

## NEBRASKA FOLKLORE PAMPHLETS

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# FEBOLD FEBOLDSON

Number Five

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### Editor's Note:

The following pages represent excerpts from a manuscript written by Mr. Beath concerning Nebraska's foremost legendary character, Mr. Febold Feboldson. As Mr. Beath wishes to make further use of the material, only parts of his manuscript are reproduced here, and most of the introductory discussions of Febold's position as a regional character has been modified. A few tales have appeared in the Prairie Schooner, Southwest Review and Omaha World Herald to whose editors Mr. Beath makes acknowledgment for permission to reprint. Such passages have been omitted from this manuscript except as they are necessary to explain other portions or to completely portray the character and prowess of Febold.

## INTRODUCTION

I first became acquainted with Febold several years ago when tales of him were being printed by Wayne Carroll in the Independent of Gothenburg, Nebraska. After the demise of that publication, the stories were continued in the Times of the same city by Don Holmes. Year by year, more and more odds and ends of narrative material have fastened themselves to the Febold legend until today his name has become a by-word with people who know of his adventures. As far as I can ascertain, only one character has any historical authenticity. Bergstrom Stromsburg is probably Olof Bergstrom, a Swedish adventurer who led a party of immigrants to America and later disappeared.

In selecting stories for the present book, I have chosen only those tales which seemed to me typical of the life lived on the great plains. A complete collection of all the material would have perhaps been more honest and scientific, but it would, no doubt, have also bored the reader insufferably and falsified the essential character of the hero. The tales of Febold which I have selected represent the lighter, even humorous, side of the pioneer plainsman's serious and often tragic struggle to wrest a living from a stubborn land.

## REAL AMERICAN WEATHER

Somebody ought to do something about the weather. It's downright disgraceful that in most parts of the United States the climate is of foreign origin. Florida and California brazenly boast of Mediterranean sunshine. Winter resorts in the Adirondacks are only imitations of those in Switzerland. Even the famous blizzard of 1888 came from Siberia. In fact, there's only one place where you can get real, genuine, American weather, and that's on the great plains between the Mississippi and the Rockies.

In the early days, I guess, it was even more American than it is now. At least that's what Bergstrom Stromberg says. He's way past ninety and has seen some big weather in his day. Besides, he's heard all about the climate of the early days directly from his uncle, the famous Febold Feboldson. Febold was the first white settler west of the Mississippi, not counting Spaniards and Frenchmen who don't count anyway.

Take 1848 for instance. That was the year the Petrified Snow covered the plains all summer and held up the '48ers in their gold rush to California with the result that they became '49ers. At that time Febold was operating an ox train between San Francisco and Kansas City, because the snow prevented him from doing anything else.

Since Febold was the only plainsman able to make the trip that year, the '48ers appealed to him for help. His secret was to load up with sand from Death Valley, California. The sands of the desert never grow cold, nor did Febold and his oxen. This sand he sold to the gold rushers at fifty dollars a bushel, and they were glad to get it.

Then the '49ers began to swarm over the snow-covered plains in their prairie schooners. But before they reached the Rockies the jolting of the wagons scattered the sand and covered up every bit of the Petrified Snow. And that's the reason, according to Bergstrom Stromberg, that the prairies are so all fired hot in the summer.

Febold cursed himself twenty times a day for twenty years for selling the '48ers that sand. Then he spent the next twenty years trying various schemes to moderate the climate. He finally gave up in disgust and moved to California. Thus he set an example which all good Middlewesterners have followed ever since.

Or take the popcorn ball. There's a genuine American product. Most people think that someone invented the popcorn ball, but it's actually a product of the American weather. It invented itself, so to speak, on Bergstrom Stromsberg's ranch in the early days when Febold owned the place.

It was during that peculiar year known as the Year of the Striped Weather which came between the years of Big Rain and Great Heat.

This year the weather was both hot and rainy. There was a mile strip of scorching sunshine and then a mile strip of rain. It so happened that on Febold's farm there were both kinds of weather. The suns hone on his cornfield until the corn began to pop, while the rain washed the syrup out of his sugar cane.

