to the Elkhorn irrigation project appeared in the April 1896 edition of The Frontier. The article stated that parties from the East had purchased about five thousand acres of valley land in a body south and southwest of O'Neill and had constructed a main ditch twelve miles long and were nearly done with the digging of "score of miles" of small lateral ditches through the land.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the mid 1890's several other irrigation projects were proposed in the county. In 1895, a irrigation district was organized which included irrigable land in Holt, Brown, and Rock counties. The Holt County Commissioners records of August 27, 1895 stated:

The proposition of the Golden Irrigation project was duly submitted to a vote of the qualified electors and owners of real estate in said district on the 16th day of August 1895, and we find that the total number of the votes cast in favor of said proposition are 635--the number cast against are 106.

After a careful canvas of the vote in said territory, we find a majority in favor of the organization of said territory into an

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<sup>20</sup>The Frontier, March 19, 1896.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., April 23, 1896.

irrigation district to be known as the Golden Irrigation District.<sup>22</sup>

In 1897, the question of irrigation continued to receive publicity. The Golden Irrigation District, after its organization had to await a decision of the United States Supreme Court before proceeding with its plans. When the court pronounced the Wright Irrigation Law constitutional, plans for the Golden Irrigation District were continued. The district, with headquarters in O'Neill, contained an area of 542,000 acres. The enterprise contemplated a diversion of the water of the Niobrara and Snake Rivers into a natural reservoir capable of holding a million acre-feet of water. The reservoir was to be located one hundred miles west of O'Neill.<sup>23</sup>

The question of whether there was sufficient water for irrigation was investigated by engineers. In July 1897, it was announced that there was not sufficient water to irrigate the entire district and to justify the property owners in constructing the ditch. It was concluded that the Golden Irrigation project would have to be abandoned and the affairs of the district would be closed in the manner prescribed by law.<sup>24</sup>

Over a period of six or seven years, the optimistic views toward irrigation had increased in the area as a result of

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<sup>22</sup>Holt County Commissioners Records, August 27, 1895.  
Ibid., January 21, 1897.

<sup>23</sup>The Frontier, January 21, 1897.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., February 25, 1897, July 22, 1897.

continued publicity by the newspapers. Farmers could visualize increased crop yields by the removal of the one big obstacle in their attempt to produce cultivated crops. Thus, the announcement of insufficient water for irrigation shattered their high hopes, and the fate of the farmer remained entirely in the hands of nature.

While Holt County farmers were experiencing difficulty during the early 1890's one of the most dramatic cases of embezzlement and murder was beginning to unfold. Between 1890 and 1894, Barrett Scott, county treasurer, gave county funds to many of the needy farmers in the area to help them buy seed and pay for their farms. In September 1894, an audit was taken of the county funds and a deficit of thirty-two thousand dollars was uncovered. Scott was brought to trial and found guilty of embezzlement. Before going to prison Scott was abducted by several masked men and hanged near Whiting Bridge over the Niobrara River. Indictments were brought against George Millighan, Moses Elliot, and Merit Ray. Millighan was the only man tried and he was acquitted.<sup>25</sup>

The 1890's also saw a change in political philosophy by the residents of O'Neill. Every election prior to 1895 was won by a Republican majority.<sup>26</sup> By late 1895,

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., June 3, 1949.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., February, 1897, July 22, 1897.

however, O'Neill and the surrounding communities took an active part in the Populist movement. The usually Republican town and precinct yielded to agricultural interests and voted Populist along with the rest of Nebraska.<sup>27</sup> The Populists polled the highest number of votes of any party in 1895, and either alone or fused with the Democrats, kept the majority until the turn of the century. In 1896, William Jennings Bryan received a majority of the O'Neill votes, and the county board was composed of five Populists and two Republicans.<sup>28</sup>

Almost as soon as the election of 1896 was over new issues began to appear in the newspapers. The question of Cuba gained increasing importance. Two years later in 1898, the sinking of the Maine received front page coverage in O'Neill. Although O'Neill's contribution to the Spanish American War was not a determining factor, several residents saw action in Cuba. Included were the following: Sam Beavers, Otto Clevish, Martin Cronin, Pat Armstrong, Dan Fennigan, and Charles Hall.<sup>29</sup>

By 1890, O'Neill had become a well established community. The earlier settlement of sod houses had given way to a bustling pioneer town. This town was meeting the needs

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., November 7, 1895.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., February 25, 1897, November 10, 1898, April 7, 1899, November 10, 1899.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., May 12, 1898, November 10, 1898, April 7, 1899; Personal interview with John Harrington, July 2, 1973.



of its era. The 1880's had witnessed rapid expansion which resulted from westward emigration and improved transportation. The pioneers of the community had met and survived the challenge. The community of O'Neill was now ready to move into the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER VII

### SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PROGRESS 1876-1900

Life for the early settlers of O'Neill was rugged and simple. To many of the homesteaders struggling to wrest a living it was a job lasting from sunrise to sunset. These settlers worked long and hard with little time for social and recreational activities. This, however, was not an indication that culture was completely void or neglected. Newspapers, banks, schools, societies of many types, and other social and cultural displays were part of O'Neill City from its very inception.

