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Photographs / Images: Adoniram J Leach; map of the Elkhorn Valley area, 1888; Neligh Mill; John D Neligh; inset logo and advertisements of the *Oakdale Pen and Plow*; Gates College; early view of Oakdale

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: ANOTHER LOOK AT THE ELKHORN VALLEY

By ORVILLE H. ZABEL

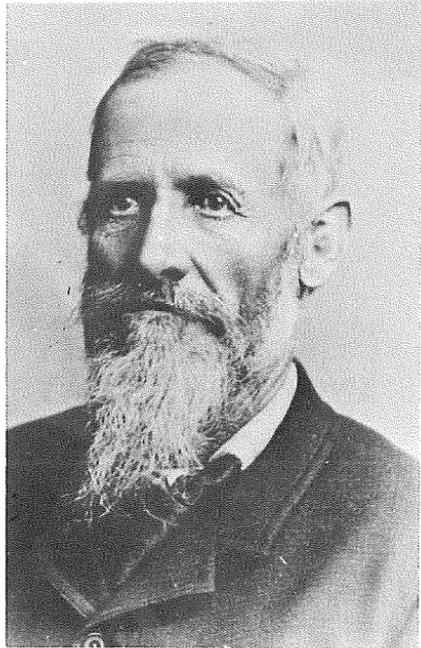
This paper was presented at the annual spring meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society in Neligh, June 10, 1973.

Since 1954 in Nebraska, we have been celebrating centennials—of the territory, of the state, of the completion of the first trans-continental railroad, of individuals (a centennial postage stamp will be issued soon for Nebraska's Willa Cather), of institutions like churches and colleges, and of communities. This year is the centennial not only of Neligh, but of Culbertson, David City, Harvard, Holdrege, Fairmont, Kearney, Loup City, Steele City, and Trenton, among others. We are gathered here at Neligh for the spring meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society to celebrate the centennial year of the Neligh Mill and to dedicate its historical marker.

A century sounds like a long time, but it isn't really so very long. I can remember half of it and the *Bicentennial* of the Declaration of Independence is still three years away! Indeed, we are young here, as those of you who have traveled in Egypt, Greece, or Palestine are keenly aware.

Our youthfulness in the Great Plains explains the growing interest now in local history—the pioneers themselves have just departed. It has all seemed like current events until now. This increasing concern with the local past is evident in the recent state law making a tax levy available for county historical

*Adoniram J. Leach served as secretary and historian of the Antelope County Pioneers. He published A History of Antelope County, Nebraska, 1868-1883, in 1909.*



societies and in the amazing growth and activity of such groups in the last decade or so. It is also seen in the interest of ethnic groups (now come of age) in their own past and one thinks of Loup City's Polish Days, Stromberg's Swedish Festival, and Clarkson's, Dwight's, and Wilber's Czech celebrations.

Those of us whose vocation is history know, as Philip Jordan suggests, that the House of History, presided over by the goddess Clio has many rooms.<sup>1</sup> There are places for national and international surveys providing broad conclusions and for various specialties—artistic, intellectual, political, religious, and social—or for various periods—colonial America, the Civil War, the New Deal, and the like.

But there are other rooms in Clio's House for regional, state, and local history. One thinks of general state histories such as James C. Olson's *History of Nebraska* and specialized books and articles on various topics. Recently the Society has published Merrill Mattes' *The Great Platte River Road* and William E. Lass's *From the Missouri to the Great Salt Lake*. There are rooms, also, for books such as *Pinnacle Jake* by Mrs. Nellie Snyder Yost, our chairman for today.

Of course, there are numerous county histories. I pause here to comment that A. J. Leach's *History of Antelope County*, published in 1909 and covering only the period from 1868 to 1883, is one of our better Nebraska county histories. Leach had participated actively in early county events. He and William B. Lambert (one of the early owners of the Neligh Mill) were secretaries and historians of the Old Settlers' Association of Antelope County from 1886 to 1909 and had done their homework in collecting information. Moreover, Leach was an intelligent man who saw the broader implications of local events, and was able to write in an interesting and accurate manner. While it obviously needs updating, his history is well done.

