

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable". For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

**1. Name of Property**

Historic name Nelson Farm  
Other names/site number Nelson-Williams Farm; MK00-116

**2. Location**

Street & number 1139 M Road Not for publication  [X]  
City or town Central City Vicinity  [ ]  
State Nebraska Code NE County Merrick Code 121 Zip code 68826

**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

/s/ Michael J. Smith  
Signature of certifying official

July 14, 2009  
Date

Director, Nebraska State Historical Society  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

**4. National Park Service Certification**

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register. \_\_\_\_\_
- see continuation sheet. \_\_\_\_\_
- determined eligible for the National Register. \_\_\_\_\_
- see continuation sheet. \_\_\_\_\_
- determined not eligible for the National Register. \_\_\_\_\_
- removed from the National Register. \_\_\_\_\_
- other, (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

**Nelson Farm**

Name of Property

**Merrick County, Nebraska**

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5. Classification

**Ownership of Property**

(Check as many boxes as apply)

Private

Public-local

Public-state

Public-federal

**Category of Property**

(Check only one box)

Building(s)

District

Site

Structure

Object

**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing

Noncontributing

5

2

Buildings

2

0

Sites

2

9

Structures

0

0

Objects

9

10

Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

0

6. Function or Use

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC: Single Dwelling

AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTANCE: Animal Facility

AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTANCE: Agricultural

Outbuilding

AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTANCE: Storage

AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTANCE: Agricultural Field

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC: Single Dwelling

AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTANCE: Animal Facility

AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTANCE: Agricultural

Outbuilding

AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTANCE: Storage

AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTANCE: Agricultural

Field

7. Description

**Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE VICTORIAN: Folk Victorian

AMERICAN MOVEMENTS: Bungalow / Craftsman

OTHER: Rural Vernacular

**Materials**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Foundation Poured Concrete; Limestone

Walls Wood

Roof Asphalt; Steel; Wood

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Nelson Farm**

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**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** Removed from its original location.
- C** A birthplace or a grave.
- D** A cemetery.
- E** A reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** A commemorative property.
- G** Less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

AGRICULTURE

SETTELMENT

**Period of Significance**

1887 - 1959

**Significant Dates**

1887

1916

1935

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

**Architect/Builder**

John M. Nelson - Builder

Herman Nelson - Builder

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- Preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- Previously listed in the National Register
- Previously determined eligible by the National Register
- Designated a National Historic Landmark
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location for additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other
- Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_

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**10. Geographical Data (RESTRICTED INFORMATION)****Acreage of property** 80 Acres

UTM References (place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet).

	<b>Zone</b>	<b>Easting</b>	<b>Northing</b>		<b>Zone</b>	<b>Easting</b>	<b>Northing</b>
<b>1.</b>	14	576239	4551323	<b>3.</b>	14	576639	4550516
<b>2.</b>	14	576639	4551323	<b>4.</b>	14	576239	4550516

[ ] See continuation sheet

**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Jessie Nunn, National Register Coordinator / Tim Williams, Property Owner  
 organization Nebraska State Historical Society date 4/29/2009  
 street & number 1500 R ST telephone 402-471-4775  
 city or town Lincoln state NE zip code 68501

**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets****Maps**A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.**Photographs**Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.**Additional items**

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

**Property Owner**

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name/title James and Jeanette Williams; Tim Williams  
 street & number 1139 M Road telephone 308-0938  
 city or town Central City state NE zip code 68826

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determined eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, (15 USC 470 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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**Nelson Farm**

Name of Property

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The historic Nelson Farm includes the north eighty acres of the original John Magnus Nelson homestead in rural Merrick County (2000 pop. 8,205), and is located approximately two miles due east of the county seat, Central City. The farm contains five contributing buildings, two contributing structures and two contributing sites. Ten non-contributing resources are located within the farmstead; however, eight of these are 1960s-1970s era pre-fabricated metal grain bins that function more as one unit than as individual structures. In addition, a number of small scale features also contribute to the historic feeling and association of the Nelson Farm. The nominated property is the historic core and center of operations for a family farm that currently includes approximately 400 acres.

Merrick County is in Nebraska's Loess Hills region, which consists of dissected plains topography.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, the Nelson Farm is located approximately four miles northwest of the Platte River along Silver Creek, in an area characterized by flat, fertile lands well suited for the production of agricultural crops and livestock. High water tables have historically provided easy access to water, and Merrick County has one of the highest concentrations of wells in the state.<sup>2</sup>

#### General Description

The historic Nelson Farm consists of the entire northern eighty acres of John M. Nelson's original homestead.<sup>3</sup> The farmstead is roughly centered within the southern forty acres of this land. An unpaved drive of approximately one-thousand feet leads directly from the east-west section road to the residential cluster of the farmstead. The drive divides the 20 acres south of the farmstead in half, with grass pasture for cattle grazing to the west and a hay meadow to the east.

The farmstead itself takes up roughly six acres on a rectangular site that is longest on the east-west axis. It is bounded on the north by a windbreak of mature trees, on the west by the remnants of a windbreak and by agricultural fields for pasture and crop production on the south and east. The eastern one-third of the farmstead makes up a residential cluster and includes the 1887 Farmhouse and 1935 Bungalow Farmhouse. Mature deciduous trees planted in front of both houses add to the residential feeling. The remainder of the farmstead makes up an agricultural or working cluster related to livestock care, as well as machine and crop storage. This cluster contains the large barn, the machine shed (former granary), metal "Quonset" shed, concrete and metal silos, feed and water tanks, windmill, and small scale features. A well-established system of roads and paths traces historic circulation patterns around the farmstead. The main road divides the residential and agricultural clusters, while secondary routes lead to garages, curl around agricultural buildings and enter associated agricultural fields.

Associated agricultural fields dedicated to the cultivation of row crops make up the rest of the Nelson Farm. An elongated field with a width identical to that of the farmstead is located immediately to east. It contains approximately five acres and is bounded on the west by Silver Creek, although only the eastern half is located within the boundaries of the historic Nelson Farm. A large continuous field dominates the entire northern forty acres of the Nelson Farm. Like the smaller field, this field also extends beyond the borders of the original homestead into lands later purchased by the Nelson family.

<sup>1</sup> Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office, "Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey Manual: Topical Listing," Lincoln, NE, 1990, 3.

<sup>2</sup> University of Nebraska-Lincoln, "Virtual Nebraska...Our Towns: Central City—Merrick County." Accessed online, 27 April 2009.

