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Article Summary: The devastating 1874 grasshopper invasion of the Great Plains destroyed settlers' crops and, in many cases, wiped out their capital. The destitute appealed to Army post commanders for aid. Lieutenant True distributed condemned Army clothing to needy settlers of Dawson County.

#### Cataloging Information:

Names: Robert Furnas, E O C Ord, U S Grant, John F Trout, Theodore E True, John S Stuckey, James P Mellot, R F James

True's Aid Distribution Points: Plum Creek, Overton, Cozad, Willow Island and Wood River, Nebraska

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Photographs / Images: a cornfield ruined by grasshoppers, grasshoppers eating corn

RELIEF FOR NEBRASKA GRASSHOPPER  
VICTIMS: THE OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF  
LIEUTENANT THEODORE E. TRUE

EDITED BY GARY D. OLSON

**H**ISTORIANS have generally emphasized the military functions of the United States Army on the post-Civil War frontier. But in so doing they have tended to neglect other less romantic, but nevertheless important activities of the Army on the Great Plains. One such activity was to act as an agent of the federal government in dispensing aid to settlers made destitute by natural disasters. Such a disaster was the invasion of Rocky Mountain Locusts or grasshoppers onto the Great Plains in the mid-1870's. While recorded invasions of the Great Plains by grasshoppers date back as far as the year 1816, the greatest and most devastating was undoubtedly that of 1874. This plague extended from Minnesota southward through Iowa, Missouri, and Arkansas to Texas as well as southwestward over Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado.

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Weather during the spring and summer of 1874 had been favorable, and the settlers anticipated a good harvest. In late July small grains such as wheat and oats were mostly in the shock ready for threshing and corn in the roasting-ear stage when suddenly the grasshoppers descended upon the fields. In a matter of a few hours the settlers' crops, so near the safety of harvest, were completely destroyed. The impact of the crop destruction was, of course, greatest in the most recently settled areas. There it was the settlers' first or second year crop, representing their total capital, which was destroyed. To the settlers of western Nebraska, on the edge of the frontier in the early 1870's, the summer crop was essential to their subsistence and survival during the coming winter.

By early fall it was still difficult for authorities to determine just how extensive the crop destruction had been and how much, if any, relief would be required. Nebraska state officials refused, at first, even to recognize the seriousness of the situation. They feared that such recognition would result in bad publicity for the state and discourage prospective settlers. Pressure from the destitute settlers of western Nebraska finally forced state authorities to face the issue. But Governor Robert Furnas possessed no power to make any public expenditures for relief. Moreover he was eager to avoid the adverse publicity and expense which would arise from the calling of a special session of the legislature to deal with the problem.

Instead of public relief, Governor Furnas sought to organize large-scale private aid. On September 18, 1874, in response to the governor's call, a committee of prominent Nebraskans assembled in Lincoln. This committee organized the Nebraska Relief and Aid Society with provisions for the creation of auxiliaries in various parts of the state. The society was formally headed by the governor himself, but General E. O. C. Ord, commander of the Army Department of the Platte and headquartered at



A cornfield ruined by grasshoppers.



Grasshoppers eating corn.

Omaha, actually supervised its operations.<sup>1</sup> Donations to the Aid Society came from the people of eastern Nebraska and from out of state as far east as the Atlantic coast. Besides cash donations, large quantities of clothing and other supplies were given.<sup>2</sup> The relief goods distributed by the Aid Society were, for the most part, low grades of flour, cornmeal, bacon, cast-off or second-hand clothes, old blankets and the cheapest kinds of groceries and dry goods. Actual distribution was made through local aid societies in the affected counties. Administration of such relief work was difficult and the State Aid Society came under strong criticism for such shortcomings as inequitable distribution.<sup>3</sup> Moreover its funds and organization did not allow it to provide relief equal to the demand or to reach the most remote areas where the needs were often greatest.

Quite naturally destitute settlers began appealing to Army post commanders for relief rations. Because the appeals for relief from individual settlers were so numerous, General Ord consulted the Secretary of War as to how extensive such issues could be. General Ord was soon able to inform the post commanders of his department that, "when a limited issue of rations to the poor, in counties where the grasshoppers had destroyed the crops, was necessary to prevent starvation, post and camp commanders could make such issues." In such cases, flour or meal and a small amount of bacon or pork were to be issued, but Ord stressed, "only to families and the most destitute." Thus relief to grasshopper sufferers, although approved by the

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<sup>1</sup> *Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Nebraska, 1854-1941* (4 vols., Lincoln, 1941-42), I, 435-36. The Department of the Platte included the states of Nebraska and Iowa and the territories of Wyoming and Utah.

<sup>2</sup> Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska, the Land and People* (3 vols., Chicago, 1931), I, 495.

<sup>3</sup> Everett Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier* (Lincoln, 1954), pp. 207-08. For a complete account of the private aid given to the victims of the grasshopper invasion of 1874 see Robert N. Manley, "In the Wake of the Grasshoppers: Public Relief in Nebraska, 1874-1875," *Nebraska History* (Dec. 1963), p. 255.

