



# Buffalo Tales



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## Sweetwater, Nebraska by Mardi Anderson

*In 1982 Linda Wilke, descendant of one of the early settlers at Sweetwater, wrote a history of this settlement on the northern edge of Buffalo County. She was kind enough to donate a copy to the Archives. While there are also various miscellaneous pieces of information in the archives about Sweetwater and the surrounding area, Wilke's history has provided the basis for the following article.*

The name Sweetwater is derived from Sweetwater Creek, sometimes called McGee's Creek. It was more commonly called Beaver Creek and is now known as Mud Creek. There are two legends about the origin of the name Sweetwater. One is that a wagon carrying a substantial amount of sugar tried to cross the creek and upset, dumping sugar into the creek. The other, more likely story is that early settlers to the region found the water to be less alkaline, sweeter, than in states from where they had migrated.

The stream originates in Sherman County somewhere north and west of Hazard and winds its way southeast into Buffalo County, turns back north briefly, then south again to empty into the South Loup at Ravenna. If one were to take a piece of string, wad it up and squeeze it tightly, then toss it out on a table, one would see what a meandering course this creek travels.

When the first settlers came to the area, Beaver Creek was clear with a sandy bottom. As has happened to so many waterways in Nebraska, when the land was settled and prairie broken to plant crops, the clear water and sandy bottom disappeared. Some time through the years, therefore, the Beaver Creek became Mud Creek.



The bridge over Mud Creek on Sweetwater Road, a quarter mile south of Highway 2. The bridge was built around 1909 by the Standard Bridge Company of Omaha.

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In those early days, the bridge across Beaver Creek consisted of logs long enough to reach from one bank to the other. The logs were covered with poles and brush. Next came a layer of hay and sod, and finally dirt. The bridge would usually last until the next flood when it washed away. Then a new one would be built.

When the Buffalo County Board of Supervisors adopted bridge standards in 1908, they contracted with the Standard Bridge Company of Omaha to build bridges across several streams in the county. The following year an 80-foot pinned pony truss bridge was built across the Beaver, now called Mud Creek. With maintenance and repair over the years, this historic bridge is still in use today and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

### *Early Settlers*

The first people to live in the Sweetwater area were the prehistoric Plains Village culture called the Itskari Phase who lived here from the early 1200s to the mid-1400s. They probably were the ancestors of the Pawnees who were living in this part of the state when the first white settlers arrived. Remains of Itskari storage pits, earth lodges, and trash deposits have been found in this area north of the South Loup River.

Settlement by people from the eastern United States and Europe did not begin until about 1870. When John McGee brought his family to settle in Buffalo County in 1873, he selected a spot on the bank of Beaver Creek in what is now Beaver Township near the Sherman County line. A trail that was used to bring supplies from Kearney to Loup City crossed the Beaver at this point. It was also on the route used by travelers going west from Grand Island. McGee established a ranch here, probably a sheep ranch, and kept a general store for the convenience of travelers. When the stagecoach route between Kearney and Loup City was established, his ranch became one of the stops. It cost \$2 to ride the stage from Kearney to the McGee Ranch. The McGee Ranch was officially named Sweetwater when a post office was established there on December 21, 1874.

When Erastis Smith (founder of Ravenna) came to Buffalo County he rented a house in Kearney where his family could stay until he finished a home for them on their claim east of Sweetwater. But then the floor of the house in Kearney collapsed under the weight of their possessions. So they loaded up everything and went to McGee's Ranch to stay until the dugout was completed—five Smiths, four McGees, and a two-room house.

Three other early families in the Sweetwater area were the Crostons, Roberts, and Hodges. Mr. Croston was a Union Civil War veteran from the north, who had fallen in love with a southern girl. Because of family opposition the couple eloped and moved to Nebraska. After spending some time in the Grand Island area they moved to a claim on Beaver Creek on the Sherman County side of the county line.

The James Roberts family came to Nebraska from Missouri where they were said to be friends and neighbors of the infamous James brothers. James Roberts worked for the Union Pacific when it was being constructed. Attracted to this part of the state, he brought his family from

Nebraska City to Grand Island and then on to a claim on Beaver Creek in Sherman County near Sweetwater.

Bob Hodges came to the area in 1872 and was one of the first to settle in Beaver Township. Although he lived in the Sweetwater area, he did not immediately file for a homestead. Hodges reportedly rode as a herder for the Olives in Texas and in Nebraska. The Olives had a cattle ranch in Dawson County and are best known for the murders of farmers, Luther Mitchell and Ami Ketchum. Sweetwater was on the dividing line between the cattlemen and the settlers at that time. Because Hodges could play the fiddle, he was often called upon to play at many social events around Sweetwater in those early days. It was said that he knew three songs.

The McGees left the area late in 1876 and for a couple of years James Goff operated the store. Goff was a farmer and may have been the original owner of the Sweetwater town site. Then Henry Beyer and his wife came to Sweetwater and took over the mercantile business. Beyer built a new store with living quarters on the second floor.