Now the cane field was on a hill and the cornfield was in a valley. The syrup flowed down hill into the popped corn and rolled it into great balls. Bergstrom says some of them were hundreds of feet high and looked like big tennis balls from a distance. You never see any of them now, because the grass hoppers ate them all up in one day, July 12, 1874.

But the Great Fog, I suppose, was the biggest piece of American weather that ever hit the great plains. It followed the year of the Great Heat which killed off the Dirtyleg Indians and Paul Bunyan's Blue Ox. Near the end of that remarkable year, according to Bergstrom Stromberg, it began to rain and kept it up for the proverbial forty days and forty nights!

"But nary a drop of water hit the ground," said Bergstrom.

"Then what became of it?" I asked.

"Why, it turned into steam, of course. That there rain had no more chance of hittin' the ground than you have spittin' into a blast furnace."

This steam, as Bergstrom tells it, cooled enough to turn into fog. The whole country was fogbound. It was so thick that people had to go around in pairs, one to hold the fog apart while the other walked through it. The pioneer ranchers didn't need to water their stock. The cattle would simply drink the fog. It looked funny to see pigs with their noses up in the air rooting for fish and frogs. But the dirt farmers were as mad as the stockmen were happy. The sun couldn't shine through the fog and the seeds didn't know which way was up. So they grew downward.

Things were getting pretty serious. All the farmers had just about decided to go to California when Febold came to their rescue. He hit upon the idea of importing some English fog-cutters from London. But the English were so slow that Febold didn't get his fog-cutters until Thanksgiving, and then the fog had tuned to slush. He finally got to work and cut up the fog and slush into long strips which he laid along the roads so as not to spoil the fields. In course of time the dust covered up the roads and today you can hardly tell where Febold buried the Great Fog.

But many a rural mail carrier has cursed Febold and his English fog-cutters. For every spring, when it rains or thaws, that old Fog comes seeping up and makes rivers of mud out of all the country roads.

## II

### POST HOLES

If there was one thing which Febold wouldn't have around the place it was a mail order catalogue. And it was all because Eldad Johnson's grandfather tried to beat Febold's record for digging post holes. For Febold did and still does hold the record. But let's begin at the beginning.

When Febold first came west in the early days there was no need of posts or port holes, because there was no cattle or cultivated land. But as the frontier pushed across the Mississippi and onto

the plains the pioneers began to feel the need of fences. They were familiar with only the two kinds which they had used back east, the rail fence and the stone fence. Since there were no stones or trees on the plains the early settlers were stumped. And they would be sucking their thumbs yet if it hadn't been for Febold and his post holes.

Just about this time barbed wire was invented and Febold got bust and bought a few thousand miles of it. His problem now was to get posts to put the wire on. This he did by digging post holes in the fall and letting them freeze all winter. Just before the first spring thaw he would dig up the holes and varnish them. Then he would put them partially back in the ground and string the wire. In time the varnish would wear off and leave the bare poles standing. Eldad Johnson says that many of Febold's post holes are still standing on the old home place on the Dismal River.

But Herebold Farvardson, another one of Febold's nephews, takes exception to Eldad's account. Herebold says he has never seen a frozen post hole above ground. It seems that there were some on the old home place in the early days, but that Febold had to use them all up driving wells during the Year of the Great Heat. That was before the invention of the well-digger. Febold would drive a post hole into the ground and then another directly on top of the first one, and so on until he hit water. A hundred foot post hole makes a very fine well. Herebold says that if anybody doubts his story, just let him come up to the old home place some time and look at the well.

Luckily it really doesn't matter what became of the frozen post holes, because it wasn't long before the pioneers were shipping in real cedar posts so fast that the problem now was how to dig enough real post holes. It couldn't be done by hand and there was no machinery. Finally he recollected that the dismal sauger had a cousin, the happy auger, which had a tail which just suited his purpose.

The happy auger was a peculiar animal. It looked something like a kangaroo, that is, it stood on its hind legs and had a long heavy tail. This tail was the most peculiar part of this peculiar animal. It was shaped like a cork screw, an instrument very common in those pre-cellophane days. Every time the happy auger sat down it spun around on its tail and screwed it into the ground several feet. With this auger Febold used to dig enough post holes to keep hundreds of men busy cutting the posts. After the auger was seated with its tail screwed in the ground Febold would sneak up behind it and fire a six-shooter. The poor creature would jump twenty feet in the air and leave the prettiest post hole you ever saw.

