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Article Summary: The history of tree planting in Nebraska and the exuberant promotional effort behind it reflect the importance of forests as a source of fuel and construction materials. Those who promoted large-scale tree planting conveniently overlooked local rainfall and temperature patterns.

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Photographs / Images: cottonwood tree (1912 photograph by B Frank Thompson of Beaver Crossing); N C Nielsen homestead near Cozad, c 1885; 1886 and 1925 views of J D Ream homestead in Custer County



The cottonwood tree is found in all sections of Nebraska. Photographed in 1912 by B. Frank Thompson of Beaver Crossing, this specimen was yet standing in 1934. The tree was known to travelers on the Cut-off between Nebraska City and Fort Kearny in the 1860's.

TREES BUT NO TIMBER:
THE NEBRASKA PRELUDE TO
THE TIMBER CULTURAL ACT

By BURTON J. WILLIAMS

Walter Prescott Webb, in describing the necessary adaptations for existence on the Great Plains, spoke of traditional prerequisites and used as his analogy a three-legged stool, i.e., land, water, and timber.¹ On the plains two of these legs, water and timber, were frequently in short supply and thus the need for both innovation and adaptation. Webb's theme in *The Great Plains* was that American "civilization and methods of pioneering were worked out east of the 98th meridian and were well suited to conditions there; however, when these institutions of the East undertook to cross into the Great Plains they broke down and had to be modified."² Putting his thoughts another way, nineteenth century Americans were dependent, naturally, on the obvious — the watered land. What has not been so obvious is the fact that their dependence upon wood was so great as to justify using an anthropological term, "The Wood Age," to describe it.³ Admittedly, anyone would be hard pressed to sell "The Wood Age" as a title to a Hollywood script writer. "Six Guns and Saddle Leather" would doubtless be more acceptable to those seeking sensationalism in accounts of the "Wild West."

As the nineteenth century merged with the twentieth, in spite of increasing use by manufacturers of metals and minerals as substitutes for wood, the consumption of forests did not diminish; indeed, it increased. And forests remained a major source for fuel and housing construction materials. The history of tree planting in Nebraska and the exuberant promotional

effort behind this endeavor are closely tied to these facts. The plains of Nebraska were essentially lacking in this predominant resource in nineteenth century America. One writer, ascending the Missouri River from St. Louis in 1854, observed that only the eastern tier of counties in Nebraska would ever be thickly settled and that the remainder would very likely never be cultivated "on account of scarcity of woodland and water."⁴ On June 17, 1854, the *New York Herald* published a report on "The Great West" and pointed out that the scarcity of timber was the greatest barrier to its settlement. Surveyors carefully chronicled the status of timber as the townships were laid out, with such remarks as: "The timber is chiefly of an inferior quality. . . . There is not sufficient timber to supply the wants of farmers. . . . There are a few scattered trees along the river and creeks fit only for fuel and fencing."

The fact that at least some sort of timber was to be found along the banks of streams explains in part the early settlement patterns of territorial Nebraska. These settlement patterns have been traced and have been seen to advance westerly along the margins of rivers and streams. This indicates that the western march of migrants did not advance along a single "frontier line" but instead penetrated along the arterial network of waterways. The limitations of such a migratory pattern soon became obvious, for only a fraction of territorial Nebraska could or would be settled if occupancy was largely confined along its waterways.

In fact, in the eyes of at least one contemporary writer, Sen. John J. Ingalls of Kansas, the wooded tracts next to water had been unattractive, even anathema to the energetic, industrious settlers. He claimed in his serio-comic essay "Catfish Aristocracy" that the most casual observer could not fail to notice the difference between the indolent settler who lived in the bottoms and the vigorous farmers who cultivated the upland prairies. The bottom dwellers he termed the catfish aristocrats, who he felt contributed little to society while living indolently off the land, fishing, hunting, and cultivating half-heartedly small acreages.

