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Article Summary: Early Nebraska pioneers often said that nothing would grow west of Salt Creek. Ezra F Stephens nonetheless built a flourishing nursery business in Crete and set about planting trees on Nebraska prairie land.

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Photographs / Images: American Pomological Society medal awarded to the Nebraska State Horticultural Society, 1871; a bountiful apple harvest; Ezra F Stephens; Stephens's home in Crete; J W Walker examining the grape harvest; Stephen's daughter Esther gathering roses for a nursery catalog photograph



American Pomological Society medal awarded to the Nebraska State Horticultural Society in 1871. Reverse side is inscribed, "Best collection FRUITS Thirteenth session 1871."

CREATING THE FRUITED PLAINS

By ANNADORA F. GREGORY

DURING the early years of Nebraska statehood, settlers along the Missouri River began to find life somewhat less burdensome. Road travel, although still rough, presented fewer hazards; railways were constructed across the state; comfortable homes were built; and farms developed from earlier truck patches and gardens. Native trees grew along rivers and streams, but settlers still believed that only one hundred miles west stretched the Great American Desert, and heard with apprehension the oft repeated saying that nothing ever grew west of Salt Creek, around fifty miles away. Many remembered their former homes farther East, surrounded by tall shady trees, fertile fields, and fruitful orchards. To them, Nebraska presented problems and challenges.

Among these settlers, fortunately, were able leaders who envisioned a bright future for the Nebraska prairies. With strong determination and unquenchable optimism, they set out to prove that the abundant resources of Nebraska, if

Dr. Gregory, Professor Emeritus of Chadron State College, is the daughter of G. A. Gregory, brother of Mrs. Ezra Stephens.

given proper care, could produce forest trees, orchards, and a variety of crops.

Early settlers located first along the Missouri River. J. Sterling Morton established his home at Nebraska City in 1855 and soon planted an apple orchard. The following year, Robert Furnas settled at Brownville where he too developed a successful apple orchard, and J. T. Allan located at Bellevue, bringing with him from his native Michigan a variety of flowers, shrubs, and one thousand young apple trees. During the sixties, J. H. Masters established an orchard and nursery at Nebraska City, and by the early seventies, it was possible to find a reliable nursery in nearly every county bordering the Missouri.¹

Morton and Furnas became political leaders in the new state and active members of the State Agricultural and State Horticultural societies. Each edited a newspaper, through the pages of which he promoted his agricultural interests. Here new settlers might find valuable information for use when planting their own fields and orchards. Such efforts brought rewards. After following approved methods of tree planting and orchard care, Nebraskans began to produce fruit of nationally recognized excellence. J. Sterling Morton stated in his address to the Nebraska State Horticultural Society in 1872:

. . . in the counties of Cass, Otoe, Nemaha and Richardson, and in nearly all other river counties of Nebraska, apple, pear, peach, plum and cherry culture has been made eminently successful. Wherever, in the whole state, intelligent and discerning men have attempted to produce fruit, their efforts have been rewarded by bountiful crops. The theory that the western prairies will not grow fruit, has been most thoroughly destroyed by actual apples and peerless pears, which at the American Pomological Society's exhibition, in Richmond for the year 1871, were awarded the highest premium. . . . The surface of Nebraska lands, gently undulating and perfectly drained, is naturally most

1. *Transactions: Nebraska Horticultural Society, for the Year 1871*, 18-22. Morton's address contains early history. *Annual Reports of the Nebraska State Horticultural Society, 1878-1879*, 13-19, carries an address by Furnas telling of early orchardists. For Allan, see *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, II (1887), 326-332 and IV (1892), 243-245.

favorably adapted to orcharding. Pears and apples can be raised in every portion of the state. . . .²

In the meantime, in order to assist settlers in acquiring public land, Congress had passed the Homestead Act in 1862. To encourage tree planting, they passed the Timber Culture Act in 1873, whereby a settler might obtain an additional 160 acres of public land by planting forty of its acres to trees and caring for them for ten years. Later, the area to be planted was reduced to ten acres and the time to eight years.³ The Nebraska Legislature likewise encouraged tree planting by an 1869 law which exempted from taxation one hundred dollars worth of property for every acre of forest trees planted and cultivated. However, this law so reduced money coming into the treasury that it was repealed in 1877.⁴

The Nebraska State Board of Agriculture had been established in 1858, and in 1869 the Nebraska State Horticultural Society was formed for the purpose of promoting pomology, arboriculture, floriculture, and gardening within the state. Although funds were not always available and state grants insufficient, the members held regular meetings and published in yearly reports accounts of their failures, successes, and experiments, including recent scientific findings in their field. In this they were ably assisted by faculty members from the University of Nebraska who advised them and provided practical information about weather conditions, types of soil, diseases, and methods of dealing with pests that destroyed their fruit trees. In these early years, Professors C. H. Barbour, C. E. Bessey, L. Bruner, F. W. Card, G. D. Swezey, and S. A. Aughey provided much help. Former Governor Robert Furnas served as president of the Horticultural Society during the late

2. *Transactions: Nebraska Horticultural Society, for the Year 1871*, 17-22.

