



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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ARMADA, THE GEM CITY 1873-1890

by James Bish

The area which became Armada, and later Miller, was a vast unsettled frontier grassland throughout most of the nineteenth century. Located in the upper Wood River valley in northwestern Buffalo County, this area experienced the initial stages of settlement shortly after settlers began to locate on the available land along the Platte River in southern Buffalo County. As Platte River valley land became scarce, a few adventurous pioneers made their way up the valley of the Wood River. The earliest known settlers were Aden L. Armstrong and Brinton Harbaugh. During the early spring of 1873 these two men settled about a mile apart on the north side of the river, and both constructed a small sod house.

In October of that year Oscar Hamilton, John Mercer and William H. Smith also staked out claims in the northern valley of the Wood River. These three men had previously lived in Ohio, and they traveled out to Nebraska together. They were good friends, and Hamilton and Smith were related. They first arrived at Plum Creek (now Lexington) looking for a place to settle, and not finding available land there, they journeyed northeast to the Wood River valley and filed claims immediately west of where the town

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The Will Craven family were the first residents of Armada village. Back Row: Ossie, Effie, Myrtle and Nettie; Front Row: Josie, Will, Neva, Elmyra and Charles.

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Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- Basic Membership\$10.00
 - Institutional Membership\$15.00
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WITH THE SOCIETY

THE OCTOBER MEETING of the Buffalo County Historical Society will be held Sunday, October 28, 1990, at 2:00 p.m. in the auditorium of the Ockinga Center on West Campus of Kearney State College.

Parking is available north of College Drive, (West 26th) north of the center.

The program will feature a film "The Days of '76". This was filmed in the Chadron area in 1915. You will enjoy this early attempt at making motion pictures.

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TALES OF BUFFALO COUNTY, Volume IV, will be published and available before Christmas. This volume includes articles from 1987, 1988 and 1989 BUFFALO TALES. The price of the book and the publication date will be announced later.

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CHRISTMAS TREE WALK is December 1 through 9 this year. We will need help to be in all the buildings, and we also need goodies for the bake sale.

We still have room for a tree or two. We still need more towns in Buffalo County to be represented. For more information call Margaret Hohnholt, 237-7327, Wilma Larson, 237-2697, Gladys Henderson, 237-5495 and Lois Rahmann, 237-3619.

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DISPLAY OF SLEDS. Barb Avery, Chairman of Displays, is still asking for the loan of old sleds for additional decoration in the buildings during the Walk.

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CONGRATULATIONS to Mardi Anderson on her election to the Executive Board of the Nebraska State Historical Society. Our best wishes go with her as she assumes new duties on the State Historical Board.

of Armada would later be located. There, on the north banks of the river valley, Smith and Hamilton dug a hole in the side of a hill, which became their home. Mercer settled about a mile further west, also in a dugout on the north side of the river.

Between 1874 and 1876 few settlers located in the area. Devastation by both drought and grasshoppers brought difficult times, and the economy was also suffering from a national depression. By 1875 Otis Halstead had settled just west of Mercer in Dawson County, and Henry Green had located between the Harbaugh and the Smith-Hamilton abodes. It appears that these few pioneers were the only settlers during the early 1870's in the area which later became Armada. When these early pioneers reminisced about those early years, Oscar Hamilton told about that first rough winter of 1873-74. He said that all he and Smith had to live on during that winter were "fifty pounds of flour and two bushels of potatoes. Before green grass struck us, the seats and knees of our unmentionables were nothing to boast of, however, accepting without a murmur anything eatable in the way of combread, skunk bacon and such, we managed to pull through." He added that by April 1874 both he and Smith looked like "the tail end of a mostly hard winter."

Harbaugh, Halstead and Mercer remembered that there were few ways of earning money in those early years. They turned to hunting and trapping for a livelihood. Plenty of elk, antelope and deer lived in the hills, while along the streams beaver, mink, wildcat and even an occasional bear could be found. Mercer claimed that to survive he would often "shoot a deer and trade it for flour and such articles of food as he stood in need of, and in that way he managed to get along." Halstead and Mercer became so well known as hunters and trappers that the mile span of the Wood River between their homesteads, located on either side of the Buffalo-Dawson county line, became known as Trappers Grove. Eventually a school and a post office would be built in Dawson County near that location, named "Trappers Grove" in honor of these two early pioneer trappers.

It was not uncommon to see small bands of Indians traveling along the river during those early years. William Craven, who would eventually open the first store in Armada, remembered on one occasion seeing "as many as two thousand Indians in one body going to and from their hunting expeditions." Usually, however, Indian bands sighted were very small in number.

