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Article Summary: In 1876 the Catherton Post Office was established in the Cowley home with Mrs Cowley in charge of the mail. The post office remained in this home for eleven years, until the coming of the railroad and the establishment of a post office at Bladen, Nebraska. Reminiscence of Catherton Post Office is by their son, Charles Wesley Cowley, based on a taped interview recorded in 1964.

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Photographs / Images: Franc (Mrs George Cather) on horseback; Francis Amanda (Franc) Smith; George P Cather, 1871

CATHERTON POST OFFICE

By CHARLES WESLEY COWLEY

INTRODUCTION

For the early pioneers of Webster County's North Divide—that high, rolling prairie between the Republican and Little Blue Rivers—getting mail was a major problem. By 1876 there were enough settlers at the four corners area (where Townships 3 and 4 North and Ranges 11 and 12 West met) to petition for a post office. When granted, the post office was established in the Isaac Cowley home in Batin Township, rather than in old Harmony Township (now Catherton Township), where the Cather family lived. Of the post office George P. Cather wrote:

In 1876 the Catherton Postoffice was established in the Cowley home with Mrs. Cowley in charge of the mail thus the home became headquarters for both mail and water, and the people of the community became very well acquainted with the Cowley family. The postoffice remained in this home for eleven years, or until the coming of the railroad and the establishment of a postoffice at Bladen, Nebr.

The Catherton Postoffice was on an overland mail route leading from Juniata to Red Cloud and supplying the offices at Silver Lake, Wells and Catherton. It was also served by a route running between Lowell and Catherton and supplying the offices of Morseville, Sportsville, Wheatland and St. Ann, for which a monthly report of the time of arrival and departure of mails was required from the Catherton Postoffice. During all the years of the Cowley incumbency in the office, there was never a complaint or a correction concerning any report made to the department, and the patrons of the office were as well satisfied with the running of the office as were the government officials.

The Cowley family were pioneers of Batin Township, homesteading in Section 6, Township 3 North, Range 11 West. Isaac Cowley was born on the Isle of Man in December, 1834, and came to the United States in 1857, settling in Illinois. On June 7, 1873, he was married to Nancy Jane Carr (born January 13, 1848, near Shelbyville, Illinois). A few days later they started for Nebraska by covered wagon. Isaac Cowley died February 21, 1896, and Mrs. Cowley died February 1, 1929.

The following reminiscence of Catherton Post Office is by their son, the late Charles Wesley Cowley. It is based upon a taped interview with Mr. Cowley recorded at Custer, South Dakota, June 25, 1964, for the Webster County Historical Society. Editing has been limited to rearranging parts of the text for continuity and to changing some wording for clarity. Cowley was born in Batin Precinct on October 8, 1876, and

died in Hastings on October 2, 1967. He was married on January 1, 1898, to Flora Ellen Cramer, whose father had come to Webster County in 1873 with the Isaac Cowleys. Mr. Cowley had a long career as a Bladen businessman. He and Mrs. Cowley were the parents of two sons, Leonard of Dallas and Ralph of Lincoln.

REMINISCENCE

My parents were married on June 8, 1873. They had their preparations to start west and they did. There were two other families, another family and a single man, that was going with them. This other family's name was Britton. Mr. and Mrs. William M. Britton and their two boys—Will about twelve and Ed, just a little fella, two years. They pulled out from Illinois on the 10th or 11th day of June, 1873. They had no definite plans where they were going, only they were going out to get a homestead. Father said they had no trouble on the road anywhere, but six weeks later from the time they left there, they pulled into camp at Red Cloud, Nebraska.

All the land around Red Cloud seemed to be taken up, so they went to a surveyor there, and he said, "I can get you all the land you want." So he took them up about ten miles north of Red Cloud to what is now Batin Township. The ladies were left in the camp. They took the tops off the wagons and set them down on the ground for the ladies to keep house in. They selected their homesteads in Township 3 North, Range 11 West. My father on the SW $\frac{1}{4}$, Section 6; Mr. Britton on the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of the same section, and William B. Cramer (Mrs. Britton's brother) on the E $\frac{1}{2}$ of the NW $\frac{1}{4}$ and the W $\frac{1}{2}$ of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 8. They filed in Lowell. Then they came back to Red Cloud, got their wagons and moved up. About six weeks, they all camped together on the Britton place. They had to drive a long ways to get water. Some springs down at the head of Indian Creek. My father and Mr. Britton went late one night. They got caught in the dark, and there was no roads—no anything—so they just laid down and went to sleep. The rest of them was up there at the camp and didn't have any water to drink. They got there the next morning for breakfast, pretty hungry guys.

