



# Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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## D. WORT

*Grain Dealer, Former Mayor*

by Emma Jane Wilder

D. Wort, my grandfather, was born in London, Ontario, Canada on December 18, 1861 to a Canadian mother and an English father. His family moved to Illinois when he was eight years old, then at the age of seventeen, they moved again, from Illinois to Prairie Center, Nebraska, in 1879. They brought with them a carload of farm machinery, household goods, two horses, a cow, nine children and very little money.

They bought 320 acres of prairie land from the Union Pacific Railroad at \$3.00 per acre on a 10-year note, but it took them thirteen years to pay for it. In one of his speeches Grandfather relates, "At that time the blue stem grass was as high as a horse's back all over the county."

His father, John Wort, built a 2-room sod house in the side of a draw. The back of the house was a bank, the front was built of sod. He remembered helping to build the soddy when "young willows were brought from the Loup River to form the foundation for the roof and were covered by a thick coating of sod. The floor was dirt. The walls were plastered with gypsum, a white clay that they dug out of the bank on Cedar Creek."

In a letter to his family, D. recalls the time when his father was helping a friend lay up his 1-room sod house. About 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon when the sod had all been laid, the friend asked his father if he would help him plaster it the next day. The elder Wort replied: "No, we will finish it tonight." So they completed the plastering about 12:00 o'clock that night. Grandfather's comment to that was that his father "was a great worker, the days were never long enough for him."

In a delightful article in a 1943 Kearney Daily Hub, Tom Gass, a neighbor of the

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D. Wort

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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
Supporting Membership .....	\$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

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Trails & Rails Museum

706 West 11th Street

(308) 234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

February 24, 2:00 p.m. at Trails & Rails Museum in Kearney, general meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society. "A Decade, plus 2, of Digging," is the subject of the program. Volunteer archivists of the Society will show and tell about the archival holdings of the Society and what is available to the public for historical and genealogical research. Anyone interested in family history or historical information of any kind will be interested in this program, which is open to the public.

Winter projects at Trails & Rails include installation of drywall in the main room of the church building, preparation of the train engine for repainting, the building of a Mormon pushcart for display, and the continued abstracting of the Society's historical records by the volunteer archivists.

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Worts in the early days, recalled that there was a time in 1879 when the Gass children came down with the measles in their 2-room sod house. Mrs. Gass was having a lot of trouble keeping young Tom in bed, but Mrs. Martha Wort solved the problem by hiding young Tom's only pair of trousers.

In a speech at Prairie Center, D. recalled when part of this land was broken out with a span of bulls. He held the breaking plow while his brother drove the bulls. He said, "I look back on those days when everybody was very poor, and all were equal. The Joneses were just as hard up as the Smiths. It seems to me we got about as much out of life then as we do now."

After moving to Prairie Center, D. attended school in the old Whittier School. The classes were large, and made up of a great number of country students.

The late Mabel Rice once told me a story she had heard repeated from other members of the family. It seems that when D. was a young man and dressed for a festive occasion, his mother, Martha Wort, had made everything he wore. Further, it was claimed, he was the best dressed fellow at the party. In addition to being a seamstress, Martha Wort could shingle a house or skin a mink.

When he was about 20 years of age, D. and his older half-brother, Steve Leek, decided to go to Wyoming to seek their fortune. At that point Grandfather had only an 8th grade education and it is doubtful that Steve had any more. Near the Wyoming/Nebraska border they had picketed their ponies and were preparing for a good rest before traveling west the next day, when a messenger arrived from home to tell them that their father, John Wort, had died, and that one of them would have to return to help the family. It was decided that D. would return since it was his own father who had passed away.

It was 1882. During his illness, his father had requested that he be buried in the neighborhood. After his death, the neighbors met at the Wort home and located Prairie Center Cemetery. Before that time it was a corn field. So it was that John Wort, Sr. was the first man buried in Prairie Center Cemetery.

One day while D. was working in the fields, Sheriff Schar found him there and asked him to accept the position of Deputy Sheriff of Buffalo County. Grandfather, knowing that he had only an 8th grade education and a lack of experience and knowledge in innumerable other ways, tried valiantly to talk Sheriff Schar out of the appointment. However, Sheriff Schar persisted and, apparently, the thought of a position with a steady income finally won him over. He was 22, and held the position for two years and seven months, being paid the "magnificent" sum of \$25.00 per month. It was the first money he ever remembered having for himself. I often heard him tell the story that it sometimes took all the entire family could scrape together to raise 25¢ to "pay the fiddler" when they wanted to attend a dance.