In his elaborate prose style Ingalls scorned the catfish aristocrat, who, he said,

... builds no school-house . . . erects no church . . . to his morals the Sabbath is unknown. To his intellect the alphabet is superfluous. . . . He delights in cracklins and spare ribs . . . has a weakness for "cowcubers" and "watermel'ns"; but when he soars above the crass needs of his common nature and strives to prepare a feast that shall rival the banquets of Lucullus, he spreads his festive cottonwood with catfish and pawpaws.⁵

Whether this kind of facetious geographic determinism had any credibility or not is questionable. If so, it only pertained to a very limited area along the deep rivers of eastern Kansas and Nebraska. There is some evidence to the contrary, i.e., that bottom land was coveted by the industrious settlers.⁶

Nevertheless, if extensive immigration were to be realized, then the upland prairies would, of necessity, be needed for the anticipated growth in population. To make these treeless, subhumid plains attractive to prospective settlers required something more than a good public relations program. Trees and water, virtually everywhere, were the essential requisites, and Nebraska's "boomers" planned to produce both.

As early as 1857 the idea had been advanced that the federal government should inaugurate a program to encourage the growth of timber upon the western prairies. The specifics of this proposal suggested that the federal land policies should be amended so as to give a quarter section or sections of land to those who would agree to plant an unspecified number of acres with trees.⁷ However, such a proposal would wait some sixteen years before Congress enacted such legislation. But Nebraskans proceeded on their own and the "gospel of trees" and its attendant blessings were preached in the "waste places" of the territory. Acting-Governor Algernon S. Paddock in his message to the legislature of January 11, 1867, favored a homestead law requiring every settler to cultivate twenty acres of timber on his homestead for five years as one of the conditions required to prove up his claim.⁸ Two years later the Nebraska legislature enacted a law whereby \$100 worth of property would be exempted from taxation for every acre of forest trees planted and cultivated.⁹ The provisions of the law required the cultivation of such trees for five years, which was also the limit to the period of time to which the tax exemption applied. The trees were to be planted no farther than twelve feet apart and "kept in a healthy growing condition."¹⁰

This law did not produce either ecstatic enthusiasm or cosmic



The N. C. Nielsen homestead (c. 1885) was located in Dawson County seven miles east and three and one-half miles north of Cozad.

convulsions. Seward County cited it in a tract promoting the interests of that place by declaring:

With such laws as these, the vast prairies of the Central State will, in a single generation, grow into a densely wooded country; and this one element of wealth, inducing immigration will give it an additional impulse, and Nebraska will have a population that will have placed her in the front rank among the States of the Nation.¹¹

A Nebraska newspaper, however, indicated that such claims of grandeur were a long way from being realized and in its reportage wondered why more people were not taking advantage of this act since the economy of the State was so bad that it was impossible to even pay the interest on the present indebtedness.¹²

Two men who remained undaunted while associated with early tree planting efforts in Nebraska were Robert W. Furnas and J. Sterling Morton. Furnas came to Nebraska Territory from Ohio in 1856 and established the *Nebraska Advertiser* in Brownville. In 1867 he started a nursery business there and remained interested in agriculture and horticulture for the remainder of his life. He became the first president of the Nebraska State Board of Agriculture and later its secretary for nearly twenty years.¹³

J. Sterling Morton had arrived in Nebraska Territory in 1855 and made his home at Nebraska City. Like Furnas, Morton also edited a newspaper, the *Nebraska City News*. He became active as a member of the Nebraska Board of Immigration and served for many years as an officer of the State Horticultural Society. In addition he was extremely active politically, serving as acting-governor and as secretary of the Territory of Nebraska. He was a frustrated candidate for the governorship in 1866, 1882, and 1884, and was also unsuccessful in his bid for the U. S. Senate, suffering defeat in 1886, a year in which he also tried to be elected governor. He did, however, gain an appointment to the cabinet of the Grover Cleveland administration (1893-1897), where he served with distinction. His major importance, insofar as the subject of this monograph is concerned, is the fact that he wrote the resolution designating the first Arbor Day and providing a prize for the person who planted the most trees on that day.¹⁴ The resolution itself urged Nebraskans to realize the importance of tree planting and the State Board of Agriculture offered \$100 to the county agricultural society which properly planted the largest number of trees on that day. In addition the state board offered a "farm library" worth \$25.00 to the person planting the most trees on Arbor Day. The state's newspapers were urged to publicize the resolution and to "remind the people of the importance of the matter from time to time."¹⁵

