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A HISTORY OF SYRACUSE, NEBRASKA

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of History
The University of Omaha

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

by
Aileen Lawson Williams
August 1958

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CHAPTER I

THE INTRODUCTION

A century ago settlement was just beginning to flourish in Nebraska. One by one communities were appearing on the prairie---Nebraska City, Omaha, and Lincoln, to name only a few. Among these early communities were some which grew and developed, while others died after a few short years leaving little to serve as a monument. Many towns which survived did not attain the goals envisioned by their founders, but remained relatively small agricultural settlements. Syracuse, Nebraska, is such a community. The events which occurred in this community's past have often been told but seldom recorded. Yet Syracuse has a story to tell, and its story to a considerable extent can be viewed as a mirror of other small southeastern Nebraska communities.

Syracuse, located in southeastern Nebraska in Otoe County, has a population today of approximately 1200 people. It was recently chosen as a study center by the University of Nebraska Community Project Committee. This project, supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, described

Syracuse in the following manner:

Syracuse, to the casual observer, would appear to be the type of town that has always been considered the model of stability. It is approaching its centennial year which means that its history can be traced back to the beginning of the Nebraska story itself. It is rather characteristic of small towns that grow up with the state, particularly in rural areas, that they exhibit an atmosphere of tranquillity and a sort of old lace respectability that is at once nostalgic and a little depressing. Somewhere along the route the optimism of beginning a new adventure has given way to the uncertainty of survival in a culture that places a premium on bigness. Being denied regional significance by a combination of forces too complicated to be readily understood, such communities seem to settle for a role of minor significance, with a dignity bordering on resignation.¹

Being chosen as one of the four Nebraska communities to serve as the basis of the project indicated the significance attached to the better understanding of a community of this size.

It is the purpose of this study to record as accurately as possible the events which have occurred in Syracuse from early settlement to the present time. The town of Syracuse was chosen because it would be a representative history;

¹The Nebraska Community Education Project, The Orientation Period, September 1, 1955--September 1, 1956 (Lincoln: Teachers College, University of Nebraska, 1957), p. 34.

it is viewed as a socially mature community with evidences of permanency.² It was also chosen due to personal interest in its past and future.

The elements which comprise the history of a town are complex. In this history an attempt was made to trace the founding of the community--to find those ingredients which combined to create this settlement on the Nebraska prairie. In accomplishing this it became important to trace the land laws which applied to the settling of Syracuse and to illustrate the significance of the railroad in its history. The railroad at first appeared to be the stabilizing influence in Syracuse, but gradually the agricultural potential of the area was realized to be even more important to community life. As the town developed, its churches, schools, and other social institutions became well established and shed a great influence on the area. Community problems arose which the citizens had to solve if Syracuse was to be maintained. Important also were the events such as political movements, war, and depression which may have occurred outside of Syracuse, but greatly affected the community's life.

²Letter from Mr. Calvin F. Hager, Associate Coordinator of the Project, March 6, 1958.

Writing the history of a community covering a period of approximately one hundred years, naturally excludes some happenings which other studies possibly would emphasize. It also should be recognized that this study was not attempted in order to compare Syracuse with other communities or to make a sociological study.

Syracuse had its origin a few years after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The southeastern area of Nebraska, the area in which Syracuse was to be located, was the best known portion of the newly organized territory, and the section to which the first settlers came. They were attracted to southeastern Nebraska not only because it was the most accessible region but also due to its rich agricultural potential coupled with the beauty of the countryside. Commenting upon this section, Bayard Taylor, journalist and author of Eldorado, remarked, "The country is one of the most beautiful I ever looked upon, but nature has given the smoothness and finish which elsewhere came from long cultivation."³ Another visitor pointed out that this part of the country was very healthy. Claims were made that chills, fevers, and other miasmatic conditions

³As quoted in Edwin A. Curley, Nebraska, Its Advantages, Resources and Drawbacks (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low and Searle, 1875), p. 221.

were almost entirely unknown due to the well-drained and airy prairies.⁴

The first white community in what became Otoe County, the county in which Syracuse was later located, was old Fort Kearney established in 1846 at the mouth of Table Creek on the Missouri River. Although the fort was abandoned two years later, Boulwares Ferry began operation at this point on the Missouri in 1854, and shortly thereafter, the town of Nebraska City was laid out near the site of the old fort.⁵ The first territorial legislature incorporated Nebraska City on March 2, 1855.⁶ On the same date it was made the seat of county government for Otoe County.⁷

Nebraska City was chosen by Alexander Majors in 1858 as the site of the Russell, Majors, and Waddell freighting business which had recently received a contract to move government supplies from the Missouri River to Utah.⁸

⁴Ibid.

⁵Address by A.E. Sheldon at dedication of Nursery Hill marker, quoted in Syracuse Journal Democrat, October 31, 1930.

⁶Session Laws of Nebraska, Volume I (Lincoln: Journal Company, 1887), pp. 177-180.

⁷Nebraska Territorial Laws, Resolutions and Memorials, 1855 (Omaha City: Sherman and Strickland Territorial Printers, 1855), p. 341.

⁸Alexander Majors, Seventy Years on the Frontier (Chicago: Rand, McNally and Company, 1893), p. 77.

The first route established for this purpose extended 250 miles from Nebraska City following the Platte River to the new Fort Kearney (located at the southernmost point of the big bend of the Platte) and was called the Overland Trail.⁹ Some years later it became the approximate route of the Burlington Railroad from Nebraska City to Lincoln.¹⁰ In the spring of 1860, the leading citizens of Nebraska City were asked to establish a shorter route. When they failed to do so, Majors hired Robert Harvey to survey a more direct trail. Harvey found a well beaten path as far as Olathe (now Saltillo) on Salt Creek, and from Salt Creek a furrow was plowed due west to Fort Kearney.¹¹ This route was seventy-five miles shorter with the advantages of easy grades, firm roadbed, and a sufficient amount of wood and water. It was known as the Nebraska City-Fort Kearney Cutoff. (Refer to map, p. 24.)

The first stopping place on the road after leaving Nebraska City was Nursery Hill.¹² Located on the southwest

⁹Address by A.E. Sheldon, loc. cit.

¹⁰A.E. Sheldon, Nebraska, The Land and the People, Volume I (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1931), p. 215.

¹¹James C. Olson, History of Nebraska (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), p. 112.

¹²Address by A.E. Sheldon, loc. cit.

quarter of section 17, township 8, range 11, this stepping place received a constant procession of wagons moving west from Nebraska City.¹³ The road became very popular and was traveled by thousands of immigrants and freighters.¹⁴ This Nebraska City-Fort Kearney Cutoff was the last and the best of the overland trails across Nebraska.¹⁵

In 1862, the cutoff received the nickname of the "Steam Wagon Road" because in July of that year a wagon propelled by steam left Nebraska City for Denver. It was conducted by General J.A. Brown. The wagon broke down, however, twelve miles out of Nebraska City and was abandoned at the side of the road.¹⁶ From then on the cutoff had a special name.

The trail and Nursery Hill played an important part in the early history of Syracuse, as did the settlers who lived throughout the county. The first settlers in

¹³History of the State of Nebraska (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), p. 1231.

¹⁴A.E. Sheldon, Nebraska Old and New (Lincoln: University Publishing Company, 1937), p. 160.

¹⁵Sheldon, Nebraska, The Land and the People, op. cit., p. 219.

¹⁶J. Sterling Morton, Illustrated History of Nebraska, Volume I (Lincoln: Jacob North and Company, 1905), p. 111.

the vicinity where Syracuse was later founded were Jacob and Brazil Thair. These brothers settled near the center of the county on the southeast quarter of section 7, township 8, range 11.¹⁷ (Refer to map, p. 9.)

The subject of this study was a community which developed in the southeastern portion of Nebraska. The territory of Nebraska, created by the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, attracted many pioneers for it offered them fertile soil and sufficient water. Otoe County, in which Syracuse was later founded, received a great share of these early settlers and soon a number of communities began to develop. It was also used as a pathway to the West, and, therefore, trails and later railroads entered into the story. In the area where the Nebraska City-Fort Kearney Cutoff passed and the Thair brothers settled, the history of Syracuse unfolded.

ROSSSEL FOWNSHIP

STAGCORN FOWNSHIP

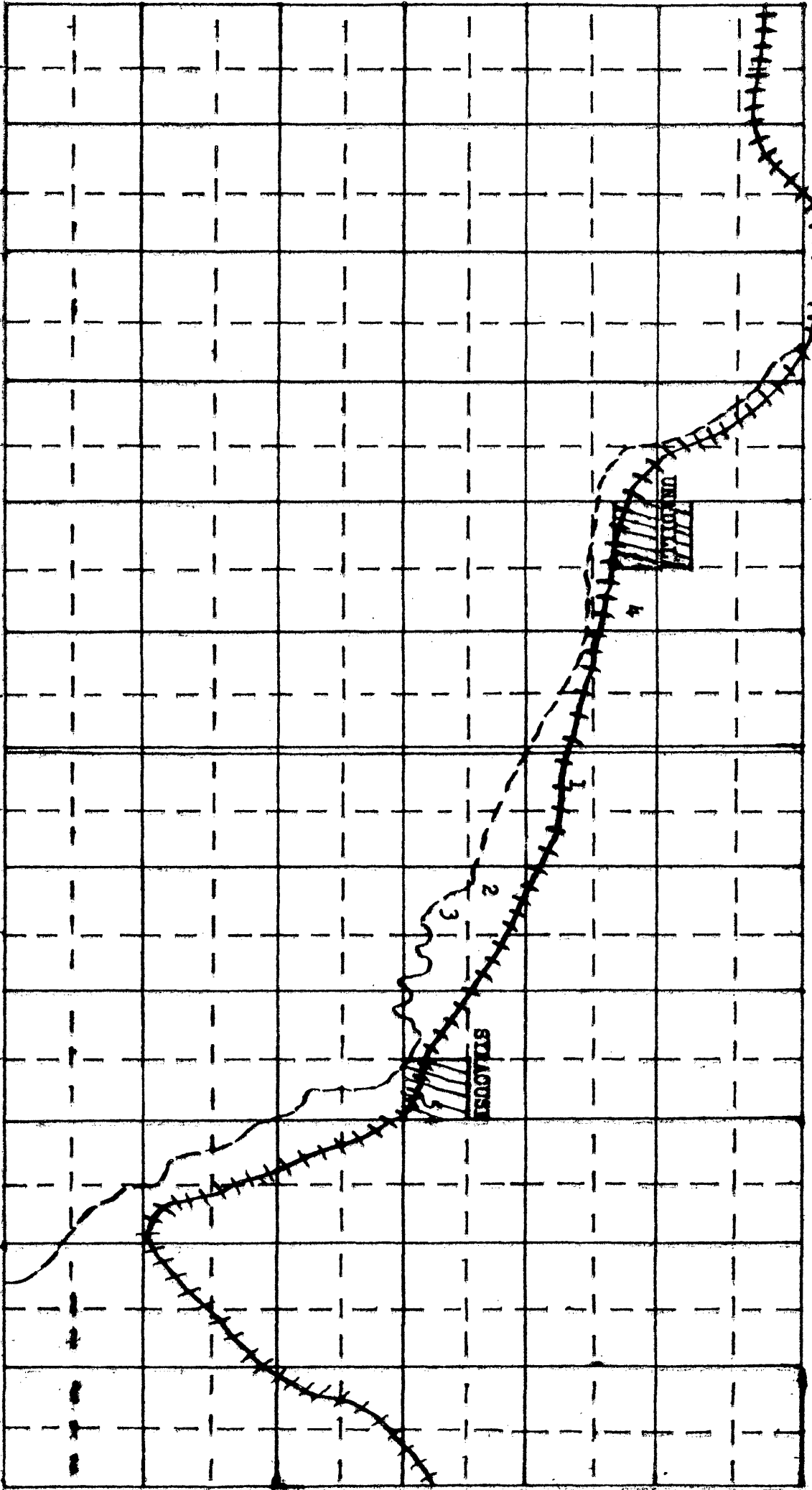


FIGURE 1

- 1---Boundary
- 2---Kerner's (approximate location)
- 3---Nursery Hill
- 4---First Pyrehouse
- 5---First School
- //// Present Town
- Kumba River, main stream
- Midland Pacific Railroad

MAP OF ROSSSEL AND STAGCORN TOWNSHIPS
 (From the Official State Atlas of Nebraska, 1895)

SCALE---Approximately 3/4" = 1 Mile

Leave off
10

CHAPTER II

THE HISTORY OF EARLY SETTLEMENT

The town of Syracuse had an unusual origin. It was founded in one location and came to rest in another. Evidence of this is found on early maps of Otoe County which place Syracuse in the northwest quarter of section 11, township 8, range 10.¹ This location was approximately six miles west of the present Syracuse. It was just east and south of the present day Unadilla, Nebraska.

Salt was the desired item which created the "first" Syracuse, Nebraska. A transaction by some early settlers took place in 1857 in the belief that valuable deposits of salt existed in the area. Salt at this time, of course, was an item in great demand and ownership of land on which an entire salt marsh supposedly existed was naturally desired.²

The transaction which took place was quite common for this period. Land laws in the 1850's favored the establishment of towns more than the pre-emption of solitary settlers. On May 23, 1844, Congress had passed the Townsite Act which

¹Sackett C. Case, "The Early History of Syracuse," Syracuse Journal, February 8, 1878.

²Ibid.

encouraged the creation of western townsites. It gave rights to towns similar to those granted individual squatters under the Pre-emption Act of 1841.³

Many times, however, settlers were too impatient for townsites to be established by survey and used "claim clubs" to protect pre-survey claims. The first in Nebraska was the "Omaha Township Claim Association" in 1854. Although the use of group control to gain unsurveyed land was not condoned by federal law, the meeting of the first territorial legislature of Nebraska passed an act defining and recognizing the authority of the "claim club".⁴ The Nebraska law stated:

Two or more persons may hold undivided claims in conjunction for the purpose of a townsite, or for any other purpose, Provided that such claims do not amount to more than three hundred and twenty acres of land for each person . . .⁵

In 1857, Charles F. Holly, LaCount Lambert, Elbert Cram, William Iler, a Mr. Russel, and possibly others took advantage of this law and united under the name of the

³Roy Robbins, Our Landed He Press, 1942), p. 152.

Heritage (Princeton: University

⁴James C. Olson, History of of Nebraska Press, 1955), p. 95.

JAMES C. OLSON, HISTORY of Nebraska (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), p. 95.

⁵Nebraska Territorial Laws, Resolutions and Memorials, 1855 (Omaha City: Sherman and Strickland, Territorial Printers, 1855), p. 159.

"Syracuse Town Company".⁶ The name was chosen in honor of Syracuse, New York, which was a great salt market. The hope of these gentlemen was that one day their new Syracuse might rival this established market. At approximately the same time two other towns named Saltville and Nezuma were created by these men.⁷

To meet government regulations, the townsites had to have inhabitants for the law continued:

. . . and provided further that each three hundred and twenty acres shall be improved by having a good comfortable dwelling erected thereon within four months after the passage of this act [passed on March 6, 1855] or within four months after said claims shall have been recorded, and if prairie land at least twenty acres under cultivation, on each side three hundred and twenty acres, which shall be occupied either by one of the joint claimants or by some good citizen for him.⁸

The town company, therefore, built a large dwelling on Syracuse and one on Saltville. LaCount Lambert resided in Syracuse; the company did not build on Nezuma.⁹

Excitement was high over the salt springs. Advertisements telling of the opportunities of these three new

⁶Case, loc. cit. Case gives 1856 as the date; the plats for the towns are dated 1857. Refer to Otoe County Deed Record Book B, p. 230.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Nebraska Territorial Laws, 1855, p. 159.