<sup>3</sup> The exact location of this property is restricted. It is described in Section 10, and is accessible with permission.

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**Individual Descriptions**

1887 House (Contributing Building)

Constructed by John M. Nelson in 1887, this house is a variation on the Ell house (L-shaped), possibly the most common house-type found on farms of this vintage in the Midwest.<sup>4</sup> The two story house is clad in clapboard and sits on a limestone block foundation. On the south-facing façade, the projecting west wing has a steep-pitched gable front. The east wing is recessed with an eave front punctuated by a large intersecting gable dormer in the center. This wing also has a one-story, hip-roofed porch that was enclosed and converted into an entrance. Decorative features are extremely limited and always simple. Wood pilasters with flat capitals are at the corners of the original house support a basic freeze, and all remaining original windows are also embellished with a simple decorative crown.

When considering its age and continuous use, the house retains a surprising amount of integrity. Small, one-story, hip-roofed additions constructed during the period of significance are located on the rear and east elevations of the house. Alterations which took place after 1959 include the installation of corrugated metal on the roof and the replacement of some windows. A large, stationary picture window flanked by 1-over-1 double hung units has also been inserted on the first story of the gable-fronted west wing. However, the roofline of the 1887 house successfully echoes the complex and asymmetrical Gothic and Victorian aesthetics of period. On the other hand, decorative features are more classical in nature. Overall, this house is representative of a typical vernacular farmhouse in its relative simplicity coupled with an earnest attempt to emulate those styles popular in more established and "civilized" parts of the United States.

Circa 1935 House (Contributing Building)

This vernacular interpretation of the Bungalow style was constructed by Herman Nelson around 1935, in response (or anticipation) to the marriage of his son, Ivan, to Elizabeth Niemoth. His construction of the barn (see below) and this house both developed and firmly established his skills as a builder. This south-facing, one-story house is covered with clapboard siding and sits on a raised concrete foundation punctured by basement windows. The gable roof with an overhanging eave supported by exposed beams and rafters is a hallmark of the Bungalow Style, although this house lacks the decorative brackets found on more high-style varieties. The main entrance is reached by a concrete stairway and stoop leading to an enclosed, gable-roofed porch, which covers half the south façade. Paired 3-over-1 light windows, a type common to Bungalow houses, are found on all three exterior walls of the porch. A single 3-over-1 light window is located on the façade opposite the porch and a small three light awning window in the gable end allows ventilation for the attic space.

The long side elevations are very similar to each other, with the notable exception of a full bay window found near the center of the west elevation. Bay windows are another common feature of the Bungalow style; however, on this vernacular interpretation the bay is simply located under the main roof structure instead of having its own gable or shed roof. The rear of the 1935 house is dominated by a two-car garage entered on the west side which was added during the period of significance. The gable roofline of the garage is below than that of the house, but it too has exposed rafters. An enclosed breezeway with an entrance on the west elevation connects the house and garage. A red brick chimney rises from near the center of the house at the ridge of the roof. Outside of a few replacement windows, this house retains excellent historic integrity.

Barn (Contributing)

The large frame barn constructed during the winter of 1916 by Herman Nelson is the most prominent structure on the

<sup>4</sup> The house would be classified as a Type 4 in Peterson's classification system. *Home in the Heartland: Balloon Frame Farmhouses of the Upper Midwest, 1850-1920*, Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press (1992), 96.

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Nelson Farm. It has a simple rectangular footprint and is approximately 84 feet long (north and south elevations) and 64 feet wide on the front and rear elevations. At an approximate height of 40 feet, the Nelson Farm's barn is one of the tallest structures in Merrick County. In 2007 the Nelson family used 135 gallons to repaint the barn a traditional red, a quantity suggestive of both its size and the amount of wood used for its construction. The barn is clad in countless horizontal boards, and contains a large hay loft above a main floor used to shelter and work livestock. Barn construction was complicated, but pattern books such as *Farm Buildings with Plans and Descriptions* published by a Chicago firm in 1917 were widely available to assist the builder.<sup>5</sup>

The massive gambrel roof replete with two original metal ridge ventilators is the barn's most noticeable feature. Both ends of the barn have a nearly symmetrical arrangement of openings, with four small windows under the roofline providing light in the hay loft. Two large ventilation openings are located in the middle of wall lighting the ground level. On the west end swinging double doors that lead to a drive-through alley in the barn are flanked by four small windows. A pulley system and hopper door used to load hay into the loft are located in the gambrel end on the east elevation. Two single man doors are located on the east end, and one on the southern corner of the west end. The side elevations are much shorter due to the gambrel roof, and only have openings on the main level. Six windows and a door entering a walking alley at the east end of the barn are found on the north side, and five windows and two man doors are arranged along the south side.

Door openings suggest the barn's interior arrangement around a "T" formation of alleys at the main level. A wide east-west driving alley meets a much narrower walking alley near the west end of the barn. There the wide alley narrows considerably and exits out a man door at the east end. With a gate situated at the "T" junction, the driving alley serves as a "catch pen" that also separates the cattle pen from the hog pen. Two small storage rooms are located just west of the hog pen. The area east of the walking alley is dedicated to the milking parlor and milk room, with a corn feeding area located in the northeast corner of the barn. Most interior pens and rooms are creating with impressive 8x8 inch poles and beams and wide, horizontally-arranged rough-hewn boards. The hay loft is a large open space with a wood floor. It is in the loft that the impressive wood truss system supporting the roof is on display.

Alterations to the barn are minimal. Windows were recently replaced with units similar to the originals. The interior has also undergone minor alterations over the years as the Nelson farm has evolved and diversified. In the 1950s horse stalls were taken out and to make way for an expanded milking parlor. Forty years later, the size of the milking parlor was decreased to create room for hog farrowing crates. Overall the barn retains excellent historic integrity.

Concrete Silo (Contributing Structure)

Nearly as tall as the barn, this round concrete structure was added to the Nelson Farm in the late 1940s to store corn and other grains. In essence, it replaced the original granary, thereby allowing for its conversion into a machine shed (See Below). The silo was built by stacking identical pre-cast interlocking concrete staves, which creates the structure's ringed appearance. A metal chute protecting the elevator mechanism runs from the top of the silo to a small rectangular opening located near the bottom of the structure. Concrete stave silos were popular beginning in the 1910s through the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> Despite the loss of its signature convex roof, this structure maintains good integrity and is vital to understanding the development of the Nelson Farm.

<sup>5</sup> Shearer, Herbert A., *Farm Buildings with Plans and Descriptions*, Chicago: Frederick J. Drake & Co., 1917.