As the Brittons had a small boy, they built the first house. They had to get their lumber from Juniata in Adams County to the north. A man by the name of Calvert took on the job of building the houses. My parents then moved over to their place

and father started getting lumber down for his own place.

In the meantime he had hired a man to dig a well. Seemed like there was a lot of fellas wandering around looking for jobs, so it was easy to hire help. But they was out there like babes in the woods. Nobody had any idea how far it was to water up there on the top of the hill, so father made this kind of a bargain with the guy: He was to pay him 20 cents a foot for each foot that he dug, but if he tried to quit before he got water, he wasn't to have anything; if father stopped him, father was to pay for all the man had dug. The man that was digging, he got down about thirty-fourty feet. He begin to want to squeal out. I guess father reminded him of their bargain; anyway he kept on. He got down eighty feet before they struck sand. Of course they had a couple of men to work on it because they had to curb the well the rest of the way down. Lumber for curbing wasn't quite so expensive as lumber for the house, but they run out of curbing material, [so] they had to use house material till they could get more curbing material there. Finally, when they had about eighty feet of curbing in, they struck water—160 feet to water from the top. Two men couldn't draw the water out fast enough so the fella could get a box in the bottom, and they got three feet of water. That three feet of water supplied all the water in the neighborhood for several months—some years before any other wells were put down. It was never known to go dry. They had two buckets—one went down and the other came up, but the one going up didn't come up as easy as the one going down did. I remember the old well house built there, I guess, to keep me out of it.

They got the house built, or so they could get into the house, anyway, so my folks went to Red Cloud and got their furniture to start keeping house: cookstove, chairs and bed, a few other things that was necessary. It happened that they did this the 8th day of October. Three years later to the day, I arrived to stay with them.

During those years there was all the hurley-burley of hauling lumber, building buildings—starting a community. The post office of Catherton was established at our house. Now, Mr. G[eorge].P. Cather was the moving spirit in that, and he had homesteaded a couple of miles farther west in October 1873. Catherton Township was named for him later on, but at that time he lived in the southern part of Harmony Township on Section 2, Township 3 North, Range 12 West. But for the

Catherton post office they had quite a fracas with the people at Washington getting a name for the place. They submitted two or three times, names of all kinds from Grand Prairie to Bloomington, but they turned them down. Mr. Cather got disgusted and said, "I'm going to name it for myself," and it was.

Later, Mr. Cather's father, known as Uncle Billy Cather, also came out from Virginia and purchased three or four sections of land from the Burlington Railroad. George Cather had homesteaded, pre-empted, and tree-claimed all in one section. Another brother, Charles, came later—the father of Willa Cather. I've heard my mother laugh about when George Cather got word of Willa's birth back in Virginia. Charlie wrote him and says, "We have a girl at our house, and we have music, both vocal and instrumental." Later the Charles Cather family moved out there and Willa grew up in Red Cloud, graduated from Red Cloud High School, and she made our whole territory famous by writing books about a lot of us. I never read all of them myself.

She told in one book about the first night when her Uncle George and Aunt Franc Cather were on their homestead. Aunt Franc was from the East, and, of course, she had to have everything tip-top and white at the camp. In the middle of the night, a prairie fire came up. If the fella that was with them hadn't started a back fire, the whole bunch would have been burned up, for they wouldn't have known what to do. The next morning Aunt Franc's white sheets were in awful shape. Mr. Cather came over to my folks with little pails for water. The well wasn't dug yet, and he found they was getting their water wherever they could find it—a scarce item.

Mr. Cather and my father worked together in a whole lot of things about improvement of the neighborhood, although they lived in what was afterwards different school districts.

Early in the settlement of our territory the people got together and decided they wanted preaching services. They were going to have them from one home to another in rotation. There was a Methodist preacher by the name of Moses Mapes, who had a homestead about three miles north of my folk's place. He held the first service in my parents' house up on the hill. So many of the neighbors lived in little dugouts that were hard to get at that Reverend Mapes just announced there would



Fashionably attired and riding side-saddle, Mrs. George Cather, known as Franc, sits in front of her Nebraska home. The photograph was taken about 1876. For a later view of the house, see page 610. (Photographs for this article were loaned by Mrs. Charlotte Shaw, Franklin, Nebraska.)

be services there at Cowleys for the rest of the season. He was a farmer himself, but Sunday morning he put his horses to rest and he walked over some place nearby where he preached. Then he walked to our house and preached in the afternoon; then he walked home. He kept that up for some time—two or three years I think. Later on, the Brethren had a preaching appointment at Catherton. Then the Baptist people took over. There



This study of Francis Amanda (Franc) Smith was taken in Winchester, Virginia, where she was teaching music at Winchester Institute. A graduate of Mount Holyoke, she married George P. Cather in 1873.

was regular Sunday services for years, and, also, we had preaching services in Highland schoolhouse—the old soddie schoolhouse. Once in a great while we had a literary, as they called it. It was a debating society. The country was settling up pretty good by those days.

