

NEBRASKA history news

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Saving Paintings an Inch at a Time



The Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center's new paintings conservator Kenneth Bé with a half-cleaned painting by J. Charles Robbins.

The formerly sterile white walls in the new painting conservation laboratory are now painted a neutral gray. Kenneth Bé, the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center's new paintings conservator, explained that controlling the color and intensity of light is very important in examining and treating paintings.

Currently you will find in the lab paintings dating from the early 1500s through the 1920s, and which include work from both Europe and America. Bé notes that each piece has its own complexity and each has to be treated like a surgeon treats a patient.

Take for example a mural done by Nebraska painter J. Emmett Robbins. The painting depicts an American Indian on horseback hunting bison, and for many years was mounted behind the bar in a tavern. And those were hard years. The painting was exposed to smoke and

grease. Worse, because it was a bar not a museum, people used thumbtacks to attach posters and menus to the painting.

The current owners realized that it was a work of art and not a bulletin board, so they brought it to Bé. His examination revealed other damage, including some darkening caused by a microwave oven that had been placed close to the canvas. His

testing of the piece revealed that it was coated with a varnish that had itself yellowed significantly, and to remove that varnish he would need to use a solvent that could also remove the paint.

It requires patience and skill to remove the varnish on an eleven-foot-long painting an inch or two at a time. And this is but one of over twenty paintings currently awaiting Kenneth Bé's attention. And it is why it is so important that we have Bé at the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center.

Bé has other passions besides the transformation of significant works of art. He plays the lute and performs regularly with groups in Omaha and Lincoln. And he has a love for the outdoors that includes bicycling, canoeing and kayaking. A true Renaissance man and a welcome addition to Nebraska. ☞

—John E. Carter



The Nebraska State Historical Society collects, preserves, and opens to all, the histories we share.

Lincoln, July 2009

On a May evening, I attended the annual induction dinner for the Nebraska Hall of Agricultural Achievement (NHAA). Established in 1916, the NHAA honors distinguished men and women in production agriculture as well as in research, extension service, education and support of Nebraska's most important industry. For 2009, the NHAA accorded its highest honors to UN-L agronomy professor, geneticist and internationally known small grains developer P. Stephen Baenziger and to former extension administrator and UN-L agronomy teacher A. Dale Flowerday.



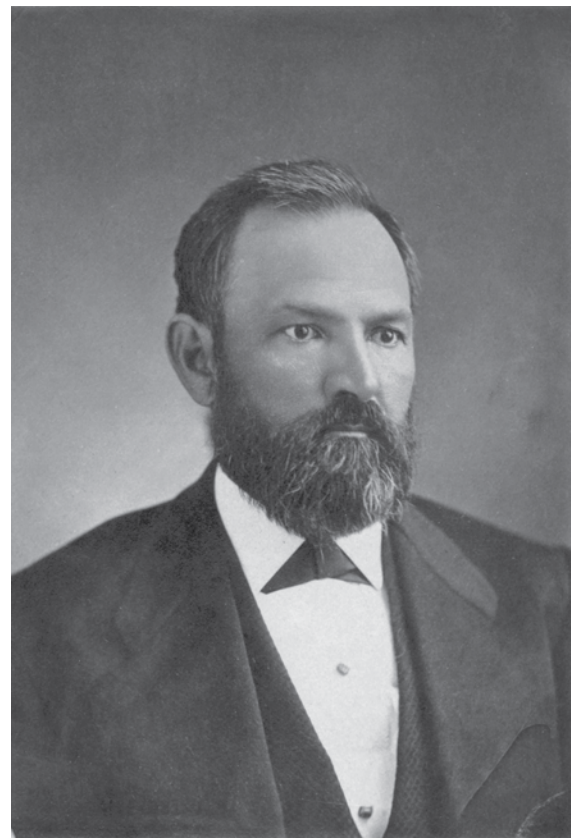
"These two extraordinary men have influenced the lives of people around the world."

These two extraordinary men have influenced the lives of people around the world. Dr. Baenziger's wheat and barley improvement program has put bread on the world's dinner tables and improved the lives of grain growers on the Central Great Plains. Dr. Flowerday's role in agricultural education here and in South America has positively impacted the lives of countless human beings.

