



# Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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## SAMUEL CLAY BASSETT: *Farmer, Historian*

*Margaret Ellen Nielsen*

Nebraska historian Addison E. Sheldon described the Soldier's Free Homestead Colony established at Gibbon Siding in 1871 as: "a big, empty, grassy valley, twelve miles from the Platte River north to the loess bluffs, with a slender thread of trees along a stream winding through the vacant prairie; a single railroad track laid on cottonwood ties; a cluster of box cars at a siding and a band of men, women and children pouring out of the cars, feeling the soil and gazing at the distance."

It was to this "farthest west farming community in Nebraska" that Samuel Clay Bassett came as a member of the colony to take up a homestead on a quarter section on the Wood River northeast of Gibbon. S. C. Bassett, born July 14, 1844 in Delaware County, New York traveled by wagon to Virginia at an early age. After eight years there, his father, Clark, "an anti-slavery whig, and a reader of the New York Tribune", realized Virginia was not the place to raise a family. Returning to New York state, he purchased a farm in Steuben County. Samuel graduated from Corning



Samuel Clay Bassett, 1844-1926

Nebraska State Historical Society Collection.

Buffalo Tales is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Editor..... Gene E. Hamaker

Membership in the Buffalo County Historical Society is open to anyone who has an interest in Buffalo County and its people, or in the history of the area.

Annual dues, payable January 1:

- Family membership.....\$ 5.00
- Individual membership... 3.00
- Institutional membership. 5.00
- Sustaining membership... 25.00 +
- Life membership..... 100.00

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Trails & Rails Museum

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*WITH THE SOCIETY*

A Sunday afternoon bus tour to points in the central part of Buffalo County is planned for Sunday, October 26. Previous tours have covered the eastern and western portions of the county. This tour will include St. Mary's Prairie Center Catholic Church and the early settlement of Prairie Center; an early postoffice at Waters, the 1872 Higgins dugout on Cedar Creek; the recent villages of Poole and Sweetwater, and early postoffices at Centennial and South Loup. Other area historical places will be pointed out on the bus route.

Cost of the tour will be \$5.00 per person, and the bus will leave the Trails & Rails Museum grounds at 1:00 p.m. Send reservations and bus fare to Buffalo County Historical Society, Box 523, Kearney, Nebraska 68847 by October 22.



The museum gift shop will have packets of notepaper picturing the Trails & Rails Museum, Windmill State Park and views of Fort Kearny in time for Christmas giving. Remember also county history books: **Where the Buffalo Roamed**, Kearney Centennial booklet, Denman and Lowell histories.

A new shipment of Union Pacific demitasse cups and saucers, and shot glasses etched with the Union Pacific seal have also been received. These Union Pacific dining car items are probably the last available to us.

A family membership in the Buffalo County Historical Society is also a well-received Christmas remembrance.

Academy in 1861 and probably farmed with his father until his enlistment in Company E. 142nd New York Infantry in 1864.\* Discharged at the end of the Civil War, Bassett was to continue farming in New York until his departure for Nebraska. He married Lucia M. Baker in 1867 and they had two children when their eyes turned westward.

There is no record of the reaction of Lucia Bassett to the "vacant prairie". She had been raised in a hotel and was a graduate of Cooperstown Seminary in New York. Any dismay she may have felt, she soon overcame. Laura Bassett Kelly of Kearney, her only surviving child, said, "She loved the farm."

It was the custom of settlers in a new country to locate their homes where the property lines joined in the middle of the section, banding together for protection, water and companionship. Mr. Bassett had moved an old granary to the homestead to serve as their first home. He went to the Wood River for seedlings of cottonwood, ash and elder to plant around the house. As time went by, many other shade and fruit trees were planted. In his poem, "Echo Farm", Bassett wrote:

"Her orchards and groves do abound,  
They beautify all of the land,  
Their planting a labor of love,  
Each planted by our hand."

