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Article Summary: Thomas Benton Hord, a young entrepreneur went to Wyoming Territory in 1880 with money to invest in range cattle. Later, in partnership with eastern capitalists, Hord's investment grew to include Wyoming and Montana ranches and feed yards in Merrick County, Nebraska. After 1900, the business diversified to include banks, grain elevators, and potash extraction plants. The Hord family legacy consists of entrepreneurial activities of significance to local and regional history, along with a long record of community service.

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Photographs / Images: T B Hord [portrait]; Mrs T B Hord and her son Heber Hord on the 77 Ranch near Lusk, Wyoming, in the 1880s; Heber Hord; Heber Hord's Central City residence in 1906; Hord cattle feeding operations; Maplehurst, one of eleven Hord ranches in Merrick County; T B Hord Grain Company elevator in Havens, Merrick County; Thomas Barge Hord roping a calf for branding at his Lakeside ranch



*T. B. Hord (NSHS-H811.3-7)*

# THE HORD FAMILY: MERRICK COUNTY ENTREPRENEURS

*By Dennis D. Madden*

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Great Plains experienced a continual influx of individuals seeking to build new lives and amass fortunes in the developing region. One such entrepreneur was a young Ohio farmer named Thomas Benton ("T. B.") Hord, who went to Wyoming Territory in 1880 with money to invest in range cattle. Later, in partnership with eastern capitalists, Hord's investment grew to include Wyoming and Montana ranches and

feed yards in Merrick County, Nebraska. Although cattle feeding and ranching would continue to be major components of the expanding Hord empire, after 1900 the business diversified to include banks, grain elevators, and potash extraction plants. For a century, T. B. Hord and his heirs contributed significantly to the economic development of Central City, Merrick County, and central and western Nebraska.

In 1986 T. B. Hord's grandson, Thomas Barge Hord, donated to the Nebraska State Historical Society an extensive collection of family papers and business records spanning the years 1887-1973. The collection includes records of the following com-

panies: Lance Creek Cattle Company, Wells-Hord Company, Waddle Land Company, T. B. Hord Alfalfa Meal Company, M. Shonsey Cattle Company, T. B. Hord Land and Cattle Company, Belgrade-Hord Company, T. B. Hord Grain Company, Hord and Son, Inc., and Lakeside Ranch Company. Also donated by the Hord family were numerous photographs, some of which were used to illustrate this article.

During the processing of the collection, it became apparent that the Hord papers were a potentially rich source relating to the business and agricultural history of Nebraska and the Great Plains. It seemed appropriate to utilize the research undertaken in processing the collection to provide an introduc-

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tion to the Hord family's endeavors, beginning in 1880 when Thomas Benton Hord first arrived in the West.

T. B. Hord was born June 15, 1850, at Marion, Ohio. From an agricultural background, he embarked early upon his own farming venture. Profits from crops grown on rented land were invested in a flock of sheep. Eventually Hord earned enough capital from his modest Ohio enterprises to consider larger-scale investment in the speculative western range cattle industry. With financial assistance from family members, Hord initiated this effort by moving to Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, in 1880. His family joined him the following year.<sup>1</sup>

During the next several years, Hord became active in Wyoming business and financial affairs. He helped

organize Cheyenne's first bank, Citizens National, and increased his herd of range cattle.<sup>2</sup> About 1884 he sent some of his Wyoming cattle to be fattened at the Pennoyer Feed Yard near Central City, Nebraska. Apparently the venture was a success, for soon afterwards Hord purchased land near Central City for a feeding operation.<sup>3</sup>

In 1886 Hord joined with Wyoming cattlemen and eastern investors to form the Lance Creek Cattle Company, incorporated in Cheyenne on March 1, 1886, with a capital stock of \$1 million.<sup>4</sup> Although the exact details of the arrangement are unclear, Hord apparently brought into the company his own cattle, as well as his fledgling Central City feed yard. The company's primary work station was the 77 Ranch, located near Lusk, Wyoming. Its long-

term plan involved raising cattle on the Wyoming ranch and fattening them for the market at Central City.<sup>5</sup>