Secretary of War, was to be on a limited and individual basis.<sup>4</sup>

Dissatisfied with this decision General Ord reported to the Adjutant General of the Army in Washington that several citizens of the state had appealed to him to request authority to send rations to the famine-stricken families of southern and western Nebraska. Based on letters and reports of reliable men in the affected areas, General Ord wrote that immediate supplies of food were necessary, or "quite a number of the poor at remote places will perish of hunger." Since, he continued, the Aid Society had no facilities to send food to those remote areas and consequently was unable to reach the most destitute cases, he wished permission to send "by reliable officers . . . two or three thousand rations of bread or flour and pork" to each of the four most stricken counties. These officers, he emphasized, would be directed "to issue it in limited quantities [and] only . . . to those in danger of starvation."<sup>5</sup> In Washington, however, it was found that the Army's subsistence appropriation for the current fiscal year was so far exhausted that it would "be impractical for the Subsistence Department to afford any relief to the destitute inhabitants of Nebraska." Consequently Secretary of War Robert Lincoln was forced to refuse General Ord's request.<sup>6</sup>

General Ord, convinced by first-hand reports that the plight of the settlers of western Nebraska required immediate attention, then tried a different approach. In a letter to the Adjutant General of the Army of November 11, 1874, he enclosed reports which testified to the destitution and suffering of the frontier people. General Ord

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<sup>4</sup> General Ord to the Commander of Fort Hartsuff, Oct. 27, 1874, *Records of the United States Army Commands, Department of the Platte*, Record Group 98, War Department, National Archives (on microfilm in the Nebraska State Historical Society), reel 4.

<sup>5</sup> General Ord to the Adjutant General, Oct. 27, 1874, "Report of Ravages of Grasshoppers," *Senate Executive Document*, No. 5, 43rd Congress, 2nd Session (Serial 1629), 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

emphasized that some of those people would certainly starve to death "while the Army storehouses within one hundred miles were filled with provisions." He believed that "Congress would not hesitate to approve any issue of supplies to save the lives of our own people," and so recommended that the Army make "such issues as were necessary" until an appeal could be made to Congress to provide for them and reimburse the Subsistence Department.<sup>7</sup>

At this point President Grant intervened and by executive order authorized the issue of condemned Army clothing to grasshopper sufferers in Kansas and Nebraska.<sup>8</sup> The Secretary of War subsequently informed General Ord that he was to determine and report the amount of clothing required in his Department. The General, in turn, requested from his post commanders estimates of the amount and kind of clothing required by the grasshopper victims in their areas. Upon receiving this information, General Ord, in late November, reported to Washington that about 700 each of wool shirts, stockings, blankets and shoes, and 400 each of overcoats and trousers were needed in Nebraska, exclusive of women and children's needs. The clothing would be packed and transported by railroad to distribution points closest to the areas of destitution.<sup>9</sup>

As acting head of the State Relief and Aid Society, General Ord in early December had appointed 1st Lieutenant John F. Trout, 23rd Infantry, to take charge of the Society's distribution of private clothing donations to the grasshopper victims. Now the issuing of condemned Army clothing was also placed in the Lieutenant's hands.<sup>10</sup> On

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<sup>7</sup> Congress did not convene until the first Monday in December. General Ord to the Adjutant General, Nov. 11, 1874, *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> "Letter from Sec. of War Belknap to Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce," Nov. 13, 1874, *Omaha Daily Herald*, Nov. 20, 1874.

<sup>9</sup> General Ord to the Adjutant General, Nov. 21, 1874, "Ravages of the Grasshoppers," Senate Executive Document No. 5, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Trout was Secretary of the State Aid Society at the time. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, Jan. 16, 1875, *Omaha Daily Herald*, Jan. 3, 1875.

January 14, 1875, General Ord ordered ten officers in his Department to report in person "without delay" to Lieutenant Trout to issue clothing to grasshopper sufferers in western Nebraska. These officers were appointed acting assistant quartermasters and detailed to make the clothing issues in each district.<sup>11</sup>

One of the officers ordered to Omaha was Lieutenant Theodore E. True. True, a native of Coles County, Illinois, was thirty-three years old and a veteran of the Civil War. He had been promoted to 2nd Lieutenant in the 41st Illinois Infantry "for meritorious services," after being wounded twice in the Union attack on Fort Donelson in Tennessee in 1861. While health reasons caused him to resign his commission in 1864, he entered the Regular Army two years later with the same rank and subsequently served at frontier posts in Nebraska, Wyoming and Idaho.<sup>12</sup>

Lieutenant True was stationed at Fort Fetterman in Wyoming Territory when he received General Ord's order on January 19, 1875. On the following day he started for Omaha by wagon. Five days later True reached Cheyenne where he boarded a train. He arrived in Omaha on the twenty-seventh and registered at the Grand Central Hotel. Upon reporting to Lieutenant Trout he received his assignment and instructions. He was to distribute clothing to the grasshopper victims of Dawson County. The following is the journal that Lieutenant True kept while performing this special duty in Dawson County, Nebraska, in late January, February, and early March 1875.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Omaha Daily Herald*, Jan. 15, 1875.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore E. True's obituary, *Army and Navy Journal* (Sept. 19, 1925), p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> The original copy of True's journal is in the possession of the Illinois State Historical Society.

January, 1875

Thursday, 28th. Reported to General Ruggles<sup>14</sup> and received G.[eneral] O.[rder] No. 6 par. 1, dated Headquarters Department of the Platte January 14th, 1875, appointing me a. a. q. m.<sup>15</sup> Received from Paymaster Major Simeon Swift my pay for January 1875. Afterwards called upon Lieut. Trout from whom I received \$110.00 government funds for the purpose of paying expenses of transportation &c.

Friday, 29th. Went to Department Headquarters and received from Gen. Ruggles G. O. No. 12, par. 1, dated Headquarters Department of the Platte, January 29th, 1875, directing me to proceed to Plum Creek<sup>16</sup> Neb. and receive

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<sup>14</sup> Major General George David Ruggles was then the Assistant Adjutant General of the Army Department of the Platte. Ruggles was originally from New York City and had attended the United States Military Academy at West Point. He was a 1st Lieutenant when the Civil War began and through a series of rapid wartime promotions reached the rank of Brigadier General in 1865 after taking part in the campaign resulting in the surrender of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia under General Robert E. Lee. After serving at various frontier posts in the postwar period Ruggles retired from the Army in 1897. Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, 1789-1903* (2 vols., Washington D. C., 1903), II, 851.

<sup>15</sup> Acting assistant quartermaster.