3. James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 157-163.

4. A. E. Sheldon, *Land Systems and Land Policies in Nebraska. Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, XXII (1936), 94. A. E. Sheldon, *History and Stories of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University Publishing Co., 1929), 209.

seventies, and J. Sterling Morton was an active member. With such able leadership, the Society soon became a center for learning.

At their meetings were question and answer periods, reports of horticultural conditions from all over the state, and addresses by prominent horticultural leaders. Soon the group sponsored fruit exhibits at local, regional, and national fairs and at farmers' institutes in various counties. They also took pride in their own little experiment stations which some of them had developed on their private farms. Prizes were won. Gradually the truth that fruit could be grown on the Nebraska prairies came to be widely accepted.⁵

Fortunately, at this time the State Horticultural Society, encouraged by favorable federal and state legislation, successfully promoted the idea of extensive tree planting. Consequently, from the middle seventies through the boom years of the eighties and on up into the nineties a golden age of tree planting evolved as "tens of thousands of trees were planted in the Nebraska soil."⁶

Into this rapidly developing state came a young man, Ezra Fessenden Stephens. In 1871 Stephens was twenty-seven years old and seeking an opportunity to buy land for a commercial orchard. After consulting with Robert W. Furnas, he decided to purchase 240 acres of land from the Burlington and Missouri River Rail Road southeast of Crete, Nebraska, even though Furnas did not think at the time that commercial orchards could be grown so many miles west of the Missouri.⁷ Stephens years later explained his decision:

The idea of raising something out of the ground which should benefit mankind had always appealed to me more strongly than law, medicine, or any other profession. . . . The urgent need for both fruit and shade

5. *Saline County Union* (Crete), September 27, 1877, contains the address of Furnas at the Saline County Fair, in which he stated that at the nation's first centennial exhibition, in 1876, three of the most important fruit premiums had been won by Nebraskans.

6. *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), March 22, 1928, under "Footnotes" contains A. E. Sheldon's estimate of this development.

7. *Thirty-Sixth Annual Report of the Nebraska State Horticultural Society*, 1905, 90.

trees was apparent. I determined to cast my lot with Nebraska, and devote my life to the development of her horticultural interests.⁸

Since his contract with the Burlington railroad required him to plant one hundred acres in orchard and timber, by 1873 he had twenty acres of his land planted with around twenty thousand fruit trees. Of eleven hundred small apple trees purchased from Samuel Barnard of Table Rock, Nebraska, he lost only five. Realizing that several years would elapse before he could expect returns above expenses, Stephens found employment contract planting timber claims and orchards for others.⁹

In 1872 Stephens already had a wide background, gained through experience and observation as he traveled over the nation. Born at East Sumner, Maine, on February 27, 1844, young Ezra's family had descended from Mayflower and Revolutionary War lines. He early learned reliable habits of work and shared in family responsibilities. At the age of eleven, Ezra was painting seventy-five churns a day in the paint shop of a churn and tub manufacturing company in which his father held an interest. At thirteen, after attending the village school, he taught school for two years, and in 1861, at the age of seventeen, he entered the Union Army. Although Ezra had an older brother, his father felt that the second son could better be spared from home than the older, and Ezra F. Stephens became a volunteer in Company H, Tenth Maine Regiment, Volunteer Infantry at Auburn, Maine. Although seriously wounded at the Battle of Cedar Mountain and a victim of malaria while with his division at Fredericksburg, Ezra served approximately three years before returning home in 1863.

Back in Maine, he worked to free the family from debt. His mother urged him to attend college, but he knew it would be a serious drain on family finances. Instead, he joined his brother in California and worked with him in a

8. *Thirty-Second Annual Catalogue*, Crete Nurseries, 1904, 1.

9. *Thirty-Sixth Annual Report of the Nebraska State Horticultural Society*, 90; A. T. Andreas (proprietor), *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: Western Historical Co., 1882), 1349.

mine for three years. After the mine was flooded, Stephens joined a cousin on a farm south of Santa Barbara, acquiring an interest in some of the good land there. This offered him an opportunity to observe methods of dry farming.