There are rooms in the House of History for periodicals such as our *Nebraska History* or regional magazines such as the *Journal of Western History*. Clio also makes room for graduate theses dealing with local topics. These are hidden away in the stacks of our university libraries, but annually the Society publishes a list of theses completed during the year. Of course, our Society and other libraries preserve an unmined wealth of raw material.

Today, I wish to do two things: first, make a few comments about local history as such; and second, briefly examine development of the Elkhorn Valley, especially in the decade of the 1870's, from a particular point of view. In approaching these topics I assume I am among friends and can speak frankly. Your presence here suggests an interest in both *local* and *Nebraska* history. I am interested in local Nebraska history too, both as historian and as native Nebraskan whose German grandmother arrived in Nebraska Territory in 1860 and whose other grandparents came soon thereafter.

Local history, generally, has had a "bad press." Why? For one thing, we are very close to it. Therefore, it is easy to assume that it cannot be very important. I suppose there is an element here akin to "no man is a prophet in his own country." Remember, natives my age *knew* the pioneers. Only now are we recognizing that the past is gone and some of the sources are irretrievably lost. The further one goes north and west in Nebraska, the more likely he is to find some real pioneers.

Recently I stopped in Taylor, county seat of Loup County, to get a picture of the little courthouse there. As I walked around with my camera, an old gentleman, curious as to my mission, approached and we were soon engaged in an interesting conversation. I discovered he was a Kinkaidier and had homesteaded in the Sandhills. Another reason for local history's "bad press" is that it often has been an exercise in local religious, family, or ethnic pride. It is strange how many inaccuracies and misinterpretations creep in under those circumstances. Finally, the "bad press" of local history derives from some very poor work which has been done. Often local history is too simple, too provincial, too antiquarian. Frequently only secondary sources are used, and errors are perpetuated.

Having made these critical comments, what are the *values* of local history? One important value is that it is part of a larger whole. The non-local historian would be hard-pressed to produce without it. It is the material from which broader histories must grow unless they are to be only summaries of previous works. Articles in local history magazines, theses, and monographs are all bases for writing broader histories. One can hardly conceive of a local history topic which will not lead, if one understands it, to all sorts of interesting ramifications.

A second value of local history is keeping the record clearly and responsibly. Allow me to suggest one illustration. It is a widely held assumption that most pioneers who came into this part of the West were homesteaders. As researchers have dug into the dusty land records in county courthouses, this assumption has increasingly appeared questionable. Apparently a limited percent of the land out here was homesteaded; the rest was purchased from speculators of one kind or another. Detailed research in the actual records dispelled the myth.

A third value of local history is its great personal reward in pleasure for the researcher. He may learn about his family in the perspective of the community, state, nation, or world. Or, he may discover the broader meaning of something he has seen and taken for granted all his life (the Neligh Mill, perhaps?) and that can be a fascinating experience too.

There are, of course, other values of local history such as providing a training ground for research and writing. It can be

used effectively this way from elementary grades through graduate school, with different levels of sophistication.

So, local history, with all its faults, properly understood, leads its practitioners to broader understanding, preserves the record accurately, and provides both pleasure and training.

It is said that two Nebraskans who loved hunting saved their money for years in order to make an African safari to hunt lions. After days of tramping through the jungles with no luck, they came upon a watering hole with what were obviously huge lion tracks around it. After contemplating the tracks for a time, one said to the other, "You follow the tracks forward and see where he is going and *I'll* follow them back and see where he came from!" Today I want to follow the lion's tracks *back* a bit without too much looking forward. I'm not even going to mention Watergate or the fuel crisis!