The individual winner that first Arbor Day was J. D. Smith who lived four miles west of Lincoln. According to the *Nebraska Herald*, he planted one tree per second for nearly ten hours, or 35,550 "forest trees." The *Herald* reported also that Elder Taggart of Palmyra had planted 20,000 trees during Arbor Day week.¹⁶ The *Nebraska Statesman* declared J. D. Smith to be the first Arbor Day champion, claiming that altogether he had planted a total of sixty acres. Smith believed that within ten years these trees would be worth \$1.00 each. He estimated that he had planted altogether 136,000 trees and recommended tree planting as a paying business.¹⁷

The fact remains, however, that tree planting had been "big business" prior to such promotional efforts as Arbor Day. Robert W. Furnas used his *Advertiser* to promote both tree planting and his growing nursery business. On August 10, 1871,

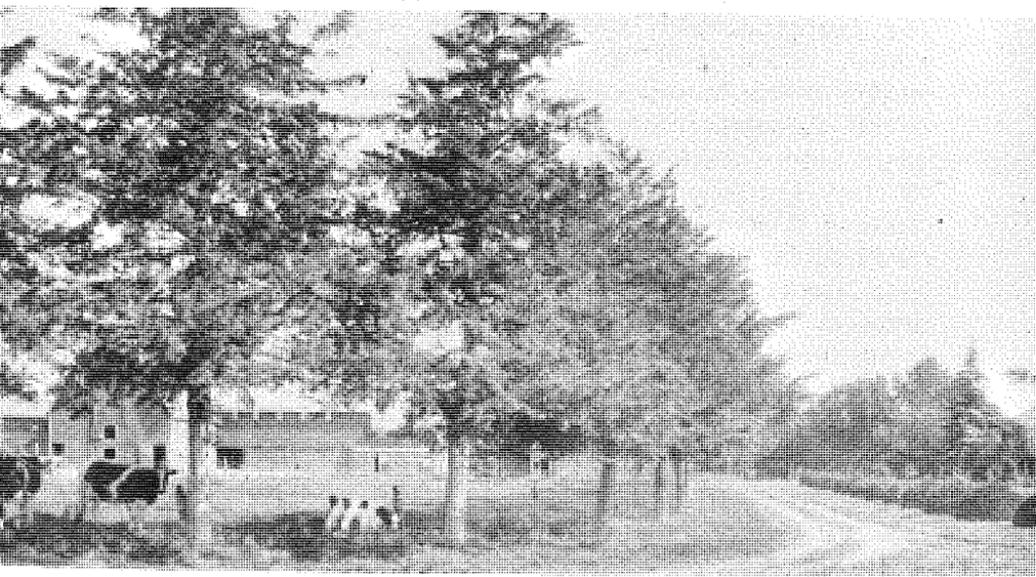
the *Advertiser* contained a two-column article under the title of "The Effect of Trees on Climate." In it Furnas said that the concept of the trans-Missouri as infertile was a myth, that in fact this very region was "God's Domain," and that nowhere else was there richer or more productive soil. Its only deficiency was insufficient precipitation. The article went on to claim that Egypt's annual rainfall had already been increased from six inches to twenty-four as the direct result of planting trees. In Algiers, North Africa, similar miracles were supposedly transpiring. On the other hand, if the climate happened to be too wet and the ground marshy or swampy, again the solution was to plant trees. The trees would drain the land and destroy the swamp fevers.