Meanwhile, his father had purchased land in Illinois, only to find there was more work than he and his third son could manage. Consequently, Stephens returned to help the family, teaching school in the winters and working on the land during the growing seasons. After his older brother came to help the family, he went to Nebraska and purchased the land near Crete. Here, after his marriage to Sophia Mann, he established his home and began to plan his future.

Stephens soon made the acquaintance of Colonel Thomas Doane, chief engineer and construction superintendent for the Burlington railroad lines in the state. Colonel Doane had previously purchased land near Crete on which he had planted trees and made some few other improvements. After planting his own apple orchard, Stephens found employment on the land of Colonel Doane and won his confidence through his dependability and hard work. At that time, the Burlington railroad had difficulty keeping its trains moving when winter snows drifted into cuts along the route west. Stephens suggested to Colonel Doane and other officials of the company that trees could be planted along these cuts to catch the snow and keep the tracks clear of drifts. Subsequently, he won the contract for planting trees on the north side of every cut along the 110 miles of Burlington track from Lincoln to Lowell, Nebraska, near Fort Kearny.¹⁰

For this project, he plowed the ground where the trees would be planted at double depth in the summer of 1872. The following spring he supervised the planting of seven hundred and fifty thousand trees. They were planted in rows seven feet apart. The north row farthest from the track was of honey locust set one foot apart to serve the double purpose of a windbreak and hedge. The next two rows were

10. *Idaho Statesman* (Boise), January 1, 1928, contains the best account of his early life. *Crete News*, February 27, 1958, contains an account by Stella Stephens Chase, his daughter.

of European larch, the next three of native forest trees—ash, soft maple, cottonwood, and willow—and the last row, nearest the track, of evergreens. The trees were planted in eighteen working days at a cost of fifteen thousand dollars, the largest tree planting undertaken so far in the state. At the fall inspection of 1873, only a small percentage of the planting had not grown. This work proved so satisfactory that the Burlington gave him similar work on other railroad lines in Nebraska, Colorado, and Wyoming over a twenty year period.¹¹

After the federal timber claim law had been passed in 1873, more than 250 people employed Stephens to cultivate their contracts in Nebraska and Colorado. As he successfully supervised the planting and care of their timber, he carried to patent forty thousand acres at a cost of around six hundred dollars per quarter section for labor and patent fees.¹²

The publicity which followed this success and the great store of information concerning soil and climate conditions which he acquired traveling over the state proved to be valuable to Stephens as he developed his own orchards. The small nursery which he first established on his land later became the orchard farm for his Crete Nurseries. His family lived on this land until another house was purchased in Crete and the family home established there. At one time this house in Crete had been the boarding house for the Doane Academy, and its lumber had been hauled by wagon from Lincoln. Nearby, Stephens later added an office building, packing shed, root cellar, and delivery grounds. He also purchased other similar tracts near Crete where fruit could be raised and shipped economically by the quick express and freight service available at the Crete Burlington station.

After the death of his first wife Sophia, he married Mary Emily Gregory in 1876. Mary was the sister of G. A. Gregory, an early Doane graduate, and had been living at the home of her uncle, Rev. Harmon Bross, pastor of the Congregational church, while attending Doane Academy. Six children were

11. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 1349.

12. *Idaho Statesman*, January 1, 1928.



Such bountiful apple harvests seemed impossible to many settlers first entering the treeless plains.

born to them: two daughters who died in infancy and Frank, Stella, Esther, and Harmon. The three older children were graduated from Doane College; Harmon was graduated from Doane Academy and Stanford University.¹³

During the seventies, Stephens developed his orchard, learning from both his successes and failures how best to

13. John M. Brenneman *et al*, *History of Doane College* (Crete, Nebr.: Doane College, 1957), 245.



meet problems arising from seasonal changes and how to overcome the diseases and insects which were capable of destroying his trees. He also surrounded his acres with hedges and windbreaks. In 1874 he enlarged his nursery and began to realize profits from his earlier planted stock. That year he sold ten thousand dollars worth of stock which resulted from his original outlay of five hundred dollars.

But that summer sudden, unexpected disaster visited the Nebraska prairies. Hordes of hungry grasshoppers fell in clouds from the sky, devouring nearly everything edible in sight and almost ruining Stephens' nursery. Only with a great deal of hard work was he able to refill his stock. The following year, grasshoppers again inflicted considerable damage. In the spring of 1877, he again replanted, but for a third time 'hoppers cleaned out the nursery. Stephens was

almost ruined financially.