<sup>16</sup> In early 1875 Plum Creek was located where the city of Lexington stands today. Plum Creek had originally been the name of a Pony Express station and after 1861 a telegraph station on the Oregon Trail, south of the Platte River near the mouth of Plum Creek. Daniel Freeman operated a store at this early site, but in 1866 he moved his establishment north of the river to where he thought the Union Pacific Railroad would establish a town on the line it was then building through Nebraska. In the winter of 1871-72 Freeman travelled to Washington D. C., Philadelphia and New York seeking to promote the settlement of Dawson County which had been officially organized only the summer before. In response a company of sixty-five men, women and children from Philadelphia and Bedford County, Pennsylvania left for Nebraska in the spring of 1872. But it was the second group of settlers who arrived the following spring who actually settled the town of Plum Creek. In the late fall of 1873, however, the town of Plum Creek moved about a mile west from the Freeman store to center around the railroad depot. By early 1874 Plum Creek consisted of about one hundred dwellings, twenty-two business firms, one newspaper, two hotels, two lumber yards, one bank, three church organizations and a public school building. In March of that year Plum Creek was incorporated as a village. Not until 1889 was the name changed to Lexington. A. T. Andreas, *A History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago, 1882), p. 619; Mrs. Gertrude Stuckey, "Unpublished Early History of Dawson County" (1931) Nebraska State Historical Society; *Dawson County Historical Society News*, Sept., 1962.

property for Relief. Received from Major Belcher,<sup>17</sup> a.q.m. transportation from Omaha to Plum Creek; and also transportation Request No. 47358 from Plum Creek to Omaha. Got all the information I could get and completed my personal outfit for the trip.

Saturday, 30th. Left Omaha for Plum Creek, where I arrived at 10:40 o'clock, p.m. Went to the 'Pennsylvania House' hotel where I passed the night.

Sunday, 31st. Changed my quarters to the 'Johnson House' hotel.<sup>18</sup> Went to the post office and received Lieut. Trout's Invoice of clothing shipped to me here. Went then to the R. R. Depot and found the number of packages correct as per bill of lading. Called upon Mr. Stuckey,<sup>19</sup> to whom I had from Lieut. Trout an official letter of introduction.

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<sup>17</sup> Major John H. Belcher was the assistant quartermaster at Fort Omaha at that time. Belcher, a native of Massachusetts, was an assistant quartermaster in the cavalry from 1864 to 1866 with the rank of captain. In 1867 he was promoted to major for meritorious service in the Quartermaster Department during the war. Belcher retired in 1892 and died nine years later. Heitman, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

<sup>18</sup> By early 1874 Plum Creek already possessed two hotels, the Johnson House and the Alhambra House. Mr. and Mrs. E. D. Johnson had first started a restaurant in Plum Creek at the old location, and when the town was moved west in 1873 the Johnson's had moved their restaurant too. In early 1874 they built a hotel on this site. The first hotel in Plum Creek, however, had been built by T. Martin and was called the Alhambra House. The Alhambra was advertised as the largest hotel in town in 1874 and was located just opposite the railroad station. Available records fail to mention a Pennsylvania House Hotel at that time. Since True arrived in Plum Creek late at night it is likely he merely crossed the street to the Alhambra House, perhaps renamed. Lucy R. Hewitt, "Early Days in Dawson County," *Collections of Nebraska Pioneer Reminiscences* (Cedar Rapids, 1916), p. 67; *Dawson County Pioneer*, May 14, 1874.

<sup>19</sup> There were two Stuckeys in Plum Creek in 1875, Captain John S. Stuckey and Joseph Stuckey. True is here referring to John S. Stuckey who came to Dawson County with the first group of settlers in the spring of 1872. At that time he located on a homestead about two miles north of Plum Creek. Stuckey was born in Bedford, Pennsylvania in 1834 and had been a captain in the Volunteer Infantry of Pennsylvania during the Civil War. He lived on his homestead for two years before moving to Plum Creek. In the spring of 1873 he was appointed to the office of county treasurer and was elected to that office in the fall of that year. By re-elections he held the office for three terms. He was apparently a man of considerable means and engaged in an extensive broker business, providing some banking services until a bank was finally established in 1882. "Plum Creek, Nebraska," *Collections of Nebraska Pioneer Reminiscences*, p. 57; Stuckey, "An Early History of Dawson County"; Andreas, *A History of Nebraska*, p. 622.

Spent the rest of the day in obtaining information and in preparing my papers for work. Was introduced to several responsible men of the place. Learned from Mr. Stuckey, Judge Pearson chairman of the County Aid Committee,<sup>20</sup> and from others that the Relief stores were not distributed in school districts,<sup>21</sup> but from the centers of settlement—viz. Plum Creek, Overton, Cozad, Willow Island, and from

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<sup>20</sup> True was undoubtedly confused on his names here for John S. Stuckey was the chairman of the County Aid Committee and the Judge he refers to must be Robert B. Peirce, the county judge of probate, who was a member of the Aid Committee. While there was a Pearson in Plum Creek at the time—Fred J. Pearson who owned and edited the *Dawson County Pioneer* and was a licensed auctioneer—he was neither a judge nor on the Aid Committee. Peirce was born in Cecil County, Maryland in 1822 and came to Dawson County with the second group of settlers from Pennsylvania in the spring of 1873. He and his family lived in a railroad car on the side track at Plum Creek for six weeks before building the first house there. He was elected county probate judge in the fall of 1873 and held the post for more than a decade. The spelling of his name varies in different sources but apparently Peirce is correct since this is how it appeared in both the available issues of the local paper in the 1870's as well as in the *Official State Atlas of Nebraska* of 1885. *Ibid.*; "General Brisbin's Report on his trip to the Republican Valley in September of 1874," *Omaha Herald*, Sept. 23, 1874; *Dawson County Pioneer*, May 14, 1874 and May 24, 1877.