Another great Nebraska scientist/educator was recognized on June 26 when Charles E. Bessey was inducted into the Nebraska Hall of Fame. A pioneer in botany, scientific education and conservation at the University of Nebraska from 1885 until his death in 1915, Dr. Bessey's influence is acknowledged today around the globe.

My position as Director/CEO of the NSHS gives me the opportunity to work with the Hall of Fame Commission and the NHAA. I have thus gained important insights into the lives of some Nebraskans who only rarely are mentioned in the media or, for that matter, in the history texts. The Nebraska State Historical Society congratulates these three extraordinary individuals and encourages everyone to visit the Hall of Fame in the State Capitol and the NHAA recognition area in the lower level of the C. Y. Thompson Library on the east campus at UN-L. The personal histories found there constitute special examples for us all.

Michael J. Smith
 Michael J. Smith
 Director/CEO



Robert W. Furnas: Nebraska governor, NSHS founder, and master of personal invective. NSHS RG2411:1727

Editorial Epithets; or, Adjectives at a Discount in 1860

Nineteenth-century journalists were not noted for "kid-glove" treatment of their rivals on the opposite side of the political fence. In fact, the give and take excoriation of one's rival editors seemed to be a mark of an accomplished newspaperman in those days. Robert W. Furnas, who became one of Nebraska's leading men, first came to attention as editor of the Brownville, *Nebraska Advertiser* in the 1850s and founder of the *Nebraska Farmer*. He went on to become governor of Nebraska, was a leading proponent of agriculture and horticulture, served as an Indian agent and soldier, and is considered the father of the Nebraska State Historical Society, among other accomplishments. His place in the Nebraska Hall of Fame seems fully justified.

Furnas should also rank well up in the pantheon of energetic and opinionated

journalists if his July 26, 1860, blast at T. H. Robertson, the Democratic editor of the Omaha *Nebraskian*, is any indication. Robertson had castigated Furnas for abandoning the Democratic Party and Stephen A. Douglas and throwing his support to Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans before the crucial national election of 1860. Among other things, Robertson accused Furnas of being a traitor to the Democrats, with whom he had long been affiliated. Robertson must have stuck a nerve, judging from Furnas's response:

“T. H. Robertson, of the Omaha *Nebraskian*, familiarly known in the country as the sycophantic spaniel owned by whoever may be in official position about him; who was expelled as a reporter from within the bar of the Nebraska Legislature for his low, vulgar course towards members, who was publicly cowhided by a lady on the Post Office steps in his own town, for his insolence and blackguardism, and who is characterized wherever known as being the most dishonest, knavish, foul-mouthed, slippery, unscrupulous, treacherous, false-hearted, cowardly, groveling, scurvy, beggardly, dishonorable, ungentlemanly, recreant, undignified, uncivilized, boorish, obnoxious, insignificant, trifling, vulgar, insolent, impertinent, egotistical, base, servile, supple, cringing, fawning, growling, parasitical, and abject mass of putridity, ever by mistake wrapped in human hide, pays us the following compliment” (Here Furnas reprints Robertson's charges against him).

Furnas concludes, “We say complimentary because it is a compliment to be *abused* by Robertson. We had much rather he would speak ill of us than favorably. His praise would make any honest man feel as though he had been stealing sheep, or acorns from a blind hog.”

—James E. Potter



The Tichenor House, an early Lincoln landmark tied to a political scandal. NSHS RG2158

Lincoln's Tichenor House Scandal

The Tichenor House was a landmark in early Lincoln. Located on the southwest corner of Thirteenth and K streets, it was the first large hotel built in the young capital city in 1869. It is remembered, however, chiefly for its connection to a financial scandal that led to a governor's impeachment. Anson C. Tichenor, a native of New York, came to Lincoln in the late 1860s. He and Jesse T. Green leased part of the Lancaster County salt basin, hoping to profit from the sale of salt. When this failed, Tichenor turned his attention to another project: construction of the city's first substantial hotel.

Seeking to boost development of the new capital city, Governor David Butler helped Tichenor and others obtain loans from the state school funds, which represented Nebraska's share of the proceeds of the federal sale of public lands. Tichenor's \$10,000 loan, dated August 1, 1870, was to run for five years at ten percent annual interest. It was secured by a third mortgage on the hotel.