Now Eldad Johnson's grandfather was one of those good-for-nothings who sit around all day looking through last year's mail order catalogue. As long as he was looking at the underwear section in the pink paper he was happy and harmless. But when he got to the firearms section in the green paper he began to get crazy ideas. One of his ideas he actually carried out and it made Febold pretty sore. What did that goofy grandfather of Eldad Johnson's do but order a machine gun from his favorite mail order house. When it came he loaded it up and hid it in the barn. Next morning he got up before Febold and sneaked the happy auger away and went out to beat Febold's record for digging post holes.

And that was the last of the happy auger. When the machine gun began to fire the poor creature

jumped at every shot. It jumped in circles, in triangles, squares, parallelograms, and swastikas. At every leap it left a perfect post hole. It finally jumped in a straight line directly for the Gulf of Mexico and hasn't been seen since. Old timers say that Febold caught Eldad Johnson's grandfather and made him fill up all the post holes.

But he didn't quite get all of them filled, because in 1861, he ran away and joined the Confederate Army. So if anyone today finds a post hole with no post it's likely to be one of those which Eldad Johnson's grandfather made with the happy auger and his mail order machine gun.

### III

#### ROCKS OF THE OX

The fate of Paul Bunyan's Blue Ox has long been a matter of controversy. The lumberman of the Northwest say Babe died of eating hot stove lids, thinking they were griddle cakes. Some people are so mean as to say Paul butchered Babe during the hard times of 1854 and sold his bones to the Smithsonian Institution as the skeleton of mastodon. These stories are obviously absurd. Bergstrom is the only person who knows what really became of Babe, because his Uncle Febold was involved in the affair.

Bergstrom always begins by telling you how Paul and Febold became acquainted. It was the year they were appointed by the Federal Government to re-establish the Kansas-Nebraska State Line. That was right after Paul had leveled Kansas. Before that time the State had been the most mountainous in the country. Then Paul, with the aid of Babe, had turned the mountains over and had found them flat on the bottom. But in levelling Kansas he had accidentally erased the northern boundary, so that no one could tell where Kansas ended and Nebraska began.

Since neither Paul nor Febold could read, write, figure, or operate surveying instruments, they were forced to rely on their wits. The giant logger made a mess of the job by trying to plow a furrow from Colorado to Missouri with his Blue Ox. The result is the channel of the Republican River which is nearly parallel to the State Line, but which is very crooked and too far north. Febold accused Paul of being drunk, but after it was explained that Kansas was a dry State at that time, he was almost forced to admit that a man cannot make a straight line without mechanical aids.

Almost but not quite. Febold would never admit that anything was impossible. He began to experiment with eagles and bumble bees. It took fifteen years, but he finally succeeded in breeding bees as large as eagles. He hitched one of his best specimens to a plow. This bee made a bee-line, the straightest thing in nature, directly between Kansas and Nebraska. Thus the State Line was re-established and Febold again proved to the world that nothing is impossible.

But return to Bergstrom Stromsberg's story of the Blue Ox. It all happened during the Year of the Great Heat, when the temperature was never cooler than 150 degrees above zero. Paul and Febold had been drafted that year to fight Indians, especially the Dirty Pawnee. But instead of fighting they spent all their time trying to keep cool, that being the chief requisite of an Indian

fighter. The Dirtylegs, too, agreed to call off the war on an account of the hot weather.

Along about the Fourth of July it became so hot that Paul and Febold and the Indians all took to the mountains. But the mountains, being closer to the sun, were hotter than the plains. The Indians began digging caves in the sides of the mountains and finally got away from the heat. The remains of these cliff dwellings may be seen today all over the Southwest.

But Babe couldn't make it. When he reached the Rockies a few miles behind Paul and Febold, he was so tired out he lay down in the shadow of Pike's Peak and fell asleep. Looking back from the Great Divide, Paul saw him.

"We gotta do something to cool off that there ox," he said, worried like.

"That's right," said Febold. "When the sun comes up tomorrow he'll be like a pie. And you can't move the critter."