<sup>21</sup> The original policy established by the State Relief and Aid Society had been to use school districts as the unit base for relief distribution.

some point in the Wood River settlement.<sup>22</sup> It appears that the country people transact their business at these five points and it appears to me that the best plan to adopt would be to get to these points in succession and from them work as from centers outwards. As Wood River appears to be the only settlement which has not some central point on the railroad, I propose visiting that settlement the first.

February, 1875

Monday, 1st. Called today upon Mr. Stuckey and Judge Pierson[sic], and Mr. James, the sheriff, and others.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Overton was originally the location of a railroad siding on the Union Pacific as were most of the future towns located along the railroad. In the days when there was but a single track, a siding was needed every five or six miles to allow meeting trains to pass and as a place to make train repairs. The location was named Overton in 1871 after a government official, but not actually settled until 1873 when James N. Patton built the first house at the present location of Overton. Stuckey, "An Early History of Dawson County"; Andreas, *A History of Nebraska*, p. 617. Cozad was founded in 1873 when John J. Cozad, of Cincinnati, Ohio, bought a tract of 40,000 acres of land in the western part of Dawson County. Upon returning to Ohio he organized a colonizing group of about thirty persons who settled at the Cozad railroad siding in December of that year. A promotional campaign in the East conducted by John Cozad through circulars stimulated such a rapid growth of the town that by 1876 it consisted of over five hundred people and about forty houses. Samuel W. Schooley, "An Unpublished History of the Founding of Cozad," *Nebraska State Historical Society and Andreas, op. cit.*, p. 617. Willow Island, located about five miles west of Cozad at another passing siding on the Union Pacific, was first settled by Josiah Huffman in March of 1873. *Ibid.* The Wood River Settlement is not to be confused with present Wood River, Nebraska. In 1875 this referred to the entire northeast corner of Dawson County which was designated the Wood River Precinct and included a number of small settlements along the Wood River such as Jewell, Trapper's Grove and New Port. The first settler in this part of Dawson County was James P. Mellott who settled there in April of 1873. *Ibid.*; General Land Office Map, 1879, Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>23</sup> Here True again refers to Judge Pierson; but note he now spells it differently than before and closer to Pierce or actually Peirce. R. F. James settled in Plum Creek in 1873 and served as sheriff of Dawson County for seven years. After that he became a partner with W. C. Allyn in the H. O. Smith and Co. general hardware business in Plum Creek. James had been something of a wanderer. He was born in Zanesville, Ohio, in 1847, but had gone to California at the age of nine. He thereafter engaged in various kinds of business in that state as well as Idaho, Nevada, and Oregon before coming to Nebraska in 1872. Andreas, *A History of Nebraska*, p. 621; Everts and Kirk, *The Official State Atlas of Nebraska* (Philadelphia, 1885), p. 173.

Learned from them that they have been distributing relief to about 600 persons in Dawson County—men, women and children. Of this number there are 60 at Wood River. I have concluded to take along with me to Wood River clothing for about 35 men. I have secured from Mr. James, the sheriff, a wagon with two horses and a driver. As the length of time for which I shall require the team, the amount of work and other possible rough usage to which they may be necessarily subjected etc. etc. All remain unknown, the question of compensation is left open for equitable settlement upon my return to Plum Creek. Went to the R. R. depot and made arrangement with Mr. C. J. Freese, the station agent, whereby my clothing can remain in store in the R. R. depot, without charge to the government, until such times as I may need to take it out for issue.<sup>24</sup> I then opened packages Nos. 1, 3, 9, 16, and found the contents of all of these to be correct as per Lieutenant Trout's Invoice to me, with exception of Box no. 9 which was found to contain 50 pairs of bootees<sup>25</sup> instead of 25 pairs boots as per invoice. I then packed for transportation with me to Wood River, the following articles, viz. 10 pairs trousers, 25 pairs boots, 14 pairs bootees, 7 great coats, foot,<sup>26</sup> 10 uniform coats, 20 blouses, 10 shirts, 7 wool blankets, 10 hats, and 15 caps. These articles I left for storage over-night in the R. R. depot. Lent to my driver 1 Great Coat, foot. Issued to Jacob Ogarolka 1 pair bootees. Repacked boxes nos. 1 and 16 as follows: no. 1, with 23 Great coats, foot; 3 wool blankets and 2 rubber blankets.

No. 16 with 17 uniform coats, 20 shirts, 58 caps, 10 hats, 84 blouses, 3 jackets, cavalry, and 49 pairs bootees. Left these with other clothing for storage in R. R. depot. Gave my driver instructions to load on the stores for Wood River and be ready to take the road at 8 o'clock a.m. tomorrow.

Tuesday, 2nd. A snowy night—was succeeded this morning by a blinding storm from the N.E. Finding that it was impossible to go to Wood River today, I called upon the county officers and obtained from them a list of names of persons residing in and near the town of Plum Creek

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<sup>24</sup> The Union Pacific Railroad provided free freighting for relief goods for both the private aid societies and for the federal government.

<sup>25</sup> A kind of boot with a short calf or upper.

<sup>26</sup> An overcoat designed for use by the infantry.

who were the most needy. I then called upon these families and ascertained their condition. It was pitiable, in most instances, upon entering the poor huts to see the women and children crouched shivering around their dull fires in the midst of a cloud of pulverized snow driven in upon them by the storm. In the afternoon I made an issue of clothing. My memorandum book shows that of the 13 men to whom I issued 10 were heads of families; the aggregate of women and children being 45. Money is very scarce in this town. The poorer people esteem themselves fortunate if they can find labor enough to supply their families with food. Many men are working for their board simply.