Fortunately, the grasshoppers did not return in succeeding years. With persistent energy, he continued to plant, finding that apple seedlings could be grown even more successfully on this land than in the East. His trees grew so well that by around 1880 he had eighty-six hundred fruit trees besides his nursery stock and small fruits. Stephens' business was reported to total twelve thousand dollars per annum; he employed some twenty hands and had a payroll of five thousand dollars per annum for labor.¹⁴ Stephens had belied

14. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 1349.

the saying; he had definitely demonstrated that fruit could be grown profitably over fifty miles west of the Missouri.

It was during the seventies that Stephens became a member of the Nebraska State Horticultural Society. There he became acquainted with other leaders in his field and was soon taking an active part in the meetings, giving reports and sharing in discussions.¹⁵ For over thirty years, he continued to prepare papers on a variety of subjects and joined with other nurserymen in promoting the status of Nebraska's horticulture at regional and national fairs.

Stephens' thriving nursery near Crete attracted the attention of the State Horticultural Society, and an official account of a visit to his orchard appeared in their annual report for 1880. The extensive nature of his interests was noted as follows:

Not far from the banks of the Big Blue—and yet upon the prairie—E. F. Stephens has established orchards and nurseries. The nurserymen of Nebraska are now the pioneers in fruit culture on the interior prairie, and as an example of the work that is being done by them a place is here found for a description of the Crete Nurseries given by a visitor.

"We drove through sixty acres of orchard consisting of 1,000 cherry, 150 pear, 400 plum, 6,000 apple, 500 budded peach and a quantity of seedling peach trees used as wind-breaks. Of the orchard, 2,000 trees were planted in 1873, 1,800 in 1874, and of these about two thirds were destroyed by grasshoppers in the fall of '74. The balance have been filled up from year to year at the rate of about a thousand per year. This spring they planted 1,600 trees, mainly apple and budded peach. Notwithstanding the drawbacks of the present season, 99 per cent of the apple trees were growing in July. Of the peaches, 90 percent were making a good growth; and of 100 pear trees planted in the spring only one has succumbed to the season.

". . . there is one acre of grapes, two and one-half acres of blackberries and strawberries and two acres of currants and gooseberries. . . .

"The entire grounds are nearly hedged in—there being four to five miles of hedging on the place. The older hedges, both honey locust and

15. *Transactions of the Nebraska State Horticultural Society for the Year 1877*, 54-56, 102-109. Examples of discussions.

osage, have turned stock for years; . . . The forest trees of about twenty-five acres are utilized as wind-breaks, and fill up the draws.

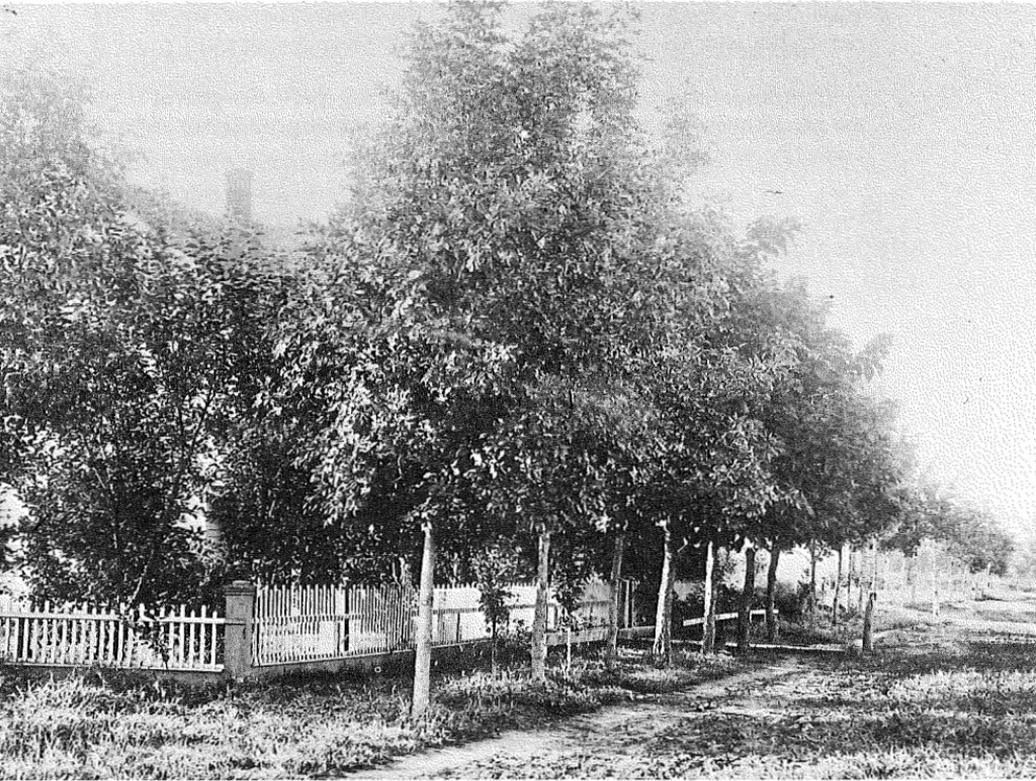
“. . . this spring 170,000 apple grafts were set out; and in one part of the ground there are ten acres of apple seedlings and seventeen acres of osage.¹⁶