With the values of local history in mind, let us try to illustrate some of them by very selectively examining community development in the Elkhorn Valley in the decade of one hundred years ago—the 1870's. Both because time is limited and because only the beginning of the historical spadework has been done, all I intend to do is to suggest one type of approach which might be made historically in examining the history of the Elkhorn Valley.

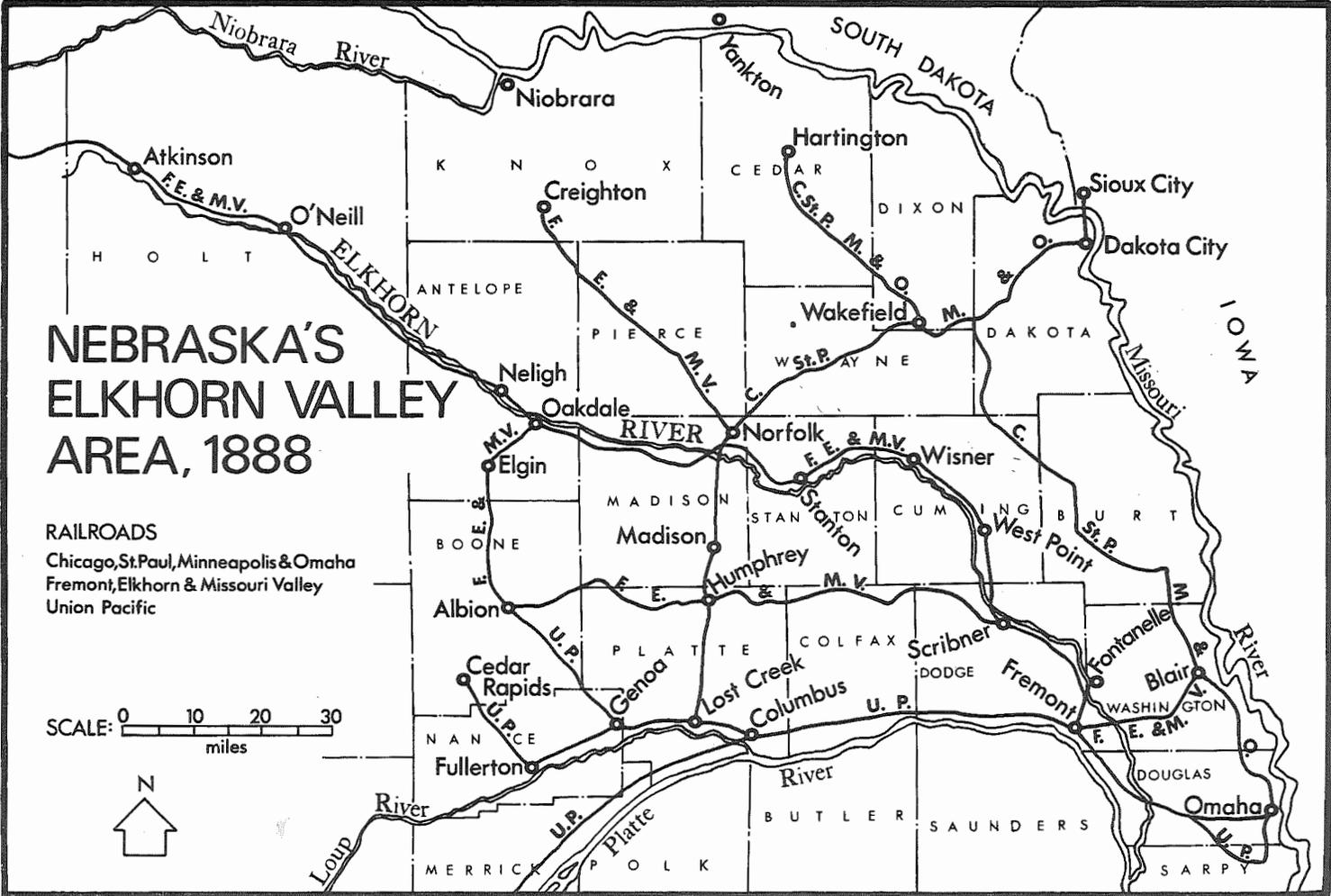
First, however, let us consider the wider perspective. You know that, generally speaking, our country was settled from east to west. What we sometimes overlook is that the Great Plains was passed by, while California and Oregon were settled and achieved statehood. There were many reasons. One was its reputation for aridity. There was some truth to that reputation for rainfall declined rapidly westward from the Missouri, timber was limited to stream banks, and, other than the Missouri, Nebraska had no navigable streams. Then, too, federal Indian policy supported the belief that the plains was the Great American Desert. In the 1830's a permanent "Indian Country" had been established and the eastern tribes moved west. Also, gold discoveries, notably in California, caused thousands (like many tourists today) to consider Nebraska mainly as a highway to some other place.

