



# Buffalo Tales



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## THE TOWN THAT WAS NANTASKET

by Rochelle A. Hunt

Countless towns sprung up along the frontier only to disappear within a short span of time. Armada, Sartoria, Buda, and Nantasket are only a few of the names that will not be found on a map today. Reasons for a town's demise vary, however in several cases, the nation's developing railroads played a major role in deciding the fate of Buffalo County towns. Where to lay the track and mark the division points were crucial for a town's future. The promoters of these towns planned and schemed to make sure theirs was the town that succeeded.

At an uncertain date in the 1880's, the town of Nantasket arose in Garfield township, Buffalo County. It was originally called Trocnov (pronounced Trots'-nof) after the hometown of John Zizka, a famous Bohemian soldier of the sixteenth-century Hussite wars. The village flourished in 1886 with a doctor, a dentist, a pharmacist, two hotels, a dry goods store, an elevator, a school, and a post office. According to the Nebraska State Historical Society, Nantasket boasted one hundred citizens by 1889.

A race between Erastus Smith, the promoter of nearby Beaver Creek (now Ravenna), and Nantasket promoter, Dr. McKinney,<sup>1</sup> began when railroad officials from the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad (C.B.&Q.)<sup>2</sup> came in the early

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The only original building left on the townsite of Nantasket.

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Basic Membership .....	\$10.00
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### WITH THE SOCIETY

The enclosed card designating Memorials to the Historical Society is sent for your consideration. Memorial gifts provide special benefits to the Society because they are used for particular items or projects designed to enhance the Trails & Rails Museum or to further the other work of the Society. The use of the gift can be designated on the card if the donor has a preference.

The flag pole, the Union Pacific dining car dinnerware, the 5-panel wall-mounted photo display piece, and a restored baggage cart are some items made possible by memorial gifts.

Consideration of gifts in memorial is especially appropriate at this time because of the "Buffalo County Memorial Day Fund," which was established by the Board of Directors in 1988. Its purpose is to remember and honor friends and family on Memorial Day through gifts to the Society.

Recent gifts received were in memory of the Nye, Cary and Tunks families, Homer McConnell, Joe Elliott, Jr., Edna Hehner, William Lynn, Betty Rockwell, Leo Musil, Tracy Kantaras, and Elmer Wiles.

Additional cards are available at the museum.

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**SPRING BUS TOUR!** Plans are being completed for a tour to The Amana Colonies in Iowa and to the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site at West Branch, Iowa. Interesting stops are being planned, both going and returning. Dates—June 17, 18, 19 and 20th. Prices will be kept as reasonable as possible. More information later.

### NEW BASIC MEMBER

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1880's to decide where the division point of the railroad should be laid. The story goes that Dr. McKinney was called away to Kearney on false pretenses, so the C.B.&Q. officials met with Erastus Smith and decided to change Beaver Creek's name to Ravenna and make it the division point of the new railroad, thus securing the future of Ravenna, a town as successful as Nantasket was supposed to have been.<sup>3</sup>

"Early day promoters believed a town would flourish at the crossing of the Union Pacific and Burlington railroads at that point. But the Burlington established Ravenna a little further west and when St. Michael was started to the east, the town of Nantasket was squeezed out."<sup>4</sup>

Another race then developed, not between the two towns, but between the two railroads. The Burlington and Union Pacific Railroads built west out of Grand Island (the Burlington headed toward Wyoming; the Union Pacific west through Pleasanton). A race ensued, stemming partially from the fact that the two tracks would have to cross each other two miles east of Ravenna. Apparently the rule was that the company that laid the track across the crossing first would get the right of way.

The story is told that one bitterly cold night the Burlington won the race by:

"lining the stomachs of the guards posted by the Union Pacific line with an ample supply of liquor; so ample, in fact, that the guards were unwilling, or unable to do anything when the Burlington crews laid their track through and beyond the crossing, thus earning the right of way."<sup>5</sup>

Thus the Union Pacific had to give up control of that point, but were determined, nevertheless, to make the village into a station.