The opening reception at the Tichenor House took place on August 9, with Governor Butler participating. The fifty-four rooms were soon filled with visitors to the new capital city on commercial or legislative business. But the hotel quickly became a subject of controversy.

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“The *Omaha Herald* charged that the loan was unsafe,” noted Nebraska historian Addison E. Sheldon, “which seemed obvious, both from the fact that it was made on a third mortgage, and because Mr. Tichenor’s reputation with respect to money matters was not good.”

Tichenor replied that the building cost \$35,000 and the furniture an additional \$10,000, and said that the insurance on the property (amounting to \$27,000) had been assigned as further security. Subsequent investigation disclosed that there were twenty-five mechanics’ liens on the building (all taking precedence of the state mortgage) and that one of the fire insurance policies had been canceled because the premium had not been paid.

In 1871, at the beginning of his third term, eleven articles of impeachment were preferred against Governor Butler. The first was that he had appropriated to his own use about \$16,000 of the school funds. The state convicted him on that charge (although it acquitted him on the other ten), and he was formally removed from office on June 2. Secretary of State William H. James served as acting governor until the election of Robert W. Furnas in 1873.

After its financial difficulties became known, the Tichenor House was sold in September 1871 at a sheriff’s auction to George W. Ballentine and three partners. The state brought suit against James Sweet, state treasurer from January 21, 1869, to January 11, 1871, for the face value and interest of the loan to Tichenor from the state school funds, whereupon he agreed to repay the principal and part of the interest. Sweet made the last payment in 1879.

Several of Nebraska’s early governors lived at the Tichenor House during its best days, when it was reputed to be the greatest

political rendezvous in the state. Its builder and namesake, A. C. Tichenor, moved on to new ventures farther west. By 1877 the University of Nebraska was renting the building for use as a young men’s dormitory. Later named the Oriental Hotel, it was destroyed by fire on September 27, 1899. ❧

—*Patricia C. Gaster*



Many conference guests stayed at Fort Robinson’s 1909 Brick Barracks, which once housed cavalry regiments.

Indian Wars at Fort Robinson History Conference

Scurvy. Fleas and bedbugs. Frostbite. Mosquitoes so big that the boys call them “Platte Valley birds.” Hardtack old enough to be drawing a pension. Ah, the life of a frontier soldier on the northern plains!

“Not everyone likes military history,” said an army veteran as we chatted in the Post Playhouse at Fort Robinson. “But to us, it’s important. We want these stories to be told.”

Co-sponsored by the NSHS and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, the Fort Robinson History Conference was held April 23-25 at Fort Robinson State Park in northwestern Nebraska. The event featured talks by noted historians of the Indian Wars, and a daytrip to Fort Laramie, Wyo.

Held every few years since 1995, the conference draws a loyal crowd. It’s the kind of event at which you might overhear a passionate discussion about minor changes in



Fort Robinson History Conference speakers, l to r: Brent Carmack, moderator, Jack McDermott, Paul Hedren, Anne Bond, Tom Buecker, Sherry Smith, Jeff Barnes, Eli Paul, Gayle Carlson, Ephriam Dickson, Tracy Potter.

nineteenth-century army uniforms from one year to the next. It's an event where people swap stories of getting stuck on some muddy back road while searching for the site of a long-vanished fort, where they rehash the Battle of the Little Bighorn as if it were last week's football game.

What is it that's so attractive to devotees? Partly it's that the events happened here, and partly, it's that the decades-long struggle between U.S. soldiers, settlers, and Native Americans has an epic sweep unlike anything since. The details of powder magazines, uniforms, or daily routines all point to the same thing: conference participants are trying to recreate that period as vividly as possible in their minds. You might say that these are the people who want to taste that moldy hardtack.

Figuratively speaking, of course.

But the story of "U.S. Army Forts & Camps on the Central and Northern Plains" (this year's conference theme) is more complex than that. To Native American attendees, those forts and weapons have a whole different meaning.