By April 1887 the cattle company was planning permanent feed yards and shipping facilities at Central City.<sup>6</sup> However, the company struggled during its early years, deeply in debt caused by severe stock losses on the range in the winter of 1886-87 and the feeding operation's failure to make a profit.<sup>7</sup> Hord moved to Central City permanently in 1887 to oversee the feeding operation as vice-president and general manager of the Lance Creek Cattle Company.<sup>8</sup>

By 1891 Hord and his principal partners, Wyoming cattleman Thomas F. Adams and New York importer Charles F. Smillie, had decided that the feeding operation represented the

*Mrs. T. B. Hord (standing on porch) and her son, Heber Hord (seated boy), on the 77 Ranch near Lusk, Wyoming, in the 1880s. (NSHS-H811.3-1)*



future of the Lance Creek Cattle Company. The company sold the 77 Ranch and withdrew entirely from Wyoming, though for convenience, it remained incorporated there.<sup>9</sup> Lance Creek retained ranches in Montana, where feeder cattle were raised for shipment to Central City.<sup>10</sup>

Hord's construction of the home ranch two miles east of Central City laid the foundation for what was to become perhaps the largest cattle-feeding operation in the nation by the turn of the century.<sup>11</sup> Yet his immediate concern lay with the continued management of the Lance Creek enterprise. Through most of the early 1890s the company struggled to solve its debt problem in the face of economic hard times. In 1896 the company requested a ten-year extension on its bonds.<sup>12</sup> At this point documentation lapses regarding the fate of the Lance Creek Cattle Company and Hord's role in its affairs. Presumably the company was liquidated sometime prior to 1900, but whether Hord purchased the other partners' Central City interests is not known.

However, Hord's personal investments in Central City probably helped him weather Lance Creek's demise. While he was manager of the company, Hord also fed his own cattle and bought land at Central City.<sup>13</sup> He became president of the Bank of Central City in 1896.<sup>14</sup> Surviving records suggest that by 1900 he was in sole charge of the various subsidiary companies that comprised the growing Hord family empire.

Eventually Hord's Central City feeding operation included as many as twenty subsidiary feeding stations or ranches in central Nebraska encompassing nearly 20,000 acres. By the early 1900s the facilities in an average year accommodated 10,000 beef cattle, 10,000 sheep, and 7,000 hogs.<sup>15</sup> Numerous feedlots were located strategically on the three major railroad lines in Nebraska — the Union Pacific, the Chicago and Northwestern, and the Burlington. Supposedly Hord

at one time owned feed yards in every town on Burlington branch lines north of Central City.<sup>16</sup>

Specific methods employed at Hord's feeding facilities deserve mention. Open or outdoor feeding was used for cattle, and no sheds or barns were placed within the feed yards. Each lot ranged in size from ten to fifteen acres and could accommodate approximately 200 animals.<sup>17</sup> Only mature cattle three years old or more were put into the yards on full feed in the fall. During the next six months, cattle were cut out as they fattened sufficiently and were shipped to market. The following spring the soil in the yards was plowed and planted to corn. This sanitized the lot and after harvest, it was once again available for fall feeding.

Sometimes hogs followed cattle into the feedlots. These animals survived largely upon cattle waste supplemented by a daily ration of mill feed. A centrally located hog house provided shelter during inclement weather. By contrast sheep were subjected to open feeding. The sheep yards were physically separated from those used for cattle and hogs. Each pen housed about 400 head.<sup>18</sup> In his feeding enterprise, Hord established a reputation for consistently providing finished livestock for the slaughter market. It was claimed that no "warmed-up" or "half-fat" stock ever left Hord feed yards.<sup>19</sup> The impact of the feeding operation on the economy of Central City and the surrounding area was immense. Not only did Hord employ about 300 people, but the feed yards created a huge market for corn and hay. In 1900 and 1901, nearly \$300,000 worth of crops were purchased annually from local farmers.<sup>20</sup>

From his Central City headquarters, T. B. Hord administered the expansion and diversification of his businesses. The cattle raising and feeding endeavors were complemented in the early 1900s by the T. B. Hord Grain Company, the Hord Alfalfa Meal Company, the Lakeside Ranch Company, and others.