The printing press was the first sign of cultural development in O'Neill City. The Holt County Record was the first paper published in Holt County. It was established on June 2, 1879, by Thomas J. Smith and B. C. Hill with the first thirty editions being printed at Niobrara, in Knox County.<sup>1</sup> The paper was then moved to O'Neill City where an office was established in the house of Patrick Hughes. Later the paper was moved from the Hughes house to the back porch of the Thomas Golden

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<sup>1</sup>Nebraska Newspaper Index, Holt County File. Nebraska State Historical Society. Hereinafter referred to as Nebraska Index. Romaine Saunders, former editor of The Frontier, states that the June 2, 1879 issue of The Holt County Record was published at Dorsey, Nebraska.

hardware store.<sup>2</sup> According to W. D. Mathews, editor of The Frontier, the paper had equipment consisting of a novelty press and perhaps a hundred dollars worth of type. Four four-column pages were printed, one page at a time.<sup>3</sup>

In July 1881, M. B. Gearon, a lawyer, bought a half interest in the paper and in November of the same year Thomas Smith sold his half interest to Patrick Hagerty. Smith then moved to Ainsworth, Nebraska, and established a newspaper there. Prior to Smith's departure The Holt County Record favored the Democratic Party but while in the hands of Gearon and Hagerty it was Republican in outlook. On February 22, 1882, Judge G. M. Cleveland bought Gearon's interest and became editor. In March of the same year, the newspaper was renamed the Holt County Banner and was the representative organ for the Nebraska anti-monopoly Republicans. The Holt County Banner operated until April 1884, when it was absorbed by the O'Neill Tribune.

The Frontier, the second paper published in the city began on July 29, 1880. The original founders were

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<sup>2</sup>Judge John J. McCafferty, MSS, Archives, Creighton University. Hereinafter referred to as McCafferty Collection.

<sup>3</sup>Ainsworth Journal, August 19, 1886.

<sup>4</sup>Nebraska Index; McCafferty Collection.

W. D. Mathews and James Riggs. Mathews was manager and editor of the paper. After a few months of operation the paper passed into the hands of the Frontier Printing Company organized by W. D. Mathews, Clyde King, and Dennis H. Cronin. In January 1892, The Frontier absorbed The Item, a Republican paper edited by E. E. Saunders. Two years later Mathews retired with Cronin and King buying his interest. In 1896, King retired and Cronin continued as sole publisher of The Frontier.<sup>5</sup>

In the summer of 1883, the O'Neill Tribune was founded by Thomas V. Golden. Golden, after operating the paper for a few months sold it to John M. McDonough, "the fighting editor", in May 1884. McDonough operated the newspaper until 1888 when it passed into the hands of C. C. Evans and sons who later established the Holt County Alliance Tribune.<sup>6</sup>

The history of the O'Neill Tribune would not be complete without a mention of John McDonough, its most popular owner and editor. McDonough operated the paper for four years until 1888, when he left O'Neill to take charge of the Omaha World Herald. McDonough gained the name of "the fighting editor", when a rival newspaper was set up in O'Neill to draw business from the Tribune.

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid.; The Frontier, June 28, 1890, September 4, 1890.

<sup>6</sup>Nebraska Index; McCafferty Collection.

The paper, The Peoples Independent, was operated by a Mr. Claybourne. The two papers clashed repeatedly on issues involving Democratic politics and the actions of local party leaders. The day following an article in the Tribune condemning the conduct of local Democrats, Taboth, a rancher, met McDonough in town. Insults were exchanged with Taboth ordering McDonough to take off his coat and kneel down while he showed him how he used to whip calves. McDonough refused and gave Taboth a beating. The following day, Taboth gathered a party of ranchers and friends and marched into the Tribune office. To the dismay of many, some of Taboth's volunteers left the Tribune office with broken bones and blackened eyes. Immediately following this incident The Peoples Independent ceased to publish.<sup>7</sup>

In the early days of the Granger movement a group of farmers formed a joint-stock company to publish a paper in O'Neill. This paper, The Holt County Independent, was designed to mold public opinion in favor of the farmers. From its very beginning the paper suffered from lack of funds and poor management on the part of its editor, Hans Houtzman. By 1893, however, a change of editors had taken place and the paper was relatively successful.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>McCafferty Collection.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

On May 8, 1890, the town of O'Neill saw the establishment of yet another newspaper. The O'Neill Sun began printing weekly six column editions under the direction of its two owners, Charles C. McHugh and a Mr. Watson. Prior to operating in O'Neill the Sun was printed in Mimmeola, Nebraska, under the direction of Echer and Watson. The O'Neill Sun was one of the leading Democratic organs in the county until it suspended operation on September 23, 1897.<sup>9</sup>

Banks were also among the early institutions to be established in O'Neill. The Holt County Bank, the first in the county, was organized in O'Neill by George E. Cheney and William Adams of Neligh in 1880. Cheney soon dropped out and moved to Creighton, Nebraska, but the bank was continued by William Adams with David Adams, a brother, as cashier.<sup>10</sup> On April 5, 1883, the Holt County Bank was incorporated with fifty thousand dollars authorized capital. Among the incorporators were William and David Adams and Moses P. Kinkaid. The bank was located at the intersection of Fourth ST. and Douglas.<sup>11</sup> In 1885, William Adams died leaving his interest in the

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<sup>9</sup>Nebraska Index; McCafferty Collection.

<sup>10</sup>McCafferty Collection.; Alfred T. Andreas, History of the State of Nebraska (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), p. 985; The Frontier, May 19, 1881.