<sup>6</sup> Beddle, Peggy Lee. "Silos: An Agricultural Success Story," in *Giving Barns New Life*, no. 4. Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin and The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, (2001), 14.

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Machine Shed (Contributing Building)

Originally a granary for the storage of ear corn, this building was converted into a machine shed in the mid-1940s. The granary was mostly likely constructed during the same period as the barn. The steeply-pitched roof and metal patching where the elevator was removed suggest its former use. In addition to the removal of the elevator, the south wall was removed during the conversion. The structural posts of the building create four bays for machine storage. The building is clad in corrugated metal sheeting; however, the roof is still covered with original wood shingles. The salt-box addition on the north-side of the building appears in a 1942 aerial photograph and, therefore, predates the conversation.

Alterations to this building occurred during the period of significance, and should be considered significant in themselves. They indicate an increasing mechanization at the Nelson Farm. At the same time grain storage was becoming less of a concern due to the increasing availability and standardization of silos. Ironically, the machine shed has become somewhat obsolete as farm machinery continues to increase in size. Today, the machine shed stores antiques, such as a 1929 "D" John Deer tractor and a 1930s era thresher, and a min-till cultivator.

Metal Shed (Contributing Building)

This "Quonset-style" shed is a pre-fabricated, corrugated metal building located immediately north of the Machine Shed. Its curved roof is the hallmark of this style of utility building, which became popular after it was developed by the military in World War II. It was added to the Nelson Farm in the early 1950s to provide additional storage for agricultural equipment and miscellany. The building is constructed with corrugated metal sheets attached to a metal frame. Long metal sheets curve over the "ridge" of the building. The tracking for the large sliding metal door on the east façade extends beyond the exterior walls of the Metal Shed. When contrasted with the labor-intensive Barn and Machine Shed, this building strongly illustrates the evolution of utility buildings on farms across Nebraska after World War II. Unfortunately, the company responsible for the fabrication of the Metal Shed is unknown.

Windmill (Contributing Structure)

The 702 model Aermotor Windmill was placed immediately east of the barn in the 1950s to pump water for the livestock. The windmill sits atop a steel, four post tower of approximately 40 feet in height. The tower is divided horizontally into segments and strengthened by crossing diagonal supports. The steel wheel of the windmill measures approximately 8 feet in diameter. "The Aerometer. Chicago" can still clearly be read on the windmill's vane, indicating it was manufactured before 1958 when Aermotor left Chicago. Although the windmill is no longer in use, it maintains good integrity and contributes to the agricultural character of the Nelson Farm.

Garage (Non-Contributing Building)

The garage is a one-story, wood-frame building with a pyramidal-hipped roof and a sliding double door on the south façade. Once more closely associated with the 1887 Farmhouse, the garage was moved to its present location. Unfortunately, the condition of the garage has severely deteriorated over the years. Due to the move and the poor condition of the garage, it can no longer contribute to the historic Nelson Farm. However, the age and location of the garage within the farmstead mean it only minimally detracts from the overall integrity of the Nelson Farm.

Chicken Coop (Non-Contributing Building)

This small frame building was moved from its original location and converted to a hog farrowing house. It has since been moved to the far eastern edge of the farmstead where it sits between rows of trees in the Windbreak. While poultry was once an important component of the Nelson Farm and chicken coops were often moved, this building has lost integrity of design due to a post-1959 conversion. Therefore, it no longer contributes to the significance of the historic Nelson Farm. Its small size and secluded location, however, make it relatively non-intrusive.

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Metal Grain Bins (Non-Contributing Structures)

Located immediately west of the Metal "Quonset" Shed is a group of eight cylindrical metal grain bins that were added to the farm after its period of historical significance. Each sits on its own on a poured concrete foundation and has a diameter of approximately twenty feet. Each is constructed of sheet metal placed over a metal frame and capped by a cone-shaped metal roof with a central opening for loading and removing grain. The bins are arranged linearly in two rows, with three to the south and five to the north. Seven of the bins are nearly identical in height, while the eighth, and westernmost, bin is taller than the others. Although these bins negatively impact the contributing and non-contributing ratio of the Nelson Farm, their effect on overall integrity is limited. Their close grouping makes them appear as single unit, and they do not detract from the agricultural character of the farm. In addition, their location at the farmstead's edge means that they do not interrupt the spatial relationships and historic feeling of the primary contributing resources of the Nelson Farm.

Windbreak (Contributing Site)

The windbreak was likely started by John M. Nelson after he selected the site for his farmstead in an effort to protect it from northern winds. It has a linear form that extends approximately 900 feet east from the western edge of the Nelson Farm and creates the northern boundary of the farmstead. Mature deciduous trees make up the southern row of trees, while mature coniferous trees make up the second row. The windbreak gains an additional row of trees behind the farmhouses, which creates additional protection. The windbreak divides the farm in half, with the south half dedicated to domestic use and livestock production and the north half used exclusively for crop production. The windbreak maintains good integrity and is essential to understanding the setting and spatial organization of the Nelson Farm.

Agricultural Fields (Contributing Site)

Agricultural fields surround the farmstead to the north, south and east. Fields to the south of the farmstead include a ten acre pasture for cattle and a ten acre hay meadow, and therefore, are directly related to livestock. Fields to the east (five acres) and north (forty acres) are used for the production of row crops, most commonly corn. Crops produced in these fields, as well as in the surrounding, non-historic fields, are used to feed livestock on the Nelson farm, with any access product being sold on the market. The fields retain their integrity as open space dedicated to agricultural production, and contribute heavily to the setting of the Nelson Farm.

Small Scale Features

Small scale features and secondary structures complete the farmstead area. For instance, a concrete line feed bunk and concrete water tanks located near the barn contribute to a continued association with livestock production. Finally, original paved walks are found in front of and between the farmhouses. In addition to the mature deciduous trees planted in front of the farmhouses, these walks create a sense of domestic space in the middle of what was once unbroken prairie.

**Overall Integrity**

Typically, the historic integrity of farms can be lost in three ways: (1) The loss of character-defining buildings, landscape features and spatial relationships leading to the loss of design, materials, workmanship and setting; (2) The presence of modern intrusions on or near the farm leading to a loss of historic setting, feeling and association; (3) The abandonment of farms which leads to a loss of integrity through severe deterioration. Fortunately, the Nelson Farm does not fall into any of these categories. As a historic *and* contemporary working landscape, the Nelson Farm has adapted to changes in agricultural technologies and methods of production since the end of its historical significance in 1959, without sustaining the loss of spatial relationships, primary buildings or landscape features. Most contributing resources retain their original design, materials and workmanship, or have alterations that are significant in themselves. Just as significantly, no large scale modern buildings are present to confuse associations with historic agricultural practices or to detract from the overall

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historic feeling of the Nelson Farm. Finally, the farmstead's central location within the Nelson Farm successfully creates a historic rural setting. This relatively high level of integrity allows the Nelson Farm to convey its significance to the historic settlement and development of rural Merrick County.