My first Sunday school that I ever attended was in the frame Catherton schoolhouse. Aunt Caroline Cather (George's mother) was my first teacher. As I remember the primary class, I was the only boy in it. There were five girls, I believe—Carrie and Blanche Cather, Alma and Lillian Ramey, and Abby Larrick. I remember Aunt Caroline always brought us cookies, so she was a fine old lady. They usually ran it nine months and laid off through the winter. It was up in the '90's before they got to having *evergreen* school up there, *evergreen* meaning year round.

The Highland School, where I was raised, was the first in our neighborhood. They built their first one of Nebraska brick in 1879. It was located on Section 5, immediately east of our place. The teacher got the magnificent salary of \$15.00 a month for a three—months term. The Catherton district had organized first but wasn't holding school and then another district joined with Highland and Catherton. The building was sod, what the boys called Nebraska brick. It was, I expect, about twenty feet long, maybe fourteen feet wide, seated with wooden benches. The windows were a half window on each side, set into the **two-foot-** thick sod walls. It was kinda dark in there on cloudy days. The floor was twelve-inch boards. They had a blackboard

*George P. Cather in October,
1871, two years before his
marriage and move to Nebraska.
Like the facing picture,
his photograph was taken
by N. Routzahn at his gallery
in Winchester, Virginia.*



made out of a big rough board painted black. They had sawed an end off of it and made a top for the teacher's desk. I afterwards bought that desk, and it's in the collection of the Webster County Historical Society.

I went to school in that old school house there; my first teacher was a lady from down by Red Cloud—Sarah L. Fisher. She taught three terms in our district, two at Catherton district, one in Highland, one at Plainview to the north of us, and one in Five Star, I know by certain knowledge. She taught school there in Webster County for thirty years. So everybody up in that country knew Sarah L. She was quite tall, slender. She'd straighten up with them black eyes and snap her fingers at you. Cracked like a pistol. You felt like crawling under your desk, only you didn't have one—just a bench at that time.

If we had anything to write on, it was a slate. We didn't have anything such as a scratch pad or a lead pencil. We didn't know what they looked like. I remember I started to school before I was 5 years old. I was afraid they wouldn't let me go, but they did, and I was 5 before school stopped. We only had about three months' school. It was several years before they got up to five months. I never went longer than a five-month term in all that time. In '85 our old schoolhouse was condemned, so I was transferred to the Catherton district. I went there for two terms in the frame schoolhouse that had also been built for a church. Any orthodox minister was permitted to preach there.

I heard about all the hard luck stories around the post office,

when I was a little fella. I was 10-12 years old before the post office was discontinued. It was a meeting place for everybody. Probably eight or ten men waiting there for the mail; they'd stand around and cuss the mail carrier because he wasn't there on time, tell yarns and everything. The little town of Wells or Pickleville, a mile west of present Bladen, was headquarters for one mail carrier. The other fella'd come down from Hastings, bring in the mail, and the other man would take it from there to Red Cloud and come back the same day. I went to Red Cloud several times with the mail carrier. He had one of those old rattletrap buckboards. He'd take me every day if mother would let me go. He liked my company or something. People would come twelve-fifteen miles to our place. Later there was a post office organized south and west of us by the name of Otto. The mail carrier would bring the mail for Otto and leave it at Catherton. Then Uncle Dick Payne used to come and carry the mail down to Otto every other day.

They was still hauling the mail from Hastings to Red Cloud by buckboard, although the trains were now running into Red Cloud. The carrier had a five-year contract with the government, and they carried the mail two years after the railroad had been put in. Webster County voted \$50,000 bonds to get the railroad built down there. I've heard my mother laugh about a Red Cloud man who was for the bonds and an Irishman, who had homesteaded a few miles west of us, who was against them. Both were at the post office, and the Irishman got kinda wrathful. The man from Red Cloud said, "Now, now, Mr. Burns, don't lose your temper." He said, "I never lose it, it just flies to pieces and I pick it up again." The bonds went through, and the railroad went through to Red Cloud.

One of the first things I remember distinctly was the assassination of President James Garfield. I remember the evening that the mail carrier brought the word; it was raining. Also, I remember my mother got word her father was dead. She sorted the mail, putting her own aside. After the mail carrier was gone, she got her letter and read it. She didn't tell me anything, only went to the almanac and said, "That was two weeks—two weeks." Grandfather had been dead two weeks before she knew anything about it out there on the prairie.

Finally the railroad was built through northern Webster County and the town of Bladen was founded a few miles north of us. That was the end of Catherton Post Office.