<sup>11</sup>The Frontier, April 5, 1883, June 3, 1949.

bank to his brother. The following year Kinkaid sold his interest to David Adams leaving David L. Darr as the only shareholder in the bank outside of the Adams family. In late November 1886 Darr sold his interest to Adams to raise money to build a water powered flour mill south of town.<sup>12</sup>

The bank now became a family institution under the control of David and Edger Adams. By 1890 the bank owed fifty thousand dollars. David Adams tried to eliminate this debt by investing in land sales within the county. This venture eventually proved fatal, as the county was experiencing a time of land liquidation and he went further in debt. Finally the bank failed to open its doors for business in 1891 and David Adams "was not at home". This was the first bank failure in Holt County.<sup>13</sup>

In 1884, what came to be known as the First National Bank of O'Neill was organized as a state bank. The bank's manager was W. G. Palmatier with John Fitzgerald, brother-in-law to Patrick Fahy, as president, and Mike Flannigan as vice president. On January 1, 1886, the bank was reorganized with Palmatier as president, E. S. Kelly, cashier, and W. W. Stewart, assistant.<sup>14</sup> In 1889,

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<sup>12</sup>McCafferty Collection.; Andreas, p. 985.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>The Frontier, January 7, 1886, June 3, 1949.

Edward F. Gallagher, Thad T. Birmingham, and J. P. Mann bought out Palmatier's interest and operated the bank.<sup>15</sup>

Another early banking adventure in O'Neill was by Patrick Hagerty, B. J. McGreevey, H. N. McClury, and Charles Gardner. These men started a private partnership bank in 1886, which continued until 1898 when McClurg and Gardner withdrew. Hagerty then organized the Elkhorn Valley Bank with capital of fifty thousand dollars. The Elkhorn Valley Bank was located on Douglas Street and measured twenty by thirty-two feet.<sup>16</sup>

The State Bank of O'Neill obtained its charter on October 1, 1895. Incorporators were W. D. Mathews, Bernard Mullen, M. D. Long, John McBride, G. C. Hazelet, S. J. Weeks, Edger Adams, W. M. Canton, Neil Brennan, E. W. Kinch, A. V. Morris, John J. McCafferty, R. R. Dickson, A. C. Charde, J. L. Hershiser, Arthur Mullen, E. F. Mack, H. C. McEvony, and G. W. Wattler. John McHugh was the first manager of the bank. The bank voluntarily liquidated in 1897.<sup>17</sup>

Almost as soon as the first settlers arrived in O'Neill schools were started. The first schools were held in homes. Any available books were used as texts. One

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<sup>15</sup> McCafferty Collection.; The Frontier, September 4, 1890.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., May 1, 1890, June 3, 1949.

<sup>17</sup> The Frontier, July 22, 1897, June 3, 1949; Arthur Mullen Collection, Archives, Creighton University.



early-day teacher recalled having instructed eight pupils and using ten books, all different. The teachers were usually members of local families. School districts were organized as the need arose. While classes were held earlier no records seem to have been kept prior to 1878.<sup>18</sup>

The O'Neill City schools were located in school district seven which was organized in 1878. The original district comprised Sections 19, 20, 31, and the Northwest 1/4 of Section 29, Township 29, Range 11 West and Sections 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 34, 35, and 36 in Range 12 West. The first teacher under contract in school district seven was Ellan O'Sullivan who taught in 1878. Miss O'Sullivan's father, J. B. O'Sullivan, was the school districts first superintendent. The dwelling in which she taught was the Sparks building which had served as a courthouse, drugstore, saloon, and law office. The school was shifted continuously from one building to another until a permanent location was acquired at the old Catholic Church in the west part of town.<sup>19</sup>

By 1881, the school system had become too large. In that year a bond issue for twelve thousand dollars

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<sup>18</sup>The Frontier, March 23, 1882; Holt County Superintendents Record.

<sup>19</sup>McCafferty Collection.; Andreas, pp. 983-985.

was passed. This was to furnish money for a new school. Four years later in 1885, the first schoolhouse was completed. The school was a two story brick building with six rooms. The cost of the building was eight thousand dollars. Also in 1885, the school was graded and was the first high school in Holt County. Stephan Wicks was O'Neill's first male graduate of high school in 1887.<sup>20</sup>

In late 1894, John Bland was hired as superintendent and principal of school district seven. Among his first actions were the replacement of the school texts with newer editions. These new texts included: Smith's physiology, Fisher's arithmetic books, and Swinton's readers, spellers, grammar, and history books. Bland also expanded the school program and hired new teachers. Those new teachers hired were Kate Mann, First Intermediate, Maggie Connolly, Second Intermediate, and Emma McNicholas, Primary.<sup>21</sup>

In September 1890, the erection of Saint Mary's Academy was begun. The building was completed in late 1892 and measured forty-five by seventy-five feet and was two full stories, including a basement and attic. The academy was to operate under the guidance of the

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<sup>20</sup>The Frontier, March 11, 1886, April 18, 1889; McCafferty Collection.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., May 19, 1881, September 18, 1884, November 10, 1884, April 19, 1885, February 24, 1887.

Sisters of Charity and was the first Catholic school of its type in Holt County.<sup>22</sup>

The pioneer families of O'Neill were no different than other settlers living on the prairie. All had a need for social diversion. How the socialization was done was usually left to the head of the immediate family. On the frontier dancing and concerts held first place in many of towns. These dances and concerts were held on holidays, at every wedding, whenever a new bridge was completed, or to celebrate the outcome of an election. On July 4, 1882, the Catholic Church of O'Neill sponsored a dinner and bowery dance. Immediately following the dance some of the local musicians gave a concert. The Catholic Church made between one hundred fifty and two hundred dollars profit from the occasion.<sup>23</sup> At another instance two programs were presented with an admission charge of twenty-five cents per person. Part of the proceeds were used to purchase an organ for the Sunday school.<sup>24</sup>

The standard price for admission to many of the local dances and concerts was twenty-five to thirty cents.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., August 21, 1890, September 4, 1890, June 3, 1949.