In 1886 the town was platted and called Nantasket (accounts vary whether it was named after the New York or Massachusetts towns of the same name). Nantasket is also known as "Bottle Town" for its "unsavory reputation" it earned from the four or five saloons it boasted and through the "exuberance of the patrons;" of a large dance hall and bar.<sup>6</sup>

According to historian Charles Jenkins, George M. Cumming arranged for the plat and purchased a half interest in the site from owner, Mr. Fred Lytle. The original plat shows Nantasket as more than three times the original thirty-block plat of Ravenna. "Over fourteen blocks were subdivided into business lots, with great expectations of the town booming in a like manner as Ravenna to its west."<sup>7</sup> A few lots were sold and a few buildings, including a school, were built. A depot and grain elevator were also raised. The townspeople named the streets after trees and called them Willow, Elm, Oak, Maple, Cedar, and so on.

Ravenna's boom soon completely overshadowed Union Pacific's and Nantasket's efforts and the town could not get a firm hold. As early as 1901, sections of the plat were vacated. The post office operated only from November 9, 1887, until 1895 when mail service was transferred to Ravenna.<sup>8</sup>

Mrs. J. C. Mahoney lived in Nantasket as a girl. She recalls it as quite a lively town in 1886 when her family moved there. She attended school at School District #96. In its boom days, W. W. Hurd ran the general store which sat between the two Union Pacific tracks located there at the time. Fred Lytle operated a livery stable and Dr. Fletcher was the local physician and druggist.

Another prominent townsman was Jacob L. Blue, M.D., who was the hotel proprietor of Nantasket in 1890. He was a man of many professions throughout his lifetime, serving as a millwright, a physician, a farmer, a librarian, a Civil War hero,

as well as businessman. He first came to Nebraska in 1875 and returned a second time to Buffalo County with his family and colony, numbering forty-three in all. He then settled in Garfield township in 1883, where he located his homestead in the northwest quarter of section 22, township 12, range 14—in the nearby vicinity of Nantasket, Nebraska.

In addition to his hotel property in Nantasket, he dabbled in real estate and owned over twenty-eight town lots and also owned and conducted a flour and feed store. Dr. Blue was an elder of the Presbyterian church and held offices there including treasurer and secretary. In civic matters, he filled the office of justice of the peace and in 1890 was the deputy postmaster of Nantasket, the post office being located in his own store and his son-in-law being the postmaster.<sup>10</sup>

Being a rural postmaster was “a family affair” in the developing West. It was carried on in the home or community store.<sup>11</sup> The first post office established in Buffalo County was at Nebraska Centre (Boyd Ranch) on July 29, 1859. It was only sixteen years later that Nantasket’s post office was established, running for eight years. With the introduction of Rural Free Delivery about 1907, most of the country post offices closed and rural mail routes were established. They were missed by the country folk because they were social meeting centers and the new settlers used them to gather information about their new homes.

Many of the new settlers were extremely politically active and held an opinion on current events such as prohibition. Dr. Blue was an active member in politics as was Fritz Stark, a local farmer. Stark moved to the area that later became Nantasket in 1876, and located on one-half of Section 2, Garfield township. His farm showed “thrift and good management . . . and his residence and barns” were “large frame structures, surrounded by fine orchards and groves.”<sup>12</sup>



Site of railroad crossing at Nantasket.

It was people like these who made up the now-defunct town of Nantasket, a town that died before the boom it expected. The Czechs, who were the original settlers of the area, emigrated in great numbers during the mid-1880's to the early 1890's.<sup>13</sup> They came from an area of religious persecution, economic hardship and political oppression, seeking opportunities and conditions they could only dream of.