John Mercer claimed that "even his dugout did not protect him from the ravages of the grasshoppers in 1874, '75, '76," that he remembered seeing grasshoppers at least "three inches thick and they didn't seem to smother each other." Those years were difficult



A store in Armada (unidentified)

for the settlers and new settlement was practically non-existent because of the drought and grasshopper devastation.

In 1875 Aden Armstrong successfully petitioned the Postal Department to establish a post office in his home, and on October 25 of that year Armstrong's sod home became the first post office, and he was appointed postmaster. He requested that the new post office be named Armada after the town in eastern Michigan's Macomb County where he grew up. In addition, Armstrong thought the definition of an armada, "a fleet of armed ships, representing strength and power with a determination to push ahead and overcome all apparent difficulties," exemplified the new settlements in the region. The Postal Department approved the name and mail service under the name of Armada began.

Armstrong was impatient about the slowness of the federal government in funding the new mail route so delivery could begin, so in order to expedite mail service, he paid for the mail delivery for about six months before the Postal Department appropriated funds to get the route started. By 1876 settlers in the upper Wood River valley had weekly mail service.

The discovery of gold in the Black Hills, over 300 miles northwest of Armada, had a major impact on the area. In 1877 prospectors flooded into the Black Hills of Dakota Territory. They needed equipment and supplies and the nearest railroad to bring these supplies was located in Nebraska's Platte valley. Communities in the Platte valley began to compete for the trade resulting from outfitting the Black Hills miners.

Sidney, Nebraska, got off to a very good start, establishing itself as a main freighting center at the head of the Sidney-Black Hills Trail. Kearney also competed for the freight business. In the spring of 1877 the Kearney to Black Hills stage route was proclaimed. With daily stage service, this route was advertised as the "shortest and best stage and freight route from all points in the East and South." The route went through the Armada area and for the first time, Armada was shown on the map. It would become an important mail and stage stop. The Kearney to Black Hills freight route operated only during 1877 as it could not compete with the more established Sidney-Black Hills Trail. However, during its existence, many persons became introduced to the beauty and fertility of the upper Wood River valley.

Although the Black Hills route was only temporary, a more permanent freight route continued to operate along the same trail to Broken Bow in Custer County. This overland freight traffic was a major factor in the establishment of a permanent village of Armada. By 1880 over thirty families had settled within a three-mile radius of Armada. These included the families of Armstrong, Mackey, Jeffreys, Wade, Grover, Fritz, Rawlings, Brown, Green, Burt, Hamilton, Smith, Jones, Harbaugh, Fennel, Roach, Burley, Davenport, Minor, Esler, Mollard, Miller, Boyd, Simpson, Able, White, Mercer, Thiede, Zarrs, Nelson, Veal, Hough, Scott and Patterson. With the large number of pioneers settling in the region between 1876 and 1880, the need for a general mercantile store became a primary concern.

During June of 1881, Will M. Craven built a sod house on the very location that was to become the townsite of Armada, and his family moved in. This was the first



Charles M. Houston,
editor of *The Armada*
Watchman, April 25,
1889 - July 10, 1890.
continued as editor of the
Miller Union with its first
issue on July 17, 1890.

structure built. By early fall of 1881, Craven began offering part of his small soddy to weary travelers along the stage route, a common practice in those days. At the same time he purchased \$9.00 worth of goods to distribute to local settlers, thus establishing the first business in Armada. The merchandise included coffee, sugar, tobacco, a tobacco cutter, and other small notions.

With the establishment of Craven's store it was logical that the Armada post office be located in the residence of Will Craven as most settlers were making weekly trips to his place for supplies. On November 1, 1881, Craven became postmaster and the post office was moved to his store and residence. Craven's store would be the only business in the area for the next three years.

In July 1884, the Postal Department established daily mail service from Kearney to Broken Bow and made Armada the point where the mail coach would change horses. This brought the establishment of other businesses near Craven's store. During the summer of 1885, finding his soddy too small to serve as store, post office, hotel and residence, Craven built the first frame building for his store. Also during that summer W. H. Fox built a frame building and began a livery business, and Brinton Harbaugh established the area's first farm implement business in a small building adjacent to the livery. In the next five years other business houses, as well as residences, were constructed and the village continued to grow. In 1886 Oscar Hamilton built a hotel, and during 1887 the First Bank of Armada, W. A. Milton's Blacksmith and Carriage Shop, and H. S. Pease's Drug Store opened. Also during that summer Will Craven built a two-story frame house on the location of his earlier sod house. This was to be the nicest home ever built in Armada. It still exists on the same location and currently (1990) serves as the family home of Raymond Hazzard, Jr.