<sup>23</sup>McCafferty Collection.; Everett Dick, The Sod House Frontier 1854-1890 A Social History of the Northern Plains from the Creation of Kansas and Nebraska to the Admission of the Dakotas (Lincoln: Johnsen Publishing Company, 1954), p. 349.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 488.; The Frontier, April 6, 1882; Item (O'Neill), April 25, 1882.

Prior to 1890 the hall on the second floor of the John J. McCafferty general store provided the meeting place for many social activities. After 1890 the Campbell Hall was used. It seated between five and six hundred people and measured thirty by ninety feet.<sup>25</sup>

Among the many musical groups that performed in O'Neill during the 1880's the brass band was the most popular. Organized in 1884 by Fred J. Herre, an E-Flat cornet player, the bands musical talent progressed rapidly. In 1885, the county's first band contest was held at the fair. Taking part in the contest were brass bands from Atkinson, Stuart, and O'Neill. O'Neill placed second to Atkinson in a very competitive contest. The original members included: Fred Herre, Fred Pfunder, John Smoot, Reese Mays, Charles Colligan, Sam Schram, Jimmy Riggs, and George Trigg.<sup>26</sup>

Between 1885 and 1890 the bands membership changed several times. A considerable turnover in leaders was also noted. Succeeding Fred Herre were Dean Selph, Mr. Gill, Ben Locks, and Homer Campbell. The band was financed by public subscription. Uniforms and instruments were bought and a list of individual contributions were kept. The list ranged from twenty cents to one dollar per month.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>McCafferty Collection.

<sup>26</sup>The Frontier, June 3, 1949.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

During the winter the residents of O'Neill took part in the activities of the O'Neill Library and Literary Society. The society had a constitution, by-laws, and officers. The programs of the society varied greatly from month to month. Usually the activities consisted of songs, dialogues, debates, and plays.<sup>28</sup> When a play was to be presented to the O'Neill residents, the society worked closely with the O'Neill Dramatic Company and the Amateur Theatrical Society. These home talent organizations featured dramatic presentations usually of a Shakespearian variety. Macbeth and Romeo and Juliet were popular with many of the O'Neill residents.<sup>29</sup> On occasion a play was presented that included the children of O'Neill. The O'Neill Tribune reported in an article on August 4, 1887, that a Chinese matinee was held. The play featured "the boys and girls of O'Neill" dressed in costume. The play was held at McCafferty's Hall and was a huge success.<sup>30</sup>

Fraternal lodges of many types were organized early on the frontier. Members of various lodges formed local units of the order in these new towns. These organizations were very beneficial and offered a vent for the social activities of the male citizens of the town.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., August 20, 1885.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., April 9, 1885; McCafferty Collection.

<sup>30</sup> O'Neill Tribune, August 4, 1887.

The first fraternal lodge to be formed in O'Neill was the International Order of Odd Fellows. Ten residents of O'Neill signed the first charter on November 30, 1876. The original members included: E. H. Thompson, H. N. McEvony, Frances McEvony, Wilson Hoxsie, David Wisegarver, Herman Strasburg, Joshua Ewing, C. C. Whitney, Samuel Wolf, and O. R. Elwood. The first meeting place for the Elkhorn Valley Lodge was a log cabin two miles east of O'Neill. Meetings were conducted every week. Four years later in 1880, the Odd Fellows built a new hall in O'Neill City which was used as a meeting hall for lodge activities and public lectures.<sup>31</sup>

Another early fraternal lodge in O'Neill City was the Anciety Order of Hibreans, Division Number One. This lodge was organized July 4, 1879, by twelve members. The officers included: Martin Walsh, county delegate; John McCann, president; Jerry Kelly, vice president; Dennis Handly, secretary; and Edward Gallagher, treasurer. This lodge proved very popular among the citizens of O'Neill and by 1882, numbered forty members.<sup>32</sup>

On January 6, 1882, a third body was organized in O'Neill City. The Frontier of December 28, 1882, contained a notice stating that a meeting was to be held at the Odd Fellows

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<sup>31</sup>The Frontier, December 29, 1881, February 9, 1882, March 9, 1882.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., January 26, 1882, March 23, 1882, January 4, 1883.

Hall for the purpose of establishing a Masonic Lodge. Any person interested should contact W. W. Mathews, William Wisegarver, Wilson Hoxsie, R. Wilton, Chas. Zickrich, S. H. Hazletine, or C. C. Millar. On March 9, 1882 the lodge was formed. The name Garfield Lodge was given in honor of the President of the United States. Those members elected were: N. T. Hoxsie, Worshipful Master; C. C. Millar, Senior Warden; W. D. Mathews, Junior Warden; and Moses P. Kinkaid, acting Secretary and Treasurer. Meetings of the lodge were to be held on the first and third Thursday of each month.<sup>33</sup>

The last of the fraternal lodges to be organized in O'Neill during the 1880's was the Grand Army of the Republic Lodge, John O'Neill Post. The initial organization of the lodge took place on January 30, 1882, when Captain Cassidy gave ten dollars toward the purchase of a charter from the mother lodge. On March 28, 1882, the post was organized with M. J. Kennedy Captain. Meetings were held twice monthly.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to the fraternal lodges several societies peculiar to the farming community were organized in O'Neill City. These included the Holt County Agricultural

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., December 29, 1881, February 9, 1882, March 9, 1882.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., January 26, 1882, March 23, 1882, January 4, 1883.