# NEBRASKA'S ELKHORN VALLEY AREA, 1888

## RAILROADS

Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha  
Fremont, Elkhorn & Missouri Valley  
Union Pacific

SCALE: 0 10 20 30  
miles



It was only after the Civil War, in the 1870's and 1880's, that Nebraska became attractive and was rapidly settled. As settlement occurred, a local Hibernian was so astonished at Nebraska's population growth that he exclaimed: "The growth of Nebraska has been much greater than I expected, and I always thought it would be!"

Total state population in 1870 was 122,993, but by 1890 (twenty years later) it had grown to 1,058,910. That was an increase of nearly a million people, or over 800 percent. In spite of the fact that optimistic boosters of the time predicted that by 1970 Nebraska's population would be 7,600,000, we learned from the last Federal Census that state population had grown only about 40 percent to 1,485,791 since 1890. We know, too, that our rural counties have declined in population while urban counties like Douglas and Lancaster have grown rapidly. My home county, Saline, had 3,106 people in 1870 and reached its peak population of 20,097 in 1890. By 1970 it had declined to 12,809. Our host county, Antelope, did not exist in 1870, and the census of 1880 showed a population of 3,953. As we will see, the railroad arrived in 1880 and by 1890 population had increased to 10,399. It continued to grow to 15,206 in 1930, but by 1970 had dropped to 9,047. My point is that for Nebraska in general, and certainly for the rural counties of the eastern half of the state, the most rapid period of growth was in the two decades from 1870 to 1890.

### SELECTED NEBRASKA POPULATION STATISTICS

| Year | Nebraska  | Saline<br>County | Antelope<br>County | Douglas<br>County |
|------|-----------|------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1860 | 28,841    | 39               |                    | 4,328             |
| 1870 | 122,993   | 3,106            |                    | 19,982            |
| 1880 | 452,402   | 14,491           | 3,953              | 37,645            |
| 1890 | 1,058,910 | 20,097           | 10,399             | 158,008           |
| 1900 | 1,066,300 | 18,252           | 11,344             | 140,590           |
| 1930 | 1,377,963 | 16,356           | 15,206             | 232,982           |
| 1960 | 1,411,330 | 12,542           | 10,176             | 343,490           |
| 1970 | 1,483,791 | 12,809           | 9,047              | 389,455           |

