

Buffalo Tales

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2010

“TOTHEBLACKHILLS,IFNOTHING BIGGER THAN A PUMKIN GOES THROUGH US”

FROM THE GREAT LAKES TO THE GREAT PLAINS: THE 1877 TREK OF EDWIN ALFRED LAMB

Part I

By Chuck Real

Since retirement in 2003 from the insurance business Chuck Real has been on the adjunct faculty of Metropolitan Community College where he is an instructor in both American History and World Civilizations.

He is a member of the Speaker's Bureau for the Nebraska Humanities Council through which he provides presentations on Celtic Culture and Irish history and the American Civil War and Nebraska settlement. He is a frequent visitor to Ireland and an amateur genealogist for his family's Irish roots. He is a past board member of the Omaha Chapter of the Irish American Cultural Institute. He has authored articles for the Irish genealogical journal Gateway to the Past and for Midwest Jewish Journal. He also authored Soaring with Eagles, the history of an Omaha based insurance company.

In addition to Celtic and Irish history he has extensively studied the American Civil War and is the founder and first president of the Omaha Sentry Civil War Round Table. His American history studies include the Pacific campaign of World War II and settlement of the West.

Real grew up in McCook, NE. He has a BA degree in Education from the University of Nebraska at Kearney with a major in Political Science and History. He received his Masters Degree in History from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Real has been a high school teacher. He is a Vietnam veteran and served as a sergeant in the United States Marine Corps.

Chuck Real has a personal connection to the subject in the tale to follow. Edwin Lamb's maternal grandmother, Julia Real Fitzgerald was his great, great, great-aunt and Patrick Real was his great, great-uncle.

As the ice-clogged waters of Michigan's St. Clair River welcomed steadily warming air and water currents marking the arrival of spring in 1877, 23 year-old Edwin Alfred Lamb made his last round of farewells to family and friends in Port Huron before boarding a steam freighter slated to be his home for another season on the Great Lakes.

By the time, his ship finished ferrying lumber products from the mills of northern Michigan to Chicago, and after nearly a decade of adventure on the high seas, Lamb made a fateful decision to embark on a far different adventure. Within the late spring and summer months of 1877, he traveled by steam-ship, train, covered-wagon and old-fashion foot-power from the Great Lakes to the pioneering areas of a sparsely settled Great Plains frontier bounded by Nebraska and the Black Hills of the Dakota Territories.¹

Some decades after his Plains adventure, Edwin Lamb wrote about his trek from Nebraska to the Black Hills, although not fully explaining the motivation behind his decision to go west. He wrote only that he



*Edwin Lamb
1913*

had heard and read of opportunities for young men in the west and thought it was something he would like to try. When he arrived in Nebraska with the goal of visiting a cousin to his mother living in Grafton, he soon found that one of the primary topics around the counter in the local general store centered on the gold mines in the Dakota Territory. Before long he became convinced that a young man looking for adventure in the west may want to take a look at the "going ons" in the Black Hills before deciding his future. ⁱⁱ

In his self-proclaimed "memoirs," Lamb noted that when his train from Chicago arrived in Lincoln, Nebraska in early May, 1877, he observed an ever increasing number of covered wagons moving westward alongside the railroad tracks. Such activity resulted in questioning his fellow passengers about the number of westward traveling wagons:

I began to see covered wagons moving west where the wagon roads ran along not far from the railroad right of way. They were traveling in bunches of anywhere from two to ten wagons through the well settled part of the State and I learned from inquiry that they were all trekking to the outskirts of the settled country where they form into large trains or caravans for self protection and help each other in every way while on their way to the Black Hills. On some of the wagons was painted "To The Black Hills or Bust" and I saw such declarations in big letters as, "WE'RE GOING TO THE BLACK HILLS, IF NOTHING BIGGER THAN A PUMKIN GOES THROUGH US." printed on the side of the wagon cover. ⁱⁱⁱ

Lamb further learned that most of these westward bound travelers had been put off their land by several years of terrible infestations of grasshoppers. In the same year as his arrival in Nebraska, the Nebraska Legislature passed the "Grasshopper Act," declaring the insect a public enemy and made it mandatory on citizens to "fight the pest." ^{iv}