Society and the Society of Sons of Rest. The Holt County Agricultural Society was formed in the summer of 1885 with John J. McCafferty as president. In September of the same year the society held its first fair. The fairground consisted of forty acres of land which was owned by the society. Fairs were held annually from 1885 with races, concerts, boxing matches, and livestock displays being very popular. A grandstand was completed in August 1887 which seated five hundred people.<sup>35</sup>

The Society of Sons of Rest was different than the usual society on the frontier. The society was organized on August 4, 1877, for the express purpose of helping sick or needy farmers. The duties of the society were to aid the farmers in everyday chores, transport them to church and social gatherings, and to help the invalid. The chapter in O'Neill did not receive much publicity in the newspapers, thus little is known of its specific activities.<sup>36</sup>

The sale of liquor and the activities of the temperance societies played a large part in the social and cultural development of O'Neill City. Temperance societies began in O'Neill City as early as 1879 when the first legal sale of liquor was recorded. Prior to 1879, a

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<sup>35</sup>O'Neill Tribune, June 9, 1887; The Frontier, March 11, 1885.

<sup>36</sup>The Frontier, September 18, 1884, April 9, 1885; McCafferty Collection.



majority of early settlers in O'Neill did not drink whiskey and the only store in the city, Hagerty's, refused to sell liquor. In 1878, when the James Stephan Stage and Mail Line opened in the city some of the drivers brought in whiskey and sold it to the residents. In October 1879, the people of O'Neill were able to buy liquor at a local store. M. H. Doggett applied and was granted a liquor license to sell whiskey in his drug store. Immediately a temperance society was formed and boycotted Doggett's store. Within a few days Doggett sold his store and left town and O'Neill was again a dry city.<sup>37</sup>

The next seller of alcohol in O'Neill City was B. J. Capwell, who came from Waterloo, Iowa. Capwell sold all types of wine and whiskey in his store. To help cover this fact Capwell employed a temperance lecturer from Sioux City, Iowa, and make him head clerk. This however, did not work as the lecturer learned of Capwell's illegal business. The lecturer together with the Reverend J. T. Smith, the Catholic priest of O'Neill City, and the Womens Christian Temperance Union brought Capwell to court for illegally selling spirits. When the case was brought to court no one would testify against Capwell and the matter dropped.

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<sup>37</sup> McCafferty Collection; Holt County Commissioners Records, October 7, 1879. The Frontier, August 25, 1881, April 9, 1885.

"It should be noted afterward that the Judge was seen frequently at the store."<sup>38</sup>

Temperance societies continued in O'Neill throughout the 1880's and 1890's with the Christian Womens Temperance Union being the largest and most widely known. Their meetings were held on Sunday whenever a need arose.<sup>39</sup>

The suffragette movement in O'Neill can be traced to October 19, 1882, when the O'Neill Womens Suffrage Society was organized. Miss Bessie Wisegarver was chosen chairman in the groups first election. Prior to the establishment of this society periodic lectures were given on sufferage by women. These women usually came from the states in the East especially Massachusetts. Although the O'Neill Womens Suffrage Union was not as vocal or as active as the temperance societies they did hold periodic meetings and elect officers.<sup>40</sup>

As the temperance and sufferage societies provided a social outlet for the women of O'Neill the men took part in the forming of militia companies. There was scarcely a county seat or a town of any size in Nebraska without a militia company. The first company organized in Holt County was on September 1, 1876, in O'Neill

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<sup>38</sup>McCafferty Collection.; The Frontier, August 25, 1881.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., April 9, 1885.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., October 19, 1882.

City. The total enlistment in the company was sixty-eight and was under the command of Infantry Captain M. H. McIntosh. The official title given to the unit was Company One of the First Regiment.<sup>41</sup>

Sporting activities in O'Neill City were in many ways similar to those in the East, but were adapted to conditions in the West. Some sports by their very nature fitted into the crude western surroundings better than others and were more popular. Probably the most popular sport in the O'Neill area was horse racing. The races were usually held at the Holt County Agricultural Society celebrations.<sup>42</sup>

Baseball was second in popularity only to horse racing. By the early 1870's it was the rule for the prairie towns to have a baseball team. The town of O'Neill was no different. As early as 1881, O'Neill's team, the Irish Peelers, were competing in different towns within the county. Information concerning the O'Neill team is vague with the only references being made having to do with scores against opposing towns.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Harrison Johnson, History of Nebraska (Omaha: Herald Printing House, 1880), p. 162.

<sup>42</sup>Dick, p. 277; McCafferty Collection.

<sup>43</sup>Item, April 25, 1882; O'Neill Tribune, June 9, 1887; McCafferty Collection; Interview with John Harrington, July 2, 1973.

Aside from playing baseball many of the residents in O'Neill were active hunters. Near at hand were duck, quails, prairie chickens, and other game. Within the limits of O'Neill City a gun club was organized. The O'Neill Gun Club held annual shoots and participated in civic projects. In June 1887, the club advertised for metal and leather scraps for a community project they were planning.<sup>44</sup>

O'Neill's social foundations were well laid by the turn of the century. Schools, newspapers, and several societies had been established and were prospering. Cultural influences effected by these institutions were part of the community life. Social and fraternal bodies lend support to the town's refinement. O'Neill gave all indications of having a well rounded society.

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<sup>44</sup>Dick, pp. 283-284; The Frontier, June 9, 1887.