⁹Case, loc. cit.

towns were sent East to interest settlers.¹⁰ The excitement, however, was short-lived. In a matter of a few years the great interest in salt died down, and when the purpose for gaining the land was gone, the "inhabitants" drifted separate ways.¹¹ Although Nezuma and Saltville became names only on old records, the name of Syracuse was not forgotten. It was given to a voting precinct in October, 1859, and reference was made to it by the Nebraska City News in notifying voters of the presidential election in the year 1860.¹²

In the summer of 1861, George W. Warner was appointed postmaster for this vicinity and the first postoffice was located at his farm residence in Syracuse precinct, and thus the postoffice received the precinct's name.¹³ (For location refer to map, p. 9.) The name of the Syracuse Postoffice was lost when R.O. Thompson took possession of the office in 1863. His business was a nursery located at the first stopping place on the Nebraska City-Fort Kearney Cutoff. When Thompson moved the postoffice to this place he called it Nursery Hill.¹⁴ Thompson was a floral expert

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Nebraska City News, October 13, 1860.

¹³Nebraska City News, August 21, 1861.

¹⁴Ibid.

who sold his products to a New York company for distribution.¹⁵ In addition to the building in which the postoffice was housed, Nursery Hill had two or three stores and a mill. The "old stone mill", as it was later affectionately referred to, was built in 1868 by Boyston and Heath.¹⁶ Behind the mill the water of the Nemaha, backed up by a dam, served as an excellent fishing and swimming spot.¹⁷

Nursery Hill received a constant procession of wagons as they traveled along the trail. One settler recalled having seen one hundred wagons pass in a single morning before eight o'clock.¹⁸ Many settlers told of this steady stream of traffic when relating the early history of the area. The site of Nursery Hill, located approximately two miles west of the present Syracuse, has since been officially marked by the county with a memorial stone.¹⁹

Many sources relate that Syracuse was an outgrowth of

¹⁵Account of Stella P. Utley Leavitt, one-time resident of Nursery Hill, Syracuse Journal Democrat, September 19, 1930.

¹⁶Account of James Fisk, Syracuse Democrat, April 22, 1915.

¹⁷Syracuse Journal Democrat, September 19, 1930.

¹⁸J. Sterling Morton, Illustrated History of Nebraska, Volume II (Lincoln: Jacob North and Company, 1906), p. 347.

¹⁹Syracuse Journal Democrat, June 20, 1930.

Nursery Hill, however, the observation would not appear entirely correct.²⁰ Although the postoffice previously called Syracuse was moved to this community, Nursery Hill was not a predecessor of the present Syracuse.

The first root for the present town of Syracuse was planted by the establishment of a school. In 1859, the building which stood on Saltville was donated by its owner, S.F. Nuckolds, to the settlers in the region to use as a schoolhouse. In that year, S.D. Brownell, George Warner, J. Sollenberger, R.O. Thompson, and possibly others moved the house by means of oxen and trucks to its new location. The location was the southeast corner of the southeast quarter of section 16, township 8, range 11.²¹ (Refer to map, p. 9.) Although there were no other buildings at that location, it was logical for the settlers to move the Nuckold's house to section 16, because in the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, Congress had set aside sections sixteen and thirty-six in every township for the purpose of

²⁰History of the State of Nebraska (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), p. 1231.

²¹Case, loc. cit.

establishing schools. The act stated:

And be it further enacted, That when the lands in the said Territory shall be surveyed under the direction of the government of the United States, preparatory to bringing the same into market, sections number sixteen and thirty-six in each township in said Territory shall be, and the same are hereby, reserved for the purpose of being applied to schools in said Territory and in the States and Territories hereafter erected out of the same.²²

The territorial legislature had further encouraged the founding of public schools when it provided for the election of a county superintendent by popular vote. Taxes of not less than three nor more than five mills were to be levied on all property in the county by the superintendent. The proceeds were to be distributed among the various districts on the basis of white children between the ages of five and twenty-one.²³ The school district established on section 16, township 8, range 11, was known as District 27.

In pioneer days the establishing of a school was a certain sign of progress and it appears that this was the only school building between Nebraska City and the western border of the county in the early 1860's. "Surely," stated

²²Nebraska Territorial Laws, 1855, p. 30.

²³Olson, op. cit., p. 103.

Case, "its power for usefulness was not hampered for the want of territory over which the teacher's bell had dominion."²⁴

Settlement around the school gradually began. The land set aside for school districts was not subject to settlement in the usual manner; it should be noted, however, that the land could be settled. The conditions to be met for ownership were stated in the law:

University, agricultural college, common school or other lands which are now held or may hereafter be acquired by the state for educational purposes, shall not be sold for less than \$7. per acre, nor less than the appraised value.²⁵

Other land could be secured by the settlers at a lower price, for under the Pre-emption Act of 1841, land was available for as little as \$1.25 an acre; after the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862, 160 acres of land could be obtained by merely living on the land for five years and paying a fee of \$10.00. Despite the higher price the school lands were in demand. This was the case because the settler stood to gain by improvement of the land. The school land could not be sold until it would

²⁴Cage, loc. cit.

²⁵Thirteenth United States Statutes at Large (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864), p. 68.

bring at least seven dollars an acre, and if the settler made improvements on it, the improvements were to be appraised and paid for by the purchaser when the state land sale was held. Nebraska law indicated the process involved in the sale of these improvements:

Any person purchasing lands upon which they have made improvements, shall be allowed to deduct the appraised value of improvements from the amount bid for said land; and in the event that any person purchase land upon which any other person has improvements, the purchaser shall pay the full price of said land to the county treasurer, and the county treasurer shall pay the appraised value of the improvements to the person owning the same.²⁶

School sections thus were frequently settled and improved before they were sold by the state.²⁷

In the spring of 1861 two men, James Turner and Truelove Tanney, began improvements on the south half of section 16. Turner began improvement on the southwest quarter and Tanney on the southeast. Tanney was the first to "break the virgin sod" on this quarter and early in 1862 erected the first dwelling on what was later to be the west side of block seven.²⁸

²⁶Laws of the State of Nebraska, 1867 (Omaha: A.D. Balcombe, 1867), p. 42.

²⁷Case, loc. cit.

²⁸Ibid.

With a wife and several children, Tanney moved into his new home during the spring of 1862. He worked a strip of land north of his house extending westward during that summer. Later in the year he sold his land claim and improvements to his partner, James Turner. The following spring, Tanney sold his house to George Masters, who moved it four miles west of the quarter section to use as a residence. Thus no building except the school remained on the section.²⁹

The claims on this quarter-section of land passed into different hands several times. James Turner sold his claim to James and John Brownell. They sold to Seymour Douglas, and he in turn to John Q. Burleigh.³⁰ This type of transaction was permissible according to statute which read as follows:

Be it enacted by the Council and House of Representatives of the Territory of Nebraska, The owner of what is known as a valid claim or improvement on the public lands has a transferable interest therein, which may be sold on execution or otherwise, and any sale of such claim or improvement is a sufficient consideration to sustain a promise.³¹

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Nebraska Territorial Laws, 1855, p. 159.

Sometime later Burleigh built a residence on block seven in which he lived until 1868. It is recorded that during that time he raised cabbages on the ground which is now Fifth and Mohawk Streets. One year he sold part of the crop for twenty-five cents per head at Nebraska City, but further profits were lost when a cow ate the remaining cabbages.³²

An account by an early settler recalling these days, relates that the "freighters" coming through via the trail would often steal the products--vegetables and watermelons--the settlers were growing for sale in Nebraska City. He described these men as "generally a rough lot".³³ Besides cows and "freighters" distressing the farmers, grasshoppers at times were so thick that they ate everything but the prairie grass and potatoes. One settler even claimed that he once with a swing of the hand grabbed twenty-two grasshoppers.³⁴

Life in the 1860's included the movements of long wagon trains through the area. Many of them belonged to the Mormons traveling to their newly established colony in Utah. Indians, which had been displaced by the invading

³²Case, loc. cit.

³³Account by L.B. Smoyer, Syracuse Democrat, May 6, 1915.

³⁴Ibid.

white man, would often come in large groups to beg the settlers for food.³⁵ Constant challenges to make something out of the prairie confronted these pioneers. Lack of cash and extremely high prices was one of the greatest difficulties.³⁶ Fortunately, some of the settlers did have the means to purchase good land and remain as permanent residents.

The awaited state land sale finally came in April, 1868. The state clearly defined the process:

The county clerk shall give notice . . . not seventy days from the notice, at 10 o'clock A.M. all of the school lands will be held to the highest bidder; Provided, that no land shall be sold for less than its appraised value, nor for less than seven dollars per acre in addition to the appraised value of the improvements on the land . . .³⁷

James Thorn, a settler from Minnesota, bought the southeast quarter of section 16 from the state, and in September of the same year he purchased the improvements on this land from Burleigh. Burleigh removed his house and left the purchaser in full possession. It appears Thorn lived on the section only a short time for he became County Treasurer and moved his possessions to Nebraska City in 1870, to

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Account by H.O. Hall, Syracuse Democrat, April 29, 1915.

³⁷ Laws of the State of Nebraska, 1867, p. 3.

take over his duties there. Despite this his ownership of the land was very important to the true birth of Syracuse.³⁸

The sixties and seventies were characterized by extensive railroad construction throughout the country. In 1870, the Midland Pacific Railroad began construction from Nebraska City to Lincoln, Nebraska.³⁹ In an article appearing in the Nebraska City News the importance of the railroad was shown:

By May 1 [1871] cars should be running from Nebraska City to Lincoln. This route to Salt Lake City will make the time to Salt Lake from Chicago or St. Louis twelve hours shorter than by Omaha.⁴⁰

Land was acquired by the railroads in various ways. One way was through donation by settlers. Possibly the community of Syracuse should have been named Thorn, for certainly this gentleman insured its existence. Thorn and others recognized the possibility of establishing a town from this railroad development through Otoe County. Thorn, therefore, gave the Midland Pacific Railroad one-hundred acres of land to locate through section 16. Surrounding land was contributed by D.J. McCann, eighty acres; Mr. Manapenny, forty acres; Robert Maters, ten acres; and Nate Bray, ten acres.⁴¹

³⁸Morton, op. cit., p. 271.

³⁹Albert Watkins, History of Nebraska, Volume III (Lincoln: Western Publishing Company, 1913), p. 352.

⁴⁰Nebraska City News, January 21, 1871.

⁴¹Case, loc. cit.

By June, 1871, the Midland Pacific Railroad was completed to Lincoln.⁴² (Refer to map, p. 24.) On its line, twenty-two miles west of Nebraska City and thirty-four miles east of Lincoln, a new station was established with an old name--Syracuse. A former settler gave the credit to her father, V.C. Utley, for attaching the precinct's name to the new town. Utley was a land agent of the Burlington and Missouri Railroad and resided at Nursery Hill.⁴³ His daughter also claimed to be the first child, and her mother the first woman to ride on the train from Nebraska City to Lincoln.⁴⁴

In Syracuse the railroad lost no time making its importance felt. An article in a Nebraska City newspaper made the significance of the railroad quite clear when it stated:

The freight business of the Midland Pacific Railroad opens better than anticipated. While other towns up and down the river are standing still, Nebraska City and Otoe County are building and improving more than any previous year-- a healthy, permanent prosperity.⁴⁵

⁴²Richard Cleghorn Overton, Burlington West (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941), p. 279.

⁴³Account by Stella P. Utley Leavitt, Syracuse Journal Democrat, September 19, 1930.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Nebraska City News, January 21, 1871.

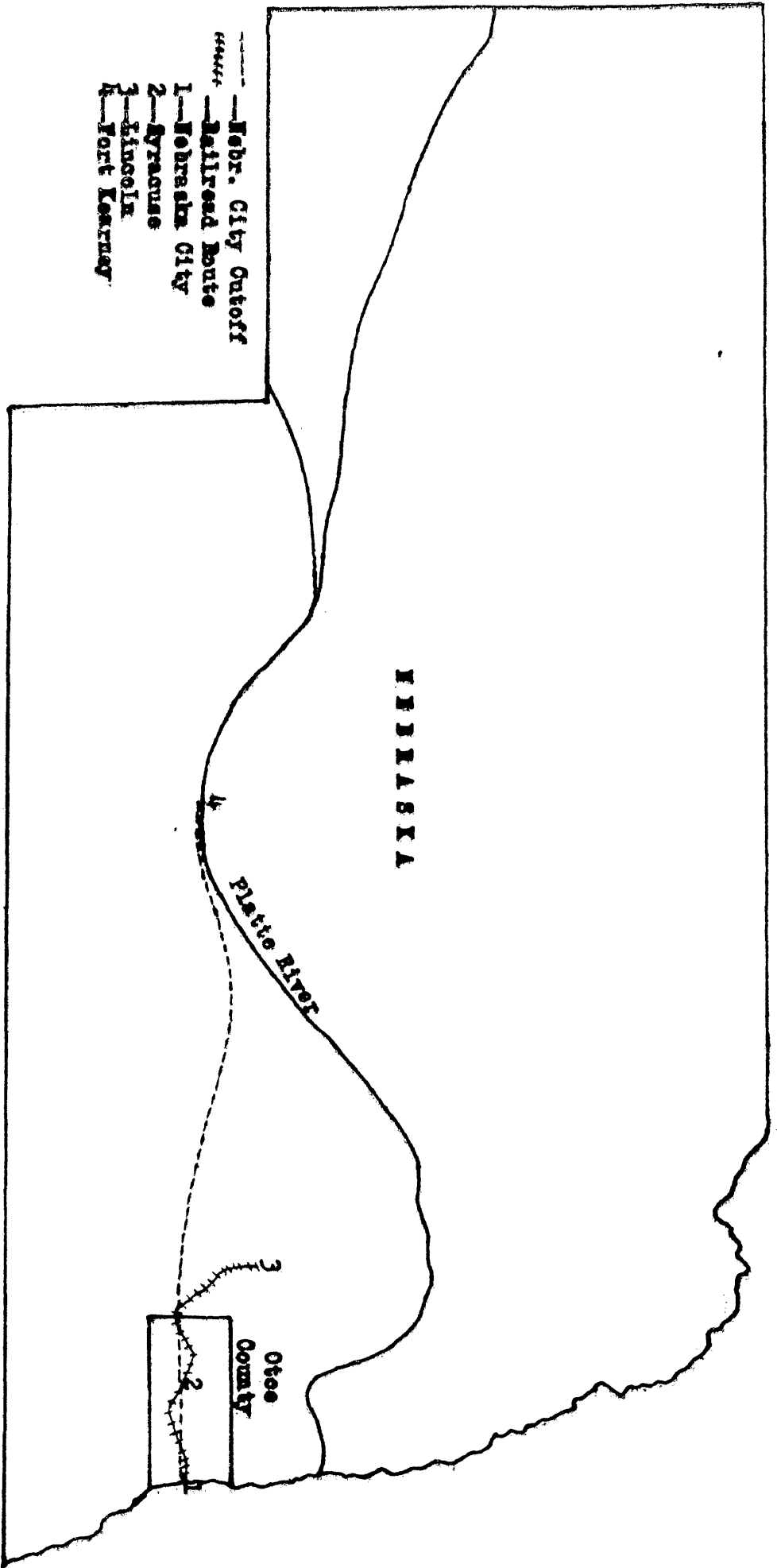


FIGURE II

MAP OF THE RAILROAD ROUTES THROUGH OTOE COUNTY
 (From Green's Unraveled Atlas, 1941)

From the first the road carried large amounts of produce and Syracuse gradually became a major shipping point for Otoe County.⁴⁶

A Plattsmouth paper summed up the effect of the railroad when it asked, "What is the salvation of every ambitious village in Nebraska? The rail."⁴⁷

The history of Syracuse involved the movement of the name of Syracuse to several locations before it finally came to rest at the present site. Although the name originated through some settlers' dream of creating a salt industry, it shortly became established due to a very different type of activity--that of education. A school was founded on a section of land provided by the territory of Nebraska. The land surrounding the school attracted additional settlers and they in turn secured the railroad to run its new line through the section. The name chosen for the railroad station was Syracuse, and the town which developed around the station and school became identified by that name.