The integrity of the Nelson Farmstead also compares favorably to the other potentially eligible farmsteads in the surrounding area. Of the approximately 200 farms that once existed in The Lone Tree Township (approximately 65 sections), only nineteen farmsteads were surveyed during a 1992 reconnaissance-level Nebraska Historic Building Survey of Merrick County. Half of these farms were listed as either abandoned or as containing only a house or barn that had historic integrity. Two of the remaining farmsteads do appear to retain integrity equal to or surpassing the Nelson Farm, however, they are located in sections adjacent to Central City and contain houses with many high-style elements not typical to the majority of Merrick County farms.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Kay, John and Kathleen Fimple. *NeHBS Reconnaissance Survey: Final Report of Merrick County, Nebraska, Save American's Heritage*, n.l., 1992 and the NeHBS database and site card collection at the Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office.

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The Nelson Farm is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A in the areas of settlement and agriculture as a locally significant example of a typical farmstead in Merrick County, Nebraska. It displays three distinguishable phases of development that occurred during the period of significance, 1887-1959. Significant dates (1887, 1916 and 1935) mark the construction of important buildings and the start or close of a development phase. The Nelson Farm also serves as a representative example of general diversified farming practices in rural Merrick County, located within Nebraska's Loess Hills region. As a working landscape that is still very much in use, the farm readily displays a slow evolution in how five generations of the Nelson family have lived and worked since John M. Nelson built the first permanent farmhouse in 1887.

### History and Settlement

Whether obtained through "proving-up" under the Homestead Act of 1862 or purchasing by the acre, the acquisition of agricultural land has been a life-changing event for countless families and individuals throughout American History. On a larger scale, the settlement and continued development of United States east of the Mississippi is an undeniably significant pattern in American history. Decisions made by John M. Nelson and his decedents about how to arrange their Merrick County farm offer insight into rural settlement patterns. Finally the continuing development of the Nelson Farm confirms that "rural settlement" did not end with a successful homestead claim for a quarter-section or a bill of sale for the first eighty acres; that was just the beginning.

At the age of twenty-two, John Magnus Nelson immigrated to the United States from Asa Smaland, Sweden. After living in Illinois for six years, where he married Ina Peterson, he homesteaded on one-hundred and sixty acres just west of Central City, Nebraska in 1879.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the typical quarter section, the Nelson M. Nelson homestead included one eighty acre parcel and a second 80 acre parcel directly south in another section.<sup>9</sup> Like many early Nebraska settlers, he built a sod house where he and his family lived and worked. After seven years in what must have been cramped and relatively primitive conditions, the Nelson family decided to abandon their sod house for something more permanent.

### Building A Permanent Settlement (1887-1916)

Why the family chose to abandon the southern eighty acres in addition to the sod house is intriguing. Silver Creek meandered through this parcel, likely complicating the family's early agricultural attempts to the extent that the northern parcel of land became more appealing as a center for operations. The creek may also explain the elongated nature of the homestead in the first place. Other 160 acre parcels along creek drainages are also arranged in this fashion in Merrick County.<sup>10</sup> Even today, satellite images and aerial photographs indicate that the creek bottoms have either withstood the plow or been significantly modified.

Once across the section line, locating the farmstead was the next monumental decision facing John and Inga Nelson. In the end, John built his new house in the approximate center of the southern 40 acres of northern 80 acres. This was most likely a rational decision that would be both vindicated and dismissed by farming guides over the next several years. Both view points are present in the *Successful Farming*, a 1916 publication that explains, "The central location economizes time getting to and from the field," but then goes to say, "From the standpoint of the home, the farmstead should be near

<sup>8</sup> *Merrick County History*, 303.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, Tim. Telephone Conversation, April 13, 2009. This is also partially confirmed in the *Atlas and Plat Book of Merrick County, Nebraska* published by the Merrick County Non-Pareil in 1921, see page 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Atlas and Plat Book of Merrick County*, 23.

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the public road.”<sup>11</sup> Nelson may have found a compromise between practicality and convenience by centering his farmstead in the “front” forty acres.

Farmstead size was another important decision. *Successful Farming* suggested that four to six acres was sufficient for a farmstead, “on a diversified grain and stock farm of 160 acres.”<sup>12</sup> At approximately six acres, the Nelson Farmstead fits within this size range. While *Successful Farming* was not available to John M. Nelson in 1887, several publications would have been including Swedish periodicals and the Swedish translations of popular guidebooks like *The Farmer’s Almanac*.<sup>13</sup> He could also draw on ethnic tradition, his experiences in Illinois and the advice of his neighbors. By the time his son Herman was taking on a decision-making role of the Nelson Farm, this situation was changing as “scientific farming” began to take hold.<sup>14</sup> His acceptance and implementation of new farming practices and his skill as a carpenter and builder greatly impacted the Nelson Farm. Herman Nelson is justly described as both a “good farmer” and a “progressive farmer” by his decedents.

The first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century were generally considered good years for Nebraska’s farmers, and the Nelsons were able to make improvements to their farm during this period. In general, this involved replacing temporary structures with the more permanent buildings that characterize the farm today. Like most agricultural properties, the buildings on the Nelson Farm are not arranged haphazardly. While constructing the Barn and the granary (now the Machine Shed), Herman Nelson ensured that the spatial arrangements of the farm would function well by creating sight lines. As Tim Williams, the great-great-grandson of John M. Nelson, explains,

...When describing the lay out of the farm we believe it is important to note that the buildings lay in a cross formation. The house, granary [machine shed], and bins are in a strait line with the barn to the south of the line. This type of formation allows the barn to be seen from anywhere on the farm, making it the pinnacle of the farm...The formation [was set up to allow] for two “working triangles.” The first triangle consisted of the house granary, and barn. The second triangle was the barn, granary, and bins. With this formation, many eyes could be kept on the livestock.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast with many of the other historic farms in Nebraska listed in the National Register, the Nelson Farm illustrates the high level of acculturation that immigrants like John M. Nelson were able to achieve in just a short period. In the fourteen years between leaving Sweden and establishing his permanent farmstead in Merrick County, Nelson had largely abandoned ethnic traditions that guided farm organization in his native country. His son, Herman Nelson, was able to build on his father’s initial decisions by adhering to progressive and “scientific” farming practices to create a farm very much in keeping with the popular agricultural guidebooks of the day.