## SUMMARY

The pioneers who moved into Nebraska during the last half of the nineteenth century were composed of numerous ethnic groups. One of the most prominent was the Irish. The settlers came to Nebraska seeking a better life for themselves and their children. The leader of the first Irish colony into Nebraska was John O'Neill. O'Neill or the "General", as he was commonly known, established several Irish communities including one which bears his name, O'Neill, Nebraska. Prior to the General's colonizing ventures in the state he was an active member in the Fenian Brotherhood and tried several unsuccessful invasions of Canada. After these invasions failed and his image in the brotherhood tarnished, O'Neill began formulating plans to bring Irish settlers from the cities in the East to Nebraska. In 1874 the first group of colonists came West and settled in Holt County on the Elkhorn River. The town of O'Neill City was formed and subsequent groups of colonists followed in 1875.

By 1876, O'Neill City was a growing community and county seat of Holt County. In 1881 the Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad was built in town. The railroad brought settlers, shipping, and great activity. Several business firms were organized and the town prospered.

The following year the town was incorporated under the laws of the State of Nebraska. The settlers who came to the town established churches, social organizations, and schools to the prairie community. Times were to change, however, and the importance of O'Neill as a railroad center diminished. Unlike some communities in similar circumstances, the town of O'Neill did not die. Instead it recognized the advantages of agriculture and cattle raising and has since become the center of a fine stock producing country.

## APPENDIX I

### Petition for Incorporation Holt County Commissioners Record

Acting upon petition for corporation of village to be known as (O'Neill) the following articles of incorporation were approved to wit: Whereas: It appearing that a majority of the taxable inhabitants of that town of O'Neill City (not heretofore incorporated under any law of this state) have presented a petition to the county board of Holt County Nebraska proofing that they may be incorporated as a village to be known as O'Neill handled as follows: Beginning at the N. E. Corner of N. E. qr. of section 30, twp. 29. Range 11 W. thence west to the N. W. corner of N.W. qr. of section 30, twp. 29, P. 11 thence South to the S.W. cor. of S.W. qr. of Sec. 30, twp. 29, R. 11, thence east to the S.E. corner of S.E. qr. of sec. 30, twp. 29, R. 11 thence north to the No. E. of the S.E.  $\frac{1}{4}$  of S.E.  $\frac{1}{4}$  section 30 twp. 29, R. 11 thence N. to the N.E. corn. of the N.W.  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the S.E.  $\frac{1}{4}$  of Sec. 30, twp. 29, R. 11, thence East to the S.E. corner of S.E.  $\frac{1}{4}$  of N.E.  $\frac{1}{4}$ , Sec. 34, twp. 29, R. 11, thence north to the place of of beginning. The board being fully satisfied, that the inhabitants of the territory described are actual residents to the number of 2,000 or more do declare the said proposed village

incorporated and shall be governed by the provisions of law applicable to the government of villages and do hereby appoint the following named persons trustees viz: John Jr. McCofferty, E.E. Evans, W.D. Matthews, Patrick Hagerty and Sanford Parker given under our hands at O'Neill City this 7th day of October A.D. 1882.

Michael Flannigan)  
W.C. Townsend )  
Frank Pittany )  
Commissioners  
(copy)