⁴⁶History of the State of Nebraska, op. cit., p. 1232.

⁴⁷Overton, loc. cit.

CHAPTER III

THE INCORPORATION AND GROWTH OF THE COMMUNITY

Syracuse in the early days of Nebraska was fortunate to gain a railroad. This means of transportation gave purpose and meaning to the settlement's existence. Growth and interest in it progressed to the point of actually laying out a town. On September 21, 1871, surveying of the town plat began. Joel N. Converse and James Thorn laid it out with L.E. Sinsabaugh assisting in driving the stakes.¹ On November 18, the plat was filed at the county-seat with E.F. Warren witnessing.² (Refer to map, p. 27.)

Construction of buildings began at a rapid pace. L.E. Sinsabaugh broke ground for his residence on block twenty-three on September 22, 1871.³ Dr. Colberg built the second dwelling on the northwest corner of Third and Midland.⁴

¹ History of the State of Nebraska (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), p. 1231.

² Otoe County Deed Record Book B, p. 230.

³ History of the State of Nebraska, loc. cit. This source states the Sinsabaugh dwelling was in block 22. This appears to be incorrect; refer to F.A. Wood and G.N. Sroat, Nebraska City and Otoe County Directory (Lincoln: Journal Printing Company, 1881), p. 123.

⁴ Wood and Sroat, op. cit., p. 117.

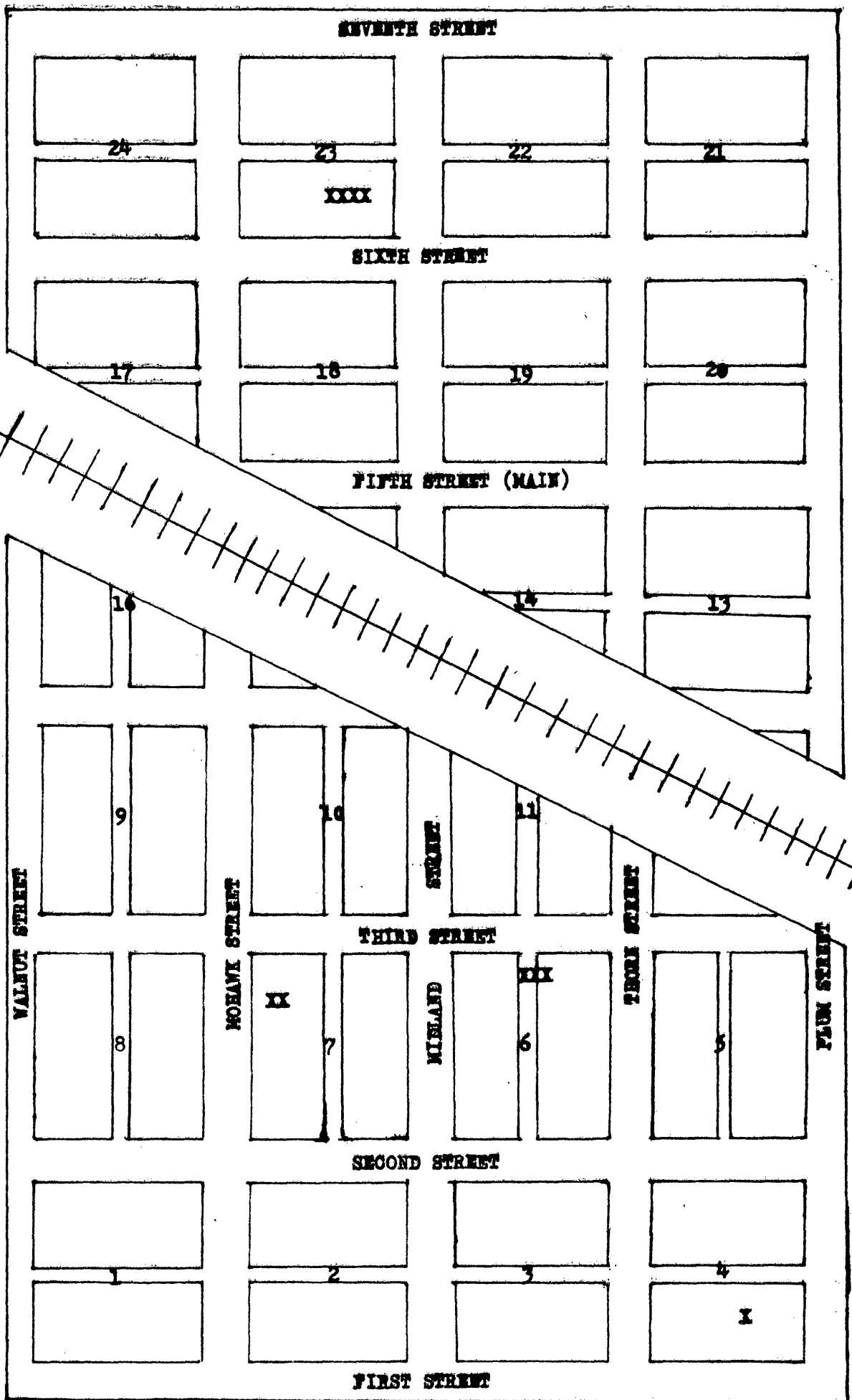


FIGURE III

MAP OF SYRACUSE, NEBRASKA--1871
(From original town plat)

- X First School
- XX Tanney Residence
- XXX Second School
- XXXX Sinsabaugh Residence

The third building was a saloon, and C.B. Linderman constructed a hotel which was probably located near the railroad. Aiding in the supplying of materials for construction was the lumberyard established by L.E. Sinsabaugh.⁵

Sinsabaugh also served as the railroad agent. His office was a railroad boxcar which at times would be moved along the track to a more convenient position, probably serving the community with a continual source of amusement.⁶

Nursery Hill was naturally effected by the new town. First, by the loss of its importance as a stopping place on the Overland Trail, and secondly, as a center of trade. In a short time its two stores owned by (C.W.?) Ireland and Abbott, and its postoffice were moved to Syracuse.⁷ Eventually Nursery Hill faded and today only a marker signifies its former location.

Just as decline seemed to bring more decline in Nursery Hill, growth seemed to stimulate additional growth in Syracuse. One authority observed, "Houses sprang up by the score and stores of all trades multiplied."⁸

⁵ Sackett C. Case, "The Early History of Syracuse, "Syracuse Journal", February 8, 1878.

⁶ Case, loc. cit.

⁷ History of the State of Nebraska, op. cit., p. 1232.

⁸ Ibid., p. 1231.

The population was increased when the first child born in Syracuse, after the town was laid out, came to the L.E. Sinsbaugh family. The son's name was William and he was born in December, 1871.⁹ Increases to population, however, were more rapidly made by the movement of settlers into the community. These settlers began to organize into churches and social orders as all groups of people eventually do.

Tragedy and disappointment also played a part in these early days. The picture would be most inaccurate if it portrayed only prosperity and growth. Prairie fires were a constant fear. The railroad engines often threw off sparks which would cause such fires. One evening in the fall of 1872, when the wind was high, this happened. Sweeping north of town, corn-fields and haystacks burned; the fire was not stopped until it reached the road running north and south of Syracuse. In its path was the cemetery which had been donated to the settlers by George Warner in 1865, the first burial being his sister, Charlotte, and the second, Mrs. Swindt, a German settler.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Account by Mrs. Sarah M. Warner Dunn, Syracuse Journal Democrat, April 22, 1932. Mrs. Dunn was a sister of George Warner and Mrs. Case.

The two acres of land were scorched by the fire. One man, realizing the fire was not to be stopped, tried to save some of the headstones by carrying them into the road. In the attempt he broke several of them two or three inches above the ground, later necessitating the shortening of the slabs.¹¹ A tornado struck the town in 1875, and destroyed or damaged a number of farms and homes. The three-year old Congregational Church building was also damaged in the terrific wind.¹²

Besides natural disasters there were the economic problems of pioneer life. All products had to be shipped great distances, adding substantially to the cost. Most of the settlers, having very little real income, felt the difficulty of purchasing needed commodities. Examples of prices in 1876 were twenty dollars a month rent for a three-room cottage; sixty cents a pound for butter; thirty-nine cents for cured ham and much more for sliced. At this time corn was selling for twenty-five cents a bushel.¹³ When one considers the method of planting the corn as described by an old settler, the price given for each bushel takes on even more significance.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Account by C.B. Page, Syracuse Journal Democrat, June 28, 1935.

¹³ Account by A. Lockard, Syracuse Democrat, April 22, 1915.

The twenty-five acres of land he planted in corn were marked out with a sled marker while a boy dropped in corn seed in the marks as they passed them. Corn was often used as fuel, for it was cheap and coal was exceedingly scarce.¹⁴

Despite these problems and shortcomings the citizens looked to the future by requesting the incorporation of the town. The county commissioners had prepared for this event in 1874 when they appointed a town board to serve as the initial governmental unit of Syracuse. The men comprising this board were L.E. Sinsabaugh, V.C. Utley, J.E. Case, W.B. Stone, and H.H. Jaspersen. Serving as town clerk was I. Ledoyt and S.C. Case was the police judge.¹⁵

The official incorporation of Syracuse came on January 6, 1875. The appointed town board began to transact business on January sixteenth and on May third of the same year the board was officially elected by the Syracuse voters to serve the community. Syracuse was now a town established under the laws of the state, fully functioning as a local unit.¹⁶

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵History of the State of Nebraska, loc. cit.

¹⁶Case, loc. cit.

The first ordinance passed in Syracuse dealt with the time and place of meeting of the Board of Trustees. The board was to meet at the Mohawk Lumber Company on the second Friday of each month at half past seven o'clock.¹⁷ Ordinances two through five defined the duties of the city officers, and ordinance six required all liquor establishments to be licensed.¹⁸

The seventh ordinance prohibited;

. . . any horse, mare, gelden, mule, Jack, Jennie, bull, cow, ox, stag, steer, calf, swine, sheep or goat to run at large with the corporate limits of Syracuse.¹⁹

The town marshall was put in charge of enforcing this all inclusive law and if accomplished it probably was done with great difficulty. In 1876, a big cattle corral existed where the Syracuse standpipe is today and cattle roamed the hills of the virgin prairie as far east as the vicinity of Turlington, and undoubtedly west into the town.²⁰

The rulings of the new town government extended further to provisions to license wagons and peddlers, to prohibit the shooting of guns in the town, and, of course, to levy taxes.

¹⁷Town Ordinances of Syracuse, Book I, January 16, 1875.
¹⁷Town Ordinances of Syracuse, Book I, January 16, 1875-December 1, 1885, p. 2.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Account by A. Lockard, loc. cit.

Not all taxes of the new town had to be paid with actual money. To improve roads a poll tax of two days work was levied on each able bodied man who lived within the corporate limits of the town. Three dollars could be paid in lieu of the work.²¹ This indicated something about the wage scale of the day.

The community grew not only in population but in area as well. On May 10, 1875, the first addition was made to the original plat known as Thorn's Addition. Its location read the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 16, township 8, range 11.²² Another addition came three years later when David S. Gray, formerly of Columbus, Ohio, added land to the community on April 26, 1878. Known as Gray's Addition it was located in the S $\frac{1}{2}$ of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 16, township 8, range 11.²³ Again, in 1879, a portion of land was added to the northern part of the community called Gray's Second Addition.²⁴

The population at this time was estimated to be from four to five hundred residents.²⁵ The significance of the

²¹Town Ordinances of Syracuse, Book I, op. cit., p. 83.

²²Otoe County Deed Record, Book I, p. 343.

²³Otoe County Deed Record, Book 2, p. 339.

²⁴Otoe County Numerical Index of Deeds, Book I, p. 9.

²⁵The Syracuse Journal, July 26, 1878.

number is recorded in a statement of the press:

Syracuse has nearly doubled its size during the past twelve months, and no one aware of the things about to occur will doubt of our town again doubling its size between now and the first of January.²⁶

Among the things which were occurring in Syracuse were increases in shipping and use of Syracuse as an agricultural center. Evidence of this activity was found on the town's streets when the numbers of horse teams were counted and several days reached the sum of forty. The grain and stock dealers were receiving thirty to forty loads of these commodities daily.²⁷

The railroad carried the products out of Syracuse to Nebraska City and Lincoln. In 1878, 350 cars of grain and 100 cars of stock were shipped from the town.²⁸ By 1881, shipping had increased to 646 loaded cars--wheat - 54; rye - 11; barley - 34; corn - 323; cattle - 94; and swine - 130. The year 1881 was a comparatively poor year in Nebraska; thus, the commercial activity that Syracuse was showing indicated that it was quite a shipping point.²⁹

²⁶The Syracuse Journal, May 3, 1878.

²⁷Syracuse Journal, March 1, 1878.

²⁸J. M. Wolfe, Nebraska Gazetteer and Business Directory for 1879-80 (Omaha; Republican Book Binding and Job Printing House, 1879), p. 222.

²⁹History of the State of Nebraska, op. cit., p. 1232.

Businesses were increasing, also. In 1882, eighty-one different services were offered in Syracuse including musical instruments, sewing machines, and a carriage factory.³⁰ The carriage factory, employing eight workmen, was operated by H.A. Barnes and had been constructed in March, 1880, at a cost of \$2500. It produced from three to four thousand dollars of equipment annually.³¹ A quarry about five miles from Syracuse was also being developed. Some of its light gray stone was shipped by rail to be used in the building of the Nebraska penitentiary in Lincoln.³²

In 1877, the Midland Pacific Railroad line was acquired by the Burlington and Missouri Company.³³ This organization built additional buildings and stock yards to handle the growing commerce. The trade came from all the surrounding country-side which by now was a settled farming section.

It should be noted that the building of the town had first been primarily in the Nemaha bottom which runs south of the town in proximity to the railroad tracks. As the town grew, however, it gradually moved upward until now its businesses and residences were on higher ground.³⁴

³⁰ibid.

³¹ibid.

³²ibid.

³³Watkins, op. cit., p. 352.

³⁴Wood and Sroet, op. cit., p. 115.

To make this movement possible additional land was acquired. In the year 1883 the Fourth Addition was made,³⁵ Six years later, Cotton's Addition was added, while a further extention was made the following year.³⁶ The Seventh Addition to Syracuse was made in 1895.³⁷

The population of Syracuse grew at a steady pace. In 1880, the census reported 510 citizens in the community.³⁸ Ten years later there were 728, and in 1900 the population was 861.³⁹ During this same period the population of the county decreased by three thousand people and thus the continual growth of Syracuse was significant.⁴⁰ The local newspaper commenting

³⁵ Otoe County Deed Record Book 15, p. 423.

³⁶ Otoe Deed Record Book 23, p. 549 and Otoe County Deed Record Book 28, p. 158.

³⁷ Otoe County Numerical Index of Deeds, Towns, Book 2, p. 236. The additions made to Syracuse since 1895 have been Simpson's addition, 1916; Eighth Addition, 1927; Ninth Addition, 1945; Tenth Addition, 1950; and Wood's Addition, 1951. All plats are in similar record books as those cited in the Register of Deeds Office, Otoe County Courthouse, Nebraska City, Nebraska. (Refer to map, p. 37.)