"I got it," cried Paul. "Since we can't move Babe under a mountain, we gotta put a mountain over him."

And the giant logger began to pile up rocks around Babe until the ox was completely covered.

The next day the temperature went up another hundred degrees and Babe was roasted underneath the rocks. About Christmas the Dirtylegs began to come out of their holes, and having had nothing to eat for three months or more, they fell upon the roast ox and devoured Babe completely. The rock pile, which they left strewn over the landscape at the foot of Pike's Peak, is known as the Garden of the Gods, a more poetic name than the Rocks of the Ox, which it should be called.

But alas for the Dirtyleg Indians! Babe was too much for them. Every last one of them died, so that today you never hear of the Dirtylegs. Paul and Febold were awarded distinguished service crosses by Congress for exterminating one of the meanest tribes west of the Mississippi, and when Gutzon Berglum finishes sculpting president's faces on South Dakota mountains, he is going to carve an image of Babe out of Pike's peak.

#### IV

#### THE COYOTE CURE

Not the least of Febold's exploits and public benefactions was the saving of the old cattle kingdom from the mournful coyotes which once threatened it with extinction. In the early days, according to Eldad Johnson, the ranges were infested with packs of wailing coyotes which were slowly but surely starving the cattle to death. These beasts used to set up such a wail that they would go about for days and days, never touch food or water, and finally die.

At first the ranchers organized hunting parties and went out to slaughter the coyotes, but

whenever they came upon a pack the beasts began to bay so mournfully that even Febold, who was an extra tough hombre, didn't have the heart to shoot them. Eldad says he thinks it must have been these same coyotes that created the depression of 1837, they were that depressing.

After the coyote hunts had failed the cattlemen just sat around watching their doggies die. Not so Febold. He was thinking fast and furious on how to rid the country of this scourge. He thought of two thousand and six schemes, but discarded them all untried. However, he did accept his two thousand and seventh scheme. This was to import an animal more dismal than the coyote, so that this new animal could kill off the coyotes in the same way in which the cattle were being killed.

"What this country needs," said Febold, "is an animal more dismal than the coyote. And I know where I can get such a critter. I'll send up to the north coundree and have Paul Bunyan send me some of them there dismal saugers. He's the mournfullest animal that be."

So Febold sent to the north woods for some dismal saugers. Now the dismal sauger is one of those animals you read about. He doesn't make a sound himself, but lumbermen have been known to go raving mad after they have met one in a swampy forest. The drip-drip-drip of the dank marsh water from the dismal sauger's cyprus beard does the trick.

In a few days Febold received the following message: "You crazy old Swede, you ought to know that the dismal sauger is a forest animal and can't live on the lone prairie. So I'm sending you a hundred gross of whimpering whingdings which ought to do the job. X. P. Bunyan (his mark)."

And how they did the job. In two days all the wailing coyotes between the Mississippi and the Rockies had crawled off and died of grief. No one except a drunkard ever sees a whingding any more, because they got to whimpering on each others' shoulders and finally cried themselves to death. Eldad says there used to be a popular song about the whingding which was entitled, "I See You in My Dreams."

The whingding was only one of the early American animals of the great plains. There were oodles of them before Febold, who was a great hunter and trapper, captured them all for the sanitarium of Dr. Keeley, the founder of the famous Keeley cure for delirium tremens. Dr. Keeley was able to deal only with the animals which were seen as the results of drinking imported European beverages. These animals, such as the griffin, the chimera, and the gargoyle, were parts of the old world tradition; methods of capturing them had been developed through the centuries.

Everything ran smoothly for Doc until his patients began to imbibe native American liquors, especially home-made corn whiskey which was the chief beverage of the corn growing states of the great plains. Then the doctor began to encounter giddyfish, ding-toed awks, lop-sided saugers, hodages, and such like American creatures. At first he tried the griffin cure on a patient who was bothered by a hodag following him about. But he soon found that European methods would never work under American conditions.

About this time Febold had to take Eldad Johnson's grandfather to the sanitarium and so became acquainted with the doctor's difficulty.

"If I could only isolate and capture some of those American creatures," said Keeley, "I could develop serums and methods of cure."