Some time later a friend and family stopped while passing through. A blanket was hung across the upstairs living quarters to provide privacy for each family. The next morning the two men drove to Kearney to get supplies for the store. It was late at night by the time they got back. The pair put up the horses and, exhausted, fell into bed. There followed a great commotion by wives and children. The men were in the wrong beds.

A group of Norwegian immigrants who had been living in Chicago moved to the area just west of Sweetwater in 1880. There were also some Danes living here. These settlers formed the Sweetwater Scandinavian Evangelical Lutheran Congregation in 1882. At first they met in homes. Finally after about ten years, the Scandinavian community built a sod church and then in 1903 a frame building was erected. Since members of the congregation were from Hazard as well as Sweetwater, they talked for many years of moving. Finally in 1940 the church was moved to Hazard where it is now known as Faith Lutheran.

### *Sweetwater*

All this time Sweetwater was located on the bank of Beaver Creek. Then in the summer of 1886 the Burlington Railroad's Grand Island & Wyoming Central branch was constructed from Grand Island to Broken Bow. The route entered Buffalo County at St. Michael. Ravenna was founded and became a division point. From there the railroad was built in a northwesterly direction, more or less following the winding Beaver Creek. Because of the turns in the course of the creek and because the railroad was on the north side, it missed Sweetwater by about half a mile. Henry Beyer moved his store north to the railroad. Sweetwater was platted in a V with the railroad forming the southwest boundary, the section line on the east, and the Sherman county line on the north. In fact, the street along the north edge of Sweetwater is called Sherman Street.

Beaver Creek must have had a good steady flow of water because it was not long before there were three grain and flour mills in operation at Sweetwater. Two were located south of Beyer's store and the third one

farther west. The Sweetwater Mill stayed in operation the longest. This mill was built and operated by brothers, Herman and Henry Wilke in 1886. In May of the following year the *Kearney New Era* reported that this mill was one of the "solid improvements on the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad to Broken Bow....The roller mill has a capacity of 100 barrels a day and utilizes the finest water power in the state."

Three years later, in 1890, the town of Sweetwater was hit by a tornado, a cyclone as it was called then. The Sweetwater Mill was destroyed. *The Ravenna News* reported, "The Sweetwater Mill, one of the best and finest roller mills in central Nebraska, had evidently been raised into the air, crushed together by some tremendous force, and dashed to the ground again, a series of shapeless ruins." Several days after the storm a part of the mill's roof was found six miles away.

In 1899 Herman Wilke formed a partnership with Andrew Rosvold, a Norwegian settler living just west of Sweetwater, to rebuild the Sweetwater Mill. They rebuilt the building and then, apparently, Andrew painted the interior. He died that summer from inhaling paint fumes. In September a notice appeared in the *Kearney Hub* announcing that Herman Wilke and Mrs. Rosvold, widow of his partner, would operate the Sweetwater Mill. The mill continued to operate until the late 1910s.

Sweetwater has never been a very large town, especially after Ravenna was established just five miles east. But it did have the usual variety of businesses. Besides the Beyer's general store there were a couple of blacksmiths and a miller listed in the 1885 Nebraska census. Then a millinery shop opened and by the turn of the century the town even had a softball team. Other businesses in Sweetwater included a grain elevator, a bakery, a lumber business, and a bank. A Presbyterian congregation had formed but they did not build a church until three years later. Out in the country the Sweetwater Scandinavian Evangelical Lutheran congregation included members from both the Sweetwater and Hazard communities.



The Sweetwater community has faced other hardships besides the tornado in 1890. In the 1870s when the first settlers were arriving there was drought and grasshoppers. There were also Indian scares. The Sioux and Pawnee Indians frequented the region around Sweetwater. Neither tribe was friendly toward each other or to the white man who was encroaching on their land. Located so far north of the Union Pacific Railroad, Sweetwater also experienced a shortage of supplies. The trip to Kearney and back by wagon was a long one. Apparently there was no brickyard in the area and hauling in brick was too expensive. Buildings were therefore constructed of wood. As a result, there have been several fires in Sweetwater over the years, each destroying two or three businesses. Oftentimes after such destruction businesses were never rebuilt.

Today there is hardly a trace left of Sweetwater. But as you drive along Highway 2 from Ravenna to Hazard, watch for a sign along the railroad track at the county line that says "Sweetwater."

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Compiled and edited by Lenore King

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**From the Society**

The annual meeting will be held at the Holiday Inn on April 10, 2005 from 12:00-3:00. Lyn Messersmith from Cherry County will be the guest speaker. She is a Cowboy Poet and will give a presentation titled, HELL ON WOMEN AND HORSES. The price is \$12.00 for members. Watch your mail for details!

The new Director is Jennifer Murrish. She is originally from Kansas and holds a Travel and Tourism degree from UNK. She was a tour guide at Trails and Rails in 1998 and has been employed at JC Penneys since she graduated. Sae and her husband, who is a student, are looking forward to making Kearney their home.

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