These original Nantaskans made one of the first buildings a meeting hall/post office for the Western Bohemian Brotherhood-ZCBB, or more properly known at the time as "Zapadne Cesko-Bratska Jednota".<sup>14</sup> Many of these fraternal lodges existed during this time—nearby Ravenna having several. It gave the immigrants a chance to keep their heritage and maintain contacts with their fellow people. Generally speaking, the members of the lodges not only came from the same country but even from the same village.

"It has been well over a century since the first Czech immigrants arrived" in the Ravenna-Nantasket area. "Their children and grandchildren still take pride in their heritage. It has been determined that 6.5% of Nebraska residents can trace their roots to Czech ancestry."<sup>15</sup>

The year 1959 marked the town's official demise when the final twelve lots of what used to be Nantasket were sold by Buffalo County School District #96 to Frances O. Fiala for a consideration of \$25.<sup>16</sup> The school was north of the tracks and was used until about 1959,

"when the building was moved to Ravenna and used as a haybarn by



Map from Buffalo County Atlas, 1907. The dotted line running through Section 14 is referred to as the Nantasket Road. The two railroads are shown crossing at Nantasket.

the Ravenna Livestock Commission Company. The hotel building was moved a quarter-mile west of Hankins Corner on Highway #2 and became a home. The bridge across the South Loup River one-half mile north of the townsite is still called the Nantasket Bridge by the local people."<sup>17</sup>

As of 1990, one house still remains abandoned across the road.

As Charles Jenkins concluded, if there was

"any reason for the failure of Nantasket to achieve the success of Ravenna, or perhaps even to replace it, it was probably the decision of the Burlington to make Ravenna a division point on the Burlington & Missouri line."<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

1. Dr. McKinney's name comes from a conversation Lois Johnsten, Ravenna Librarian, had with Blanche Hervert, Ravenna resident.
2. The Chicago, Burlington, & Quincy Railroad and the Burlington and Missouri Railroad officially consolidated in early 1880. Their names seem to be used interchangeably until March 2, 1970, when the names were changed to Burlington Northern.
3. Overton, Richard. *Burlington Route: A History of the Burlington Lines*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1965.
4. Interview with Lois Johnsten. 1990.
5. *Ravenna News*. "Nantasket, Once Thriving Village, Is Wiped Off the Deed Records." September 10, 1959.
6. Jenkins, Charles. *A Place Called Banishment: History of Ravenna, Nebraska*. 1961. (131)
7. *Ibid.* (132)
8. *Ibid.* (132)
9. According to Charles Jenkins, the closing date of the post office was 1895. However, other dates include 1908, from the 1986 Ravenna Centennial publication, and 1909 from the September 27, 1959, article in the *Lincoln Journal-Star*.
10. *Ravenna News*.
11. *Biographical Souvenir of the Counties of Buffalo, Kearney, Phelps, Harland and Franklin, Nebraska*. 1890 (203)
12. *Ibid.* (203)
13. *Ibid.* (201)
14. Abraham, Edith Fiala. *Buffalo Tales*. "The Czechs In and Around Ravenna, Part I." May 1985.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Abraham, Edith Fiala. *Buffalo Tales*. "The Czechs In and Around Ravenna, Part II." May 1985.
17. Register of Deeds Office, Buffalo County, 1990
18. Johnsten, Lois.
19. Jenkins, Charles. (132)

## SOURCES

*Buffalo Tales*, May, August 1978; May, June, July 1985; Biographical Souvenir, Counties of Buffalo, Kearney and Phelps, Nebraska, 1890; Buffalo County Plat Book, 1907; Jenkins, *A Place called Banishment; History of Ravenna*, 1961; Overton, *Burlington Route*, 1965; *Ravenna News*, September 10, 1959; *Lincoln Journal-Star*, September 27, 1959; *Ravenna Centennial 1886-1986*, 1986; Personal interviews conducted by Lois Johnsten, 1990.

*About the Author:* Rochelle Hunt graduated from Ravenna High School. She is now attending Kearney State College and will be receiving her B.S. Degree in May 1991. Her plans are to continue the study of history in the Master's degree program at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

Buffalo County Historical Society  
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