The lane to the house was lined with trees; anyone standing at the end of the lane and shouting toward the house could hear an echo—and thus the farm gained its name. Bassett's poem continues:

"How the house did resound with the noise  
Four girls and three strong hearty boys.

.....  
Mary E., Spencer Clark and Sam B.,  
Bronson, and Martha and June,  
With the Laura the youngest of all,  
Life gave us no greater boon."

At the Bassett Memorial Hour, held at the College of Agriculture in 1927, E. C. Folsom of Lincoln told of one incident in Mr. Bassett's life as "Homemaker". "Going to town one day Mr. Bassett took Mary...part way to let her run home. A sudden prairie fire swept across the stretch between the town and home. The terrified father searched the wake of the fire as soon as possible to find that an old dugout cellar into which the child had fallen had proved a haven and the little girl was saved from harm."

Besides battling the other hardships of the homesteader: drouth, grasshoppers, lawless men, Mr. Bassett also taught the first term of winter school in the county, and continued teaching another four years. In addition to his activities in the community, his interests soon expanded to the county and state level. He was secretary of the first Republican convention in the county in 1871, and attended the State Republican meeting as a delegate in 1876. He met "many prominent friends" there, among whom was Robert C. Furnas, later Governor of Nebraska. Mr. Furnas gave him several of the rare trees which were planted on Echo Farm.

In 1875 Bassett was one of the founders and secretary of the County Agricultural and Mechanical Society, which held the first county fair in rooms offered free of charge by N. Hemiup and E. C. Calkins. His travels all over the state talking to children and their parents at farmers' institutes led one associate to dub him the

\*This may have been 1863 as there are conflicting accounts.

"agricultural schoolmaster."

Dr. Charles E. Bessey, in a tribute to Mr. Bassett at an agricultural extension banquet in 1924, told of a meeting "in a little room between Eleventh and Twelfth Streets where a few men were gathered to talk over a state dairyman's association." Samuel became the first president of the State Dairyman's Association in 1885 and was its secretary until 1899.

A. E. Sheldon later wrote, "My first recollection of Samuel Clay Bassett goes back to a committee room in the old State Capitol." As secretary of the Dairyman's Association he had appeared with Chancellor McLean of the University to propose that \$6,000 be granted by the Legislature for the establishment of a Dairy and Farm School on the Agricultural College Campus. Mr. Sheldon continues, "Some of us had the vision even then of Science in the cornfield pulling History and Literature with her through the corral gate." In 1897, in the midst of a severe depression, most legislators were Populists, who had been elected on a platform of rigid economy. "There was still abiding a strong prejudice against 'book larnin' on the farm." In spite of much opposition, the money was appropriated and the Dairy and Farm school "became the foundation of the Nebraska School of Agriculture which furnished scientific farm education to 7,500 Nebraska boys and girls from 1897 to 1929, when the school was merged with the College of Agriculture."

Mr. Bassett was also a member of the State Board of Agriculture and served as president in 1899 and 1900. In 1916, he founded the Nebraska Hall of Agricultural Achievement, made up of selected persons "either actively engaged in farming or in promoting the interests of farming." The achievements of a number of persons were



"Echo Farm", Home of S. C. Bassett near Gibbon.

Loaned by Laura Kelly and Myrtle John.

presented at the society meetings and the most outstanding were the honorees whose portraits were hung in the Hall of Fame at the Agricultural College. The four selected at the first meeting were Robert C. Furnas, J. Sterling Morton, Isaac Pollard, and C. E. Bessey.

Mr. Bassett served in the State Legislature in 1882-1885 and again in 1911, when he landed in the middle of a controversy over the Capital Removal Bill. As a dry, Bassett saw the bill as an attempt by liquor interests in Omaha to defeat county option on prohibition. He believed the bill to move the state capital to another town was a scheme to punish Lincoln, where the open saloon had been abolished.