³⁸ Bureau of the Census, Tenth Census of the United States, Population, Volume I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883), p.253

³⁹ Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Abstract (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), p. 42.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

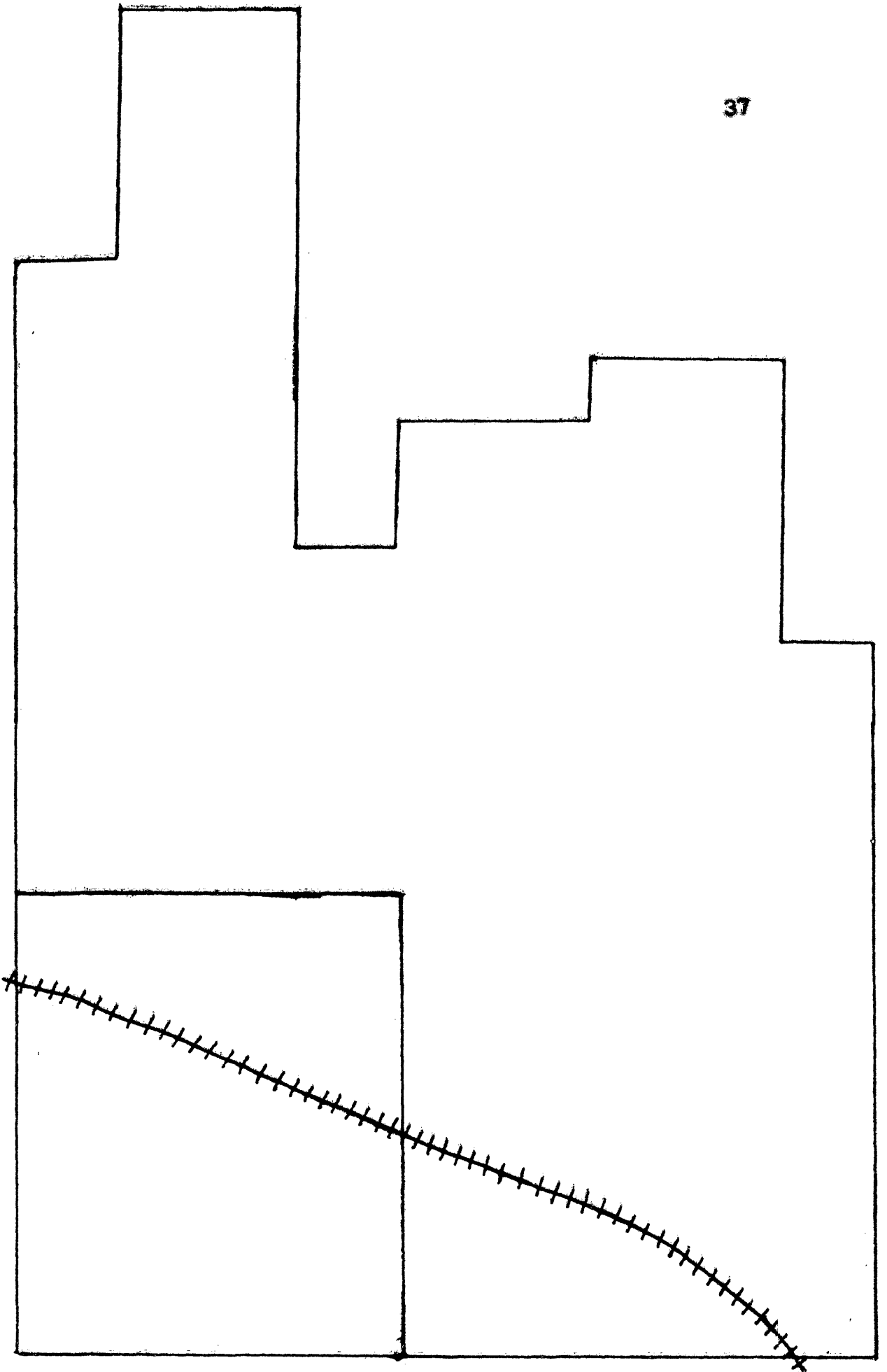


FIGURE IV

OUTLINE MAP OF SYRACUSE, NEBRASKA--1958
Indicating growth from original quarter-section
(From Power System Extensions Map)

on this trend stated:

Syracuse never had what is facetiously called a "boom" but she keeps on growing and improving with the regularity of the seasons, every year forging ahead on the up grade. This year [1892] several new dwellings have been erected, a cob-pipe factory started, and one new fine brick store building added to its business district.⁴¹

This growth was also recognized by other communities in southeastern Nebraska. From a Palmyra paper came the following item:

Syracuse is pushing to the front in neat streets, fine stores and is drawing to her the whole trade of central Otoe. The fact that she has outstripped all other villages of the county and is fast becoming its leading town is a pleasure to realize and absurd to deny.⁴²

The incorporation and growth of Syracuse was a steady process of development. The railroad, which gave the settlement a reason to become a town, drew people and businesses into the community. The true stability of Syracuse was not centered in the rail, however, but in the land. Only as other means of transportation and larger trade centers developed, did the true significance of the agricultural potential of the Syracuse vicinity become evident. Trade and population figures, however, do not give a complete picture of the development of a community. The cultural growth of Syracuse was likewise important.

⁴¹Syracuse Journal, November 4, 1892.

⁴²Quoted in Syracuse Journal, December 2, 1892.

CHAPTER IV

THE CULTURAL ASPECTS OF SYRACUSE

The early pioneers brought from the East the institutions which they valued, and established them on the prairie. In their new communities they set up schools, churches, and social groups which had been significant parts of their former life. Although the cultural life was probably not as highly developed as in the East, the western prairie towns soon developed a culture of their own which met the needs of the people.

As previously traced, the school played a major role in the founding of Syracuse. The land on which the town developed was first set aside as a school district, and its initial building was a house the early pioneers had hauled to the site in 1859 to meet the need for an educational center. Thirty-one pupils were registered in that first school of District 27. These children ranged from five to fifteen years of age and were drawn from an area as far west as to the edge of the Palmyra district, which was approximately fifteen miles. Although thirty-one was the potential enrollment of the school, only thirteen pupils actually submitted their names for the roll, and the average attendance was five students.¹

¹Syracuse Democrat, November 8, 1911.

The teachers in these pioneer days received approximately twelve dollars per month salary. One of the first teachers was Miss Olive Johnson who traveled from Valparaiso to District 27 by ox-cart to fill the teaching position. She later became Mrs. C.G. White of University Place, remembered for her generous contributions to Nebraska Wesleyan University.²

School attendance gradually increased so that by the 1870's when Amelia Andrews was the teacher, fifty students were attending the school.³ This increase in enrollment created the need for more facilities. Consequently in 1872 a new edifice was constructed at a cost of four thousand dollars which was the pride of the entire community. It was a large building located on the flat south of town (present city park) and was one of the finest buildings of its type in the state. For a number of years it provided adequate facilities for the school system.⁴ This building at a later date was moved to the place

²Ibid.

³History of the State of Nebraska (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), p. 1231.

⁴Ibid.

where the community hall is now located, and was used as a hotel; sometime later it burned down.⁵

The school term consisted of two sessions; the first began in September and ended in March, the second began in March and continued until July. Literary exercises for the community were held at the end of the fall session, and attendance for the year was reported to the community in July. In 1878, there were sixty-six pupils between the ages of five and twenty-one enrolled. The average attendance, however, was forty-four; there was only one teacher.⁶

In November of 1875, A.E. Rathburn furthered educational progress by bringing the first printing press to Syracuse. The initial product of this press was an advertising handbill for the Hurd and Waldorf Hardware Store. The first issue of the Syracuse Reporter appeared under the editorship of Rathburn on December 11, 1875.⁷ Three years later the Syracuse Journal was published with Albert Joyce as its editor; the first issue was dated January 25. While

⁵Account by George Bray, Syracuse Journal Democrat, July 26, 1935.

⁶The Syracuse Journal, July 12, 1878.

⁷Sackett C. Case, "The Early History of Syracuse," Syracuse Journal, February 8, 1878.

it was a weekly paper, there were times when issues were printed semi-weekly.⁸ In 1882, Reverend George S. Alexander, a Methodist minister, bought the newspaper. Other proprietors were his son, Arthur, George W. Dunn, L.R. Ostran, William H. Carson, and James and Will Keithley.⁹ In 1885, the Syracuse Daily Journal was established, but it continued in existence for only a short time. The same year, another weekly was founded, The Syracuse Herald, which was issued until 1898 when it was absorbed by the Syracuse Democrat. The Democrat which had been started two years earlier with H.E. Baker as its editor, exerted considerable political influence for the Democratic cause until it was consolidated on May 1, 1917, with the Republican Journal to form the Syracuse Journal-Democrat. The owners, Will Keithley and Melvin J. Wilkins, claimed the new paper would be non-partisan. In 1935, two small independent papers merged with the Journal-Democrat making this paper widely read in Otoe County; these were the Douglas, Nebraska, Enterprise and the Burr, Nebraska, Bulletin.¹⁰

In the early days of Syracuse journalism, approximately

⁸From the Newspaper Film Record, S-V, Nebraska Historical Society.

⁹A.E. Sheldon, Nebraska, The Land and the People, Volume I (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1931), p. 122.

¹⁰Newspaper Film Record, loc. cit.

two-thirds of the newspaper's material was purchased on boiler plate from an outside source. It contained the standard copy on national and state affairs. The remainder of the paper was locally written and printed and served as a commentary on community life. Stories, essays, reviews, advertisements, and news of the world certainly made the newspaper an educational medium. The editorials often served as pricks to the community's conscience.

An example of this was one editor's facetious article on the subject of visits to the school. He pointed out that during the term of 1877-78 there had been only one visit to the school from the county-superintendent, none from the Board of Education, and only one parent had put forth the effort to visit. The journalist went on to presume that the members of the school board were not accustomed to visiting school and, therefore, did not wish to break their usual custom. He also felt the parents ought to be complimented on the magnitude of their interest in the educational process.¹¹

In 1880, it was found necessary to enlarge the facilities for public instruction and another building was constructed

¹¹Syracuse Journal, July 12, 1878.

on the hill overlooking the town (present site of school) at a cost of two thousand dollars. Three departments were then set up--two in the new building and one in the old.¹² The upsurge in enrollment during these years probably was due to rapid settlement in the farm area surrounding Syracuse rather than outstanding increases in the town's population. By 1882, approximately two hundred pupils attended District 27; seventy-five of these children were in the primary grades housed in the old building. The faculty at this time consisted of William O. Rosch, principal and high school teacher; Anna L. Parry, teacher of the intermediate; and Carrie Link of the primary department.¹³

Again in 1889 more school room was needed. At the annual meeting of the school district held on June 24, 1889, the patrons discussed the possibility of a new school building in Block 13, Gray's Second Addition to Syracuse, on property owned by the district. At a special election on August 12, 1889, the voters authorized the issuance of ten thousand dollars in bonds to provide for its construction.¹⁴ The final cost exceeded this to a sum of \$998. The school

¹²History of the State of Nebraska. loc. cit.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Syracuse Democrat. August 17, 1889.

which had been built in 1880, was removed to the east side of the property to permit the erection of the proposed new building. Mr. Ellis of Omaha served as architect. Construction began in December, and school was first held in the new building on September 8, 1890.¹⁵

The school in Syracuse added an eleventh-grade course to its curriculum in 1888, and in the year 1908, it offered for the first time a twelve-year program.¹⁶ The length of the school year was nine months at the turn of the century with a two day vacation at Thanksgiving and two weeks at Christmas for the pupils. During the school year the activities held in the school for the students were somewhat hampered by their irregular attendance. A notice in the newspaper at the beginning of the term was an illustration of this: "Let all pupils arrange, if possible, to begin work the first day of the term as it is much easier for the teacher and gives better satisfaction to all."¹⁷ Another indication of the problem was in the enrollment statistics. In the school year 1899-1900, the school enrollment in Syracuse jumped to 333 students--151 boys and 182 girls.

¹⁵From a book of Minutes of District 27, no date, property of the Syracuse Public School.

¹⁶Record compiled by P.A. Epley in June, 1940, located at the Syracuse Public School.

¹⁷Syracuse Democrat, August 26, 1896.

Of these the average daily attendance for boys was 115 and girls 139.¹⁸ In the school year 1900-1901, however, the enrollment dropped to 250 students. The explanation given for this was the Free Attendance High School law being declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, thus compelling non-resident students to pay tuition.¹⁹ It seems evident with this variation in student attendance that the school must have had great difficulty in planning its program.

By 1925, increased enrollment and the need for an expanded curriculum made it necessary for this district to build an annex to the main building. This housed the Junior High School--a type of division which was becoming quite popular at that time. The expanded curriculum included a health program, music, normal training, and an extended commercial course.²⁰

Another community activity related very closely to the schools of Syracuse was the library. As early as 1878, the Syracuse Journal proposed the establishment of a library and in support of this measure suggested it would be a means of getting "idlers" off the streets to use their time in

¹⁸Syracuse Democrat, June 7, 1900.

¹⁹Syracuse Democrat, September 6, 1900.

²⁰Minutes of the Regular Meeting of the School Board, October 18, 1924.

"intellectual recreation".²¹ While a reading room was established in the downtown district, it was not until April 2, 1901, that the Board of Trustees officially created a public library and reading room. For a time it was located in the Odd Fellows Hall. By 1905, the library contained 1262 volumes and was loaning approximately forty-seven books a week.²² Not only local citizens, but also farm families in the surrounding area made use of its facilities.

Another institution which the pioneers transported to the prairie from their former homes was the church. The denominations which organized were similar to those in the East, and though their houses of worship were not as large and their ceremonies not as formal, their services were just as meaningful.

In Otoe County, religious history goes back to the 1850's. The pioneers would gather under the "largest tree in Otoe County", located eight to ten miles south of the present Syracuse, for preaching on an occasional Sunday. Everyone in a radius of approximately twenty miles would journey to take part in the worship service and hear the missionaries

²¹Syracuse Journal, March 8, 1878.

²²Syracuse Democrat, September 14, 1905.

who traveled from Nebraska City to preach.²³ In 1859, a Methodist class was organized and met in the Jacob Sollenberger home, two and one-half miles southeast of the present town.²⁴ In 1866, Syracuse was part of a Methodist circuit which included Palmyra, Helena, Rockford, and towns in Johnson and Nemaha counties. Under the guidance of the Reverend David Marquette, services were held at the Sollenberger's home and later in the old school located at the southeast corner of Syracuse.²⁵

A group which first took the name of the Nursery Hill Congregation Church was also active at this time. At first services of worship were held in a schoolhouse located a mile south of Nursery Hill, but in the 1870's the group began to meet in the store of Norris Dennis in Syracuse. Almost at once the idea of building a church began to formulate in their minds, and in 1873, two years after the town plat was made, a church building was constructed of \$1350, which had been subscribed by members of the congregation. The Reverend George Davis was the pastor

²³Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Syracuse Methodist Church, Sunday, October 25, 1953, Syracuse, Nebraska, 1878-1953, p. 1.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵History of the State of Nebraska, op. cit., p. 1231.

while the building committee consisted of W.C. Dudley, J.Q. Burleigh, J.H. McKie, and M.B. Castleton.²⁶ This was the first church to be built in Syracuse. The next year, in December, 1874, it was decided to change the name of the church to the First Congregational Church of Syracuse, Nebraska. A roll call of early ministers to this church would include such names as James Hall, C.G. Bisbee, G.M.F. Chessington, H.S. Thompson, Thomas Brown, and M.F. Platt.²⁷

For a time Congregationalists shared their church building with the Methodists who in 1878 built their own sanctuary. This church was located on lot twelve which had been purchased for fifty-five dollars; the building constructed was of the frame type with the traditional steeple.²⁸

The Baptists had not organized a church in Syracuse but at times met in the Congregational Church under the inspiration of the Reverend H.T. Vose.²⁹ Another church, the Saint John's Evangelical Church, was organized on June 20, 1880 with seventeen families. The first structure built by this denomination lasted from 1882 to 1907 when

²⁶ Ibid., p. 1232.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Syracuse Methodist Church, loc. cit.