During the 1880's, in the newly opened country, there was a lack of organized athletics, and therefore, a great deal of interest centered around the races staged by various competing Fire Departments. Early residents recalled that "running races between Fire Departments from all over the country drew as much attention as any modern sport today. The rules and regulations for those contests were as definite and detailed as those governing present athletic events." D. Wort joined the Kearney Volunteer Fire Department in 1886 when it was made up of two departments: the Hose Company and the Hook and Ladder Company. He was a member of the "Wide Awake Hose Company". As Deputy Sheriff when he lived over the old county jail, many times he would run from the jail to the City Hall on a fire call, and then help pull the hose cart to the fire.

In an address to the 48th Firemen's Convention in January, 1930, he tells of his experiences in 1886 and 1887:

"At that time the hose cart was pulled by man power, no matter how deep the mud or how wild the blizzard. I have seen men drop out exhausted before the fire was reached. . . . We had tournaments each year in different cities of the state when the Hose Teams and the Hook and Ladder Teams would compete for cash prizes.

"In 1886 when we went to Fremont we felt we had a good team, but we lost every race we were in. We would make the run on time, but something seemed to go wrong at the vital moment. In 1887 we hired a trainer and he worked us hard all summer. Day after day we ran around the half-mile track at the fairgrounds, and after the workout we would rub down with Dr. Hoover's witch hazel liniment. In 1887 the tournament was held in Kearney, with crack Hose Teams and Hook and Ladder Teams from all the largest cities in the state. It was held at the fairgrounds, which looked like a tent city. Our team was in the race each day. Finally, on the 4th day, we discovered we had won, and received our badge on July 21, 1887."

Their team won with a time of 39¼ seconds, a **world** championship time and a record that still stands, although the practice has long been obsolete. D. Wort was a tongueman on the team and was ever afterward proud of their world record.

Grandfather had started in the grain business in a small way back in 1880. When he completed his term as Deputy Sheriff, he turned his attention to that business, starting in 1890 in Pleasanton, "with two scoop shovels and a \$500 note in the bank."

He became a naturalized citizen on August 19, 1890. In February of 1891 he married Emma Jane Chesbrough in Harvard, Illinois, and brought her to live in Pleasanton where he and his brother, Right Bruce Wort, began to develop their grain business. On January 12, 1894 he was elected a member of the Pleasanton Board of Trustees when Pleasanton first became incorporated.

On November 5, 1895 he was elected Sheriff of Buffalo County. It was then that he moved to Kearney with his wife and small daughter, Weslie. They moved into the Buffalo County jail where Grandmother spent a lot of time cooking for the prisoners.

D. and his brother, R. B. Wort, finally completed the building of their new elevator in Pleasanton, and on December 10, 1897 had it running and shipping grain. In 1899 when he ran for a second term as Sheriff, he was defeated. It was after that defeat that he entered the grain business at Buda. Eventually he owned, or had an interest in, six elevators: at Eddyville, Watertown, Pleasanton, Buda, Amherst and Poole. He purchased the one at Amherst in 1901 for \$3,500. After 24 years he sold the elevator at Eddyville, and later, the one at Watertown. The Pleasanton elevator was destroyed in the 1924 flood. The elevators at Amherst and Buda were still in the



Wort Elevator at Buda

family when he died.

The Pleasanton flood of July 18, 1924 devastated much of the town. It carried away about 800 feet of track and cut the ground from under the Wort elevator leaving it supported on a few piles, ready to topple over at any moment. Luckily the elevator was empty, the little grain left in it had been shipped out a few days before. Grandfather estimated his loss at approximately \$3,500.

In a speech to the Rotary Club, D. told them that the buying at the elevators was done by the men in charge at prices he furnished them each morning. His price was generally based on the Chicago market. From his standpoint, the Chicago Board of Trade was the best way grain could be handled fairly between buyer and seller.

By 1907 he was one of the organizers and a member of the Board of Directors of the Commercial National Bank in Kearney.