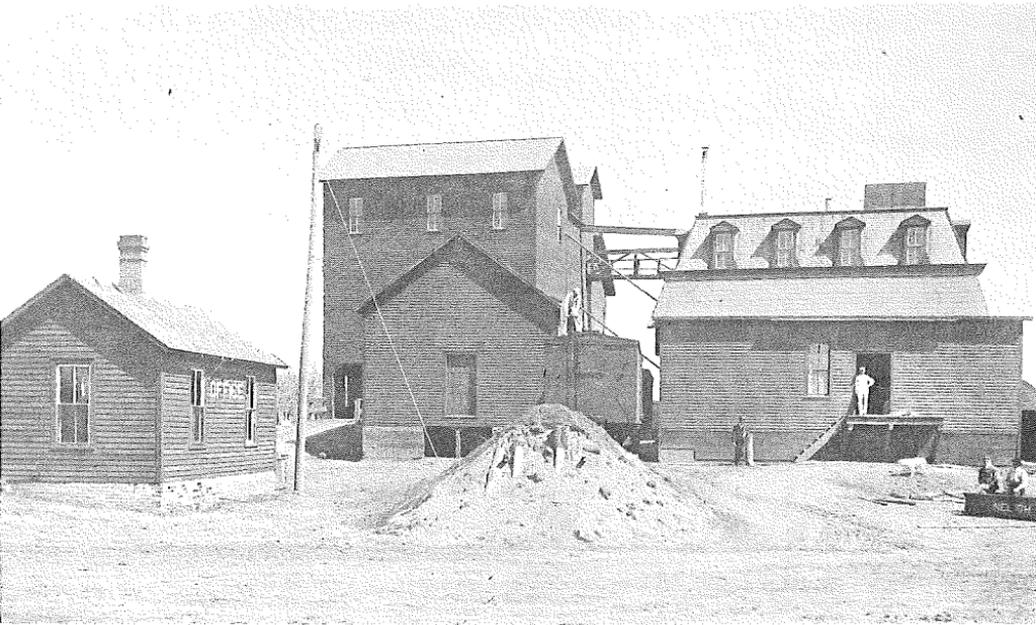
It has been usual for us as we talk about settlement of Nebraska to emphasize the individual farmer—either native or foreign immigrant—who arrived in his covered wagon, staked out a claim, built his log cabin (or, more likely in Nebraska, his dugout or soddie) and put down roots in the community. To be sure this was not an uncommon pattern, but all of us know, as Willa Cather, Mari Sandoz, and O. E. Rolvaag have made so plain, it was no *simple* process.

In recent years various historians have suggested that *where* these dirt farmers settled depended partly upon another group (which we would call “developers,” “promoters,” or “boosters”), essentially urban dwellers who often preceded the farmer. Daniel Boorstin<sup>2</sup> and others have suggested that these people, usually with some money, with boundless faith in the future, with intense (but transferable) loyalties, and with extravagant claims, worked to provide certain conditions and institutions which would attract people to *their* area.

Some study has been made of the role played by William B. Ogden in Chicago, Daniel Drake in Cincinnati, and William Larimer in Denver. The last, Larimer, first came to Nebraska in 1855 where he laid out La Platte, south of Omaha. He was flooded out in the spring of 1856, moved to the village of Omaha where his promotional activities were disappointing, and went to Leavenworth, Kansas, just in time to hear of the gold discovery at Cherry Creek in Colorado where he immediately moved. He became a Denver developer devoting his energy to building up that community as the commercial hub of the central Rockies. I have little doubt, and some evidence, that the Creightons, Kountzes, and many others played similar roles in early Omaha. My graduate seminar at Creighton University last year began investigating certain aspects of this matter.

Such people were involved as well in the development of the Elkhorn Valley. Some succeeded in setting up communities; some failed. Briefly, let us orient ourselves to the Valley and then examine a sampling of certain conditions and institutions (by no means all of them) which developers saw as devices to attract settlers to their particular area.

The Elkhorn River, a very crooked stream (resembling, with its tributaries, the horn of an elk—hence its name), rises in north



*The Neligh Mill was established in 1873 by John Neligh, who sold it that year to William Lambert. The mill, pictured here about 1900, is now restored and operated by the Nebraska State Historical Society.*

central Nebraska and flows some 309 miles southeastward through the counties of Holt, Antelope, Madison, Stanton, Cuming, Dodge, Washington, and Douglas. It finally joins the Platte River near the western border of Sarpy County. These counties as far west as Cuming were organized between 1854 and 1857. Dates of organization of the others reflect the thrust of settlement up the river valley: Stanton (1866), Madison (1868), Antelope (1871), and Holt (1876).