²⁹ History of the State of Nebraska, loc. cit.

another church edifice was built. The Evangelical Church was admitted to synodical membership in 1884.³⁰ In October, 1880, the First Evangelical Luther Church of Syracuse was born. Just a year later a building was completed, a Sunday School was in operation, and a parsonage was provided for the Reverend C. Nauman, the first pastor.³¹

Other religious denominations were later established-- Saint Paul's Catholic Church and the Federated Church, both constructed buildings. The Lutherans divided into two groups--the Luther Memorial English Lutheran Church and the First Lutheran Church.

The church in Syracuse set certain standards for the community. The thoughts expressed in 1902 by the Reverend B. Lewis of the Congregational Church exemplified this:

He who would destroy Sunday by using it for work or play is a traitor to his country . . . Our intense, modern, hurrying life makes a rest day imperative.³²

If swearers would be content to use some common words like papa, potatoes, or prunes it would not be so bad, but they can bring in the most sacred words in our language, God, Heaven, Hell, and Jesus Christ. You rarely hear educated men swear. Swearing is an indication of ignorance, of poverty of intellect.³³

³⁰Syracuse Journal Democrat, October 17, 1930.

³¹History of the State of Nebraska, loc. cit.

³²Syracuse Democrat, July 31, 1902.

³³Syracuse Democrat, August 7, 1902.

On the same day the above was preached, the subject for the evening service was the evils of tobacco.

The Sunday Schools, the men's organizations, women's groups, and the church choirs have given opportunity to all ages and abilities throughout the community's history. The church bazaars, dinners and County Fair stands have also been contributions.

The importance of religion was shown in the stability of the churches of Syracuse. Although the Congregational Church disbanded in 1930 and its building became the present library, and the Federated Church dissolved its organization, the five other churches indicated above have continued to exist.³⁴

Throughout the years, fraternal and other social organizations have also provided interests for the citizens of Syracuse. As early as 1873, an organization of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows and one of the Good Templars existed. On June 24, 1875 the Mount Moriah Lodge of Masons received its charter with seventeen members. Other organizations which came to Syracuse during the years were the Maccabees, Woodmen of the World, Yeoman, Eagles,

³⁴Syracuse Journal Democrat, July 19, 1934.

Fraternal Aid, and others. The Wadsworth Post of the Grand Army of the Republic was organized in July, 1879, with eighteen members.³⁵

The Eagle Lodge, when it did exist, had such a large membership, approximately two hundred, that it built a hall for its activities. Dedicated in 1912, it was a fine two-story brick building.³⁶ This building was purchased in 1920 by the town trustees for four thousand dollars to be used as a community hall and fire station.³⁷

In 1904, the Brilliant Star Chapter Number 178 of the Eastern Star was instituted and has remained active in Syracuse throughout the years.³⁸ In addition, Scouts, Lions, and the American Legion have been strong elements within the community.

Beyond these social organizations, many general activities in the community conveyed its history. In May of 1893, the citizens of central Otse County formed an organization to promote a county fair. It was decided to purchase

³⁵ History of the State of Nebraska, loc. cit.

³⁶ Syracuse Democrat, November 21, 1912.

³⁷ Syracuse Journal Democrat, September 24, 1920.

³⁸ Syracuse Journal Democrat, October 24, 1924.

thirty-three acres of land southwest of the village of Syracuse to use as the fair grounds. Shares valued at fifty dollars each to an amount of five thousand dollars were issued. A one-half mile race track was part of the plan. The description of the grounds follows:

The entire thirty-three acres were enclosed with a seven-foot tight board fence. A goodly number of box stalls were constructed for horses and a large number of cattle stalls, hog pens and sheep pens were all enclosed. A floral hall . . . a fine ticket office at the entrance, grand stand, judges stand . . . were all built.³⁹

The Otoe County Agricultural and Mechanical Association held their annual fair on these grounds for a number of years.⁴⁰ In 1890, additional use of the grounds was made when it was decided to construct a kite-shaped mile race track extending north and south of the fair ground on land leased for that purpose. The track became well-known throughout the state. The next year, approximately one hundred and fifty horses filled the stalls on the

³⁹Described in the Syracuse Journal Democrat, June 22, 1934.

⁴⁰J.M. Wolfe, Nebraska Gazetteer and Business Directory for 1882-83 (Omaha: Herald Book Printing House, 1882), p. 200.

grounds. In addition, one-half and one-eighth mile tracks were added, while a double-decked amphitheater made it possible to view the races in comfort. The effect of this activity on the community was described in the following:

So many visited the town during this time that the hotel couldn't accomodate its guests, and Mr. Holderness built an addition making the hotel again as large. Farmers had a steady market for hay, straw, and grain. The people could go to the grounds any morning and see some wonderful exhibitions of speed.⁴¹

Dr. D.T. Hill, who shipped in horses from the East and had a farm to raise mares, stated:

From about 1880, to the advent of the automobile, Syracuse was the best known town in the state as a horse center for the light harness horse.⁴²

What happened to this enterprise which existed in Syracuse for a number of years? The hard times of 1894 are blamed for its disappearance. With economic problems facing them, the stockholders withdrew, the county commissioners stopped their support, and the track was closed down.⁴³

⁴¹Syracuse Journal Democrat, June 22, 1934.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

To take the place of the fair and possibly the activities of the race-track, an event was originated in September of 1906 called "Syracuse Day". It was a gala affair with decorations all along main street, a picnic, a parade of bands, a baseball game, and other activity. The newspaper claimed five thousand people participated in the first "Syracuse Day". This was the beginning of an annual event which existed until it was incorporated into the annual county fair.⁴⁴

In addition to the above event, the population of Syracuse also enjoyed a huge Fourth of July celebration in its early history. The celebration in 1899, for instance, included the town decorated in red, white and blue bunting, flags flying; a parade headed by the Cook, Nebraska, band, with singers and speakers following in carriages, and the fire department all marching to the old fair grounds. On arrival an address was given to commemorate the occasion, a ball game during the afternoon was held featuring Syracuse versus Talmage, and horse, bicycle and foot-racing were enjoyed. Skills were also tested with a tug-of-war and the Hose, Hook, and Ladder Companies of the fire department

⁴⁴Syracuse Democrat, October 4, 1906.

held a race--the hose company being victorious.⁴⁵ Such activities took place in the town three or four times a year with various types of picnics and celebrations. Only one of the events remains today--that of the Otoe County Fair.

Organized athletics began to be of importance to the community around 1899. At that time there were approximately three inter-school football games scheduled a year. The teams on the roster of competition included Omaha and Nebraska City.⁴⁶ The annual game between Nebraska City and Syracuse was always a colorful event. One year the entire school with pennants flying went to meet the train bringing the Nebraska City team. Syracuse won that football game with a score of twenty-nine to five, and after the game a large reception for all the players was held.⁴⁷ Community baseball has been popular in Syracuse as in many Nebraska communities. In Syracuse it consisted of a summer activity in which the town's people followed the team around to all the communities in the area to watch them play. In 1916 a special election was held in Syracuse at which the voters approved Sunday baseball.⁴⁸

⁴⁵Syracuse Democrat, October 4, 1906.

⁴⁶Syracuse Democrat, November 23, 1899.

⁴⁷Syracuse Democrat, March 30, 1905.

⁴⁸Syracuse Democrat, July 13, 1916.

Another activity which the town has always seemed to have supported, was a city band made up not only of school students, but also older residents. This band would play summer concerts in the park and tour the fairs in the area each year.

Probably the greatest center for social activities in the community was the opera house. This establishment was the scene of rallies, plays, meetings, banquets, revivals, and camp meetings.⁴⁹ Advertisements of coming attractions to be found in the newspaper included such things as the announcement in 1899, of the Kickapoo Indian Medicine man who was to give a series of free exhibitions at the opera house for the public.⁵⁰ Traveling companies presented plays such as Uncle Tom's Cabin to audiences for twenty-five to thirty-five cents a seat admission price.⁵¹ Jugglers, acrobats, animals, Dutch and Irish comedy were all part of the Lucky Bill Show which appeared.⁵² Hundreds of other acts and performances came through the town.

⁴⁹Syracuse Journal, October 28, 1892.

⁵⁰Syracuse Journal, April 19, 1899.

⁵¹Syracuse Journal, October 11, 1889.

⁵²Syracuse Journal, September 25, 1902.

⁵²Syracuse Democ

In 1901, the first moving pictures in the town were viewed at the opera house and sponsored by the church societies. They were Edison's films and included such subjects as the American soldiers capturing a Spanish Fort, Rough Riders, an elopement, a Negro dance, American territorial possessions and illustrated songs.⁵³ The newspaper critics gave the following review to the new source of entertainment:

The moving picture shown at the opera house last Friday night was well attended, but the gentleman who had it in charge should buy new films or quit business. The pictures were very poorly shown on the canvass, and the audience was greatly disappointed.⁵⁴

By 1906, the movie had not improved a great deal. On one occasion the film caught fire and panic reigned until the building was cleared and the small blaze was extinguished.⁵⁵ One of the most famous movies, Birth of a Nation, was first shown in Syracuse at the opera house in 1917.⁵⁶

Lecture courses, also held in the opera house, were quite popular. Tickets were sold to include five programs on a variety of subjects.

⁵³Syracuse Democrat, January 17, 1901.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Syracuse Democrat, July 12, 1906.

⁵⁶Syracuse Journal, April 13, 1917.

The first chautauqua held in Syracuse used temperance as its theme. Carrie Nation was the outstanding name on the list of speakers, and she pounded away on the evils of liquor.⁵⁷

In addition to the opera house, the Palace Theater became a source of social activity and entertainment a little later in the community's history. Admission prices in 1913 were advertised as five cents for children and ten cents for adults.⁵⁸ When talking pictures first came to the town it was a great event. The year was 1929 and the new attraction was described as follows:

. . . talking-speaking motion picture machines that bring out the actors in their plays on the screen and at the same time you hear their voices as though they were living acting persons on the stage before you.⁵⁹

Licensed dance halls were allowed in the town and in 1928 Anderson's Pavilion, now known Elm's Ballroom, was built. It was to be used not only for dances, but also as a place for meetings and athletic events.⁶⁰

The usual activities, of course, such as hay-rack rides, picnics, sledding, family reunions and others have always been part of the community's social life and added their colorful threads to the web of memories of the people.

⁵⁷Syracuse Democrat, July 23, 1908.

⁵⁸Syracuse Democrat, January 30, 1913.

⁵⁹Syracuse Journal Democrat, May 31, 1929.

⁶⁰Syracuse Journal Democrat, February 17, 1928.

If a conclusion were to be made to the history of these events and happenings it would necessarily be incomplete. Many times records were not kept of those elements which made up the educational, religious, and social life of Syracuse, for the inhabitants surveyed them as quite ordinary, certainly not historical, happenings. The school and churches in Syracuse have developed into a very strong facet of the community. There have been a number of lodges and social organizations formed at one time or another in the community, and have been responsible for community improvements and activities. Not all of them took root and continued to exist, but a favorable group of them still contribute to the social life of Syracuse. A variety of recreational facilities and opportunities--from a race track to lecture courses have been enjoyed in the town. In total view the educational, religious, and social life of Syracuse appeared quite normal in their aspects--similar to what many other small Nebraska communities must have experienced.

CHAPTER V

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMMUNITY

As Syracuse took root and grew in the soils of Otoe County many problems arose; if these problems or challenges had not been met the town would have declined and eventually disappeared. The citizens of Syracuse met most of the community problems with a determination to overcome them and continue to progress.

The early 1900's was a period of restless activity in Syracuse. Even to the impartial observer it would have been obvious that if this town had been affected by economic problems resulting from the Panic of 1893, it was rapidly overcoming them and was again on the upward swing. New business buildings and residences were being constructed, and more conveniences were being added. The activity in Syracuse led the Omaha World Herald to observe the following:

Yes, Syracuse is one of the best towns in the South Platte country and you know that means anywhere inside or out of the state. Some people believe to this day that the garden of Eden was located where the town of Syracuse now stands.

Despite the exaggeration, this was an interpretation of some important developments which were then taking place in the community.

¹Quoted in the Syracuse Democrat, January 19, 1905.

Although Nebraska City had been made the county-seat of Otoe County in the early days of the territory, all the functions which signified this position were not located there. Eventually, the pattern developed of centering all county agricultural activities in Syracuse. The Otoe County Agricultural and Mechanical Association's fair was held in Syracuse in the 1870's despite the protests of Nebraska City. In protest, Nebraska City began to hold a rival fair in 1878 to attract patronage from the county fair in Syracuse.² In 1879, when the Nebraska City News Press asked for only one fair, the Syracuse paper remarked:

Syracuse says amen. Let us have one grand agricultural exposition in Otoe County that will eclipse anything of the kind ever held. Let the fair be held at the central town of the county, so as to be conveniently accessible to all.³

This factor of central location was and continued to be the deciding element in these agricultural activities. Land near Syracuse was purchased in 1883 as the grounds for the county fair and Syracuse remained the fair site. The town also became the county headquarters for the American Farm Bureau Federation in the early part of the twentieth century. The activities of the Farm Bureau were of major importance if space devoted to them in the local newspaper can be used as a criteria.

²The Syracuse Journal, June 28, 1878.

³The Syracuse Journal, May 9, 1879. Refer to Syracuse Journal Democrat, March 8, 1929, for additional material concerning this controversy.

This growth in importance of agriculture to the community increased in rather a subtle way. While attention at first was focused on the railroad as the chief activity in and about Syracuse, gradually agricultural affairs became more and more important. In 1881, the town had two grain elevators, one grain warehouse, and three implement dealers.⁴ One of the grain dealers built a new elevator in 1904 which reportedly loaded fifty-five bushels of grain each time the carrying cups revolved.⁵ Through the years the growth of agricultural activity could almost be measured by the increase in number and size of the implement stores and grain elevators. Today seven farm implement dealers and two large grain elevators operate in Syracuse.⁶

Agricultural growth as recorded in the farm programs located in Syracuse was especially great during the 1930's. The Syracuse Sales Pavilion was organized in 1930. On sale each Wednesday, farm families crowded the town, and, in recent years, the sales have crossed approximately 750 thousand dollars a year.⁷ A new agricultural hall was erected on the fair grounds in 1936.⁸ Located in Syracuse was the county office of the

⁴F.A. Woods and G.N. Sroat, Nebraska City and Otoe County Directory (Lincoln: Journal Printing Company, 1881), p. 117.

⁵Syracuse Democrat, December 1, 1904.

⁶Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star, May 1, 1935.

⁷Omaha World Herald Magazine, June 19, 1935.

⁸Syracuse Journal Democrat, January 22, 1937.

Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Association, and the county agent working through the Farm Extension Service. Syracuse was the first town in Nebraska to have a building constructed specifically for the purpose of housing the Farm Extension Service. "I feel," stated Governor Cochran on October 28, 1939, at the dedication ceremony, "that this project is one of great importance to the county and state. It is a very fine example of cooperation of farm residents . . ."⁹ Many educational and social activities have been carried on in Syracuse as a result of the Extension Service.