Much of Stephens' success resulted from thorough preparation of the soil, careful selection of stock, and special care given his orchards during the growing season. The soil

16. *Annual Report of the Nebraska State Horticultural Society, 1880 and 1881*, 97-98. The orchard visit was probably made in 1879.



Ezra F. Stephens, early Nebraska nurseryman.



Stephens' home in Crete, pictured here in the late 1800's, also illustrated its owner's love for trees.

had to be mulched at the proper time, trees had to be planted in spaced rows allowing plenty of air and sunshine, and then protected from diseases, insects, and birds. Considerable grafting was done, and it was found that some varieties of fruit grew better in certain locations than others. Carefully prepared lists of the best varieties of fruit for the different parts of the state were compiled, frequently revised by members of the Horticultural Society, and made available to all those interested.

Stephens effectively promoted the sale of his nursery stock, sending out agents during the spring and summer to contact farmers at their homes in the surrounding areas.

Doane students were frequently employed, and since they needed financial help, the income earned provided necessary assistance.¹⁷ In the spring of 1878, he had four thousand pamphlet catalogues and fifteen hundred agent's cards printed. In the fall of 1879, it was reported that the Crete Nurseries had booked ninety-five hundred dollars in trade orders that year and expected spring trade to amount to ten thousand dollars.¹⁸

Stephens had come to be known as a hard worker and an excellent orchardist. He won many prizes for his fruit displays at Saline County and Nebraska State Fairs. A sixteen dollar cash premium for "the most successfully planted orchard and the largest number of forest trees planted to grow" was awarded him by the State Horticultural Society in 1879. A reporter for the *Saline County Union* stated that Stephens "loses no opportunity to inform himself upon all new discoveries in the culture and care of fruit and forest trees, neither does he miss any opportunity of attending all meetings of the societies where these questions are thoroughly discussed, and as a result of his labor, Mr. Stephens is walking away with the prizes and is becoming one of the leading Horticulturalists of the State."¹⁹

Always an apostle of good dependable work, he expected such of his employees. As a young man, he had worked sixteen to eighteen hours a day during busy seasons for twenty dollars a month, never expecting extra pay. When in the spring of 1889 some of his hands complained that they were asked to work eleven hours a day for ten hours pay, he told them of his heavy expenses and low prices, adding that each spring he paid around five hundred to one thousand dollars for help he could get along without.²⁰

One of the Doane students whom he employed recalled in later years that "No one could work around E. F. Stephens

17. For an example of amounts earned, see A. Gregory, *George Albert Gregory, Pioneer Educator*, 45-50.

18. *Saline County Union*, May 23, 1878; October 17, 1879.

19. *Ibid.*, March 21, 1879. References to prizes also appear in the *State Vidette* (Crete), September 17, 1891 and September 15, 1892.

20. *State Vidette*, April 25, 1889.

without being inoculated with a passion for trees. . . . He was not a money maker, his interest was too active in public service to achieve success as a financier. But his memory will be treasured by thousands of people to whom he rendered a service never paid for in dollars."²¹

Active in community life, he held membership in the Holland Post, Number 75, of the Grand Army of the Republic at Crete; in 1885 he became vice president of the Crete Globe Company, publisher of the *Crete Globe*. He was an early trustee of the First Congregational Church and a loyal friend to Doane College. He held membership in the Nebraska State Historical Society. However, most of his efforts were spent directing his nursery business and advancing the interests of the Nebraska Horticultural Society, of which he became a life member in 1889 and president in 1892.

During the boom years of the eighties, horticultural developments in Nebraska advanced rapidly, recouping the heavy losses of the seventies. By January, 1882, 390 acres were under cultivation by the Stephens nursery. There were 110 acres of nursery stock, sixty acres of orchard, five acres of small fruits, sixty-five acres of hog pasture, and thirty acres of stock pasture. The remaining consisted of cultivated timberland. Employees averaged twenty a year at a total cost of five thousand dollars. The reporter for the *Saline County Union* explained further:

Although they devote considerable time to growing seedling stock for nurserymen, the leading business of the nursery is supplying an annual average of 2,500 retail customers scattered over Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado and Dakota. . . . The nursery has secured 70 acres near town and will in a year or two, move its offices to town. The nursery has large cellars for storage of stock and a shop in which six men will graft all winter. . . .²²

By 1885 the Crete Nurseries were using five hundred acres in their business.