Communities were created in different ways. One of the earliest settlements on the Elkhorn was Fontanelle,<sup>3</sup> founded by a group from Illinois sometimes known as the "Quincy Colony." Fremont, on the Platte and near the Elkhorn as it begins to flow largely parallel to the Platte in the same valley (a peculiar geological situation), was founded by a town company made up of early settlers.<sup>4</sup> West Point was laid out by the Nebraska Settlement Association;<sup>5</sup> Colonel Charles Mathewson determined the location of Norfolk in 1869 and built a mill there;<sup>6</sup> Oakdale's townsite was on Omaha and Northwestern Railroad Company lands sold to several individual members of the State Board of Immigration in 1872. Andreas says the terms



*John D. Neligh, a Pennsylvanian, came to Nebraska in 1857. He lived in West Point most of his life and was a driving force in the growth of Elkhorn Valley industry.*

were \$3.25 per acre and the purchasers' bond for \$10,000 as a guarantee they would build and operate a mill.<sup>7</sup> According to William B. Lambert (you will recall he was an early owner of the Neligh Mill), John D. Neligh and others of West Point noted the advantageous site of the future Neligh in 1872. They decided to purchase the land, lay out a town, erect a flouring mill, and open a general store. Since this land was also owned by the Omaha and Northwestern Railroad Company (these were internal improvement lands acquired from the State of Nebraska), Mr. Neligh went to Omaha. There he discovered that the railroad company had marked the identical tract for a townsite and had reserved it from sale. Lambert described what happened:

After examining their plats under pretense of buying, with apparently no particular tract in view, he succeeded in having the numbers inserted in the contract under which he bought the present site of the town. Mr. Kountze, the vice-president of the road, before signing the contracts in duplicate, made particular inquiry as to whether it embraced the tract they had reserved as a townsite, and being assured by a careless' clerk that it did not, he affixed his signature to the contracts, and Mr. Neligh came out victorious.<sup>8</sup>

Regardless of *how* local settlements were initiated, the

promoters of each turned to boosting their communities. In the process they were fiercely competitive with any possible rival. What were the typical devices and institutions promoters felt would further their communities?

Obviously, being designated the county seat was an important step. Most of our Nebraska counties had real county seat wars. Fremont secured the Dodge County Seat in 1860 after the original seat, Fontanelle, was transferred to Washington County by legislative act! In Antelope County, Oakdale was first designated as county seat. Only after voting on the matter several times and destruction of the courthouse and its contents by a mysterious fire in 1875 did Neligh have sufficient voter support to get the county seat in 1884.<sup>9</sup>

Second, a newspaper was considered essential to a community, for it would become the advertising vehicle which would call into being the public it would serve. A newspaper appeared very early in each community. In 1882, Andreas in his *History of the State of Nebraska* praised the *Stanton Register* for having "constantly advertised the advantages of Stanton County as a location for settlers, and in every way labored for the best interests of the country."<sup>10</sup> Leach claims that in 1874 the *Oakdale Journal* was started, but friends of the community of Neligh during the county seat controversy prevailed upon the editor to transfer it to Neligh in 1875 and to rename it the *Neligh Journal*! Incidentally, not only was the courthouse burned the evening of October 6, 1875, but the *Journal's* editor was hanged in effigy in Oakdale for his defection.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the county seat and the newspaper were related for the publication of legal notices helped support those struggling newspapers which survived.

Third, any self-respecting community needed a college. My seminar's research last year indicated that by 1865 when Nebraska Territory's population was about 30,000, some twenty-three colleges, universities, and seminaries had been chartered in Nebraska. Many never opened; some did and closed; and one from that period, Peru, survives although now under state auspices. This process continued throughout Nebraska history but Allen Beermann, our secretary of state, tells me that the records, if they now exist, are in the county courthouses. Antelope County promoters were aware of the

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PEN AND PLOW,  
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E. P. McCORMICK,  
SARAH E. TAYLOR, { PROPRIETORS.