Expansion and Hard Times (1917-1934)

By 1921, John M. Nelson had managed to acquire more land surrounding his original 160 acres, tripling the farm’s size to 480 acres.<sup>16</sup> In addition, his daughter and son-in-law, John L. and Josephine Nelson, purchased a farm in an adjoining

<sup>11</sup> *Successful Farming: A Ready Reference*, ed. Frank D. Gardner, Philadelphia, PA: John C. Winston Co. (1916), 844.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 845.

<sup>13</sup> John M. Nelson was listed as a Swedish-speaking naturalized citizen in the 1930 Federal Census, just two years before his death.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, Greg. “Historic Context Report: Loess Hills Livestock, General Farming, and Cash Grain,” Lincoln, NE: Nebraska SHPO (1994), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, Tim. “The Nelson Farm,” Email Correspondence, April 13, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> “Parts of Prairie Creek, Chapman and Lone Tree,” *Atlas and Plat Book of Merrick County, Nebraska*. Central City, NE: Non Pareil, 1921; 23.

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section after their marriage in 1901 further expanding the family's land holdings and consolidating their resources.<sup>17</sup> These purchases were only possible when neighbors sold-off their land, deciding either to give up the rural life altogether or try again elsewhere. By acting on such opportunities, the Nelson family demonstrated the relative success of their agricultural enterprises and an ongoing commitment to their settlement in Merrick County.

Despite success and expansion, the Great Depression was obviously a difficult time on the Nelson Farm. In *History of Merrick County*, Ivan and Elizabeth Nelson, Herman's son and daughter-in-law, recall that "crops were scarce and it was hard to keep the milk cows and animals fed."<sup>18</sup> In fact, the expansion may have added to the families' hardships during the Depression. As profits soared during World War I, many farmers purchased land at inflated prices to further increase their profits only to find the agricultural markets drop dramatically by 1919.<sup>19</sup> Like most of Nebraska's farm families, the Nelsons entered the Great Depression of the 1930s already hurting. In this period of economic uncertainty, improvements to the farmstead and surrounding 80 acres were limited. During this phase of development, the historic Nelson Farm became the headquarters of operations for a larger farm that was increasingly subject to market fluctuations, as self-sufficiency gave way to global events.

Modernization (1935-1959)

Herman Nelson was not about to watch the family farm wither away due to drought and economic depression. By 1935 he had again turned to "progressive" farming practices. The crops needed water, and with the farm's proximity to the Platte River, irrigation seemed like a reasonable option. Without a system for ditch irrigation in place to deliver water to the farm, Herman Nelson opted for deep-well irrigation. This irrigation method had been practiced in Nebraska since the early 1900s; however, it finally gained widespread popularity in the drought conditions of the 1930s.<sup>20</sup> The Nelson Farm was one of the first to use deep-well irrigation in Merrick County. According to Ivan Nelson, irrigation had an immediate and positive effect on the crops, but some of the neighbors were skeptical. Tim Williams recalls one family story about a neighbor who told Herman, "You'll kill your corn with that cold water." After nearly 70 years of successful deep-well irrigation, Jim and Tim Williams converted the Nelson Farm to the central-pivot system in 2002.<sup>21</sup>

The construction of the family's third, and final, house on the Nelson farmstead around 1935 marked yet another sign of commitment to the farm. It also marked a significant change in how the family lived. For the first time in the farm's history, different generations of the Nelson family were able to live in separate residences. Herman again put his carpentry skills to work to construct this house in anticipation of his son's marriage to Elizabeth Niemoth on May 1, 1935. Upon completion, Ivan and Elizabeth took over the "old" house, while Ivan and Jessie Nelson moved into the new bungalow. In addition to marking a shift in familial living arrangements, this house also suggests a growing recognition of the concept of retirement. The bungalow is located on the eastern-most corner of the farmstead nestled in mature deciduous trees and out of the "working triangles" that Herman Nelson and his father had so carefully planned. In addition to the relative seclusion of the house, Herman was also able to skillfully execute a "modern" design for his retirement home similar to those popularized in mail-order catalogs since the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. and *History of Merrick County*, 303.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Historical Context Report: Loess Hills, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Miller, Greg. "Historic Context Report: Well Irrigation in Nebraska," Lincoln, NE: Nebraska SHPO (1993), 2.

<sup>21</sup> The well site is located approximately 640 feet west of the shelterbelt, and outside of the Nelson Farm historic district. Because it has lost integrity, it was not included within the district.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Schweitzer and Michael W. R. Davis. *America's Favorite Homes: Mail-Order Catalogues as a Guide to Popular Early 20<sup>th</sup> - Century Houses*, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press (1990), 154.

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Other improvements to the farmstead followed the 1935 Bungalow during this final period of historically significant development on the Nelson Farm. A cement silo was added approximately 30 feet north of the Barn in the 1940s. This structure allowed the conversion of the original granary into a machine shed, an event that illustrates the increasing importance of machinery in agricultural activities on the Nelson Farm. This mechanization also led to a decline in the need for horses, which in turn allowed for the removal of horse stalls in the barn and the expansion of the milking parlor. Other improvements added in the 1940s and 1950s include the addition of an Aerometer windmill and concrete water tanks in front of the barn, a concrete fence line feed bunk east of the barn and a pre-fabricated Metal Shed just north of the machine shed. The distance in workmanship, design and materials between the 1916 Barn and the early-1950s Metal Shed powerfully convey the evolution in agricultural buildings over just forty years. Later farmhouses and farm improvements are yet to be properly treated in Nebraska's historical contexts for agricultural properties, but they are certainly no less significant to an understanding of farm settlements than the earlier structures.

Very few changes have been made to the Nelson Farmstead since 1959, particularly when the property is viewed in its entirety. Perhaps the most significant change is the switch in irrigation methods from deep-well to the central pivot, a move that the family felt was necessary for the farm to remain competitive in today's market. From a cultural perspective, the fraternal passing of farm ownership from father to son also ended during the post-1959 period. Ivan Nelson's son chose to pursue commercial interests in Central City rather than stay on the farm. It was his daughter Jeanette and her husband, Jim Williams, who took over responsibility for the farm upon Ivan's retirement. Jim and Jeanette Williams currently live in the 1887 Farmhouse and manage the Nelson Farm with their son, Tim Williams.