Keynote speaker Sherry L. Smith, professor of history at Southern Methodist University, spoke of this during her address, "Winning the West Revisited." She spoke of Fort Robinson's reconstructed "Cheyenne Outbreak" barracks, named for an ugly 1879 incident in

which 149 men, women, and children were imprisoned in the barracks and broke out with great loss of life (see nebraskahistory.org/sites/fortrob/outbreak.htm).

Smith praised curator Tom Buecker for welcoming the Cheyenne people who visit the site every year. This, she said, is an example of "complicated storytelling" that enriches a traditional subject like western military history. Places such as Fort Robinson "should be meeting grounds where descendants of past combatants meet to discuss these conflicts... They remind us that history is not dead but very much alive." 🌿

—David L. Bristow



Memorabilia from the Wildcat Hills Guest Ranch on display at the North Platte Valley Museum in Gering.

Gering Remembers the Wildcat Hills Guest Ranch

Half a century after it stopped hosting visitors, the Wildcat Hills Guest Ranch is still nestled in the hills south of Gering. It is a private residence now, where family and friends sit in the evenings and listen to the sounds of wildlife, or watch in the morning for bighorn sheep scaling the hills.

In town, meanwhile, a current exhibition at the North Platte Valley Museum is remembering the former Panhandle tourist attraction. Recently, Don "Lucky" Clark, son of original ranch owners Morton and Bernice Clark, donated memorabilia to the museum.

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Both Mort and Bernie were the children of local homesteaders. Mort became president of an electrical appliance company in Ohio, and invented a galvanized welding product called Galvweld that protected and coated welded seams—a valuable product used on airplanes in World War II.

Having money now, Bernie realized a dream. She and Mort returned to Gering, bought land in the Wildcats and built their ranch. Bernie's brother, Slim Daley, took charge of the horse operation while Bernie took care of the guests. Dignitaries at the 1947 grand opening included Nebraska Governor Val Peterson, Michigan Governor Kim Sigler, and Nebraska Senator Otto Prohs. Thanks to Mort's military contracts, the ranch often hosted influential people. Mort sent many customers from his Ohio business.

It became a popular spot for other city folks as well. Guests enjoyed horseback riding, exploring the hills, eating and singing around the campfire, being entertained by Bernie and her trick horse, or getting held up by Old West bandits at the front gate.

Business waned as time went on. Mort and Bernie divorced in the '50s and Mort stopped sending guests from Ohio. Slim stayed at the ranch, while Bernie moved to town and opened Bernie's Corral Restaurant, where she built stables and an arena outside and put on a Shetland pony show for her customers while they ate. A tornado destroyed the restaurant in 1955. Mort and his son Jim ran cattle on the ranch until selling it in 1961.

The North Platte Valley Museum is using the exhibit not only to tell visitors about local history, but also to elicit more stories about the ranch from people who remember visiting it. History, the museum staff believes, is most interesting when shared. 📖

—Jan Van Newkirk



NSHS Headquarters in Lincoln. It's like this inside, too.

Our Construction, Your Research

The whine of power tools has replaced the hum of microfilm machines at our headquarters building (to say nothing of the whine of staff members who can't access the collections they want). Fortunately, the \$6.2 million renovation is right on schedule.

The first phase of asbestos abatement is complete, and the electrical and heating/ventilation contractors are doing demolition work. The project's expected completion date is Spring 2010.

Meanwhile, researchers can still access some of the Society's materials.

"Ninety-nine percent of government records are still available," said Andrea Faling, associate director for the library/archives.

These records include marriage licenses, naturalization records, gazetteers (city business listings), and Civil War documents. They are at the "K Street" building at 440 S. 8th St. in Lincoln. Due to limited space, researchers need to email gayla.koerting@nebraska.gov to make an appointment. Hours are 8:30 – 12:00, Monday through Friday, and 1:00 – 4:30 on Saturdays.

Unlike the research room, the K Street facilities require exact change, staff has to find all the materials, and there are only two microfilm readers and one printer. Still, Faling encourages researchers to contact the staff even if they need information that isn't a government record.

"General Nebraska and county history is available," she said. The Society also has more than 35,000 images in digital form and more than 300 newspapers on reserve. "People can check with us to see if the newspaper they want has been pulled. The odds aren't great, but we have a list of what we have."