What challenge did Syracuse face by becoming the center for activity in the county? Undoubtedly the citizens of 1871 were not aware that the soils of Otoe County were to be the sustenance of the community rather than the rail, but as time progressed this trend became more and more apparent. It began in 1901 when the Missouri Pacific Railroad which had used this route, withdrew from Syracuse, leaving the Burlington Railroad as the only company using the line.¹⁰ As transportation became centralized in Omaha and Lincoln, the need for depots such as Syracuse diminished. In January, 1938, freight service through Syracuse changed from a daily schedule to tri-weekly, and in April of the same year passenger service was discontinued.¹¹

⁹Syracuse Journal Democrat, November 3, 1939.

¹⁰Syracuse Democrat, April 18, 1901.

¹¹Syracuse Journal Democrat, January 13, 1939.

Certainly the location of Syracuse was important. It was able to gain agricultural leadership in the county despite Nebraska City's size and governmental prominence. Due to this factor, Syracuse was able to continue as a strong community despite the loss of the railroad activity--a loss which to many similar towns had brought collapse.

Dependence on agricultural production, however, brought with it an even greater sensitivity to weather conditions. Floods have been a threat to Syracuse throughout its history. Located near the Little Nemaha River, excessive rains each spring brought flooding. Some of the worst floods occurred in the early days of the community. On June 19, 1883, the river went over its banks and the water rose to the town's railroad tracks.¹² Floods came again in 1902; by this time the land in the Nemaha bottom was more extensively cultivated and crop damage reached thousands of dollars.¹³ Again in 1904 and in 1908 residents had to move out of the lowland due to floods.¹⁴ Since these floods frequently came into the main street, it was not uncommon to see citizens rowing boats down the streets and alleys.¹⁵ As the annual problem of floods became more and more

¹²Syracuse Democrat, July 17, 1902.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Syracuse Democrat, July 9, 1908.

¹⁵Syracuse Journal Democrat, July 26, 1935.

evident, a drainage ditch was constructed southeast of the town to straighten the river's course and enable excess water to be carried off more quickly.¹⁶ The problem was not entirely solved by this method, however, for in 1950, a terrible flood brought great damage and loss of life to Syracuse and Unadilla, emphasizing the need for better means of flood control.

The prairie has always been a land of extreme temperatures. Bothered by bitter cold in winter and intense heat often accompanied by drought in summer, the farmers were never guaranteed a crop. The snows of 1881, 1905, 1907, 1912, and 1956, were exceedingly heavy to mention only a few. In the years of 1905, 1919, and 1932, extremely cold temperatures were recorded in Syracuse when the mercury went as low as 33° below zero.¹⁷ The drouths such as in the 1930's brought hard times to the people of Syracuse and the farm families living in the vicinity.

Tornadoes also caused destruction in the vicinity during the early 1900's. A number of farm homes and buildings on the edge of Syracuse were completely destroyed and life was lost on March 23, 1913, when a tornado struck.¹⁸ Others have struck a number of times in the farm area around Syracuse but not in the town proper. Although these extremes in weather--floods,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Syracuse Democrat, February 17, 1905; Syracuse Journal Democrat, December 12, 1919; Syracuse Journal Democrat, December 16, 1932.

¹⁸ Syracuse Democrat, March 27, 1913.

droughts, cold, heat, and tornadoes--have brought problems to agriculture, the farmers in the Syracuse area, as in all regions where good soil exists, continued to work their land, for the promise of a good crop was always ahead.

Business activity in Syracuse, as in any agricultural community, was consistently affected by farm production--when crops were good, business was good, and likewise, when crops were bad, business was bad. Crops in the early part of the century must have been fairly good for the business activity in Syracuse increased considerably during these years. New businesses were encouraged by George Brown, a furniture dealer in the community, who was responsible for the construction of a number of stores in Syracuse during the year 1902.¹⁹ One of the buildings housed his own business, which later was purchased by Mr. E.F. Tonsing who is still a furniture dealer in Syracuse today.²⁰ In 1906, a building which served as the Masonic Hall on the upper story and the bank on the ground floor was constructed across the street from Brown's business. The bank was the First National Bank of Syracuse which had been incorporated in 1886 and a year later boasted assets of \$300,000.²¹

During the first decade of the century a Syracuse commercial club was organized to work for civic improvements. Some

¹⁹Syracuse Democrat, August 28, 1902.

²⁰Syracuse Journal Democrat, May 4, 1917.

²¹Syracuse Journal, January 21, 1887.

of its goals were to provide better park and recreational facilities, clean up the town, and improve roads to encourage increased farm purchasing in Syracuse.²²

Despite the improvements which were made, the town was completely out of debt by 1912 and taxes were reduced.²³

Rental property became scarce due to an increase in population, while some industry became located in the town. By 1913, three cement-block and concrete companies were in operation and the construction of an oil supply plant was completed.²⁴

Syracuse also made marked growth as a produce distribution center for a large portion of Otter County during these years.²⁵

In the period from around 1900 to 1913 Syracuse definitely became an agricultural community rather than the railroad centered town it had been earlier. This transition brought with it increased construction and additional services. The next period of growth and development came in the 1920's, when increased home building and improvement was again noticeable. During this decade a cold-storage and ice plant was added to the town's business district. Another enterprise, began in

²²Syracuse Democrat, March 8, 1906.

²³Syracuse Democrat, May 22, 1913.

²⁴Syracuse Democrat, October 16, 1913.

²⁵Syracuse Democrat, November 20, 1913.

this period, which appeared at first to offer great possibilities was the A.F. Kendle One Spring Alarm Clock Company. Kendle, a local jeweler, organized a company to produce the "one spring alarm clock" which he had invented. The citizens in the community purchased stock and soon a factory was set up with special equipment shipped from Chicago. Although the factory did begin to operate, either there was no market for the product or the production problems were too great, at any rate, the industry soon closed.²⁶

The face of Syracuse began to change during the twenties. Many of the buildings which were tangible records of the town's early history were pulled down to make way for new construction. The local newspaper editor, quite history conscious, recounted the past of these old buildings as one by one they disappeared. The Sinsabaugh lumber building which also served as a mercantile house was torn down in 1921. An edifice known as the Meeker Building, which had housed the Syracuse Democrat when it had been an independant paper, was removed about the same time.²⁷ The McFarland barn which had been constructed by Wait and Case, original settlers, as a dance hall and skating rink and later had served as the community opera house was also razed. During the days when it had served as an opera house

²⁶Syracuse Journal Democrat, May 27, 1927.

²⁷Syracuse Journal Democrat, April 27, 1921.

it was used for the early farmers' institutes when such outstanding speakers as J. Sterling Morton and Honorable M. L. Hayward spoke to Syracuse audiences. It was in this building in 1890 that William Jennings Bryan made his bow to Syracuse in the famous Bryan-Connell series of debates. This series, held during a Congressional campaign, ended at Syracuse, and when, in the debate, Bryan presented Connell with a copy of Gray's Elegy it was an oratorical climax which swept the enraptured audience to its feet.²⁸ Quoting him directly, he said to Connell:

"I desire to present to you in remembrance of these pleasant meetings this little volume, because it contains 'Gray's Elegy,' in perusing which I trust you will find as much pleasure and profit as I have. It is one of the most beautiful and touching tributes to humble life that literature contains. Grand in its sentiment and sublime in its simplicity, we may both find in it a solace in victory or defeat
But whether the palm of victory is given to you or to me, let us remember those of whom the poet says;

"Far from the madding crowd's ignoble
strife,
Their sober wishes never learn'd to
stray
Along the cool sequester'd vale of
life
They kept the noiseless tenor of
their way."

These are the ones most likely to be forgotten by the government Let me in parting express the hope that you and I may be instrumental in bringing our government back to better laws which will give equal treatment without regard to creed or condition. I bid you a friendly farewell."²⁹

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ William J. Bryan, The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan (Chicago: The John C. Winston Company, 1925), p. 251.

A number of years later, the building in which these events took place became the McFarland Barn and a building across the street, now the location of the Beer's Implement and Appliance Store, was used for the community opera house.

Two other buildings were also removed in the 1920's. The George B. Hare photograph gallery, which was later the Farmers' Produce Building, and the first postoffice building, built by Mrs. Ireland when the office was transferred from Nursery Hill, were removed.³⁰ A little later, the railroad windmill and tower, and the house which had served as the first school were pulled down.³¹ These buildings were landmarks and had served the community well, but in their places new buildings were needed if Syracuse was to continue to develop.

The modernization program which was being carried out in many similar communities throughout the country began to have an impact on Syracuse around the turn of the century, when "modern conveniences" began to be used. In May of 1899, the Board of Trustees called a special meeting to grant Henry A. Coit of St. Louis the right to establish and maintain a telephone exchange in the village. The rent for this new contraption was to be one dollar a month for a residence and two dollars for a business house.³²

³⁰Syracuse Journal Democrat, March 31, 1922.

³¹Syracuse Journal Democrat, January 8, 1926.

³²Syracuse Democrat, May 18, 1899.

The next year a movement was started to secure a municipal water system. The movement was successful and a water-works plant which reportedly cost the townfolk twelve thousand dollars was built; the first year it served sixty-five consumers.³³ A number of additional water mains were added in 1916, and a new one-hundred gallon standpipe was constructed to meet the growing needs of Syracuse.³⁴

The farmers in the area began to feel the effects of the coming mechanized age. William Masters in 1902 received a new Nichols and Shepherd engine and thresher by freight, and a few years later, the first tractor arrived in the agricultural community.³⁵ (Refer to the photograph in the Appendix, p. 111.)

The light and fuel problem was next to challenge the town. A town meeting was held at the opera house to hear C.J. Colby of the Practical Gas Company of Chicago speak on the possibilities of gas light for the town.³⁶ The citizens were interested in the idea and it was decided to call an election for a bond issue to construct and maintain a light and fuel system. The bond issue was to total five thousand dollars with interest

³³Syracuse Journal, May 17, 1900.

³⁴Syracuse Democrat, May 27, 1915.

³⁵Syracuse Democrat, July 17, 1902.

³⁶Syracuse Democrat, August 28, 1902.

at four and one-half per cent per annum.³⁷ A vigorous campaign in support of the measure was carried on by the newspapers. The final vote, however, indicated considerable doubt in the minds of many voters as to the desirability of the measure. When the returns were counted on September 2, 1902, out of the 185 votes cast, 100 were for the bonds, 84 were against, and one ballot was invalid.³⁸ By a margin of only sixteen votes, Syracuse had gained its light and fuel system. The construction of gas mains and a service building was begun in November of the same year.

Gas lights brought inconvenience, however, as well as illumination. For instance, when the gas lights flickered out at the Methodist Church one Sunday, all the congregation hurried out fearful of an explosion, but the trouble was found before such a mishap occurred.³⁹ Service was not guaranteed, as the following newspaper account relates:

The house that the village has been buying their gasoline from for the light plant cut the order short last week and failed to ship promptly the first of this week and consequently we had no street lights from last Thursday until Wednesday of this week.⁴⁰

The community did not, however, accept the new system readily as was indicated by the fact that in 1903 there were only

³⁷ Syracuse Democrat, September 4, 1902.

³⁸ City Council Records, Book II, p. 379.

³⁹ Syracuse Democrat, April 25, 1903.

⁴⁰ Syracuse Democrat, September 17, 1903.

thirty-six consumers of gas in Syracuse, this including both residences and businesses.⁴¹

A bad explosion did take place in August of 1905. Mr. Reed who was employed at the gas plant smelled gas escaping. In haste he checked a connection by striking a match which caused an immediate explosion. He was enveloped in flames but luckily jumped into a pit which held a little water and then dragged himself, severely burned, from the building. The explosion blew the whole north end off the plant.⁴²

By 1915 the use of electricity had become widespread and a movement was begun to obtain it in Syracuse. A bond issue for electric lights was passed by the voters in the spring of 1916, by a vote of 134 in favor to 79 opposed.⁴³ A generating plant was constructed and, in addition, the Water and Light Company of Nebraska City was contracted to furnish electric current from its transmission line.⁴⁴ The contract with the Nebraska City Company was discontinued in 1928 when the Syracuse plant began to produce its own current; this it continued to do until recently when supplemental current was again obtained through the Rural Electrification Administration to help meet the power needs of Syracuse.⁴⁵

⁴¹Syracuse Democrat, August 20, 1903.

⁴²Syracuse Democrat, August 24, 1905.

⁴³Syracuse Democrat, April 6, 1916.

⁴⁴City Council Records, Book III, p. 55.

⁴⁵Syracuse Journal Democrat, May 4, 1928.

Meanwhile the telephone system had been changing hands. In 1906, the Nebraska Telephone Company was given permission to establish its system in the town. Service was not too satisfactory judging from the newspaper criticism. Possibly for this reason, the Lincoln Telephone and Telegraph Company was given control of the service.⁴⁶ A new telephone exchange building was constructed on the corner of Fifth and Chestnut Streets in 1928, and a new switchboard for the system was installed.⁴⁷

One of the problems which had plagued the town throughout its early history was muddy streets. The streets would get so muddy from rains and especially floods, that it was impossible to get about the community. In fact, one account stated a run-away horse was finally caught on main street because it fell into a mud-hole.⁴⁸ Boardwalks were at first constructed to get the pedestrian out of the mud and about 1902 the use of concrete was introduced for this purpose.⁴⁹ The streets were first surfaced with gravel but this did not

⁴⁶ Syracuse Democrat, January 30, 1913.

⁴⁷ Syracuse Journal Democrat, November 30, 1928.

⁴⁸ Syracuse Journal, March 29, 1878.

⁴⁹ Syracuse Democrat, September 11, 1902.

prove too satisfactory. As early as 1918 a movement was started to secure paved streets, but nothing came of it until 1923 when an ordinance was passed creating paving district number one.⁵⁰ This district included main street and a few side streets--six blocks in all. Cochrane Construction Company of Lincoln was contracted for \$38,800 to do the job.⁵¹ When the project was completed the excitement over it was shown by the following editorial:

This work is one the town can well be proud of and relieves the difficulty that existed for many years when there was wet weather or when the frost was coming out of the ground in the spring Thus Syracuse has taken a long step and marks the commencement of an era of municipal importance that cannot be overestimated besides making one of the neatest and prettiest towns of its size anywhere.⁵²

In fourteen months twenty-four blocks of paving were laid and at the same time a sanitary sewer system at a cost of \$39,930 was completed.⁵³

Paving of the streets as well as buildings, which were constructed and modernized in the 1920's indicated that this decade brought substantial improvement to Syracuse. One

⁵⁰Syracuse Journal Democrat, December 20, 1918.

⁵¹Syracuse Journal Democrat, April 6, 1923.

⁵²Editorial in the Syracuse Journal Democrat, November 9, 1923.

⁵³City Council Records, Book IV, p. 67.

resident became poetic and demanded further improvement when he wrote:

Let us have a lovely town, one of which we all may boast,
Building up a high reknown that will spread from coast
to coast,
So that people in the trains will exclaim when looking out,
"Here's the burg where Hustle reigns--here's the town they
brag about!"

Now that war is done and past, and the fighters have all
quit,
Let us have a town at last that will truly make a hit.
That's the way we're talking now, here in Pruneville-in-
the-Hole
And each morn we make our vow that the town must reach
its goal.

First we need a public dump, let it cost what 'twill, in
cash;
For the town must sadly slump which is cluttered up with
trash,
Having built our dump in style, there we'll take old cans
and hats,
Haul it to the rubbish pile, and last season's cast off
cats.⁵⁴

Later a city dump was made west of the town.