From time to time there were reports that large foreign investments were about to be made in an attempt to cover Nebraska with forests; however, this was never realized.¹⁸ The *Omaha Daily Tribune* was heartened at local efforts and "the energy with which the settlers had commenced to plant trees," commenting that four-inch seedlings could be purchased at West Point, Nebraska, for \$13.75 per thousand. The *Tribune* urged haste in planting, since the dearth of coal required an increasing supply of wood for fuel.¹⁹ The *Tribune* had been campaigning for tree planting for some time, having earlier declared, "We can grow anything which can be successfully cultivated in Illinois or Ohio unless it be frogs."²⁰ A few days later a similar article concluded with this boast: "Yes, Mr. Editor, in five years from today, the 'Great American Desert' will be the garden of America."²¹

Paradoxically, the *Blue Valley Record* printed a story in which the scarcity of trees appeared to be a boon. The story argued that it was easier for a farmer "to haul his wood and fencing several miles than to settle in a country where there is heavy timber and have to wear himself out clearing his land."²² The argument was pressed still further by the claim that if two farmers, one beginning his farm on the prairie and the other on a timbered farm, were to compare their success at the end of ten years, the prairie farmer would have excelled by a wide margin the accomplishments of the farmer who began on timbered land. The prairie farmer "will have double the amount of land under cultivation, will have fences equally as good, a



In 1886 the J. D. Ream homestead in Custer County had small ornamental evergreens lining the driveway and the beginnings of a shelterbelt behind the sod house.



In 1925 a photograph was taken from almost the same spot. The trees had prospered and the primitive buildings had given way to substantial frame structures on the Ream farm.

better house, better stock, his land will be worth from 25 to 50 percent more, and he will seem at least five years younger."²³ The only reservation expressed in the *Record* story about the advantages of prairie farming was the statement: "True, it may seem hard for a while, but after he once gets a start he can live with half the labor, and enjoy all the privileges he could on a timbered farm."²⁴

On May 31, 1871, the *State Journal* carried the allegorical newsstory of a man who wanted to migrate from the East to Nebraska. He had no money. His only asset was a life insurance policy, and he had inquired of the newspaper what it might be worth. The *Journal* answered that the only way he could collect on the policy was to die, and in that event he wouldn't be able to go west. Following this perceptive observation, the *Journal* went on to point out that loving parents would be wise to plant trees as a legacy for their children. The lesson drawn was that if the Easterner had had parents who were tree planters, he would have been wallowing in wealth with which to finance his move west.

As for the kinds of trees to be planted in Nebraska, there was a profusion of advice concerning the most adaptable varieties. The European larch was frequently suggested, along with willow, cottonwood, ash, oak, walnut, hickory, chestnut, catalpa, maple, honey locust, black locust, Osage orange, and several varieties of pine. Sometimes there were conflicting reports about the successes obtained with one or more of these varieties. The qualities of the larch were hotly disputed, some claiming it grew well, others not at all. One critic argued in effect that it was unpatriotic to buy European trees such as the larch. He encouraged the planting of native trees until such times as farms were paid for, then a few dollars could be "squandered" abroad.²⁵

In spite of all the claims and the enthusiastic promotional activity, the annual report of the Nebraska State Horticultural Society for 1897 stated that "not until 1873 did we see any active planting west of Lincoln."²⁶ And this in spite of the fact that the planting of trees was alleged to cure the homesickness of immigrants, to cause rain, to moderate the temperature, to prove parental love of their children, to instill patriotism, and of course tree planting was guaranteed to make everybody rich.

Yet, surprisingly the 1880 Nebraska Agricultural Census lists "woodland and forest" as "unimproved."

The fact that the attempt to promote tree planting was not an unqualified success is attested to by a correspondent of the *New York Sun*. While traveling over the plains of Nebraska he sent his paper a deprecatory newsstory, appending to it what he termed "the only real picture of a Western Prairie ever taken; it was taken on the spot; it is a night scene, as seen by night." What accompanied his article in the *Sun* was a small, column-wide all-but-blank rectangle containing only the numbers 1 through 11 and a total of 19 asterisks. Below this the numbers were identified as: (1) prairie chicken, (2) herd of cattle, (3) unheard of cattle, (4) Boston drummer, (5) silvery sheen, (6) space, (7) nothing, (8) pale moonbeams, (9) dew, (10) don't, (11) dust.