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OAKDALE



Pen and Plow

Vol. 1. Oakdale, Antelope Co., Neb., January 12, 1878. No.

COLUMBUS BUSINESS CARDS

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RAILROAD MATTERS

A Project for an Air-Line Narrow Gauge Railroad from Chicago Westward Indefinitely.

As one evidence of the interest taken in this little paper, we are in receipt of a letter from a party interested in the above named project, urging us to discuss the subject in our columns and try to arouse the farmers of Northern Nebraska to invite the extension of the road into the Elkhorn Valley.

The Oakdale Pen and Plow, established on April 7, 1877, by Isaac N. Taylor, became the Oakdale Journal in 1883. The newspaper underwent several title changes before publication stopped in 1891.

importance of a college as Oakdale Seminary (Presbyterian) and Neligh's Gates "College" (Congregational) attest. Both were founded in 1881.

Fourth, in the Great Plains it was the railroad which opened up the country to settlement. Contemporaries were quite aware of the importance of the railroad in this respect. The State Board of Agriculture in 1873 approvingly quoted James D. Butler to the effect that settlement's "advent into Nebraska was on locomotives, which, plying on iron rivers that rendered all prairies navigable, leave no corner of them untouched."<sup>12</sup>

As you know, the first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869. The Union Pacific had reached Fremont in 1866. In the winter of 1868-1869 a company of Fremont businessmen organized to agitate for building a railroad up the Elkhorn Valley. Success came quickly as railroad bonds for \$120,000 were guaranteed, and ground was broken during a

celebration in Fremont on November 5, 1869, for the Fremont, Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad, a branch of the Sioux City and Pacific. The speakers at the gala event reminded their listeners of the implications of the railroad. E. H. Barnard, the chairman, asserted that "this road is to become a connecting link in a great national railway. . . . Over this very spot will pass at no far distant day the products of the three zones, as those of two hemispheres do now. When that time arrives, the position of Fremont will be truly a commanding one."<sup>13</sup> In the first year the forty-one miles of rail to West Point were laid.<sup>14</sup> Cuming County voted \$100,000 in railroad bonds.<sup>15</sup> By 1871 Wisner had been reached.<sup>16</sup> Stanton County voted bonds as well.<sup>17</sup> The hard times of the 1870's slowed expansion, but in 1879 locomotives chugged into Norfolk.<sup>18</sup> In Antelope County, Twin Grove Precinct (Oakdale) and Center Precinct (Neligh) both voted railroad bonds by overwhelming majorities.<sup>19</sup> The Fremont, Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad reached Neligh in October, 1880, and O'Neill in 1881.<sup>20</sup> The supporters of the railroad were not disappointed. For example, Antelope County population grew from 3,953 to 10,399 in the decade of the 1880's.

Promoters or boosters in the Elkhorn Valley, as elsewhere, saw numerous other institutions as boosting their communities—churches, hotels, opera houses, schools, and the like—but I have time to describe only one other development common to early settlement and community development: the water-powered gristmill (the local sawmill is a part of the picture too). The promotional histories of early Nebraska, such as those of Andreas, Johnson, and Curley, place great emphasis upon such mills and the available water power.