D. was the first person in the county to undertake buying and selling automobiles. At one time he sold more cars in Buffalo County than all other dealers combined. In addition, he sold throughout central and western Nebraska. From 1912 to 1917, he was a partner in the Wort-Minton dealership, which was dissolved in 1917. During 1916 the partnership had gross sales totaling \$416,364.00. Most of the cars sold were Fords, Maxwells and Overlands. When customers began to buy cars on credit, he decided to get out of the business. Heretofore, his business had all been for cash and barter. He sold the business to two men who had worked for him for many years, John Wiseman and Lloyd Deets. In 1918 he purchased the building at 2313 Central and began to renovate it.

In February of 1921 he was appointed City Commissioner to fill the unexpired term of Frank Arbuckle. He then filed for election and became one of the three men elected as City Commissioners. At that time the Commissioners elected him Mayor. During the 1921-1923 term hitching racks were still in use, and repairs and additions were made to them. Late in that term an election was held and the people voted to change their form of government from the Commissioner form to the Council form that we know today. That change took place when the new councilmen were installed on April 17, 1923.

One local news item noted that Mayor Wort was no friend of liquor and gambling. It is my opinion that it was during his years in the Sheriff's office, when he came in close contact with the "plain drunks" of his day, that cemented this attitude. As a matter of fact, I remember a family story that the reason he became a Democrat was that after attending a Republican convention and seeing the delegates consuming an overabundance of John Barleycorn, he questioned how they could make a clear-headed decision on a candidate. He then became a Democrat and remained one for the rest of his life.



**Wort Building, 2108-2110 Avenue A  
1926-1990**

**Buffalo County Historical Society**  
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In 1926 he built the building at 2108-2110 Avenue A that has been torn down (1990) to make room for the new Kearney Hub building. When the building was built it represented an investment of about \$10,000. He bought the materials from Tollefsen-Elliott Lumber Co. and then hired Frank Vanderworker and Hogg to build it.

On April 2, 1929, he was again elected Mayor. It was in September of that year that the city took over the government landing field to operate it as a municipal airfield rather than a U.S. field. A license was duly issued to the city by the U.S. Dept. of Commerce. About a year after the stock market crash of October, 1929, the Airport Committee felt it premature for the city to undertake the maintenance of an Airport and it was transferred back to the U.S. Dept. of Commerce in 1930. In 1938 the Chamber of Commerce again requested the acquisition of the Airport, and this request was also denied.

In June of 1931, D. Wort attended the Rotary International Convention in Vienna, Austria as a delegate.

During the Dust Bowl and depression days of the early 30's. Mayor Wort reduced his salary 10%, and raised the subject of salary reduction for city employees. He also spoke of carefully guarding public funds, and appointed a Finance Committee to investigate the various city funds, check city operating expenses, and make recommendations to the Council.

He was again elected Mayor in April, 1937 and at the April 11, 1938 meeting the council considered increasing the salaries of city employees who had been with the city for over two years in the Water/Sewer Department and the Streets/Alleys Department. These salaries would go from 35¢ an hour to 42½¢ an hour.

A new roof for City Hall had been under consideration by the Council. But when it was found that both the roof and walls were in bad shape and the bricks crumbling badly, plans were proposed for a new City Hall-Fireman's Building at an estimated cost of less than \$130,000. On June 24, 1938, the P.W.A. granted the city 45% of the cost, but it was not to exceed \$58,500. A bond issue was put to the people and in October, 1938 it passed in the amount of \$55,000, and the P.W.A. grant offer was accepted on January 9, 1939 in the amount of \$57,150.

About 1938, he was one of the Committee of Five that reorganized the Kearney Building & Loan when it failed, paying out the principal in full, \$335,000, to investors with only a loss of their interest.

When D. Wort ran for reelection in 1941, he was defeated by Ivan Mattson. He died in April of 1948 at the age of 86.

#### SOURCES

Personal speeches by D. Wort; personal letters; newspaper clippings, Records of the Sheriff's office. City Council minutes; "Pleasanton on the Loup" history, 1890-1990; Interviews with Evelyn Hunter, Milford Wiseman, Gordon Turner; and personal memories of Granddaughters Isabella Artman and Emma Jane Wilder.