Attest:  
Sanford Parker  
Co. Clerk



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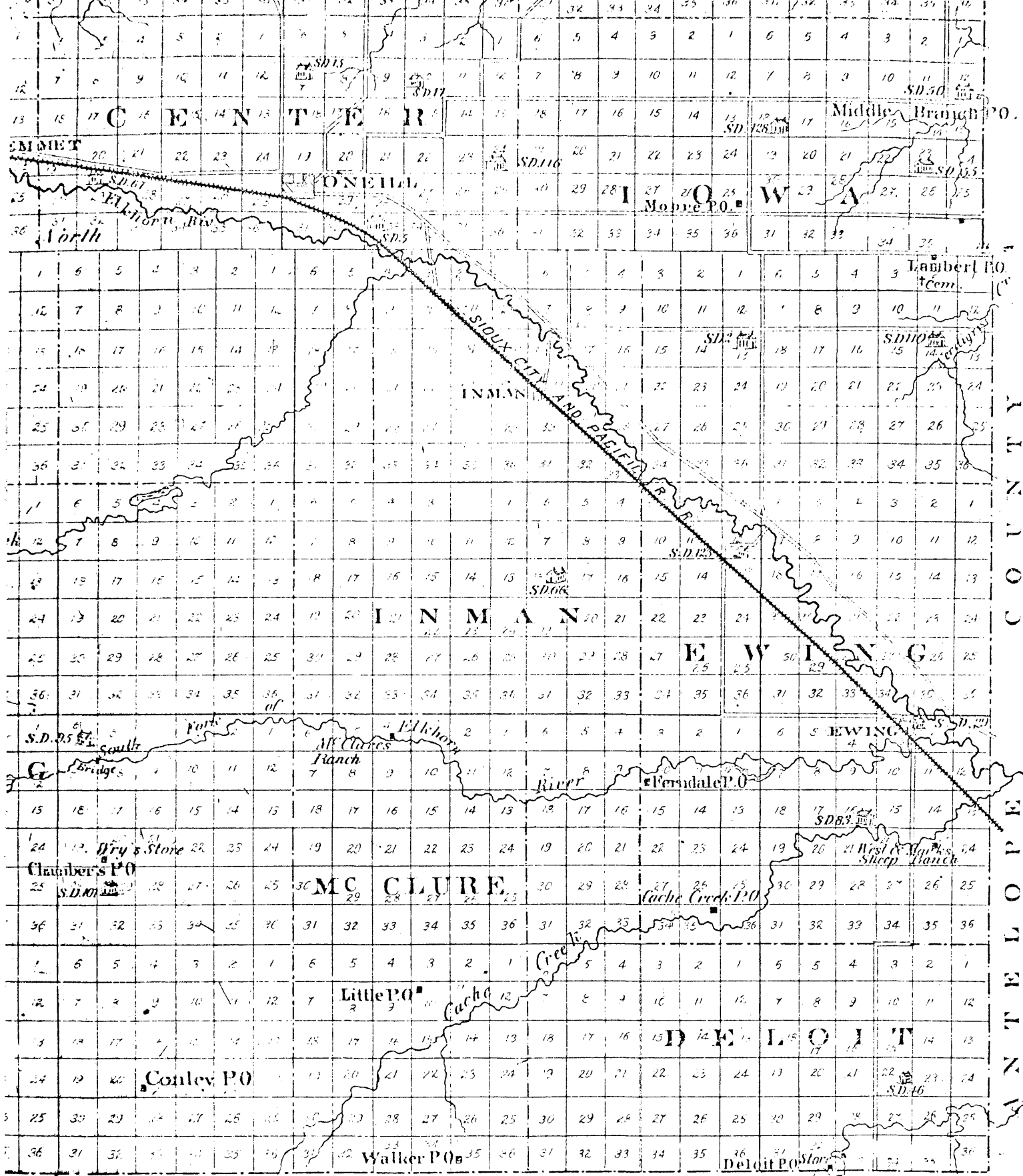
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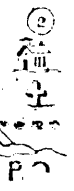
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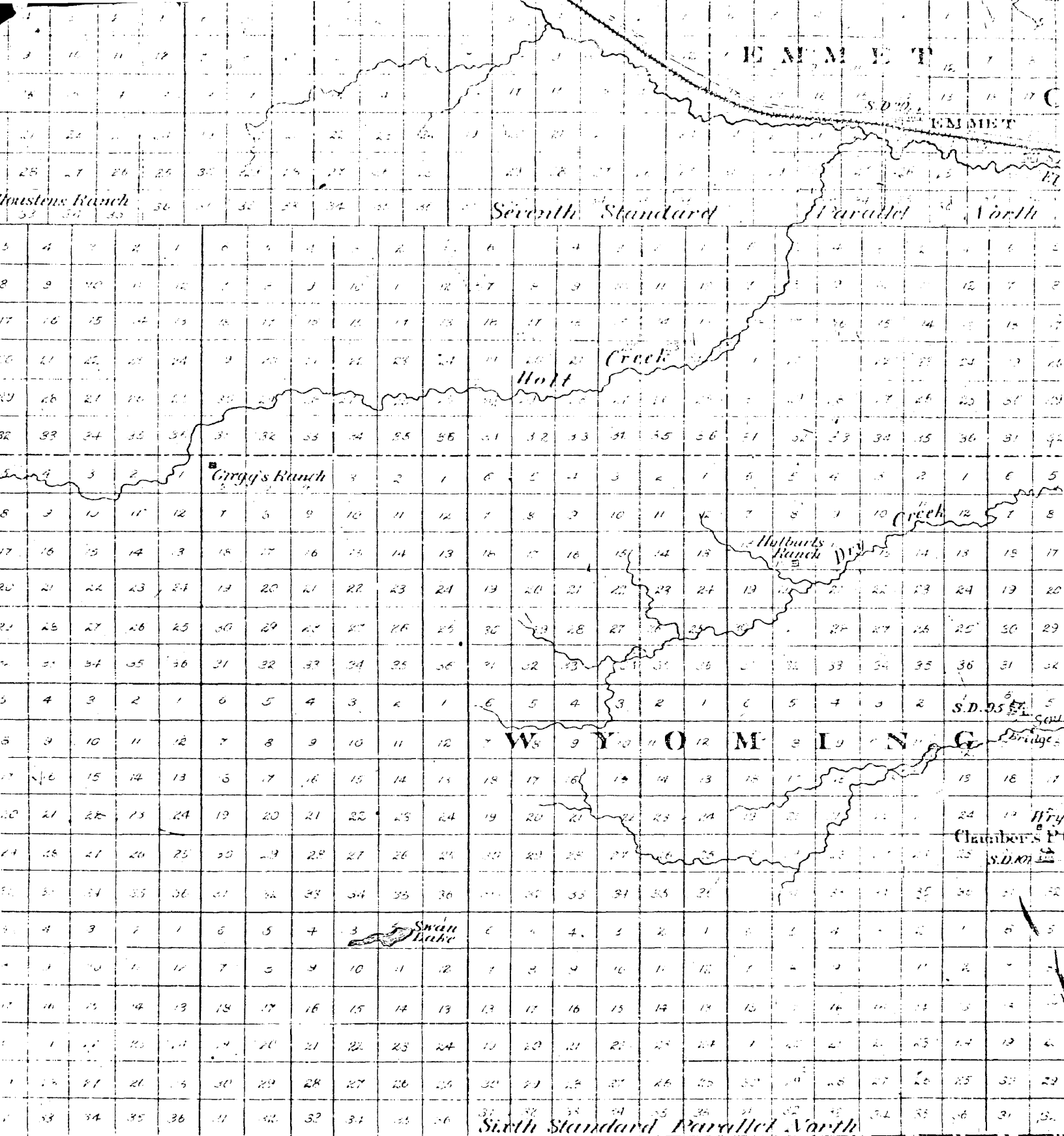
R. 12 W. R. 11 W. R. 10 W. R. 9 W.