Arriving in Grafton, he immediately made contact with his Irish born cousin, a former Union army officer, Patrick Sarsfield Real. By the time of Lamb's arrival, the former army captain owed several businesses, including a combination hardware and general store, lumberyard, hotel and a grain elevator. ^v

After accepting the hospitality of the Real home, Lamb continued thinking about where he should travel after Nebraska. Claiming work experiences to date had "sharpened my intellect regarding human nature. Just the same, I realized what I was up against in my new surroundings and I began to realize that my ability was of little help in the west." ^{vi}

In studying his new land-locked surroundings, Lamb found that the local population seemed to have shaken off some of the anxieties of the previous several years of devastated harvests. He noted that "the average farmer was in straightened circumstances and there were more barefooted men and children coming to town to trade and see the sights." He discovered that having freed themselves of the "heavy plow shoes which they were all able to buy," it was not "thought out of place for boys and girls to go to dances barefooted and dance on the earth floors." He seemed fascinated with the quaintness of Grafton area homes that were "well constructed of sod and thatched roofs." ^{vii}

In enjoying the friendliness of his Grafton hosts and the surrounding farming community, Lamb continued to be amazed at the constant stream of wagons moving west and ultimately to Dakota country. Grafton offered a way-station for both families and beast to draw water and replenish larders and grain buckets. As Lamb noted, Grafton sat on the Burlington & Missouri route that then reached as far as



*Caption reads:
"As I Remember The Real Fennel
Co. Elevator in Grafton Nebr
Approx 1915"
Drawn by Robert Real*

Kearney. In his conversations, he soon learned that from Kearney, wagon trains on the way to the Dakota Territory could “strike north into the sand hills . . . more or less of a wilderness.”^{vi}

No doubt the movement of wagons and the painted inscriptions started Lamb thinking about whether there was something waiting for him at the end of the same trail. He further learned that the more cautious men were traveling on their own with their wives and children left either in their former homes or with relatives. Those members remained behind while the men investigated “before getting into more trouble” than they had with the grasshoppers. Grafton, however, seemed protected from the worse of the grasshoppers since cold weather and early rains had killed off the “young hoppers before they were hatched out and . . . everything bid fair for good crops.”^{vii}

As Lamb considered setting out for the Black Hills, he thought about possibly taking supplies to the miners and likely hoped for a measurable profit. If he was to go to set out on this new adventure, however, he first needed to be grubstaked to both a means of transport and for the supplies most needed in the mining camps surrounding the expanding and notable stereotypical wild-west town of Deadwood. In this quest, one of his first steps into landlocked freighting would have to begin with someone best suited to provide the equipment and supplies needed. That would be his host, Patrick Real.

As his own interest in the “doings out there” increased, he noticed that Captain Real had his own thoughts on the same subject. About two weeks into Lamb’s visit, his older cousin must have sensed that his young border was ready to move on. On a day when both had discussed the prospects of doing business in the Black Hills, Lamb relates his cousin’s suggestion:

I surmise that you will go to the hills with the rush now on and I was wondering how you would like to take some cattle and merchandise out there on a commission basis for me. Prices are way up on staples and you could sell out at a good profit and then trade off the cattle for horses and return here for the harvest time with the horses and get a good price for them.^{viii}

With the opportunity presented, Lamb wasted little time in agreeing to his cousin’s offer. His memoir noted he was more than willing to make the journey and the opportunity to perhaps do his own “gold digging.” One of the first actions taken by his benefactor was to provide the loan of a hired-hand named Tom Russell. Real had confidence in Russell to help Lamb over some of the hurdles of the trek while at the same time probably protecting Real’s own substantial investment.^{ix}

Sources:

ⁱ Edwin A. Lamb. Letter to Agnes Lamb. 1 May 1935. Copy held by author (“Lamb Letter”). The letter is not clear whether sent by Lamb to his daughter Agnes Irene or his niece Agnes Margaret. At the top right-hand corner of the letter is the handwritten address for the niece who had taken the name of Sister Mary Avila and was in residence at the time at the Academy of the Holy Angels in Richfield, Minnesota.

ⁱⁱ Lamb, “Memoirs,” 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} Wagner, Alexandra. “Grasshopper: America’s Response to the 1874 Rocky Mountain Locust Invasion.” *Nebraska History* Vol. 89 Winter (2008): 165.