In spite of a harsh winter with a shortage of coal, when spring arrived in 1888 at least ten new residences and businesses were built and by early summer the town boasted a population of 110 persons. It was also in the spring of 1888 when Armada citizens were first able to read a newspaper printed from their own town. On May 9, Will A. Hale began publishing *The Armada Times*. In December 1888, he sold the newspaper to R. A. Reid who changed the name to *The Armada Watchman*. Because of poor health Reid sold the paper to Charles M. Houston on May 25, 1889.

Armada continued to grow through 1889 and was considered one of the most prosperous villages in Buffalo County. The *Kearney Enterprise* called it the "Gem City" in describing the flourishing village with "its beautiful streets, abundant shade, swift flowing river, magnificent farms, stately residences and prosperous people." Businesses were expanding and new settlers continued at a steady pace to locate in and near the town. Armada citizens also began hearing that a railroad would soon be built to their town. In 1889 the future of Armada could not have looked brighter. Amidst this optimism, on Memorial Day on 1889, the local citizenry turned out for a grand celebration. A procession headed by Civil War veterans marched through the village and north to the Armada Cemetery located one-half mile northeast of the town. The activities included music, prayer, and speeches, but much of the day was spent in remembrance of those who fought and died in the Civil War, as well as those who had since passed away. Armada had its share of former Union soldiers on that Memorial Day. The paper listed over forty veterans living in the area.

But the grandest celebration Armada would ever have occurred later that summer on the 4th of July. Activities began at ten o'clock in the morning with a parade, followed by musical entertainment and speeches before a picnic dinner at noon. Afternoon activities included baseball games, with a \$25.00 purse going to the winners, following which the new game of football was exhibited, then a greased pole contest, wheelbarrow, sack and foot races, and lawn tennis and croquet, two of the more popular sporting

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activities of the day. These activities were followed by a supper picnic and horse and carriage races. Winners in the horse racing events took home \$150.00 in prize money. As the sun went down local residents settled in to watch what they called a "grand display of fireworks," and activities were capped off that day with an evening dance. *The Kearney Hub* said that of all of the 4th of July celebrations in the county, Armada had the largest attendance.

Armada continued to grow into 1890. In the time span of 1888 to 1890 over forty residences and businesses were built in the new village, increasing its population from near 50 in 1887 to near 250 by 1890. There were four church congregations: Presbyterian, United Brethren, Methodist and Christian which met in the homes of various members, and plans were in the works for the construction of at least two churches in 1891.

None of this was to become a reality. In the summer of 1890 the railroad did come up the Wood River valley, but it was built on the south side of the river and Armada was located on the north side. As a result, citizens deserted Armada, relocating their homes and businesses one mile southwest across the river in the new town of Miller where the railroad depot was located.

Aden Armstrong's hope that Armada would have the strength and power to push ahead and overcome all apparent difficulties would not be realized. The town was not able to overcome the railroad depot location. However, the Armada name has survived over the last one hundred years. Today the township in which the village of Armada was located, and where currently Miller exists, is named Armada Township, and the cemetery which served the people of Armada, and has since served the people of Miller, is still, one hundred years later, called the Armada Cemetery. In these instances the name Armada has survived as Mr. Armstrong had hoped.

SOURCES

Anderson, Mardi, "Freighting In Buffalo County," 1986 *Tales of Buffalo County*, Vol. III; Manken, Norbert, "The Sidney-Black Hills Trail," *Nebraska History*, Fall, 1949; *Biographical Souvenir of Buffalo, Kearney, and Phelps County*, 1890; Billington, Ray, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, 1972; *Miller Area Heritage*, 1983; *Armada Watchman*, April 1889-July 1890; *Kearney Daily Hub*, June 1889-July 1890; *Kearney Central Nebraska Press*, April-November, 1877. More on the history of Armada can be found in *Tales of Buffalo County*, Volume I, pp. 21, 36-37, 43-47, 118 (*Buffalo Tales*, May, August and October, 1978 and April 1980.)

About the author: Jim Bish grew up in the Miller area, graduated from Sumner High School, attended Kearney State College graduating in 1983 with a B.A. in Education, majoring in History; later attended the University of Nebraska at Omaha, receiving a Master of Arts in History in December 1989. He currently teaches history in a Virginia High School.