COUNTY TABLE OF EXPLANATIONS

- |                       |       |                  |       |
|-----------------------|-------|------------------|-------|
| TOWNSHIP LINES        | ----- | ROAD DISTRICTS   | ----- |
| SECTION LINES         | ----- | SCHOOL DISTRICTS | ----- |
| QUARTER SECTION LINES | ----- | CEMETERIES       | ----- |
| RAIL ROADS            | ===== | MARSHES          | ----- |
| RAIL ROAD INCOMPLETE  | ----- | STREAMS          | ----- |
| PUBLIC ROADS          | ----- | POST OFFICES     | ----- |







R. 16. W

R. 15. W

R. 14. W

R. 13. W

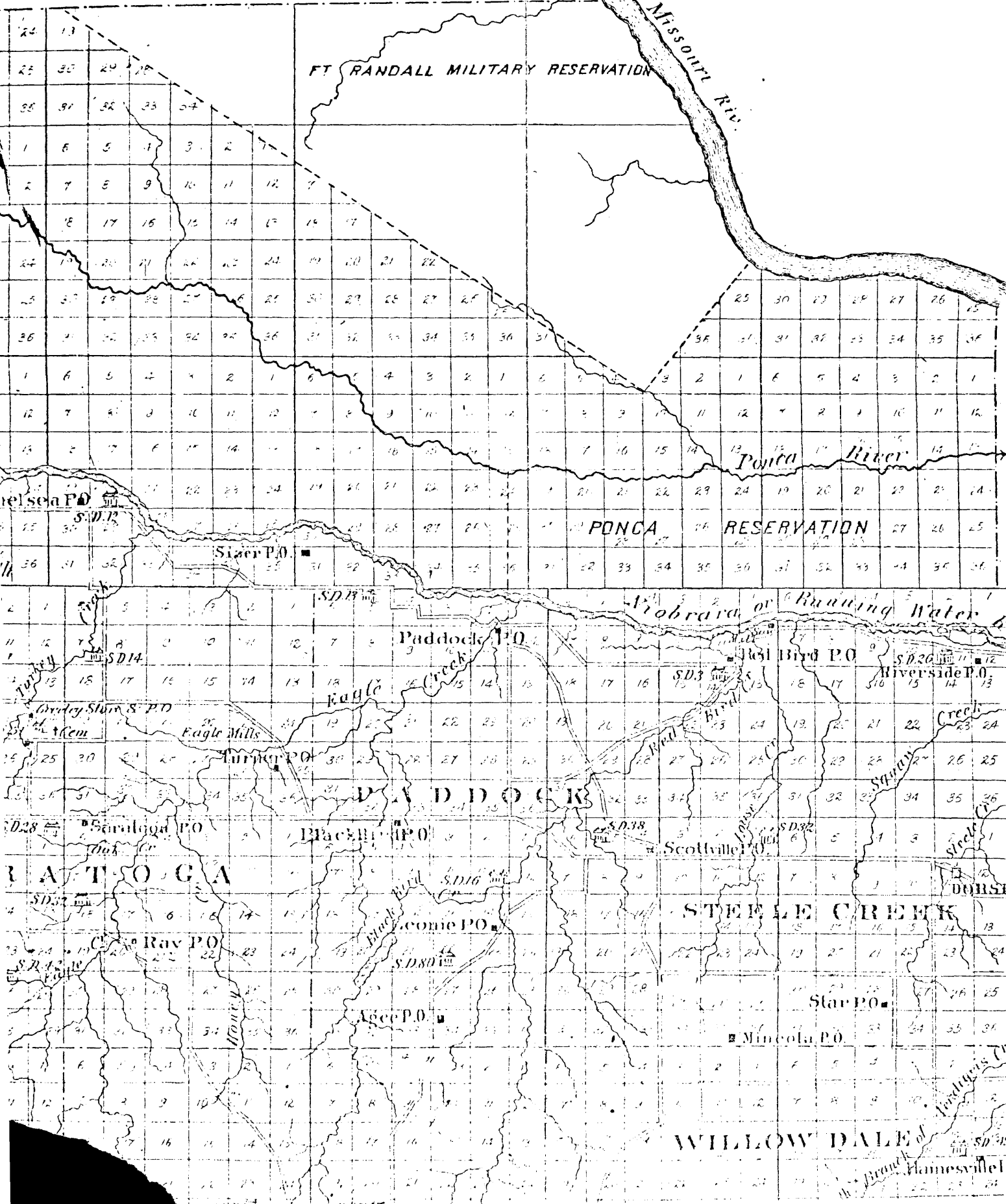
W H E E L E R

examined the above Map of Holt County  
 as well acquainted with the geography  
 of the county pronounce it a very complete, correct and  
 true Map.

A. E. Rice  
 County Surveyor

to 1/2 Mile.

TERRITORY



KANSAS TERRITORY

Paddock Precinct

Paddock settled in 1874  
First Co. Seat  
by Election - 1876

Center Precinct

Freight Trail to Ft. Niobrara  
Elkhorn River

O'Neill City  
First settlers  
here in 1873.

Lasser (Irwin) Lakes  
Inman  
First Temporary  
County Seat - 1876

Deadwood  
Ewing  
First settled  
in 1870

Ford Precinct

Scale 3 to 1 inch to 1 Mile

# DAKOTA TERRITORY

STATE LINE

T. 35 N.  
T. 34 N.  
T. 33 N.  
T. 32 N.  
T. 31 N.  
C O U N T Y