The census of 1880 listed 134 water mills functioning in Nebraska. A century ago a mill was a prized possession, and community promoters actually sought millers and provided inducements to settle on proposed townsites. Numerous mills were located on the Elkhorn and its tributaries. It was *not* strange that John D. Neligh of West Point should start building a mill here in 1873. What *was* strange about the Neligh Mill was its durability and success and that story in detail would be an interesting one. Suffice it to say here that the Panic of 1873



*The citizens of Neligh realized the importance of higher education to the growth of their community. Gates College (Academy), a Congregational institution, was established in 1881.*

forced Neligh to sell to William B. Lambert and William Gallaway, who completed the mill and brush dam and began grinding in 1874 with stone buhrs powered by a Leffel turbine wheel connected with a Roebling wire cable.<sup>21</sup> At various times in the past century the mill's ownership changed, and it was enlarged and improved as technology developed and as winter wheat replaced spring wheat. In 1900 it began supplying both electric power and water to the Neligh community. Its milling became more and more sophisticated, and it is claimed that the "Gold Medal" brand of flour originated there but subsequently was sold and became the property of General Mills. In any case it continued to function until recently as a flour and feed mill. In 1970 it was purchased by the Nebraska State Historical Society. The Neligh Mill, then, represents several things: (1) the hundreds of similar early water mills scattered along the streams of Nebraska; (2) the base of our cereal production in this agricultural state; and (3) the foundation of many communities—both those which survived and those which disappeared. It



*This is an early view of Oakdale (date unknown) looking down the hill south of town. On the left is the Oakdale Mill building on Cedar Creek. Established in 1873, it was the first flour mill in Antelope County.*

is fitting, indeed, that as historians we should dedicate and preserve this symbol of the past.

Now, briefly, let us follow the lion's tracks forward. Today, as population statistics suggest, Nebraska communities are changing rapidly. Technology—especially the auto and tractor—threaten many small communities throughout the state. Some will decline and disappear; others will survive and grow. I suspect that, just as was the case a hundred years ago, the institutions a community attracts and retains will be the determining factor in its survival or demise. From the *local* point of view, the county seat must be retained if possessed. County merger is not popular in rural Nebraska. The disappearance of a local newspaper which unites the community is a calamity. If possible, a technical college, community two-year college, or a new private college must be established to add community strength. Such hope recently supported the creation of the now defunct Hiram Scott and John J. Pershing Colleges. Of course, the high school *must* be retained. Transportation is crucial. If the railroad cannot be continued, at least good roads

and bus service are essential. Industry must be attracted and retained—it may be the Peterson Vice-Grip Wrench factory at DeWitt in Saline County or the Iowa Beef packing plant at West Point in Cuming County. You see, really some things haven't changed so very much in a century!

Indeed, the local history of Fremont, Fontanelle, West Point, Stanton, Norfolk, Oakdale, Neligh, O'Neill, or other communities along the Elkhorn *is* a part of a larger whole. Understanding it *will* keep the record straight. And from studying these local communities *can* come rewards of personal pleasure and awareness.

I heartily commend the diligent practice of local history to you.

#### NOTES

1. *The Nature and Practice of State and Local History* (Baltimore, 1958), v.
2. *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York, 1965), 113-168.
3. The Quincy Colony adopted the name Fontenelle, incorrectly using an "a" in its spelling. The family name, Fontenelle, has been used correctly in other instances. See James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 1966), 24-25, 49, 99.
4. Harrison Johnson, *Johnson's History of Nebraska* (Omaha, 1880), 314.
5. *Ibid.*, 256.
6. A. T. Andreas, Proprietor, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago, 1882), 1105.
7. *Ibid.*, 376; See also A. J. Leach, *A History of Antelope County Nebraska From Its First Settlement in 1868 to the Close of the Year 1883* (Chicago, 1909), 131.
8. See Leach, *History of Antelope County*, 133.
9. *Ibid.*, 140-146.
10. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 1438.
11. Leach, *History of Antelope County*, 141-142.
12. *Fourth Annual Report of the . . . Nebraska State Board of Agriculture* (Lincoln, 1873), 28.
13. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 637.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, 601.
16. *Ibid.*, 606.
17. *Ibid.*, 1437.
18. *Ibid.*, 1104.
19. Leach, *History of Antelope County*, 155.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 378.