Aside from livestock feeding, Hord's most profitable venture was the grain company, established in 1906. His entry into this area is best explained by a contemporary cattleman, Edward Wentworth:

Mr. Hord afforded the single greatest market for grain and hay in the central west. Annually such enormous quantities as 10,000 tons of hay and 1,000,000 bushels of corn were fed in his yards. Of this amount only 5,000 tons of hay and 75,000 bushels of corn were produced by him and the remainder had to be purchased. His demands made a lucrative business for several grain dealers and elevator operators, but having become established, they made the mistake of trying to crowd prices on him too concertedly, and he secured the capital, not only to buy them out, but to obtain a string of elevators all across Nebraska and Iowa on the main trunk lines.<sup>21</sup>

Eventually Hord owned the largest grain company in the state with over fifty elevators. The company offices in Central City served as an exchange: buying, selling, and "shipping Midwest corn and grain products to all four corners of the United States and all points in between."<sup>22</sup> Lumber, coal, feed, fertilizer, and hardware were additional products sold by the company.

Hord's various enterprises not only contributed to the economic health of his community and region, but had an impact in the international business arena. During the 1890s Hord experimented with shipping high quality livestock from Central City to European markets, especially England and Germany. Between 1902 and 1910, through the efforts of the Waddle Land Company Limited, Hord and associates engaged in various agricultural undertakings in Canada.<sup>23</sup> They helped establish one of the early bonanza wheat farms in western Canada. This experimental farm, consisting of 40,000 acres located in the Saskatchewan Valley between Craik and Davidson, was purchased for \$200,000.<sup>24</sup>

In 1908 Thomas B. Hord suffered failing health and later succumbed to partial paralysis following a stroke. On December 24, 1910, he died, leaving his vast holdings to his only son, Heber Hord. The admiration, respect, and appreciation Hord earned from his contemporaries is reflected in an

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excerpt from an obituary written by a personal friend identified as "J. C." (probably John Clay, an associate from Hord's Wyoming years):

His greatest asset was pertinacity. He never knew defeat. It might be there, but he brushed the thought away, and so he conquered. When he got a start he went fast up the path of success, but he was ever the same kindly man to his employees and the star of success did not dim his genial smile when he met old friends.

While the West did much for him, he did a lot in return. As a practical ranchman, as a feeder, as a judge of stock, he might have had equals, but no superiors. He showed this by his work and results, and his fellow men honored him for it.<sup>25</sup>

Heber Hord, the son of Thomas Benton and Sarah Hill Hord, was born June 1, 1877. Young Heber showed an early interest in the family businesses. Through close association with his father and a brief education at Oberlin Ohio Business College, he acquired the

necessary acumen to conduct the affairs of the far-ranging Hord operations.

Under Heber Hord's guidance, family business interests prospered initially. He expanded enterprises such as the feeding and ranching operations and the grain company. By the 1920s Heber could boast of having fed as many as 75,000 sheep in a single year.<sup>26</sup> In 1923 Hord feeding facilities accommodated over 25,000 cattle.<sup>27</sup> The Lakeside Ranch Company, established in 1907, experienced continued growth under Heber Hord's direction. Originally composed of Kinkaid tracts purchased by T. B. Hord shortly before his death, the ranching operation saw its holdings in Garden and Sheridan counties in Nebraska



*Heber Hord (above) constructed his Central City residence in 1906. The spacious, two-story frame house, remodeled in 1923, is now on the National Register of Historic Places. (NSHS-H811.3-8, 14)*





*The Hord cattle feeding enterprises created a large market for hay, some of which was produced on Hord property. (NSHS-H811.3-44)*



*Maplehurst, one of eleven Hord ranches in Merrick County. (NSHS-H811.3-17)*

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increase to nearly 70,000 acres by 1930.