Fire, a constant threat to any community, has caused considerable damage a number of times, but Syracuse was fortunate in having a good volunteer fire department. In 1880, it was urged, by the newspaper, that ladders and a force pump with hose attached be purchased for the "bucket brigade" fire department.⁵⁵ Gradually better equipment was added until, in

⁵⁴ Portion of a poem paraphrased by Walt Mason, resident, from Life, appeared in the Syracuse Journal Democrat, June 11, 1920.

⁵⁵ Syracuse Journal, November 26, 1880.

1926, a motorized volunteer fire department, housed below the community hall, was set up in Syracuse.⁵⁶ One of the worst fires occurred in 1913 when the general merchandising store of J.H. Arends burned. This company which had been in business for forty-seven years, lost \$35,000 worth of stock due to the fire. Arends sold what was left to Harry Hughes of Rulo.⁵⁷

The town government, as previously discussed, came into being in 1875. Of interest through the years were the campaigns made by the candidates for local elections. Although today nominations take place outside the political party framework, at one time all elected local offices were campaigned for in the party manner. Town government seemed to have more color when the two local political parties--the Citizen's Party and the People's Party--caucused in the opera house or community hall on consecutive nights to nominate their candidates.⁵⁸ These parties were not connected with a national party and were distinctly for the purpose of nominating candidates for the local government.

The Board of Trustees had to deal with many issues such as community health. This problem ranged from scolding those

⁵⁶Syracuse Journal Democrat, August 27, 1926.

⁵⁷Syracuse Democrat, December 24, 1913.

⁵⁸Syracuse Democrat, March 20, 1913 and Syracuse Journal Democrat, March 16, 1934.

citizens who insisted on spitting on the postoffice floor to attempting to halt an outbreak of smallpox by vaccination.⁵⁹

In 1919, a Syracuse Board of Health was created to pass rules of health and enforce them. This board consisted of the marshal, a physician, and one other citizen.⁶⁰

Although the issue of law enforcement has not been a great problem in Syracuse, the Board of Trustees has had to deal with it. In the early days of the town a vigilante committee was organized to help the board enforce the law and this notice appeared in the newspaper: "Tramps and desperadoes will find Syracuse a poor place to put in an appearance. The officers and people are prompt in punishing all offenders."⁶¹ In 1880, the reason given for a number of petty fights which had occurred in the town, was the extremely cold weather which was "supposed to have [had] a too exhilarating effect on a number of our people."⁶² In 1904, the members of the board established a curfew for children under fourteen. A whistle was to blow at nine o'clock, and all children not accompanied by parents were to be in their homes.⁶³

⁵⁹Syracuse Democrat, January 17 and 24, 1901.

⁶⁰Syracuse Journal Democrat, July 18, 1919.

⁶¹Syracuse Journal, May 10, 1878.

⁶²Syracuse Journal, December 19, 1880

⁶³City Council Records, Book II, p. 417.

These and similar actions kept the community's life running smoothly. The Board of Trustees has been the continuous type of government in Syracuse since incorporation of the town. It has been a stable influence on the community and has fulfilled the duties of government in granting licenses, protecting the citizens and their property, and in promoting improvements in the town. Although the type of government in Syracuse has not changed since 1875, the community had completely changed its focus by the 1930's from a settlement created by a railroad to a settled agricultural community. As the importance of agriculture dawned on the town, more and more farm organizations and services were located in Syracuse rather than in Nebraska City, the county-seat. This was primarily due to the central location of the town in Otoe County. The community's prosperity became dependant on the surrounding farm land and the "good times" in Syracuse can almost be measured by the state of the farm economy.

In the early part of the twentieth century two periods of increased commercial activity were evident in Syracuse. The first extended to around 1913, and the second came in the decade of the 1920's. During these periods, although population did not increase greatly, community improvement advanced at a steady pace. Conveniences such as water, light, heat, sewer, and telephone systems were established through citizens' efforts. The streets and sidewalks were paved as a matter of

convenience and to increase the value of the town. From the time it was established in 1875, the Board of Trustees type of government has functioned in Syracuse, and has been consistently stable.

Syracuse never was to grow a great deal, but the activity which came in the early 1900's provided a strong basis for the town and made it appear much more advanced than many other communities of the same population. Syracuse drew the commercial trade of central Otse County and became a stable rural community despite the loss of the railroad activity which had initially made it a town.

CHAPTER VI

SYRACUSE AS A REFLECTOR OF NATIONAL EVENTS

None of our national leaders have come from Syracuse, Nebraska, nor has a national crisis occurred there, but despite this obvious insignificance in national affairs, the people of Syracuse have continually been concerned about issues of the day, voted for their favorite candidates, participated in politics, sent their boys to war, and cooperated in national programs. Possibly this measures in part what the true significance of the small community is in a democracy. The study of how some of the well-known historical happenings affected the southeastern Nebraska community of Syracuse may parallel in part the reaction in similar towns.

Syracuse did not exist as a village during the Civil War, and very little happened in any Nebraska community to suggest the severity of the conflict. It was rather ironic that the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, playing an important role as one of the pre-war issues, created Nebraska, and yet the new territory was so little affected by the war itself. Only a few slaves were brought into the territory and no

organized fighting occurred.¹ The greatest effect it had on Otoe County was in the number of immigrants who came from the South and East after the Civil War to get away from the devastation of their former homes or to obtain new land. The growth of population in Otoe County was illustrated by the fact that in 1863 there was no settlement in the county farther than ten miles west of Nebraska City, and the total county population was 4,211.² By 1870, however, the population of the county had grown to 12,345.³ Another evidence of the Civil War, was the post of the Grand Army of the Republic which was formed in the early days of Syracuse indicating that a number in the community had been active in the war. In 1907, the GAR requested the War Department to give a Civil War cannon to Syracuse. The request was granted and an eight inch Columbaid weighing 9200 pounds was placed in the Syracuse cemetery.⁴ A plaque on it gives the members of the GAR and with what regiment they served during the war; it remains the only

¹The census of 1870 indicated that ten years earlier there were fifteen slaves in Nebraska, ten of these were in Otoe County. There were also sixty-seven freedmen in Nebraska. See Bureau of the Census, Ninth Census of the United States, Population, Volume I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), p. 47.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Syracuse Democrat, July 4, 1907.

emblem of the Civil War in Syracuse. Around it each Memorial Day, community services are held.

The Spanish-American War was the first conflict in which the United States engaged after Syracuse became a community. Although the people of the town supported the war, their reaction to the Philippine Insurrection which followed was not as enthusiastic if an editorial in the newspaper can be used as an example of their thinking:

The people of Nebraska mourn the loss of brave boys over in the Philippines. Boys who are opposed to imperialism, but who are loyal to a free government and are always ready to obey orders, and die when the good name of their home and state are at stake. Boys who enlisted only with the thought of helping to lift the yoke of tyranny from the neck of the ~~oppressed~~, and but for the slow, red tape action of an imperious inclined administration, they would not have been forced to sacrifice their lives in this way.⁵

The next month a memorial service was held at the opera house in honor of those boys involved in the war.⁶

During this period, two newspapers, holding opposite political views, existed in Syracuse. Their constant efforts to prove their points of view increased the community's interest in political affairs. The voters were always receiving advice on how to cast their ballot, and the Republican or Democrat who did not vote a straight ticket was deemed a

⁵Editorial, Syracuse Democrat, April 27, 1899.
Democrat, April 27, 1899

⁶Syracuse Democrat, May 18, 1899.

failure to the cause.⁷ The Republican and Democratic groups held frequent meetings and rallies to strengthen their parties, and political activity on the local level seemed greater than it is today. In the county election of 1899, the Republican Journal commented upon the opposition candidates as follows:

Some of these gentlemen were never heard of before and after the funeral ceremonies on the fifth of November, they will all pass gently and swiftly out of the memory of the living⁸

During the 1890's, a third party, the Populist Party, gained influence and in 1899 held its county convention at the opera house in Syracuse.⁹ The next year, the Democrats and Populists fused to form a Bryan Club in Syracuse.¹⁰ William Jennings Bryan was a very popular figure in the town and was always well received when he came to speak. The Syracuse Democrat, of course, followed his career with avid accounts comparing him to Jefferson and describing him as the "greatest living exponent of democracy".¹¹ When

⁷ Syracuse Journal, November 4, 1892.

⁸ Syracuse Journal, October 11, 1889.

⁹ Syracuse Democrat, August 24, 1899.

¹⁰ Syracuse Democrat, September 20, 1900.

¹¹ Syracuse Democrat, October 17, 1900 and March 28, 1912.

Bryan spoke in Syracuse during the presidential campaign of 1900, the Syracuse Democrat reported:

Mr. Bryan said there was not a town in eastern Nebraska he would rather talk in than Syracuse, and the date here was his own choice. This is a compliment to every citizen of our village, and they should reciprocate by giving him a big vote.¹²

When Bryan was defeated by McKinley, the paper announced that "four years hence our forces will fight just as valiantly for what they believe to be right."¹³

McKinley's assassination submerged political differences in 1901 and the citizens of Syracuse were shocked at his untimely death. The Democrat stated, "No good can come from anarchy and it should be stamped out for the safety of our government."¹⁴ Services were held at the opera house in memory of him later in the month.¹⁵

Throughout the campaign of 1900 and the years following, big business received little sympathy in southeastern Nebraska. Cartoons showing men of wealth taking advantage of others regularly appeared in the newspapers. When the stock panic of the Northern Pacific Railroad came in 1901,

¹²Syracuse Democrat, September 27, 1900.

¹³Syracuse Democrat, November 8, 1900.

¹⁴Syracuse Democrat, September 12, 1901.

¹⁵Syracuse Democrat, September 26, 1901.

the Democrat heralded it by saying it pinched the wealth that was fighting wealth and a "few lambs were also caught".¹⁶ It was natural that an agricultural area such as Nebraska would be lacking sympathy for monopolies and big business.

The reaction in Syracuse to the outbreak of World War I was very interesting for Syracuse had a large German population; its first move was to form a German relief society to help those in the fatherland.¹⁷ Nationality was also emphasized by a German-American Volksfest which was held each summer during the early part of the war before the United States became involved.¹⁸ No newspaper accounts urged American involvement in the war except in the following capacity, "Shall we not as American people still hold forth our hands with offers of peace and mediation . . ."¹⁹

When war was declared by the United States the picture changed--bond drives began almost immediately, soldiers rapidly enlisted, and soon a flag, with a star representing each man in the service, flew over the town.²⁰ Full page

¹⁶Syracuse Democrat, May 16, 1901.

¹⁷Syracuse Democrat, September 3, 1914.

¹⁸Syracuse Democrat, August 24, 1916.

¹⁹Editorial, Syracuse Democrat, September 17, 1914.

²⁰Syracuse Journal Democrat, February 15, 1918.

advertisements appeared in the paper urging, "Win the war by preparing the lend", "Bonds are not a burden but a blessing", and "Lend him [soldier] a hand".²¹ A strong Red Cross unit was organized June 13, 1917, and did a great deal of sewing and knitting for the soldiers.²² Eight hundred Otoe County boys went into the service in World War I, out of these twenty-eight died.²³

The armistice brought great joy to Syracuse. The news came to the town at three in the morning when the citizens were asleep, but they were soon awakened by Schroeder's mill whistle, and anvils being hammered by Charles Meeker.²⁴ The following describes the result of this noisy proclamation:

. . . the street was soon filled with a happy throng and everywhere the good news radiated from happy faces as they discussed the situation. The home guard firing squad was out and fired volley after volley, whistles blew and bells were rung, the band discoursed patriotic music and the national colors were flying to the breeze. Everywhere much joy was manifested.²⁵

The next year a large celebration called the "Syracuse

²¹Syracuse Journal Democrat, April 19, 1918.

²²In the World War, 1917-18-19, Otoe County, Nebraska. (Syracuse: Keithley, Wilkins, Lawrence, and Fowler, 1919), (no page numbers).

²³ibid.

²⁴Recalled in Syracuse Journal Democrat, November 16, 1923.

²⁵Syracuse Journal Democrat, November 11, 1918.

Soldiers and Sailor's Homecoming Day" was held. The program presented to the "thousands" who attended consisted of servicemen recounting their war experiences, music, and a ball-game.²⁶ After the boys were home little interest was shown in the community on problems which still confronted the world. From time to time someone would speak on the League of Nations, but no great support seemed to develop.²⁷

Two domestic issues which had been facing the nation throughout this period were women's suffrage and prohibition. Although prohibition finally gained enough national prominence to be made an amendment to the Constitution, the movement actually began throughout the United States at the local level. Red Ribbon Clubs were organized in Nebraska to further the cause of temperance and Syracuse had such an organization.²⁸ This group must have exerted some influence on the community for in the early 1880's a prohibition ordinance was passed by the Board of Trustees.²⁹ The ordinance became ineffective in 1903, however, when the issue was brought to a popular vote and a majority cast their votes against prohibition.³⁰ By 1908, the temperance forces

²⁶Syracuse Journal Democrat, August 9, 1919.

²⁷Syracuse Journal Democrat, October 29, 1920.

²⁸Syracuse Journal, April 26, 1873.

²⁹F.A. Wood and G.N. Sroat, Nebraska City and Otoe County Directory (Lincoln: Journal Company, 1881), p. 116.

³⁰City Council Records, Book II, p. 391.

had once more gained the upper-hand, and in a special election the voters of Syracuse voted "dry". Ordinance seventy-eight put the result of the election into law. It prohibited the treating or giving away of any malt, spiritous, or vinous liquors within Syracuse, and section seven of the ordinance was especially descriptive; it read:

It shall be unlawful for any person or persons to congregate together and drink any malt, spiritous, or vinous liquors, or any intoxicating liquors whatever, on the streets or around any stable, shed, warehouse, out-building, outhouse, or by-place whatsoever, within the corporate limits of the village of Syracuse, Otoe County, Nebraska, for the purpose of carousel, spreeing, playing cards or other games, or for revelry, or to do what is commonly called "rushing the growler"-- the carrying of such liquors in pails, buckets, or other vessels to be drank in the aforementioned places for the above purposes.³¹

A specific penalty was prescribed by a later ordinance for those found intoxicated. They were to receive a fine of ten to fifty dollars or imprisonment from ten to thirty days.³² By 1919, when the entire nation was adopting prohibition, the Syracuse editor summed up the state of affairs

³¹City Council Records, Book III, p. 123.

³²Ibid., p. 339.

in Syracuse when he wrote, "This part of Nebraska is really dry--whichever way you wish to take it."³³

The women's suffrage movement in Syracuse was organized in July, 1913, when the women met to gain support for equal voting rights.³⁴ The Nineteenth Amendment, which was accepted by Congress in June of 1919, but was not formally ratified by the states until August of the next year, went into effect early in Syracuse. In the primary election held in Syracuse in April, 1920, out of 335 votes, eighty were cast by women.³⁵

Other changes were becoming evident in the fields of travel and communication. Airplanes became of interest as early as 1913. To add to the Fourth of July celebration that year, a dismantled plane was brought in by rail, assembled in the ball park, and the pilot gave a demonstration flight around the area. It was heralded as a wonderful attraction, but probably thought of more as an entertaining contraption than as a means of travel.³⁶

The way in which the news traveled at the death of President Harding differed a great deal from present news

³³Syracuse Democrat, July 25, 1919.

³⁴Syracuse Democrat, July 17, 1913.

³⁵Syracuse Democrat, April 23, 1920.