### Agricultural Production

Located within the Loess Hills region of Nebraska, Merrick County sits along the bottomlands of the Platte River in an area noted for being "very productive."<sup>23</sup> Despite the county's potential as a bread basket, livestock production offered a much larger profit margin during the period of early settlement and farmers followed the money with investments in cattle and hogs. The early success of pioneering families in rural Merrick County can be attributed in part to the good soil and sufficient rainfall, which could be counted on until it unexpectedly did not fall in the mid-1890s.<sup>24</sup> This combination of loess soil and rain has allowed relatively small farms in Merrick County to grow sufficient crops to feed and finish their own livestock. This practice is described broadly as "general farming," or "diversified farming." The relative self-sufficiency of general farming contrasts with modern agricultural practices (large-scale farming and feedlots), as well as with other recognized agricultural traditions in Nebraska like Sandhills cattle ranching and cash-crop farming in the Central Plains region.<sup>25</sup>

The Nelson Farm was a family-operated general farm during its 1887 - 1959 period of significance, and continues to be operated as such today by a fourth- and fifth-generation of the Nelson family. As discussed above the farm's arrangement is locally significant as a physical record of local rural development patterns; however, it is also important to recognize the forces and activities driving this development. The Nelson Farm is a working landscape shaped by repeated agricultural activities typical of those that contributed heavily to the history and development of Merrick County.

### All Eyes on the Livestock

Domesticated animals have played a significant role at the Nelson Farm since its very inception. That family oral history

<sup>23</sup> Miller, Greg. "Historic Context Report: Loess Hills Livestock, General Farming, and Cash Grain," Lincoln, NE: Nebraska SHPO (1994), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>25</sup> Not to say that general farming is restricted to the Loess Hills in Nebraska. The Republican Valley and the Southeastern Region are also well-known historically for general farming, and general farming was typical on most early farms prior to specialization or industrialization.

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claims the windbreak was planted to provide shelter for the stock and not the people only begins to suggest their elevated role.<sup>26</sup> Horses, in particular, were important during the early stages of development on the Nelson Farm as they provided the "horse power" to plow fields, harvest crops and haul goods. The 1916 barn was constructed primarily to shelter horses and the hay they consumed, although its use shifted with the mechanization of the Nelson Farm.

Horses, however, were service animals and did not provide profit in the way that cattle and hogs did. It is difficult to say when John M. Nelson decided to add livestock to his farm, but it is likely he followed the pattern of other Loess Hills region farmers. During the decade when the Nelson family moved into their first permanent farm house (1880-1890), counties in this region averaged an increase of 20,000 head of cattle and 35,000 hogs.<sup>27</sup> The Nelson Farm was likely a part of this movement and it is clear by the early 1900s livestock production was in full swing. At that time the farm included a farrow to finish hog operation and a breeding herd of 30-40 cattle. This would also have include calves, depending on the season, and weaned "feeder" calves on their way to being finished for sale in Central City. Tim Williams recalls that "sale days" in town were particularly exciting for the family. No matter if the market was up or down, sale days represented the sole payoff for the hard work required in finishing livestock.

Like many general farming enterprises, poultry and dairy production supplemented the family's income. In the early 1900s this included eggs from laying hens housed in a chicken coop and milk from the farm's herd of 40-50 Holsteins. The chicken coop has been moved to the far western edge of the farmstead, but the milking parlor and milk room remains in the eastern portion of the barn. Poultry offered an opportunity for women to make a profit, and Ivan Nelson's wife, Elizabeth, raised chickens and sold hatchling eggs to Jensen's Hatchery during her earliest years on the Nelson Farm.<sup>28</sup>

Livestock production shifted with the market and with the interests of each new generation of the Nelson family. Ivan Nelson, for instance, developed an interest in cattle, and according to his wife "you would find him watching the 4-H shows instead of looking at the farm machinery displays."<sup>29</sup> Ivan's time as a 4-H leader further developed his knowledge of the livestock industry, while also allowing him to pass on this knowledge to youth outside his own family. It also brought community members to the Nelson Farm, and the barn in particular, to participate in 4-H meetings. While cattle have had a consistent place on the Nelson Farm, hog production seems to have fluctuated with the market during the period of significance, just as it did in the rest of the Loess Hills region.

#### Feeding the Herd

On the Nelson Farm crops were mainly used to feed livestock. As soon as John M. Nelson could manage to "bust" the prairie sod on his homestead he likely planted a crop, and more than likely that crop was corn. Although corn prices were low during the early development of Merrick County, this crop grew relatively easily in Nebraska and could be used to feed livestock—the real "cash cow" during this period.<sup>30</sup> As the agricultural sciences developed, alfalfa also became important in the Loess Hills region because it fed livestock and replenished the soil. On the Nelson Farm, the dry-land period eventually evolved into a mix of pasture, alfalfa and corn. The ten acre pasture located between the farmstead and the county road has avoided the plow, something that would be atypical in cash-crop regions of Nebraska.

Crop production continued through all phases of the Nelson Farm's historic development. As the farm grew from the original 160 acres to 480 acres by 1921, the family was obviously able to produce more crops, and in turn feed more

<sup>26</sup> Email Correspondence, 04/13/2009. All information on the Nelson Farms livestock and crops comes from this source unless otherwise specified.

<sup>27</sup> "Historic Context Report: Loess Hills Region," 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Merrick County History*, 303.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> "Historic Context Report: Loess Hills Region," 2.

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livestock. However, during hard times such as the Great Depression crop yields would have decreased significantly regardless of a farm's size. Once Herman Nelson introduced irrigation in 1935, however; the Nelson Farm had a more dependable source of water and a more dependable crop yield, despite the increased work that came with keeping the fields irrigated. On the farm's historic eighty acres, crops have traditionally been cultivated in the southeastern ten acres, the north forty acres, and the five acres immediately east of the farmstead. Each of these areas is currently part of larger fields that extend beyond the boundaries of the historic Nelson Farm. However, because they remain under cultivation and retain their integrity as open space, they still successfully convey their historic agricultural significance and association to the historic Nelson Farm.