21. *Nebraska State Journal*, March 22, 1928.

22. *Saline County Union*, January 12, 1882. Editorial.



J. W. Walker, Foreman of the Crete Nurseries, examines the rich grape harvest in a photo from an early catalogue.

The other day, it was the good fortune of a Globe representative to visit Mr. E. F. Stephens, the genial and energetic superintendent of the nurseries, at his home and inspect the city delivery grounds with him. Mr. Stephens has just completed the erection of a neat and substantial office. . . . The cost of the building with its furniture will be about \$600. Near this building is a delivery shed where shipping cases are made and stock prepared for shipment. We found here men sorting seedlings which were to be sent east. . . . He informed us that western seedlings were regarded as much better in every way than those that could be procured in the east, since they were larger, of a healthier growth and free from insects, especially what are known as plant lice.

The Crete Nurseries have at the present time 210 acres of growing nursery stock, and they are using in all 500 acres in the business. They own 102 town lots in Crete which are reserved exclusively for ornamental stock, in addition to these they lease 200 lots for the same purpose. . . . The stock sales during the past year reached the enormous figure of \$40,000. Six salaried agents are constantly employed and forty local agents. In the nursery here, from forty to seventy-five men are required the year around. . . . Mr. Stephens by his push and energy

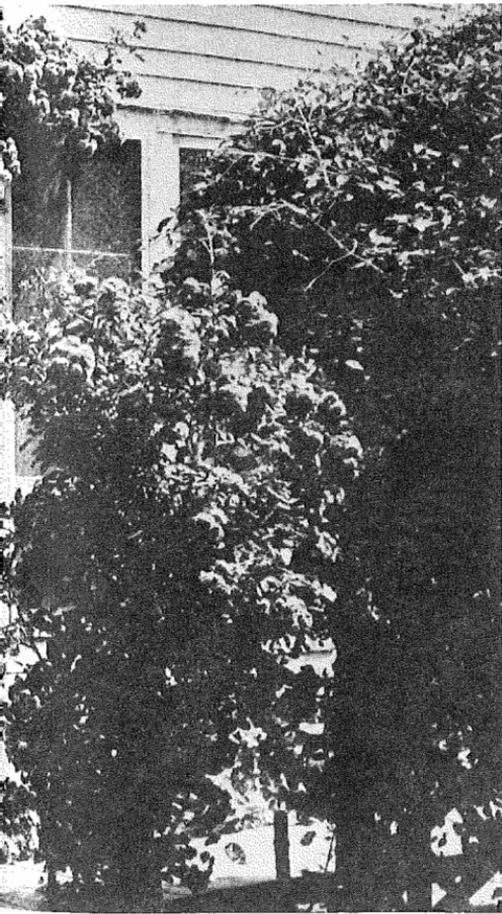


Stephens' daughter Esther gathers roses near the house for another photo

has brought the business to its present prosperity and it is sure to increase proportionately in the future.²³

By the later eighties, an enormous tree claim business had developed to meet the demands of those who had taken claims under the Timber Culture Act. By April, 1888, Stephens had one hundred men in five divisions employed in

23. *Crete Globe*, November 12, 1885.



for a nursery catalogue.

western Nebraska and eastern Colorado planting an average of one hundred thousand trees a day. In the spring of 1889, over ten million forest trees were shipped from his Crete Nurseries, in addition to fifty or sixty carloads of fruit trees, plants, and shade trees. The tree claim business of the Crete Nurseries for 1889 was estimated at eighty thousand dollars and their other regular business at twenty thousand dollars. These large tree sales indicated the extensive amount of planting done by Stephens during these years, amounts which probably topped the national record for tree planting in the entire United States at that time.²⁴

Unfortunately, the boom years of the eighties were followed by the disastrous nineties. Bad weather conditions, drouth, and a national business depression combined to again almost ruin the nursery.