"Leave that to me," said Febold. "Where I come from the woods, I mean plains, is full of 'em."

So when Febold returned he went to work and captured all the hodags, awks, and other such animals in the country and sent them to Dr. Keeley for experimentation. In return for this favor the doctor sent Eldad Johnson's grandfather home cured and never charged a cent for professional services rendered.

## V

### INDIAN SUMMER

The purple hue of the western prairies has always been one of the most picturesque features of the open country, but until last spring I had never connected this purple sage with Indian Summer and the Dirtyleg Indians. But one day when Bergstrom Stromberg was in town I happened to remark to him that spring was here at last.

"Don't you believe it," said Bergstrom. "This here ain't spring, this here is one of them Indian Summer days which the weather bureau had left over from last fall."

It all started way back in the days when the Dirtyleg Indians petitioned Congress to continue Indian Summer all winter. But Wall Street and the snowshoe interests got bust and passed a bill providing for snowy weather. What happened was that both bills passed and there was the weather bureau with too many warm days on its hands.

The officials were about at their wits' end when Febold heard about those extra summer days. He suggested that the Government give him those days and he would slip a few in during February and March out on the plains where the population was sparse and the change wouldn't be noticed so much. The weather bureau was only too glad to agree to this plan.

And Febold being, as Bergstrom expressed it, human as a politician, he played favorites. When a Sunday School class or a baseball team wanted a fine warm day, Febold would let them have one for a consideration.

However, during Lincoln's administration, Febold had a change of heart, gave all his money to charity, and turned back the extra days to the weather bureau. Congress then passed a law which provided that there should be ten days of Indian Summer during February and March. These days are mixed up with the regular days and then ten drawn by lot, so you never can tell just exactly when these days will occur. Bergstrom has a sneaking suspicion that somebody in Washington is trying to work Febold's old racket. He says he's going to write his Congressman about it.

It was this very same year in which the Dirtylegs had trouble with Congress that the prairies turn purple. When Congress yielded to the snowshoe interests and refused to extend Indian Summer all winter, the Dirtylegs and other prairie Indians began to curse and fume until the air became a purple fog. Febold, as Indian agent, ordered a big snow storm to clear the air and show the Indians that the Government meant business. The snow lasted for days and days because when the Indians saw that the air was clearing, they began to protest all the harder and the air would become purple again. But Febold kept ordering more and more snow until the Indians had to give up and be satisfied with making the snow purple.

The snow of course melted in the spring, but the purple coloring stayed on the grass and sage brush of the plains. Nobody believed this story, Bergstrom said, until Zane Gray wrote his "The Riders of the Purple Sage" to prove it.

## VI

### THE DIRTYLEG INDIANS

The Dirtyleg Indians were not only one of the meanest tribe of the heathens west of the Mississippi, but also one of the cleverest. But Febold, in spite of his never taking a bath, was a white man, and therefore more clever than even the Dirtylegs. At least, he was if we want to believe Eldad Johnson's story about duck hunting in the early days.

When Febold first came west the Dirtylegs were still getting their ducks as their grandfathers did. They would get a herd of buffalo and drive them in a circle near a river until there was a large circular ditch made. Then when they saw a flock of ducks about to alight on the river the Indians would turn the water into the ditch. The ducks would follow the water round and round until they became dizzy and dropped to the ground. The Dirtylegs would then pick them up and wring their necks.

But during the Year of the Great Heat there was no water in any river, only a few sandhill ponds. Since the Dirtylegs could not make these ponds flow in any direction, Chief Tummihake appealed to Febold for help.

"Wal," said Febold, "you Injuns have allus been such gosh-awful braggarts, you oughta have big enough lungs to ketch a few ducks. So come along."

And Febold and Tummihake and the Dirtylegs went off to the sandhills where Febold stationed the Indians in the weeds about one of the ponds. When a flock of ducks were about to light on the pond Febold yelled "Blow!" and the Indians blew all the water away. And there were the ducks stuck in the mud.

Febold than had the Indians dig tunnels under the pond and build fires there. Thus the ducks were roasted without being touched by human hands and Febold was initiated into the tribe with the name of Old-Stick-in-the-Mud.