Kearney, Grand Island and Columbus were among the towns who believed they had a good chance to become the new capital. The "wet element", real estate developers, and "vote traders with other schemes to sell" descended on legislators opposing the bill. Buffalo County supporters went to work on Bassett. On the day the bill came up for final vote, "a large and imposing package" was placed on his desk. Inside was a petition from his home county signed by over one thousand voters, all demanding he vote for the bill. Believing Kearney had little chance of becoming the capital in any event, he voted "no". The bill was defeated 58 to 38.

The reaction at home was predictable: he was deluged with hundreds of letters, "a few commendatory, a large majority condemnatory." A protest meeting was held in Gibbon, where he tried to defend his position, but the meeting ended with little change of opinion on either side. The County Board of Supervisors, on February 11, 1911, voted unanimously that he had "voted contrary to the sentiment of practically all of the voters in this county...and should resign at once".

He didn't resign. One accomplishment of his year in office was the passage of his bill introducing the teaching of agriculture into the public schools.

From the first Mr. Bassett was both a participant in and an observer of the making of history. He had for many years written extensively for various agricultural and historical publications. His activities brought him an appointment to the board of the State Historical Society; a position he held for twenty years, also serving as vice-president from 1909 to 1915.

In addition to writing of his own experiences, he began, about 1908, to collect information for a comprehensive county history. Besides writing countless letters, he interviewed many pioneers and authorities on local history, and made a number of trips to the courthouse in Kearney to search through records. This information was finally compiled in the two-volume **History of Buffalo County and Its People**, published in 1916.

Upon Mrs. Bassett's death in 1907, their youngest daughter, Laura Lee, who graduated from Kearney Normal that year, came home to keep house for her father. "He had never been sturdy," Mrs. Kelly said. In his later years he devoted much of his time to his reading and writing. In 1914, he began to write "Echo Farm Musings", a weekly column for the **Lincoln State Journal**. In addition to comments on news items, a portion of each column was devoted to "My Neighbor". The anonymous "neighbors" described in nine years of writing for the **Journal** would no doubt read like a roll call of the pioneers of Gibbon and the surrounding area.

Mr. Bassett took special pride in his Duchess apples, and he delighted in presenting to a friend an "Echo Farm Apple" with his initial standing out in strong relief against the red fruit. This was accomplished by outlining the initial in adhesive tape on

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the side of the apple before it had ripened. One day, when librarians from Lincoln had come to visit, he had climbed a ladder to reach their "monogrammed" apples, when he fell, severely injuring his spine. Because of this injury he was confined to the farm for the remainder of his life.

His younger children took charge of the farm and the house, welcoming the many friends from across the state who came to visit. Sheldon wrote, "many of us have sat up past midnight within its enchanted, simple surroundings. It was one of the most inspiring homes in all Nebraska".

After his death, on March 4, 1926, an S. C. Bassett Memorial Meeting was held at the Agricultural College with Dean A. E. Burnett presiding. Friends described the many facets of his life, such as Homesteader, Legislator, Newspaper Writer, Horticulturist, Dairyman. His portrait, the sixth to be hung in the Agricultural Hall of Fame, was unveiled by his granddaughter, Miss Barbara Prouty of Shelton.

A. E. Sheldon, with whom Mr. Bassett had been working on *A History of Agriculture*, said in his tribute to him "As a Historian," that as the first historian in a new society, he "fixed in enduring form the fact and romance of pioneer days", and he "set a luminous example of painstaking care in finding the truth and telling it clearly and attractively."

#### SOURCES

Samuel Clay Bassett, *History of Buffalo County and Its People*; S. C. Bassett Collection, State Historical Society; *Kearney Daily Hub*; Interview with Laura Bassett Kelly, June 27, 1980; Bassett papers loaned by Mrs. Kelly; "Nebraskans I Have Known—Samuel Clay Bassett", by A. E. Sheldon; *Nebraska History*, 20:164, (1939); *True Stories of Pioneer Days as Told to His Children by Alfred Brunson (1793-1882) Ella Brunson*.