Heber's early administration of the grain company also proved successful. The exchange flourished. Into the 1920s the main office in Central City was continually negotiating with over twenty non-Nebraska elevators and other shippers for the purchase of surplus Nebraska grain.<sup>28</sup> Sixty railcar purchases and daily bank clearings of \$75,000 to \$100,000 were not uncommon during this period.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to supervising the established family businesses, Heber Hord ventured into new areas. One was the Hord Alkali Products Company, established in 1917. Despite earnings of over \$1 million, this foray into the short-lived Nebraska potash industry produced mixed results.<sup>30</sup> Potash, used primarily in the manufacture of fertilizer, was in great demand during World War I. The need was prompted by the suspension of trade with Germany, previously the principal supplier for the United States.

Upon determining that the brackish lakes and ponds on the Lakeside Ranch were suitable sources, Hord directed efforts to begin potash reduction. A \$200,000 plant was constructed at Lakeside that averaged a daily output of fifty tons, most of which was shipped to southern states.<sup>31</sup> The plant employed over 100 workers.<sup>32</sup> Reduced demand forced a temporary closure of the complex in 1919, but later that year operations resumed, only to be suspended again by a devastating fire. Damages to the plant and ancillary structures were estimated at \$600,000.<sup>33</sup> Soon after the plant was reconstructed and returned to full capacity, the Nebraska potash boom ended and the plant closed permanently. The failure of this Hord undertaking was an indicator of events to come.

The 1920s and 1930s proved difficult for the Hords. A variety of their enterprises faltered. A representative casualty was the Belgrade-Hord Company. Founded in 1903 as the Haas and Hord Cattle Company, it sustained

early growth, showing a profit of over \$23,000 in 1906-7.<sup>34</sup> Consistent profitability over the next decade resulted in the diversion of \$75,000 to a surplus account by 1918.<sup>35</sup> By the mid-1920s, however, annual losses were being recorded as the agricultural economy declined. By 1930 the company reported losses of nearly \$90,000 during the first six months of the year.<sup>36</sup> Continued losses, mounting deficits, and

impending foreclosure forced dissolution of the Belgrade-Hord Company in 1936. A similar scenario unfolded for the Hord-Shonsey Cattle Company, which ceased operations in 1942.

Other Hord businesses, while managing to survive, suffered severe setbacks during the Depression. The formerly lucrative grain company netted a profit of only \$5,081 for fiscal 1940-41.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, financial stress

*The T. B. Hord Grain Company elevator in Havens, Merrick County. (NSHS-H811.3-27)*





*Thomas Barge Hord ropes a calf for branding at his Lakeside Ranch. (NSHS-H811.3-43)*

necessitated the sale of nearly half of the Lakeside Ranch property. Despite these difficulties, three solvent Hord enterprises survived after World War II — Hord and Son, Inc., the T. B. Hord Grain Company, and the Lakeside Ranch Company. These entities remained the latter-day focus of business for Herber Hord until his sudden death from a heart attack in November 1949. Soon afterwards his only son, Thomas Barge Hord, took control of the Hord interests.

Thomas Barge Hord had been born at the home ranch in Central City, February 21, 1905, and like his father, groomed at an early age for eventual management of Hord businesses. In 1931 at the age of twenty-four he became general manager of the Lakeside Ranch Company. Young Hord and his family moved to the Sand Hills, where he spent most of the next thirty-five years concentrating on the ranching business, though he exercised responsibility for directing the other Hord enterprises.

Thomas Barge Hord was president of the T. B. Hord Grain Company for over seven years. From 1950-57 the

company consistently reported profits. Nevertheless, earnings had begun to decline substantially. The treasurer's report for the fiscal year ending May 31, 1957, noted "sizeable decreases in transit grain, lumber, and hardware sales" resulting in a meager net operating gain of \$4,102.<sup>38</sup> When a national economic recession intensified, a liquidation plan for the grain company was implemented in May 1958 that transferred the remaining corporate assets to stockholders. By 1963 the dissolution was completed.