A close analysis of the 1921 *Atlas and Platbook of Merrick County, Nebraska* helps establish the agricultural significance of the Nelson Farm. In that year John M. Nelson was the eighth largest land owner in the Lone Tree Township, a rural subdivision of approximately 65 sections, and had more land within that township than 96.5% (or 192) of his neighbors.<sup>31</sup> With his son-in-law, John L. Nelson and brother, Nels Nelson, located nearby, the Nelson family farmed more acres than any other family in the Lone Tree Township.<sup>32</sup> Just as significantly all three Nelson farms were owned free of mortgage by 1920, suggesting a measure of agricultural success.<sup>33</sup> Farm size is not the only indication of agricultural significance, but it does establish the Nelson Farm as one of Merrick County's leading agricultural enterprises during its period of historical significance. In particular, the large, well-preserved 1916 Barn stands as physical evidence this historical significance.

**Conclusion**

The Nelson Farm is significant at the local level under Criterion A in the area of settlement as a typical example of how farms in rural Merrick County, Nebraska were first established as permanent settlements and then continued to develop during the property's period of historical significance. Significant dates include the construction date of the first permanent farmhouse (1887), the completion of the barn in 1916, and the construction of the second farmhouse in 1935. Each significant date also marks the end or beginning of an identifiable phase of development. The Nelson Farm is also significant under Criterion A at the local level in the area of agriculture as a historic working landscape associated with general repeated agricultural activities typical to Nebraska's Loess Hills region and rural Merrick County. The Nelson Farm was also one of the largest in Merrick County's Lone Tree Township during its period of significance, further establishing its local significance. Farms that retain historic integrity and are still owned by original families are increasingly rare in Merrick County and in Nebraska. When coupled with the obvious significance of the family farm in Nebraska's history, those still able to convey their historic associations are valuable to our understanding of rural settlement patterns and agricultural production.

<sup>31</sup> Lone Tree Township is one of 10 townships in Merrick County. Data compiled from *Atlas and Plat Book of Merrick County Nebraska*, Central City, NE: Non Pareil (1921), 21, 23, 21, 33, 35. (See table in Section 10 "Supplementary Material").

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> 1920 Federal Census, "Lone Tree Township, Merrick County Nebraska," enumerated by Jos. A Hays, accessed online at [http://www.usgennet.org/usa/ne/county/merrick/olres/1920\\_merrick/lone\\_tree\\_twp.txt](http://www.usgennet.org/usa/ne/county/merrick/olres/1920_merrick/lone_tree_twp.txt), 05/28/2009.

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**RESTRICTED INFORMATION**

**Verbal Boundary Description:**

The E $\frac{1}{2}$  of the SW $\frac{1}{4}$  of Section 11, Township 13 North, Range 7 West, Merrick County, Nebraska.

**Boundary Justification:**

The boundaries include the Northern 80 acres of the original John M. Nelson homestead and include all resources that contribute to the Nelson Farm during its period of significance, 1887-1959. The southern 80 acres (the E $\frac{1}{2}$  of the NW $\frac{1}{4}$  of Section 14, T13N-R7W) of the homestead was not included because it is no longer owned by the Nelson family and it contains no historic resources that would contribute to this historic district. Because this is where the original sod house is located, it is possible that the southern 80 acres may be archeologically significant.

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**Photo 1 of 8:** Nelson Farm Farmstead; Aspect: West; Stacy Stupka-Burda, NSHS, 12-18-2007.

**Photo 2 of 8:** 1887 Farmhouse; Aspect: Southeast; Stacy Stupka-Burda, NSHS, 12-18-2007.

**Photo 3 of 8:** c. 1935 Bungalow Farmhouse; Aspect: Southwest; Stacy Stupka-Burda, NSHS, 12-18-2007.

**Photo 4 of 8:** Non-contributing Garage; Aspect: Southwest; Stacy Stupka-Burda, NSHS, 12-18-2007.

**Photo 5 of 8:** 1916 Barn and Aerometer Windmill; Aspect: West; Stacy Stupka-Burda, NSHS, 12-18-2007.

**Photo 6 of 8:** 1916 Barn and Cow Pasture; Aspect: North; Stacy Stupka-Burda, NSHS, 12-18-2007.

**Photo 7 of 8:** Machine Shed (Granary) and Grain Bins; Aspect: Southeast, Stacy Stupka-Burda, NSHS, 12-18-2007.

**Photo 8 of 8:** Metal Shed and Windbreak; Aspect: Southeast, Stacy Stupka-Burda, NSHS, 12-18-2007.

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**Farm Size Analysis of Lone Tree Township, 1921**

Acres (of 41,600)	Surname (of 169)	Surname (%)	Individuals (of 200)	Individuals (%)
Over 1000	3	1.8 %	1	.5%
900-1000	0	0	0	0
800-900	1	.6%	1	.5%
700-800	4	2.4%	0	0
600-700	2	1.2%	2	1%
500-600	2	1.2%	2	1%
400-500	5	3%	8	4%
300-400	12	7.1%	11	5.5 %
200-300	20	11.8%	20	10%
100-200	70	41.2%	85	42.5%
0-100	50	29.6%	70	35%

Source: Compiled by the author from *Atlas and Plat Book of Merrick County, Nebraska*. Central City, NE: Non Pareil, 1921.

Shaded rows indicate the range the Nelson Family and John M. Nelson fell within, respectively. In 1921 the Nelson Family (John M., John L., and Nels) owned 1280 acres in Lone Tree Township—more than any other family. Only the T. B. Hord Land & Cattle Company owned more at 4300 acres. Only seven individual land owners (3.5%) had obtained more land than John M. Nelson’s 480 acres in Lone Tree Township. Notice that a majority of farms fall within the rage of 100-200 acres, suggesting that most Lone Tree Township farmers had not purchased or rented land beyond their original homestead or timber claim of 160 acres.