³⁶Syracuse Democrat, July 3, 1913.

communication. Dr. D.T. Hill, a local physician, heard the news on his radio approximately thirty minutes after the death. The radio stations made the announcement and then cancelled their programs and signed off for the day. Since very few residents had radios, the townsfolk were notified by the telephone. The town's flag was flown at half-mast in honor of the deceased President.³⁷

In 1929, when most of the nation was shocked over the stock-market crash, the Syracuse paper made no comment on it. Perhaps the effects of this were not realized at the time, at least it was quite a period before news on the economic situation even rated a significant spot in the newspaper. In December of 1929, the paper reported that Hoover's prosperity program was going well.³⁸ Finally, in February, 1930, a small article on the front page told of the governor of Nebraska calling a special session of the legislature to discuss the state banking situation.³⁹ The first real effects of the depression hit Syracuse in 1932, when one of the two banks, the Bank of Syracuse, failed ~~and~~ ^{did} some businesses.⁴⁰

³⁷Syracuse Journal Democrat, August 10, 1923.

³⁸Syracuse Journal Democrat, December 6, 1929.

³⁹Syracuse Journal Democrat, February 14, 1930.

⁴⁰Syracuse Journal Democrat, December 23, 1932.

Reaction was shown in the election of 1932 when the only Republican to carry a majority in Otoe County was Dwight Griswold, candidate for governor.⁴¹ All other national, state, and county offices were Democratic in a traditionally Republican county, indicating the actual concern over the state of affairs. The paper summed up the presidential picture by saying:

Franklin Roosevelt will be the next president of the United States. The people of the land, eager for a change, amassed for him a margin in both electoral and popular votes that is far, far greater than any recorded for many years.⁴²

One of the first actions of the new President was to declare a bank holiday. A letter arrived from Washington to thank the Syracuse Board of Trustees for their cooperation, for the board had passed a resolution giving the measure full support and had sent a copy to the President.⁴³

The businessmen also cooperated by becoming part of the National Recovery Act. Approximately fifty unemployed person

⁴¹Syracuse Journal Democrat, November, 1932.

⁴²ibid.

⁴³Letter from Louis Howe, Secretary to the President, to the Board of Trustees, Village Clerk, March 29, 1933. In the Board of Trustees minutes for the meeting of April 3, 1933.

registered to get work under the program of public works.⁴⁴ School grounds and walks were improved, and the city park was made more beautiful by the planting of trees and flowers. The American Legion administered the relief for the needy and flour, clothes, and other items were distributed.⁴⁵ Most of the programs found favor; at least in March, 1934, a Roosevelt night was held at Anderson's pavilion in Syracuse for the Otoe County citizens. The purpose of the gathering was stated in the following invitation:

All of Otoe County is invited to this meeting which is to be a review of and a thanksgiving for the great emergency acts and programs of the national leaders in attempting to bring us out of one of the greatest periods of economic distress we have ever known.⁴⁶

The road back to economic security was not an easy one for the nation, however, and many problems faced each community. In Syracuse the newspaper recorded a great increase in robberies and vandalism during the period. On Friday, December 22, 1933, the town was especially shocked when the First National Bank was robbed. Three men, none from Syracuse, walked into the bank at twenty minutes before noon.⁴⁷ They

⁴⁴Syracuse Journal Democrat, August 18, 1933, and August 25, 1933.

⁴⁵Syracuse Journal Democrat, December, 30, 1932.

⁴⁶Syracuse Journal Democrat, March 2, 1934.

⁴⁷Later identified as Ford Bradshaw, Clarence Eno, and Charles Cotner, Syracuse Journal Democrat, March 30, 1934.

were armed with army automatics and were chewing long cigars. Everyone in the bank was lined up by the wall by command of the gunmen. The time lock was on the safe over the noon hour and thus the bandits were able to escape with only thirteen hundred dollars. Further excitement was added when two of the bank's employees, Charles Andrews and Wyatt Lambeth, were taken as hostages. The men were required to ride on the running board of the bandit's 1933 Chevrolet to the northwest part of town to aid in the escape.⁴⁸

Another unusual happening around this time was the burning of a large cross. The Klu Klux Klan burned the cross at a nearby farm to signify the organization had obtained one hundred members in and around Syracuse.⁴⁹

Drouth and heat set new records and added to the farmer's problems during the depression. Crops were destroyed, and a farm relief program was established to aid the farmer in obtaining feed for his animals and income for himself.⁵⁰ The depression certainly presented problems to the community which were not easily overcome.

⁴⁸Syracuse Journal Democrat, December 29, 1933.

⁴⁹Syracuse Journal Democrat, June 1 and September 21, 1934.

⁵⁰Syracuse Journal Democrat, June 8, 1934.

Rumblings of World War II were already being heard in the 1930's. The news of the death of Germany's Von Hindenberg was recognized to be serious to world affairs. The Syracuse paper said:

Hitler immediately took charge of German affairs and the world will anxiously await developments that will vitally concern world peace. All Europe is in an uproar that was only equalled in 1914 and Hindenberg's passing will not help matters any.⁵¹

When it finally came, World War II brought a more serious reaction in Syracuse than the first World War. Right after Pearl Harbor the fear for Syracuse boys who were already in the Pacific area put a different aspect on the war.⁵² Farmers were again urged to greatly increase production and a war fund drive was held at once with Syracuse raising \$337.25 to aid the Red Cross Relief War Fund in its work.⁵³ Defense stamp and bond drives were held, rationing and price controls went into effect, and observances were planned to urge patriotism.⁵⁴

By this time radio and out-of-town newspapers were able to carry a more complete story of the war and, therefore, the weekly accounts in the Syracuse paper were brief. When victory in Europe was attained, the activity was quite subdued

⁵¹Syracuse Journal Democrat, August 9, 1934.

⁵²Syracuse Journal Democrat, December 12, 1941.

⁵³Syracuse Journal Democrat, January 2, 1942.

⁵⁴Syracuse Journal Democrat, October 27, 1942.

with church observances being the major concern.⁵⁵ When final victory came over the Japanese, the reaction in Syracuse was described as:

After the first burst of whistle tooting and bell ringing which began as soon as President Truman's announcement had been flashed to the world, the village resumed its normal life.⁵⁶

Possibly the writer of this description summarized well the community as it reflected all national events. Its history displayed the beginning of movements which began throughout America at the local level, and changes in communication were shown. The importance of politics in Syracuse has seemingly decreased since the days when not only national parties were well organized, but local parties were also functioning in the town. The compliance with national programs, and the hardships war, drought, and depression brought were significant, but despite these things the major impression of Syracuse is of a people who have always returned to their normal pursuit of life after being caught up in national crisis. This continuity and consistency possibly conveys more belief in the future of the nation and in democracy than can be realized.

⁵⁵Syracuse Journal Democrat, May 11, 1945.

⁵⁶Syracuse Journal Democrat, August 17, 1945.

CHAPTER VII

SYRACUSE AT THE PRESENT TIME

The town of Syracuse has not changed basically in recent years. Its population, according to the 1950 census, was 1,097.¹ Its main interest has remained that of an agricultural community serving the six hundred farm families living in the vicinity.² The changes most evident in Syracuse in the last twenty years have been the improvements which have altered its physical appearance and made it a most attractive rural community.

On the spot where the old brick schoolhouse, constructed in 1890, was located, a white concrete building of modern design stands today. The history of the present building goes back to 1930, when the need for new school facilities became evident, and additional ground was purchased as the first step in the process of obtaining a new school. The bond issue put before the voters in 1938, however, was defeated and it was not until WPA assistance was available that the issue was again voted upon. By this time, 1940, an architect, Bruce Hazen of Lincoln, had been employed and drawings

¹Bureau of the Census, Census of Population, 1950, Volume I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1952), p. 24-16.

²Minutes of the Board of Trustees, School District 27, October 30, 1940.

were made as to the type of building desired. When the voters marked their ballots for a forty-eight thousand dollar bond issue in January, 1941, 304 votes were cast in favor of it and 175 against. With this local appropriation available, Mrs. Hazen wrote the State Administrator of the WPA, D.F. Felton, the following:

School District No. 27, Syracuse, Nebraska, herewith requests the allotment of \$82,352³ for the construction of a new architectural concrete school building and the demolition of the present building, which is fifty-eight years old . . . The present building is inadequate for the needs of the community. At present three grades are housed in a frame building to the west and the toilets and boiler house are in a separate building to the rear of the present building. The auditorium of the proposed building will serve as a meeting place for community gatherings as well as school functions. There are no such facilities in the town at present . . .³

The WPA accepted the project in March of 1941, and began construction. Another bond issue for fifteen thousand dollars was passed on March 16, 1943, to enable completion of the building when the WPA allotment was not completely fulfilled.

During the time of construction, school was held in the community hall, the library basement, and the school annex. The inconvenience to the pupils was well compensated for by the enjoyment the new school brought the community. After

³Letter in the files of the Board of Trustees, District 27.

moving into the new school, an extended athletic program was authorized and manual training was introduced. A home nursing course in adult education and a home economics unit were instituted.⁴

Today the building houses kindergarten through twelfth grade with an approximate enrollment of 350 students. The high school is accredited by the state and rated as a Class B school on the basis of the number of pupils. The curriculum offers three broad areas of study--the general course, the college preparatory course, and the commercial course. Syracuse has received many honors in music and athletics in recent years at district and state contests. The schoolhouse standing in the center of the village is perhaps the most cohesive force in the life of the community.

New church steeples have also changed the town's appearance. The Luther Memorial congregation constructed a beautiful church in 1954, which is today the largest church in Syracuse. The Methodist and Catholic Churches are today (1958) both involved in ambitious building projects. In 1955, the five churches in the community reported a combined membership of seventeen-hundred persons while the population of the town was at the most not over twelve-hundred.⁵ This is

⁴Minutes of the Board of Trustees, District 27, June 10, 1946, January 12, 1948, and June 21, 1948.

⁵Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star, May 1, 1955.

an indication of the important role played by the church in Syracuse.

Another new building of much significance to the town is the one which houses the Community Memorial Hospital. The twenty-bed, \$260,000 building was completed in January of 1952. Forty-seven per cent of the cost was financed by local subscription, and the rest came through a federal government grant. In the hospital are excellent facilities for complete diagnostic and clinical services such as x-ray therapy and the latest in operating facilities and nursing care. It is managed by the Lutheran Hospital and Homes Society and has an annual patient load of around 450 patients who are drawn from the surrounding area.⁶

The appearance of the business and residential sections has changed considerably during the last few years. Many expensive homes have been constructed and new store-fronts have modernized main street. Two new buildings in the business district which are evidences of an important activity in the town are the office building and the warehouse of the Rural Electrification Administration. The establishment of the Eastern Nebraska Public Power District, one of the first rural electricity groups in the country, in Syracuse,

⁶ibid.

culminated the importance of the town as an agricultural center. It began providing power in May, 1937, and today it serves approximately ninety-three percent of the rural population in seven counties.⁷

Syracuse has progressed to the point of having a small airfield west of the town for several private planes, and the town has also looked forward to the complete reconstruction of state highways two and fifty which serve not only as highways to larger cities, but as roads to carry the farm trade into Syracuse.

Another addition to the town has been sixty-four blocks of street paving since 1950, making a total of eighty-five blocks of paving within the city limits.

Although the number of people living in Syracuse has not increased a great deal in recent years, the citizens have continually shown their interest in the community. As the University of Nebraska Community Project Committee has stated:

While Syracuse is rather typical of the agricultural towns that dot the eastern section of Nebraska and western Iowa, the level of economic activity here is considerably higher than in towns of its general classification.⁸

Syracuse has grown to be a very well-to-do farm community. Its attractive modern buildings are not indicative of the size of its population. Syracuse and its people are looking ahead.

⁷Omaha World Herald Magazine, June 19, 1955.

⁸The Nebraska Community Education Project: The Planning Period, January 1--September 1, 1955. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1955.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The pioneers who moved into the territory of Nebraska in the latter half of the nineteenth century founded many communities. The area most accessible to them was that along the Missouri River and thus the towns of Bellevue, Omaha, and Nebraska City quickly sprang up. A little farther inland from the Missouri, other communities developed, and one of these in southeastern Nebraska was Syracuse. On the gently rolling hills and fertile soil of Otoe County it came into being on a section of land set aside primarily for school purposes. With the opening of the Nebraska City-Fort Kearney Cutoff or Overland Trail, this area became more accessible and soon additional settlers joined the few already residing in the general area. Several of the settlers moved a house which had been donated to section sixteen to serve as a school. Land laws at the time generously permitted settlement on the school section, but little settlement occurred until the land was purchased by James Thorn. He in turn was instrumental in influencing the Midland Pacific Railroad to construct its new line through the section by giving the company sufficient land to do so.

The result was the establishment, in 1871, of a town around the railroad and the school. It was given a name which had been attached to several locations in the area--that is, Syracuse.

The railroad brought settlers, shipping, and great activity. Nursery Hill, on the old trail, lost its significance and soon its business houses were moved to Syracuse. The town was incorporated under the laws of the state in 1875. The settlers who came to the town brought churches, social organizations, and additional schools to the prairie community, and due to its advantageous location it appeared Syracuse had the prospect of limitless growth. Times were to change, however, and the importance of Syracuse as a railroad center diminished. Unlike some communities in similar circumstances, the town of Syracuse did not die. Instead it recognized its true reason for existence--the soil on which it had been founded and the agricultural potential of it.

As the years passed, more and more agricultural programs for Otoe County were centered in Syracuse, and although it was not the county-seat, its activity and appearance gave that impression.

A history of a town has little significance to anyone except its residents unless it may be used as a representative

history of an area. Syracuse has become such a representative for southeastern Nebraska, and as a small agricultural town it has testified to the struggles and successes necessarily endured to become an established community on the Nebraska prairie.

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APPENDIX



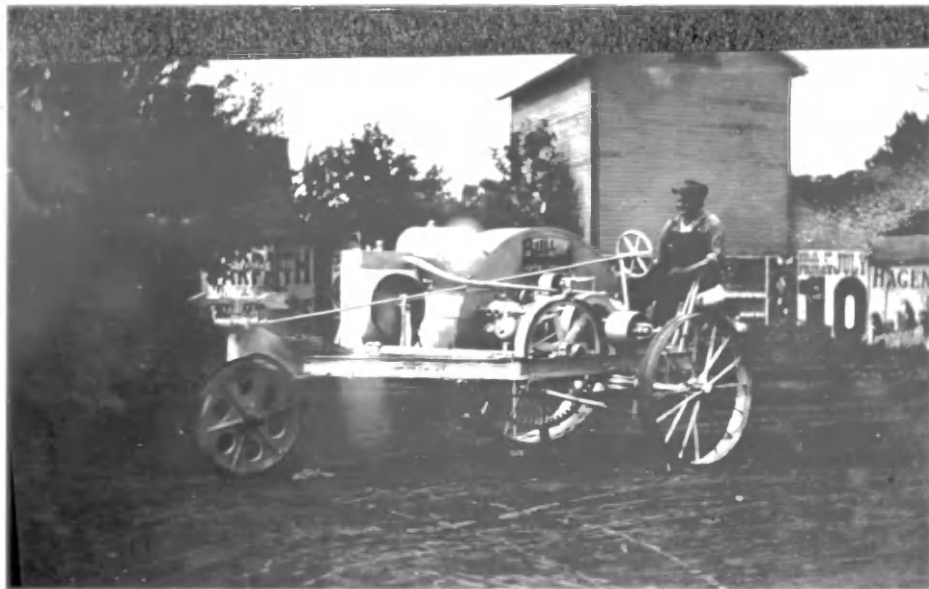
THE SITE OF NURSERY HILL



THE OLD MILL NEAR SYRACUSE



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