As general manager and later president of the Lakeside Ranch Company, Thomas Barge Hord was responsible for an extensive ranching operation with holdings in both Garden and Sheridan counties. The ranch was divided into Lakeside North and Lakeside South. The former contained over 10,000 acres; the latter nearly 25,000 acres. This cow-calf operation, specializing in Herefords in its heyday, maintained an average herd of 5,000 and shipped nearly 2,000 cattle per year to feed in Central City.<sup>39</sup> The ranch enjoyed a reputation for quality livestock and herd improvement

through selective buying and scientific breeding.<sup>40</sup>

However, despite its apparently progressive nature the ranch also encountered financial difficulties by the 1960s. Erratic earnings were followed by consistent losses in the early 1970s.<sup>41</sup> The affiliated feeding enterprise, Hord and Son, Inc., based in Central City, experienced similar problems. Efforts to compete in the new agribusiness environment proved unsuccessful. Both companies were liquidated in the early 1970s, signaling an end to a Nebraska family business that spanned nearly a century.

Aside from its business activities, the Hord family maintained a dominant presence in its community. By the early 1900s Thomas Benton Hord had obtained the first telephone franchise for Central City.<sup>42</sup> He also introduced a profit-sharing plan that allowed employees to participate in the success of the companies. Hord built the town's first sewer system and donated Hord Hall to Nebraska Central College.<sup>43</sup> The nearby village of Stark in Hamilton County even changed its name to Hordville in 1907.<sup>44</sup>

Heber Hord also left his mark on Central City. His gifts to the community included a post office site, street lights, and a community hospital.<sup>45</sup> His commitment to the cattle industry was demonstrated by his active membership in the Nebraska Stock Growers Association and his twenty-five-year tenure on the board of directors of the Union Stockyards Company of Omaha. For his wide-ranging community services, Heber Hord received a Good Neighbor citation from the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben in 1946.

Thomas Barge Hord also demonstrated ingenuity and commitment to the Nebraska cattle industry. While manager of Lakeside Ranch, he implemented various mechanical innovations to enhance the efficiency of ranch operations. Among them was haying equipment, specifically an all-steel stacker he developed which attracted the interest of ranchmen throughout the Panhandle.<sup>46</sup>

The several Hord homes in Central City have been landmarks reflecting the family's success. T. B. Hord's home, built in Central City in 1899, was donated by Heber Hord to the community in 1945 for use as a hospital. In 1959 the building was razed when a more modern hospital was constructed. The original home ranch outside of town was sold by the Hords in 1985, but the new owners have attempted to maintain the historic integrity of the main house, barn, and outbuildings.<sup>47</sup> The Heber Hord home, built in 1906, has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The Hord family legacy consists of entrepreneurial activities of significance to local and regional history, complemented by a long record of com-

munity service. The Hord papers offer additional opportunities to assess the role this interesting and influential family played in the business and agricultural development of Merrick County, the state of Nebraska, and the Great Plains.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"The Hord Family" genealogy, MS4232, Subgroup One, Hord Family Papers, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society (hereafter Hord Papers); Ruth Morse, "Hello There," *The Nebraska Cattleman* 4 (January 1948), 16; Nellie Snyder Yost, *The Call of the Range: The Story of the Nebraska Stock Growers Association* (Denver: Sage Books, 1966), 145.

<sup>2</sup>"The Hord Family" genealogy, Hord Papers.  
<sup>3</sup>Yost, *Call of the Range*, 147.

<sup>4</sup>Certificate of Incorporation and Bylaws of the Lance Creek Cattle Company of Wyoming Territory, March 1, 1886; "The Hord Family" genealogy, Hord Papers.

<sup>5</sup>Gene M. Gressley, *Bankers and Cattlemen* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 178; Yost, *Call of the Range*, 147.

<sup>6</sup>*Central City [Nebraska] Courier*, April 14, 1887.

<sup>7</sup>Gressley, *Bankers and Cattlemen*, 179-81; Yost, *Call of the Range*, 147-50.

<sup>8</sup>Morse, "Hello There," 16.

<sup>9</sup>Charles F. Smillie to T. B. Hord, February 18, June 8, 1891; Smillie to Henry G. Hay, November 13, 1891. Lance Creek Cattle Company file, Hord Papers.