Not only will researchers benefit from improved facilities, but the research staff is also using the down time to microfilm naturalization records and newspapers, and is taking a comprehensive inventory of the documents at K Street. Faling is hopeful that the building will reopen on schedule next spring.

"If we're lucky, it will be earlier," she said.
—*Kylie Kinley*

Students Compete at History Day

Almost three hundred Nebraska students in grades 6-12 competed in the state National History Day competition at Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln on Saturday, April 18. The judges included many Historical Society staff and board members.

The students wrote papers, crafted web sites, built exhibits, created documentaries and composed and acted in performances centered on the theme "The Individual in History." Topics ranged from international figures such as Albert Einstein to Nebraskans such as Father Edward Flanagan and John Neihardt.

Patrick Kopke, a junior at Hastings High School, won the Historical Society's senior

division award for his individual exhibit, "General George Crook, Man Who Forever Changed the Nation." Crook was a renowned Indian fighter who, ironically, was a supporter of Standing Bear during his famous Nebraska trial.

Kopke has been competing in History Day since he was in eighth grade and has qualified for state every year. He said he encourages everyone to participate.

"I get to talk to people and meet people from different cultures," he said. "It teaches you how to present well and has made me more confident."

Loren Steinman, a sixth grader at Nebraska City Middle School, won the Historical Society's Junior Division award for his individual documentary on Nebraska pioneer A. W. Higgins—who is also Steinman's ancestor.

"I wanted to do someone in my family who made an impact on early Nebraska," Steinman said.

Eighth graders Callie Albers and Emilee Peterson also chose a topic to which they felt a connection. The duo performed a scene from the life of Marie Antoinette.

"She was fourteen when she got married, so we could relate to her," Albers said.

Albers and Peterson won first place in the Junior Division Group Performance category, giving them the opportunity to represent Nebraska at nationals in College Park, Maryland, in June.

"It gets your confidence up," Albers said of History Day. "I used to be really shy."

"And you get to go places," Peterson said.

For a list of all of the competitors and winners, visit ne.nhd.org/state.htm.

—*Kylie Kinley*



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History Makers to be Honored at Annual Meeting Luncheon Reserve Your Seats Now!

Join us on Friday, September 18, 2009 to recognize Nebraskans who have made history by helping preserve it!

Allison Petersen, Walton, will receive the Robert W. Furnas Memorial Award for her support of the Nebraska State Historical Society and Foundation.

Dr. Sara Crook, Peru, has spent decades researching and teaching Nebraska history, meriting the Addison E. Sheldon Memorial Award.

Innovative elementary teacher Suzanne Ratzlaff, Hampton, will receive the James C. Olson Memorial Award.

Duda Farms, L.L.C., Omaha (Walter M. Duda, Clare J. Duda, James G. Duda, Laraine K. Roberts) will be honored for its preservation of archeological sites with the Asa T. Hill Memorial Award.

Winners of the Nebraska Preservation Award and the James L. Sellers Memorial Award are yet to be announced.

The NSHS Annual Meeting/Awards Luncheon will be held at the Embassy Suites Hotel, 1040 P Street, Lincoln. The luncheon in Regents Section A costs \$25 per person; register by September 1, 2009, by contacting Martha Kimball at martha.kimball@nebraska.gov or 402-471-4746.

Registration begins at 11:30 a.m.; lunch is served at noon; the NSHS members' meeting begins at 12:45. Parking is available at any of the Lincoln parking garages; the closest are the Que Street garage (which connects to the hotel at 11th and Q) or the Market Place garage at 10th and Q.

Plan now to attend and learn more about what Nebraskans are doing to preserve our past for the future.

Your Summer Vacation

You like others may be planning your summer vacation a little closer to home. Nebraska really has some terrific places to visit: Chimney Rock National Historic Site near Bayard, Fort Robinson Museum near Crawford, Neligh Mill in Neligh, the Senator George W. Norris home in McCook, the John G. Neihardt Center in Bancroft, and sites in Willa Cather's hometown of Red Cloud. In Lincoln, you can visit the Nebraska State Historical Society's Museum of Nebraska History at 15th and P streets, and the Thomas P. Kennard House at 1627 H Street.