Wednesday, 3rd. This morning the mercury stood at  $-21^{\circ}$  Fahr. and a smart gale was blowing from the west, drifting the snow considerable and making even a short exposure to the weather quite painful. This put my going to Wood River today entirely out of the question; and accordingly in order to economize and occupy time I got on a freight-train and went to Cozad and Willow Island stations, in quest of information for my guidance in making up packages for distribution in the precincts of which the above named towns are centres[sic]. Saw Mr. Geo. Goodyear of Cozad<sup>27</sup> and Mr. Joseph Huffman of Willow Island, the Relief Agents for those precincts. While *en route* our locomotive froze so badly that the train was abandoned at Coyote siding<sup>28</sup> and we went on slowly with the locomotive and caboose. Before starting I inspected my stores in the R. R. Depot at Plum Creek, and found the packages apparently undisturbed and all right.

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<sup>27</sup> George Goodyear, later referred to by True as H. Goodyear and then finally as Henry Goodyear, was a resident of Cozad, who along with many of the original settlers of that town, probably left in the late 1870's as a result of the grasshopper devastations. At any rate none of the available sources mention either a George or Henry Goodyear of Cozad.

<sup>28</sup> Coyote was the name of the railroad passing siding approximately six miles east of Cozad. Until 1873 there were no houses except for that of August Selk, the section foreman for the Union Pacific. In April of 1873 S. S. Baldwin took the first claim there, and he was soon followed by several others. In 1906-07 George B. Darr of Lexington purchased land north of the railroad line at Coyote, and sometime later the name of the settlement was changed to Darr. Chas. E. Allen, ed., *The Early History of Cozad and Surrounding Community* (Cozad, 1955), p. 40; Andreas, *op. cit.*, p. 617.

Thursday 4th. This morning the mercury marked —30°. But as there was but little wind I started at 11 o'clock a. m. for the Wood River settlement, taking with me the clothing indicated in my notes for the 1st instant. My transportation consisted of the wagon and two horses. The driver was a young man of Plum Creek named Manspeaker.<sup>29</sup> At about 4 o'clock p.m. I arrived at the house of Mr. Milotte[sic]<sup>30</sup> on Wood River. Mr. Milotte[sic] is the Agent for the Relief Commission and bears among all the reputation of a man of integrity. Before leaving Plum Creek I inspected my property in the R. R. Depot and found the number of packages correct and seals uninjured. Distance travelled today 20 miles.

Friday, 5th. Issued to the settlers on Wood River up stream from Mr. Melotte's house. Mr. Melotte who is intimately acquainted with the settlement accompanied me and gave me very great assistance. I took my stores in the wagon and went from house to house. The day was quite cold, and about 2 o'clock P. M. a sharp wind came on from the north and towards evening brought snow. This upper section of the Wood River settlement extends along the course of the Wood River and along its 'dry branches.' The settlement is quite a new one, the first ground being broken in 1873. It is for the most part composed of ex-volunteers of the Union Armies, who have brought with them their families and settled upon 'Soldiers' homesteads.'<sup>31</sup> The attempts at agriculture have resulted almost uniformly in failures, owing to the ravages of the grasshoppers. The consequence is that no revenue has accrued to the settlement from sales of produce, while as almost every settler arrived here exhausted of money. There is but little cash in the section of the settlement visited by us today. Nobody has anything to buy with and

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<sup>29</sup> William Manspeaker was a member of the first group of settlers which came to Plum Creek from Pennsylvania in April 1872. *Ibid.*, p. 618.

<sup>30</sup> James P. Mellott, as mentioned above, was the first settler in the northeastern part of Dawson County, settling there in April of 1873. *Ibid.*, p. 617.

<sup>31</sup> The Congressional Act of April 4, 1872, gave veterans of the Union Army or Navy a year instead of six months to begin residence on their homestead and permitted them to deduct their term of service, up to four years, from the Homestead Act's five year residence requirement. Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage, The Public Domain, 1776-1936* (Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1960), p. 216.

accordingly the worn out clothing of the settlers has not been replaced by new.

Saturday 6th. Issued to the settlers upon the lower section of Wood River in Dawson County. The Wood River precinct contains 18 families and is divided as follows: 33 men, 24 women, 42 children. The livestock of the precinct is as follows: 52 horses, 14 oxen, 36 young cattle, 165 head cattle and cows; 26 hogs. There are 30 houses in the precinct. The valley of the Wood River ranges, in Dawson County, from 1 to 2 miles broad, and appears to be very fertile. The bluffs are not adapted to agriculture but afford excellent grazing for all kinds of stock. A very vigorous growth of timber clothes the river, and from this growth the settlers obtain their fuel.

Sunday, 7th. About 11:30 p. m. started from Mellotte house and returned to Plum Creek, arriving about 3 o'clock, p.m. Made arrangement for canvassing Overton precinct tomorrow and the next day. Mr. James is to furnish a team and spring wagon and a driver.

Monday, 8th. Started in the morning accompanied by Dr. Bancroft<sup>32</sup> of Plum Creek. Canvassed the portion of country lying between the R. R. and Platte River. Arrived at Mr. Ryan's<sup>33</sup> house just over the eastern boundary of Dawson County.

Tuesday, 9th: Completed my canvass of Overton Precinct and returned to Plum Creek. about nightfall[.] found [sic] a good deal of destitution in Overton precinct. The day was a bitter and stormy one.

Wednesday, 10th. Overhauled stores and packed supplies for Overton. Made arrangement with Mr. James to furnish a team to transport myself and stores from Plum Creek to Overton and return. When I started out on the canvass of Overton Precinct I supposed that it would be

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<sup>32</sup> Dr. William M. Bancroft, physician and surgeon, arrived in Plum Creek with the second company of settlers in April of 1873. He was born in Dover, Delaware in 1849 and graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1871. He had practiced medicine in Dover before coming to Nebraska. *Andreas, op. cit.*, p. 621.