<sup>10</sup>Board of Trustees Report to Bondholders and Stockholders of the Lance Creek Cattle Company, December 31, 1891, Lance Creek Cattle Company file, Hord Papers.

<sup>11</sup>George W. Hervey, ed., *Nebraska Resources Illustrated: A Condensed History of Nebraska for Fifty Years to Date* (Omaha: Nebraska Farmer Company, 1903), 86.

<sup>12</sup>Statement to the Bondholders of the Lance Creek Cattle Company, February 1, 1896, Lance Creek Cattle Company file, Hord Papers.

<sup>13</sup>Charles F. Smillie to T. B. Hord, December 31, 1891, May 2, 1892, May 3, 1893, Lance Creek Cattle Company file, Hord Papers.

<sup>14</sup>*Central City [Nebraska] Nonpareil*, June 18, 1896.

<sup>15</sup>Hervey, *Nebraska Resources Illustrated*, 86.

<sup>16</sup>*Nebraska State Journal*, Lincoln, December 25, 1910.

<sup>17</sup>Edward N. Wentworth, *Biographical Catalog of the Portrait Gallery of the Saddle and Sirluin Club* (Chicago: Union Stockyards, 1920), 162.

<sup>18</sup>Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, Vol. 3 (Lincoln: Western Publishing and Engraving Company, 1913), 308.

<sup>19</sup>*Central City Nonpareil*, August 28, 1902.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>Wentworth, *Biographical Catalog*, 151.

<sup>22</sup>"Henry Phares, Key Hord Dispatcher, Sells Grain to Points Everywhere," *Central City Nonpareil*, undated clipping, Subgroup One, Hord Papers.

<sup>23</sup>Directors Minutes, 1902-10, Waddle Land Company, Subgroup Three, Series One, Volume One, Hord Papers.

<sup>24</sup>"Nebraskans Go to Canada," *Central City Nonpareil*, undated clipping, Subgroup One, Hord Papers.

<sup>25</sup>"T. B. Hord, An Appreciation," in "The Hord Family" genealogy, Hord Papers.

<sup>26</sup>"Hord Interests Have Played a Leading Part in Making Nebraska an Inland Empire," unidentified clipping, Subgroup One, Hord Papers.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup>"Phares, Key Hord Dispatcher," Hord Papers.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup>R. E. Dale, "Back to Normal," *Nebraska History* 38 (September 1957), 194.

<sup>31</sup>J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Western Publishing and Engraving Company, 1918), 841-42.

<sup>32</sup>Balance Sheet, Hord Alkali Products Company, Subgroup One, Series Four, Hord Papers.

<sup>33</sup>Richard E. Jensen, "Nebraska's World War I Potash Industry," *Nebraska History* 68 (Spring 1987), 36.

<sup>34</sup>Balance sheets, Belgrade-Hord Company, Subgroup Eight, Series Three, Hord Papers.

<sup>35</sup>Directors' Minutes, Belgrade-Hord Company, Subgroup Eight, Series One, Volume Two, Hord Papers.

<sup>36</sup>Balance Sheets, Belgrade-Hord Company, Subgroup Eight, Series Three, Hord Papers.

<sup>37</sup>Directors' Minutes, T. B. Hord Grain Company, Subgroup Nine, Series Two, Volume One, Hord Papers.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup>"Tom B. Hord, '75 Stockman," *Central City Republican-Nonpareil*, May 29, 1975.

<sup>40</sup>"Hereford Country," *The American Hereford Journal*, Fall 1965.

<sup>41</sup>Directors' Minutes, Lakeside Ranch Company, Subgroup Eleven, Series Two, Volume Two, Hord Papers.

<sup>42</sup>Merrick County History Book Committee, *History of Merrick County, Nebraska, 1981* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1981), 39.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup>Elton A. Perkey, *Perkey's Nebraska Place Names* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1982), 93.

<sup>45</sup>*History of Merrick County, 1981*, 39, 239.

<sup>46</sup>Morse, "Hello There," 23.

<sup>47</sup>*Central City Republican-Nonpareil*, July 25, 1985.