However, Stephens' orchards produced well in 1891, and the crop of winter apples was estimated at nearly twelve thousand bushels. At the Saline County Fair, he had one hundred plates of fruit on exhibition for which he asked no premium. In January, 1893, he reported more orders for that time of year than for several years previous. Eight men were kept busy in the grafting department, and work in other parts of the nursery was brisk. Even in January, 1894

²⁴. *Ibid.*, April 19, 1888; April 18, 1889; *Idaho Free Press* (Nampa), March 4, 1928.

twenty-two hands were employed and as many agents were on the road. That year they also found less competition from similar agents from the East.²⁵

But by the spring of 1894, Stephens found himself in financial difficulties. The preceding year had been bad for many people, and they were unable to meet their payments. However, it was reported that Stephens had sufficient nursery stock to meet his own payments and it was thought he would be able to reorganize his business. During the following winter of 1894 to 1895, times were hard. Thirty-one families, comprising 127 persons found it necessary to obtain assistance from the Crete Relief Association. That spring teachers' salaries were cut.²⁶

Conditions fortunately improved the following year, and Stephens' business was placed on a firm basis. He gave away three thousand peach trees and also donated small trees to around seven hundred Crete school children who came with their superintendent to visit the nursery. After Stephens demonstrated to them how a tree should be planted, the children had their picture taken.²⁷ It came to be his custom to give children who wanted them small trees to plant each Arbor Day.

By the following spring, a very complete nursery catalogue had appeared and around thirty men were employed delivering stock.²⁸

During this time, Stephens had continued his activities in the Horticultural Society. He had served on most of the committees and had been one of the three directors for several years. He was then chosen president for five consecutive years, from 1892 to 1896. These were the years of discouraging drouth and business depression. During these troubled times, Stephens provided strong, inspiring leadership which helped dispell the gloom and encourage optimistic plans for the future.

25. *State Vidette*, September 17, 1891; January 12, 1893; January 25, 1894.

26. *Ibid.*, May 31, 1894; February 14, 1895; May 30, 1895.

27. *Ibid.*, April 23, 1896.

28. *Ibid.*, March 11, April 1, 1897.

Although the fruit of Nebraska's orchards proved to be inferior in 1893, Stephens succeeded in having fruit displays sent by the Horticultural Society to the Columbian Exposition that year. He constantly urged more experimental work by members on their own land and urged them to exchange the information gained. He consistently favored cooperation with the University of Nebraska in the work carried on at their experimental farm near Lincoln. For many years, he served on the committee which visited this farm and reported on ways in which cooperation between the Society and the University could be promoted.

Due to the drouth, the possibilities of irrigation and the various kinds of irrigation pumps were discussed at horticultural meetings, and reports of systems already in operation in western Nebraska were given. More efficient ways of marketing were developed and new varieties of small fruits were grown, including strawberries, raspberries, grapes, and cherries. Members of the Society carefully examined the processes of grafting and cross fertilization in their constant search for those varieties of fruit best adapted to various areas of Nebraska.

In 1897 Stephens presented a paper before the Horticultural Society entitled "What Has the Timber Claim Law Done for Nebraska?" In this paper, he stated that he had planted seven million trees for customers on four year contracts and had sold millions to others. During the years 1885 to 1890, he estimated that all together as many as one hundred million trees a year had been planted in the state. One nursery firm sold thirty million trees in one season, and all nurseries enjoyed a full trade. Stephens estimated that at least four million acres had been taken under the timber claim law in Nebraska. Native trees were also increasing, he noted. Ravines were filling up and ash trees were more prevalent in bottomlands and along streams. Groves formed valuable windbreaks and trees planted earlier were already providing fuel.²⁹

29. *Annual Report of the Nebraska State Horticultural Society for the Year 1897*, 51-52.

By 1898 many members of the Horticultural Society could look back twenty-five years to the time when few orchards had been planted beyond the Missouri River area. But by the turn of the century, they could see groves and orchards as well as a variety of flowers and garden vegetables around almost every Nebraska home. This encouraged the members to continue experimentation and to use increased care in planting trees.³⁰

After his years as president of the Horticultural Society, Stephens continued his active participation in the organization, presenting papers on correct cultivation of irrigated lands, timber planting for commercial purposes, commercial orchard management, the care of old orchards, and the marketing of fruit through cooperative organizations of fruit growers.

In his travels through the state, Stephens noted the careful work of Jules Sandoz on his land near Rushville, Nebraska, and reported to the Society as follows:

Near Rushville Mr. Jules Sandoz has been planting trees for many years and has been quite successful in growing trees and fruit without irrigation, depending entirely upon cultivation. This gentleman has experimented with more varieties of fruit than any other party in northwestern Nebraska.³¹

A result of Sandoz' grafting was his hardy Sandoz Plum. Stephens obtained some of these young trees and advertised them in his nursery catalogue as follows:

The new Sandoz is a Nebraska plum for Nebraska people. It originated in the extreme northern part of the state where it has verified all the predictions made for it. The Sandoz has yielded a bushel per tree the fourth season after planting. Being an ironclad northern variety of Nebraska origin it can be planted with confidence in all parts of the state.³²

30. *Annual Report of the Nebraska State Horticultural Society for the Year 1898*, 12ff.