Among other things for which Febold and the Dirtylegs are responsible is the expression "being stung by the presidential bee." This is more than a figure of speech, because there actually was such a bee in the early days when the expression originated. Febold raised them on his bee farm when he was cross-breeding bees and eagles.

Febold discovered the marvelous power of his bees quite accidentally. One of the no-account bucks of the Dirtyleg tribe, Standing Pat, tried to steal a bee one day and got stung. He swelled up to twice his natural size. The Dirtylegs were so amazed at his gigantic stature that they made him their chief. Febold saw great possibilities in his "chief bees," as they were then called, and began to peddle them to the Indians, one to a tribe and that to the highest bidder. When, however, the U.S. Government took over the Indian lands and put all the tribes on the reservations, Febold's racket was wrecked.

But Febold got a good price for his bees. He sold them to Tammany Hall and Wall Street who changed the name to "Presidential Bee" and went right on with the business. Herebold Farvardson says that Febold always did regret that deal, because the New York politicians have always been so unethical about handling these bees. Instead of stinging one man and letting him be President, they sting a dozen and let them fight it out. And the bad part of it is, says Herebold, that the men who lose get stung the worst.

The Year of the Great Heat was a bad year for prairie fires, and Febold had to do some fast thinking to find out the cause of the fires and stop them. At that time Febold was living with the Dirtylegs as Indian agent. The grass was so dry that he forbade the Indians having any camp fires at all. But still there would be bad fires every week.

Since the fires never started in the Dirtyleg country Febold began to scout around among the Pawnee Sioux. Immediately he found out the cause of all the trouble. The Sioux were great fighters, and when a Sioux warrior got real mad he had fire in his eye, and that was what was setting the prairies ablaze.

The problem was to keep the Sioux and other warlike tribes happy and peaceful. And that was too easy for Febold. He imported barrels and barrels of whiskey from the Kentucky mountains. He passed it around among the Indians who called "fire water," not because it tasted like fire (as has hitherto been supposed), but because it stopped the prairie fires.

## VII

### THE WEDDING OF THE WINDS

Love or any sort of sentimentality is about the last thing one would associate with Febold, and yet the old codger must have had his moments. Or perhaps it is Eldad Johnson who has contributed his own sentiment to the story. Anyway each spring, according to Eldad, when the first warm winds from the South began to give everyone spring fever, Febold would get a peculiar far-away look in his grizzled old face and begin telling of those two winds which he met in his earlier days.

But instead of going on about its business the blizzard lingered in the vicinity. Febold thought this most unusual, until he saw that a spring breeze was coming up from the South. Febold didn't know whether he was witnessing a rendezvous or an ambush. It proved to be the latter.

When the spring breeze saw the Canadian blizzard she suddenly stopped and seemed undecided whether to retreat or not. But the blizzard opened his eyes wider, stuck out his chest, and began to show off. He whirled a skiff of snow across the hills and whipped it into fantastic drifts. He followed this with a rattle of hail and some blinding sleet. Febold meantime was nearly buried in snow.

At this display of masculine charm the poor little spring breeze blushed furiously. As the blizzard came closer she gave a weak zephyr-like cry and swooned in his arms. In a short while he brought her back to consciousness with a few blasts of his icy breath. They then talked earnestly for some time. Febold couldn't hear what was said because of the wind. The Canadian blizzard must have proposed marriage and the spring breeze must have accepted him, for they soon whirled off together with their arms about each other. Febold heard afterwards that they had gone off to Kansas to start up in the tornado business.

A few years later Febold had good reason to wish that he had tried to stop this match while he had a chance. The offspring of this union became so numerous and so rambunctious that Kansas became a menace to the whole country. The pioneers began to write letters to Washington protesting against these young tornadoes. They even threatened to give up their homesteads and move to California unless something drastic was done. The Government finally got itself out of a bad mess by appointing Febold to patrol the Kansas border and chase all stray twisters back into the State.

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Editor's Note:

About half of Mr. Beath's manuscript has been reproduced above. The balance will appear in a later issue if our readers are interested and our schedule permits.

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Nebraska Folklore Pamphlet Number Six will be issued on or before August 1, 1937, and will contain Animal legends.