Following the "picture" was this explanation: "All the blank part is grass. The stars are supposed to be shining on the grass, and all nature is hushed. That part of nature that is not hushed, is left out of the design, by design."²⁷ One loyal Nebraska newsman's editorial comment was simply that the *Sun* correspondent "did not appreciate the picturesque beauty of our Western landscape."²⁸

Nevertheless, out of all this came a federal supplemental land law, the Timber Culture Act, which was approved March 3, 1873.²⁹ Its provisions were ludicrous. Its author, Nebraska Senator Phineas W. Hitchcock, should have known as much, being familiar with the state's varying rainfall and temperature patterns, its soil capabilities, and the time and energy the harassed homesteader had to devote to caring for his plots of trees. Yet somehow, once the act was sanctioned in Washington, local conditions, including climatic and geographic determinants, were supposed to cooperate, but in Nebraska they didn't.

NOTES

1. Walter P. Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1931), 9.
2. *Ibid.*, 428.
3. James C. Malin, *Grassland Historical Studies* (Privately published, 1950), 1.
4. *New York Tribune*, July 4, 1854, quoted in Malin's *Grassland Historical Studies*, 61.

5. *The Writings of John James Ingalls* (Kansas City, Mo.: Hudson-Kimberly Publishing Co., 1902), 122-123.
6. See Milton E. Holtz, "Early Settlement and Public Land Disposal in the Elkhorn River Valley, Cuming County, Nebraska Territory," *Nebraska History*, 52 (Summer 1971), 113-132.
7. *The National Era*, Washington, D. C., April 23, 1857, quoted in Malin's *Grassland Historical Studies*, 75.
8. *Nebraska Council Journal*, 1867, 12.
9. *Laws, Joint Resolutions and Memorials Passed at the Fourth and Fifth Sessions of the Legislative Assembly of the State of Nebraska*. (Omaha: A. D. Balcombe, State Printer, 1869).
10. *Ibid.*
11. O. T. B. Williams, *Seward County*, (Milford, Neb.: Culbert and Parsons Publishers, 1872), 8.
12. *The Cass Democrat*, (Plattsmouth, Neb.), February 15, 1872.
13. Robert W. Furnas Papers, Reel 1, MS 2501, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.
14. Much of the foregoing information was gleaned from James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955).
15. Nebraska State Board of Agriculture, *Proceedings*, Sept. 4, 1873, to January 26, 1876, 18. See Addison E. Sheldon, *Land Systems and Land Policies in Nebraska*, (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1936), 96-97.
16. *Nebraska Herald*, April 18, 1872. Found in the Burlington Railroad Scrapbook, Vol. 9, 187, Nebraska State Historical Society. Hereafter such newspapers cited in the above scrapbooks will be noted by the abbreviation B. S. B.
17. *Nebraska Statesman*, May 18, 1872. B. S. B., Vol. 9, 187.
18. *Omaha Daily Tribune*, May 27, 1871. B. S. B., Vol. 6, 30
19. *Ibid.*, no date, B. S. B., Vol. 6, 21.
20. *Ibid.*, Febr. 25, 1871. B. S. B., Vol. 6, 10.
21. *Ibid.*, Febr. 27, 1871. B. S. B., Vol. 6, 10.
22. *Blue Valley Record* (Milford, Neb.), April 27, 1871, B. S. B., Vol. 5, 9
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Omaha Daily Herald*, Nov. 20, 1872, B. S. B., Vol. 7, 230.
26. *Annual Report of the Nebraska State Horticultural Society, 1897*. (Lincoln: Published by the State, 1897), 9-10.
27. *Advertiser*, (Brownville, Neb.) March 20, 1872, B. S. B., Vol. 4, 30.
28. *Ibid.*
29. The Timber Culture Act, approved on March 3, 1873, provided that homesteaders could acquire an additional quarter section of land by planting forty acres of the same to trees and tending them for ten years. The act further stipulated that the trees had to be planted not in excess of 12 feet apart, which meant approximately 12,000 trees had to be planted and tended!