<sup>33</sup> This probably refers to H. Ryan who took out a homestead in Elm Creek Township of Buffalo County in 1871. Available sources give no more information regarding him. Samuel C. Basset, *Buffalo County Nebraska and Its People* (2 vols., Chicago, 1916), I, 119.

impossible to complete the tour in less than 2½ days and accordingly appointed Thursday—tomorrow—as issue-day. I have now to keep my appointment and so must almost lose a day.

Thursday, 11th; Drove down to Overton, made an issue and returned to Plum Creek that night.

Friday, 12th: Drove through the northern portion of Plum Creek Precinct and collected *data* for my guidance in issuing at Plum Creek tomorrow. Notice had been previously given of the contemplated issue. Returned to Plum Creek a little after dark. Rec'd telegraphic orders to report upon completion of duty.

Saturday, 13th. Issued at Plum Creek, and in the evening sent word to the Cozad people that I would issue at their town on Tuesday next.

Sunday, 14th. Packed supplies for Cozad, Willow Island and south of the Platte River. Made arrangement with Mr. Freese the R. R. Agent for transporting stores free of cost to Cozad and Willow Island.

Monday, 15th. Finished packing stores, and made arrangement for starting at 1 P. M. to Cozad. At 12:30 p. m. went to the post office and received G. O. No. 20—Hdgrs. Dept Platte. . . together with letter of instructions and roll of blanks for enrollment of Heads of Destitute Families.<sup>34</sup> Had notices printed appointing places and times for enrollment in Dawson County, and wrote letters to Messrs.

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<sup>34</sup> On February 10, 1875, President Grant signed a bill passed by Congress a few days earlier entitled, "An Act to Provide for the Relief of Persons Suffering from the Ravages of Grasshoppers." This bill authorized the President to direct the issue, "through the proper officers of the Army temporarily, of supplies of food and disused clothing sufficient to prevent starvation and suffering and extreme want to any and all destitute and helpless persons living on the western frontier, who have been rendered so destitute and helpless by ravages of grasshoppers. . . ." *United States Statutes at Large*, vol. 18, pt. 3, p. 314. Army Department commanders such as General Ord were ordered to make an enrollment of "all who have been rendered destitute by the ravages of the grasshoppers." *Omaha Daily Herald*, February 5, 1875. The enrollment was to group families together, giving the name of each person entitled to relief with children under twelve years of age rated separately since they would receive half rations. It was to be determined in each case when food would be required and where would be the most convenient point of distribution. General Ord instructed the officers then distributing clothing in Nebraska, including True, to make this enrollment.

Patton of Overton,<sup>35</sup> H. Goodyear of Cozad, and J. Huffman of Willow Island.<sup>36</sup> Arranged for disseminating information of the enrollment at Plum Creek. At 4 p. m. started for Wood River Precinct to make an enrollment of that settlement. At 7 p. m. arrived at Mr. Mellott's house on Wood river and made arrangement for sending, early in the morning, information of the enrollment to the settlers up and down Wood River valley.

Tuesday, 16th. Enrolled settlers of Wood River Precinct, Dawson County, and returned to Plum Creek arriving about 9 o'clock p. m.

Wednesday, 17th. In the afternoon enrolled at Plum Creek. In the evening had a conversation with Mr. E. S. Child, chairman Frontier Co. R. Committee<sup>37</sup> and from notes furnished from him constructed an Estimate Report of Enrollment of Destitute Families in Frontier County, which I gave to him for delivery to Lieut. Trout.

Thursday, 18th. Completed enrollment at Plum Creek.

Friday, 19th. Drove to Overton and enrolled there, returning to Plum Creek that night.

Saturday, 20th. Went to Cozad and enrolled there.

Sunday, 21st. Went to Willow Island and enrolled there. Telegraphed Mr. James to have my team in readiness to start south on Monday. Returned to Plum Creek that night and learned from Judge Pierce<sup>38</sup> that some settlers who lived in Dawson and Gosper counties, south of the Platte in the valley had not received notice of the enrollment and had accordingly not come in. Left a roll with the Judge,

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<sup>35</sup> As mentioned above, James N. Patton was the first settler in Overton, arriving in the spring of 1873.

<sup>36</sup> As already mentioned Josiah Huffman was the first settler at Willow Island in March, 1873.

<sup>37</sup> This is Everard S. Child, not to be confused with the Reverend E. S. Childs the first resident minister of Frontier County. Everard S. Child was engaged in farming and stock raising in 1875 having settled in the county only a year before. Child, born in Portsmouth, Ohio, in 1842, had moved to Cass County, Nebraska with his father in 1856. During the Civil War he served three years in the 1st Nebraska Infantry. After returning to Frontier County for about seven years Child moved to Arapahoe in Furnas County where he was a real estate and loan agent. Andreas, *op. cit.*, p. 889.

<sup>38</sup> True now refers to Judge Pierce or Peirce whom he was probably referring to earlier when he wrote Judge Pearson and Judge Pierson.

who promised to enroll these settlers and forward the roll to Lieut. Trout on the 23rd.

Monday, 22nd. Started for Gosper County, and on the way stopped at Danielson's Ranch,<sup>39</sup> where I hired a man for \$1.50 and sent him up the river to notify the settlers to be in at Plum Creek against [sic] Tuesday noon the 23rd instant. Arrived in the late afternoon and found that Mr. Geo. H. Beck<sup>40</sup> had spread the notice of the intended enrollment in Gosper county on Wednesday the 24th instant.

Tuesday, 23rd. A violent snow storm which lasted all day, forbidding all going about the country. A day of enforced idleness.

Wednesday, 24th. Enrolled at Mr. Beck's house for Gosper County. Owing to the severe cold only a few of the settlers appeared for enrollment. It was apparent that only a [portion] of the sufferers had appeared for enrollment and although this was the day appointed beforehand for enrollment I determined to remain here during the greater portion of tomorrow and made my arrangements accordingly.