While you are visiting these places around Nebraska, take advantage of the museum stores, which will provide you with meaningful reminders of your visit. To learn more about these fun-filled sites, visit nebraskahistory.org or call us at 402-471-3272. ☒

Don't Call It a Newsletter

You're holding the first issue of an expanded *Nebraska History News*. What we once thought of as a newsletter is growing into a small magazine—a true counterpart to our flagship publication, *Nebraska History*. *NHN* will still report on Society activities and historical events around the state, but now it also includes feature articles about a variety of historical topics.

This is also the first issue of *Nebraska History News* that you can receive by email. If you'd like to start receiving this publication as an email file attachment, email us at nshs.web@nebraska.gov with "NH News" in the subject line. Be sure to tell us your name (or the name your membership is in), and whether you'd like to receive the newsletter by email only, or if you'd like both an email copy and print copy. ☒

N S H S

foundation news

July/August/September 2009



How a Wish Became Reality

Ten years ago the staff of the NSHS was asked to provide a wish list of items for their divisions. For Julie Reilly, director of the NSHS Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center in Omaha, a paintings conservation lab was at the top of her list. Such a lab would care for the wealth of important paintings in collections across this state and region.

Working hand-in-hand, the Nebraska State Historical Society and the NSHS Foundation began a quest to fund the lab and provide the paintings conservation expertise that is an essential—and often neglected—element of our cultural preservation. Thanks to a challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the overwhelming generosity of our donors, an endowment was established, and a wish became a reality.

A start-up challenge grant from the Peter Kiewit Foundation provided ready funds to hire the conservator and equip the lab, while the endowment funds earn drawdown revenues for the lab's future operation. Last fall, the Nebraska State Historical Society and the Foundation entered into a partnership with the University of Nebraska at Omaha to provide for the hiring of a professional paintings conservator.

Thanks to your support, the Ford Center now boasts the first paintings conservation lab in Nebraska, offering professional paintings conservation and preservation services by a world-class paintings conservator.

Kenneth Bé is a graduate of Yale University and the NYU conservation program, with over twenty-one years of experience in museum and private paintings conservation.

A recent arrival from Cleveland, Ohio, Mr. Bé will head the paintings conservation lab where he will direct and/or perform all painting conservation treatment and other preservation activities including outreach presentations, lectures, tours, and professional training. He brings his extensive experience and knowledge of paintings conservation, technology, and history to the region. The Nebraska State Historical Society and Foundation are extremely pleased to welcome Mr. Bé and the new Paintings Conservation Lab to the Ford Center.

This is just one example of what we can accomplish together and how your support can help assure that Nebraska's history will be preserved for future generations. If you would like more information on how you can support this and other important projects at the Nebraska State Historical Society, please contact our office. ☐



Using a flashlight held at an angle to provide raking light, paintings conservator Kenneth Bé examines a canvas by Nebraska artist Elizabeth Dolan in the collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation

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hours

*Museum of
Nebraska History*
15 & P Streets, Lincoln
402-471-4754

Tuesday–Friday, 9–4:30
Sat. & Sun., 1–4:30
Closed Monday

Museum Store
402-471-3447

Tuesday–Friday, 10–4:30
Saturday & Sunday, 1–4
Closed Monday

Library/Archives
1500 R Street, Lincoln
402-471-4751

*Reference room closed
for construction*

State Historic Site hours:
www.nebraskahistory.org

N E B R A S K A


history news

Nebraska State Historical Society

From the collection. . .

A simple phone booth sign reminds us that racial segregation and discrimination were very real here in Nebraska. Our history includes laws against interracial marriage, practices that segregated home buying, and a once-active and virulent Ku Klux Klan. Even during World War II the Nebraska USO clubs that served our brave service men and women had separate facilities for black and white soldiers.

This sign probably dates from the 1920s, but it ties to much larger stories in Nebraska's past. Over the course of the next year the Nebraska State Historical Society will plan and develop exhibits and programs that will explore this important and timely subject more fully.

The acquisition of this sign is but the beginning of the investigation. It is surrounded by questions: Where, if ever, was it used? Was it something commonly used or a rarity? What does it tell us about Nebraska's social fabric? If you can assist in dating or documenting this sign, please contact John Carter at john.carter@nebraska.gov 



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