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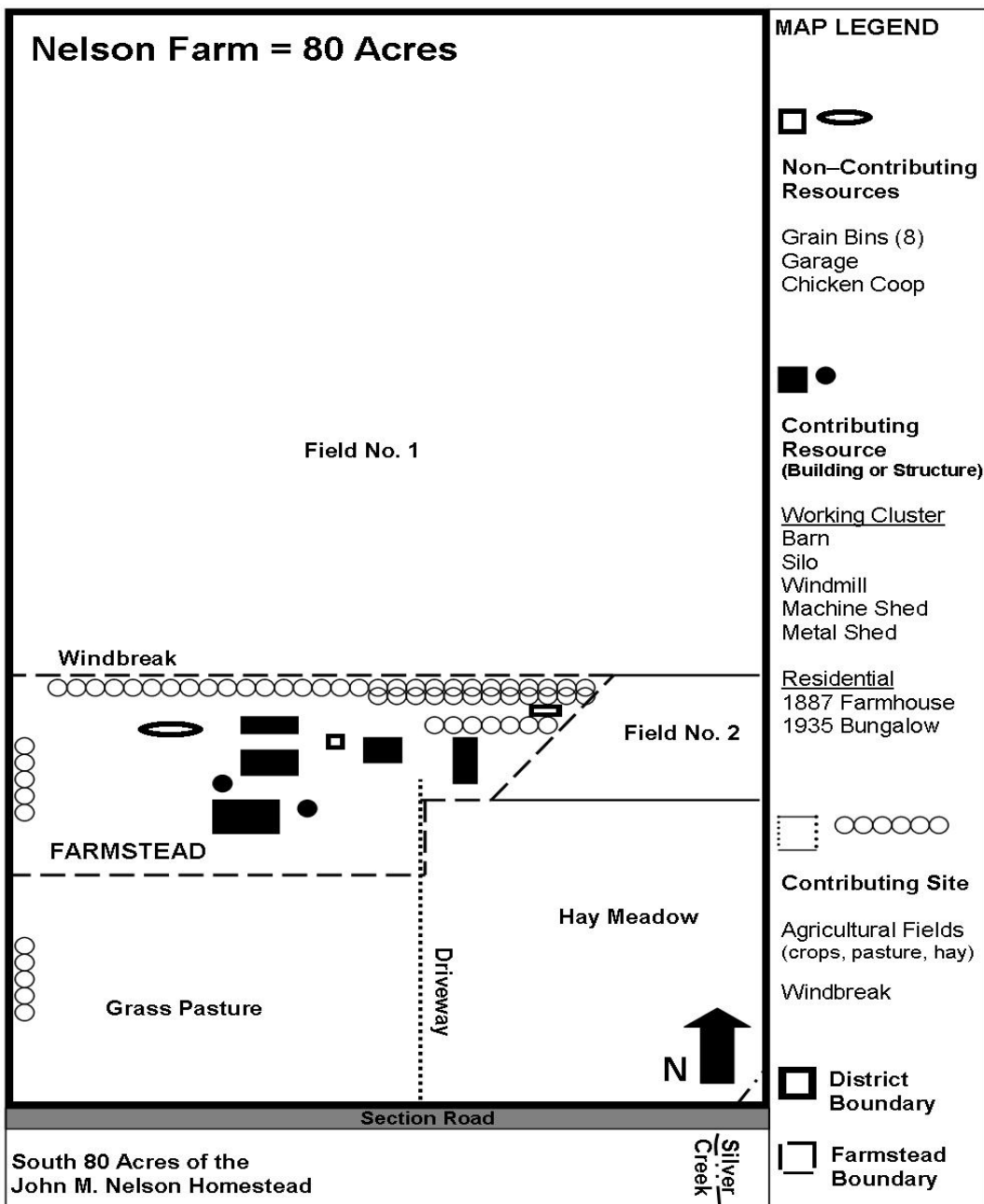
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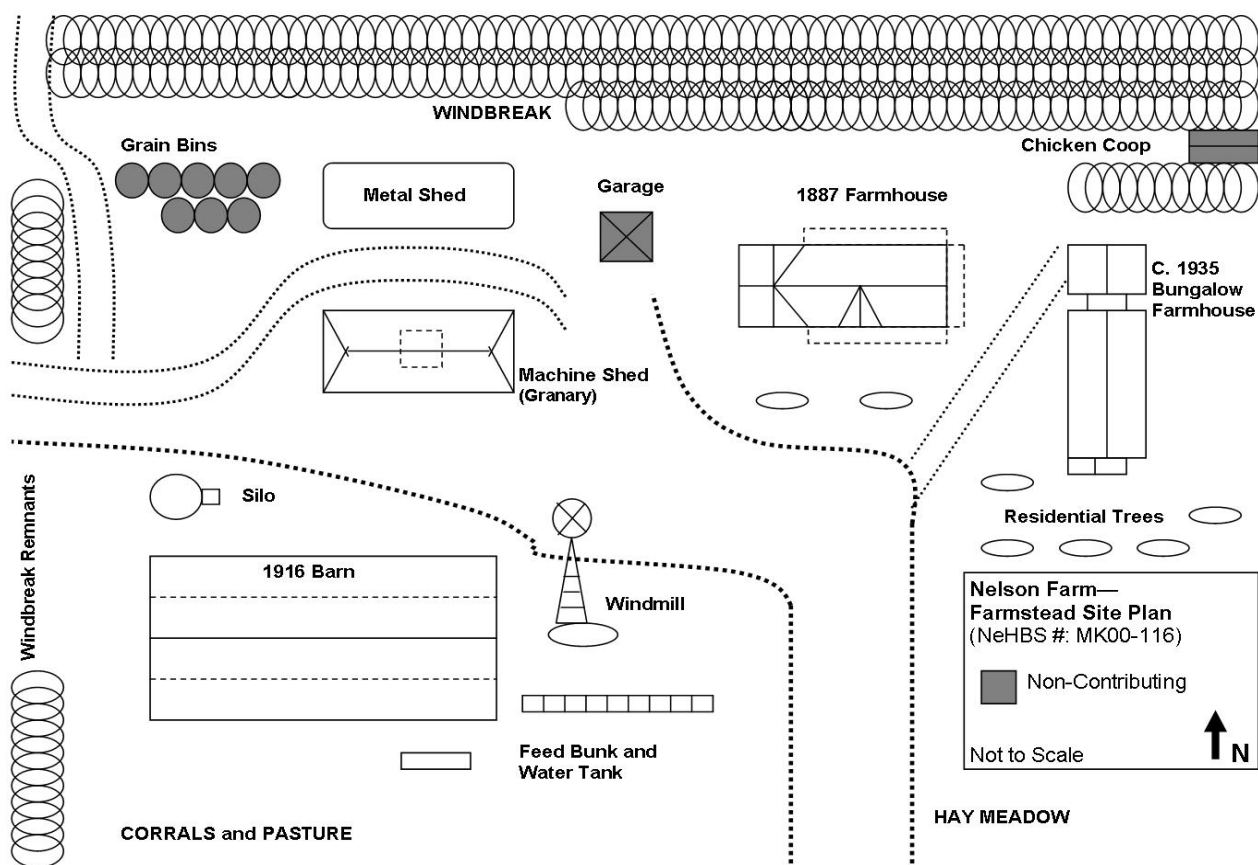




Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4



Photo 5



Photo 6



Photo 7



Photo 8