Thursday, 25th. This morning early I employed Mr. Cummins of Gosper County<sup>41</sup> to ride through Frontier County visiting the Committee men in particular, and spreading the news of my intended enrollment of Frontier County, "At the Residence of Mr. E. S. Child, Chairman, Frontier Co. R.[elief] & A.[id] Committee, on the afternoon of Friday, February 26th and on Saturday February 27th, 1875." I agreed to pay Mr. Cummins \$2.50 per day—good pay for hard work. Completed the enrollment of Gosper County,

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<sup>39</sup> This was probably the ranch of P. B. Danielson who settled on what came to be called Danielson Island in the Platte River. Danielson settled there in April of 1873. *Ibid.*, p. 617.

<sup>40</sup> George H. Beck lived near the center of Gosper County and was a county commissioner in 1874-75. He along with E. L. Warner and J. A. Cummings were officers of the local Aid Society. Beck, a native of Champaign, Illinois, had been a soldier in the 2nd Illinois Cavalry for four years under General Ord and had settled on a soldier's homestead in the spring of 1873. "General Brisbin's Report," *Omaha Herald*, Sept. 23, 1874; Everts and Kirk, *Official State Atlas of Nebraska*, p. 203.

<sup>41</sup> This was J. A. Cummings or also spelled Commins who also lived near the center of Gosper County and was a member of the Aid Society. In 1878 he was a County Commissioner of Gosper County. *Ibid.*, 202; "General Brisbin's Report," *Omaha Herald*, Sept. 23, 1874.

and 4 o'clock P. M. started from the house of Mr. Beck en route to Frontier County. While on the road I met Lieut. R. P. Brown, 4th Infantry,<sup>42</sup> on his way to Plum Creek, and gave him my Gosper Co. Report to mail to Lieut. Trout. Arrived after dark at the house of Mr. Carroll of Furnass [sic] County, where I stayed all night.

Friday, 26th. While on the road to Mr. Child's house my wagon broke down, and I had to send it back to a blacksmith shop for repairs. I hired a team of Mr. Ole Simon's of Gosper County<sup>43</sup> who, for \$2.00 carried me on his sled to the house of Mr. Child, where I arrived at 12 n.[oon] Mr. Child had not yet returned from Omaha. I found several men at Mr. Child's awaiting my arrival, and commenced the enrollment of Frontier County. Learned that Mr. Cummins had spent last night here, while on his canvass of Frontier Co.

Saturday, 27th. Continued the enrollment of Frontier County. Only 37 persons have appeared and I am sure that not all have come in. But as my notices have been on my part diligently circulated, I am certain that all have received information of the enrollment. About noon a Mr. Lynch of Medicine Creek<sup>44</sup> brought me a letter from Mr.

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<sup>42</sup> 2nd Lieutenant Rufus Porter Brown was performing the same duty as True in another part of Nebraska. In fact Brown had also been stationed at Fort Fetterman and had accompanied True to Omaha. Brown was born in Ohio and graduated from West Point in 1866 as a 2nd Lieutenant. He was promoted to 1st Lieutenant in 1876 and died in 1892 with the rank of Captain. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army*, I, 253.

<sup>43</sup> Ole Simon filed his claim to a homestead in the southern part of Gosper County, directly north of Holbrook, Nebraska, on July 2, 1873. Simon was born near Lillehammer, Norway in 1847 and came to the United States at the age of ten with his parents who settled near Mineral Point, Wisconsin. In 1910 Simon retired from his homestead farm and moved to Holbrook where he died in 1936 at the age of eighty-nine. Bayard H. Paine, *Pioneers, Indians and Buffaloes* (Curtis, Nebraska, 1935), p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> John Lynch homesteaded south of Stockville in July, 1872, only a few months after Frontier County was organized. He died in 1878 and is not to be confused with his son John "Jack" Lynch who was sheriff of Frontier County in the 1890's. Obituaries of "Jack" Lynch and his sister Mrs. Nellie Shelley, *The Curtis Enterprise and the Stockville Faber*, December, 1932 and 1934.

E. G. Nesbitt,<sup>45</sup> complaining that the time allowed would not permit of much representation from Medicine Creek, and asking what further steps were necessary for him to take. In reply, I sent him a verbal message to make out some list of the people in need of seed and forward it by first hand to the Railroad and mail it to me at Plum Creek. As this has been a fine day it is altogether likely that people who would have not come in today would not come in tomorrow. Paid Mr. Cummins \$7.50 for 3 days courier work in Frontier County, and took his receipt therefor. About noon my wagon got up, having had to go to Arrapahoe [sic]<sup>46</sup> for repairs.

Sunday, 28th. Started on my return to Plum Creek, leaving Mr. Child's house about 8:30 o'clock a.m.. Travelled back by the same road which I had taken in going to Mr. Child's. The roads were very heavy, owing to the deep snows—stopped at Carroll's house for dinner, and arrived at Vaughan's ranch on Elk Creek<sup>47</sup> about sunset. Spent the night at Vaughan's where I learned that Mr. Child had just a short time previously to my arrival left Vaughan's on his return home.

Monday, 1st. Left Vaughan's about 7:30 o'clock a. m. and arrived at Plum Creek a little before 3 o'clock P. M. Made arrangements for an issue of clothing to the people south of the Platte River on Tuesday the 2nd and sent notices to Mr. J. Huffman at Willow Island that I would issue in his town on Wednesday the 3rd. and to Mr. Henry Good-year that I would issue at Cozad on Thursday the 4th, and requested both of those gentlemen to disseminate this information as widely as possible. In the evening I enrolled 3 men of Gosper County, who live in the Platte valley 3

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<sup>45</sup> In 1875 Everett G. Nesbitt of Stockville was the County Clerk for Frontier County. He was one of the earliest settlers of Stockville, coming there from Philadelphia in December of 1871. He was the first postmaster and built the second building in town. Upon the organization of Frontier County in January of 1872, Governor W. H. James appointed Nesbitt County Superintendent of Schools. In the fall of the same year he was elected County Clerk and was re-elected for several terms. Andreas, *op. cit.*, p. 880.