31. *Annual Report of the State Horticultural Society, 1906*, 101.

32. *Thirty-Second Annual Catalogue, Crete Nurseries, 1904*, 11.

Through his many years of travel in Nebraska superintending the care of his trees and advertising and selling the fruit grown at the Crete Nursery, Stephens had become interested in the national field of fruit production. In the early nineteen hundreds, he was employed by a national newspaper syndicate to write articles on horticultural developments. The syndicate was composed of approximately twenty newspapers and covered a large part of the United States and Canada. To gather material for these articles, Stephens visited nearly every fruit-growing district in the northwestern United States, including the Hood River Valley in Oregon, Wenatchee and North Yakima in Washington, the Bitter Root Valley in Montana, and parts of Idaho.

Stephens' son, Frank G. Stephens, who had earlier assisted his father in advertising the Crete Nurseries, moved to Nampa, Idaho, in 1906. He, too, was interested in planting orchards and founded the Stephens Orchard Company. Through his company, which had its headquarters at Nampa, he planted around 370 acres of flourishing apple trees for himself and friends. In 1910 he took a large display of fruit from the Nampa area to the National Horticultural Congress at Council Bluffs, Iowa. It proved to be the largest single display and accumulated a long list of premiums.³³ In this way, Nampa received recognition as a favorable area for apple trees. The city had been placed on the map.

For some time, Frank had been urging his father to sell the Crete Nurseries and move to Nampa. After subsequent trips to Idaho, Stephens decided to follow his son's advice. He sold most of his nursery stock and land near Crete by the close of 1911 and set out to establish orchard interests at Nampa. He did retain his family residence in Crete however.³⁴ In closing out his stock, Stephens donated a large share of it to Doane College, allowing the college to sell it and retain the profits.

33. *Crete News*, December 9, 1910.

34. *Idaho Statesman*, January 1, 1928; *Crete News*, March 16, April 20, November 9, 1911.

After planting trees in Nebraska for approximately forty years, it was with some regrets that Stephens set out for Nampa, a pioneer again at the age of sixty-seven. The Holland Post of the G.A.R. sponsored a farewell birthday dinner at the Central Hotel on February 27, 1911, marking his birthday as well as those of two other members. The occasion was quite a gala affair, and several Crete dignitaries were present. Stephens, when called upon to make some closing remarks, "concluded by speaking most tenderly of his endearing associations and work with friends in Nebraska. In an optimistic mood, he expressed the hope that if he should be spared to work ten years in the new field of Idaho, he would do as much there as he had accomplished in Nebraska in forty."³⁵

This proved to be a realistic prophecy. At Nampa he planted more fruit trees and helped care for the thirty-six thousand apple trees already growing on his son's acres. Through careful selection of stock, thorough cultivation of orchards, and the protection he gave his trees from the rabbits which infested the area, he raised bumper crops. Gradually it became unprofitable to retain his home and remaining business interests at Crete, and in 1914 he moved his family to Nampa.

There he found trees planted in 1910 yielded around nine bushels per tree in 1915. By 1917 Jonathan apple trees produced twenty-one bushels per tree and Roman Beautys twenty-six bushels per tree. During the last few years of his life, he planted 142 acres of orchard trees on nearly frostproof land. The crop of apples on his Idaho home place in 1927 totaled forty-six thousand bushels.

In 1915 Stephens was saddened by the death of his wife, but he continued actively in his chosen profession until the last few weeks of his life. He died at the home of his daughter, Stella Stephens Chase, on March 13, 1928, at the age of eighty-four.³⁶

35. *Crete News*, March 16, 1911.

36. *Idaho Free Press*, March 14, 1928. Obituary.

Ezra Fessenden Stephens, from his early childhood days in Maine, through his service in the Union Army to his forty years planting trees in Nebraska and his final seventeen years in Idaho, had fashioned a career adventuresome, gratifying and rewarding. With satisfaction he could look back over the disheartening years of grasshopper destruction, drouth, and depression to recall the many good years with bountiful yields. Stephens has been ranked among the first five of the early Nebraska horticulturists who pioneered tree planting on Nebraska's prairies.³⁷ At his death, he left a rich heritage of well-planted orchards and attractive forest tree groves to be enjoyed by later residents of the Tree Planter's State.

37. *Nebraska State Journal*, March 22, 1928.