<sup>46</sup> Arapahoe was commonly spelled with two r's at the time.

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin K. Vaughn was the owner of a ranch on Elk Creek in Gosper County and served as County Clerk and Clerk of District Court of Gosper County in 1878. He is not to be confused with E. G. Vaughn who was a County Commissioner of Gosper County in 1873 and County Clerk and Clerk of District Court in 1877. Everts and Kirk, *op. cit.*, p. 202

miles from Plum Creek and at least 20 miles from the nearest settlement in Gosper County. Closed my Frontier County rolls, settled with Mr. James for my wagon and team, and then went to bed.

Tuesday, 2nd. Issued to the "South River" people. Posted up my clothing rolls, made arrangement with Mr. Freese to ship my stores by rail to Cozad and Willow Island and went down to the depot at 10:30 P. M. to take the passenger train for Willow Island. Just before the train arrived I learned that there was no certainty that the freight train tonight would have a way car. Here I was in a "fix." My appointments were out, and if the freight train should not fetch [sic] my goods a great many people would be disappointed. Happening at the junction to run across Mr. James, I contracted with him to deliver the stores at Cozad and Willow Island against 12 n. tomorrow. For this I am to give him \$10.00 [more] than is right, but I was caught in a trap. Took the passenger train and went to Willow Island.

Wednesday, 3rd. Issued today at Willow Island. *Only 6 persons* presented themselves for relief. Before 11 a. m. the stores arrived [,] 3 boxes having been left with Mr. Goodyear at Cozad awaiting my arrival at that place for issue. At 4 o'clock P. M. I repacked my boxes, loaded them on the wagon and drove to Cozad where I found my stores apparently all right. Stored all the 5 boxes for the night in a large room of the hotel and discharged my team. Made arrangements for shipping my stores that may remain after tomorrow by freight or express to Plum Creek, where I have appointed a closing up issue on Friday the 5th.

Thursday, 4th. Issued today at Cozad. Late in the afternoon went down by freight train to Plum Creek.

Friday, 5th. Issued today at Plum Creek and by the afternoon had nothing left except a few boots, shoes and forage caps,<sup>48</sup> and telegraphed to Lieut. Trout that the issue in Dawson County was completed, and that I had remaining on hand a few more stores.

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<sup>48</sup> The regular uniform cap of the United States Army at the time with a flat top slanting forward and a short brim.

Saturday, 6th. Received from Lieut. Trout today a telegraphic order to "Turn over the extra clothing to Dawson Co. Committee and instruct them how to make out rolls and issue it if needed.[''] Boxed up the clothing and proceeded that [sic] to turn it over to Judge Pierce and Mr. Wallace the chairman and secretary of the Committee aforesaid, taking their memorandum receipt therefor.

Sunday, 7th. Got on passenger train at 4 this a.m. and went down to Omaha.

The activities recorded by Lieutenant True in his official journal are probably typical of those experienced by the other officers performing the same duty in other parts of Nebraska. It is not, after all, Lieutenant True himself who makes his journal noteworthy and interesting. Rather the journal is significant because of its firsthand description of the Nebraska frontier and the effects of the grasshopper invasion of 1874. Moreover it provides a graphic account of just one of the means whereby aid was given the destitute settlers.

While True's primary function had been the distribution of Army clothing to the needy settlers of Dawson County, he had also prepared the way for the eventual issuance of government food rations in Dawson, Gosper, and Frontier counties. Before the distribution of condemned clothing by the Army, the local and state aid societies had shouldered the entire task of caring for those people left without resources by the ravaging grasshoppers. By February 10, 1875, when President Grant approved the congressional appropriation, the private aid societies and the Army had pretty well satisfied the clothing needs of the destitute. Food, however, remained a great deficiency among the grasshopper victims.

On March 8, 1875, a month after Lieutenant True had returned to Omaha from Dawson County, the Army began to issue food rations to the grasshopper sufferers in Nebraska. This issue was based on the enrollment made by the officers such as True who had supervised the distribution of clothing. Although an elaborate ration including

coffee, tea, beans and sugar had been recommended by the Commissary-General of Subsistence, the ration as actually issued consisted of little more than cornmeal and salt pork.<sup>49</sup> When the distribution ended on September 1, 1875, in addition to the large amount of clothing, a total of 1,081,122 rations had been issued to 29,226 adults and children in the Department of the Platte. Similar amounts of food were also issued by the Army in the Departments of Missouri and Dakota.<sup>50</sup> Thus it is pretty clear that the aid received from the federal government was vital to the survival of many settlers in western Nebraska since by late winter 1875 the resources of the private relief organizations were exhausted.

After further service on the frontier True entered the Quartermaster Corps as a captain in 1889 and advanced to the rank of major and later lieutenant colonel. On January 22, 1904, the day before his retirement, Theodore E. True was awarded the rank of brigadier general; a fitting climax to a long and distinguished military career.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>"Letter from Secretary of War," 44th Congress, 1st Session, *House Executive Document*, No. 28 (Serial 1687), 2.

<sup>50</sup>"Letter from the Secretary of War transmitting the reports of the Quartermaster and Commissary General of Subsistence made in compliance with the act of February 10, 1875." 44th Congress, 1st Session, *House Executive Document*, No. 28 (Serial 1687), 10.

<sup>51</sup>True's obituary, *Army and Navy Journal* (Sept. 19, 1925) p. 22.