^v Andres, A.T.. *History of Nebraska*. Chicago: 1882; Geneva Signal. 25 May, 1893; Murphy, Father William. “A Brief Sketch of the Life of Captain P. S. Real.” Read before the State Historical Society, January 14, 1896, 26-35. *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Second Series, Vol. II, Lincoln: State Journal Company, 1898*. Gaffney, Wilbur G., ed. *The Fillmore County Story*. Geneva: Geneva Community Grange No. 402, 1968; In March 2009, a picture of Captain Patrick S. Real was featured on the cover of a new Civil War book: Swan, James. *Chicago’s Irish Legion: The 90th Illinois Volunteers In The Civil War*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2009.

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 3.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 3.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x *Ibid.*, 4.

^{xi} *Ibid.*

Did You Know...?
 ... THAT THE STEAM LOCOMOTIVE CURRENTLY FOUND AT THE TRAILS AND RAILS USED TO BE USED AS A JUNGLE GYM IN A PARK BEFORE IT WAS RESCUED BY THE CITY OF KEARNEY AND DONATED TO BCHS?
 SEE YOUR WORDS IN PRINT!
 WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE MEMORY OF... HALLOWEEN?
 WHAT WAS YOUR ALL-TIME FAVORITE COSTUME?
 DID YOUR FRIENDS AND YOU PULL PRANKS ON YOUR NEIGHBORS OR DID ALL THE CANDY MAKE YOU SICK?
 E-MAIL US AT: BCHS.BUFFALOTALES@HOTMAIL.COM



Ghost Hunting

We are having a special session of Ghost Hunting to help celebrate Halloween! There will be two different classes on October 15th starting at 6:30 pm and 10:00 pm. Bill Sinnard and Jacob Sikes from Midwest Paranormal Investigators will be back to conduct the classes. The classes will begin with a very short introduction to ghost hunting, followed by around 3 hours of actual ghost hunting. The classes are \$30 per person. Contact Jen at Trails & Rails (308) 234-3041 or by e-mail bchs.us@hotmail.com for more information and registration.

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 Phone: 308 234.3041 Email: bchs.us@hotmail.com

Dr. Mark R. Ellis, Editor
 Katherine Wielechowski, Production Manager

2010 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Individual.....	\$35.00
Family.....	\$40.00
Institutional Membership.....	\$50.00
Supporting Membership.....	\$75.00

We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.

Directors
 Term expiring June 1, 2011: Mary Beth Lowe, Sharon Martin, Duane Muhlbach, Barb Riege
 Term expiring June 1, 2012: Bernie Hascall, Janice Martin, Dan Speirs, Gary Straatmann
 Term expiring June 1, 2013: Vicki Bissell, Chad Henning, Lynn Rauner, Jim Cudaback

Officers (1 year term).....	Dan Speirs
President.....	Sharon Martin
Vice-President.....	Barb Riege
Secretary.....	Lynn Rauner
Treasurer.....	

2010 Calendar of Events

Sunday, April 18th from 1-3 pm: BCHS Annual Meeting

Sunday, June 13th: 3rd Annual ½ Marathon: Buffalo County Stampede— Reg. @ 6 am. Race begins @ 7 am

Tuesday, June 15th from 6:30-9:30 pm: 4th Annual Trivia Contest & Soup Dinner

Saturday, July 3rd from 9-10:30 pm: Members Only Night (watch city fireworks)

Saturday, July 10: 25th Annual Wagons West Celebration— Music and Exhibitors from 10-6 pm

Includes fiddle contest and "What is it?" portion

Saturday, August 7th from 10:30-1:30 pm: Genealogy Open House with spotlight on One-Room School w/ a picnic!

Saturday, December 4th from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 23rd Annual Christmas Tree Walk

Saturday, December 4th-Sunday, December 12th from 1-5 pm daily: Open to the public: 23rd Annual Christmas Tree Walk

Volunteers and sponsors are still needed for these events. Please contact any staff member to help!

Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

PO Box 523, 710 W. 11th St., Kearney, NE 68845
(308) 234-3041 www.bchs.us bchs.us@hotmail.com

We hope you enjoy these stories about Buffalo County. We would love to have a stock pile of Buffalo Tales ready, so they can go out in a more timely manner. Please submit your memories and stories to us by e-mailing them to bchs.us@hotmail.com or sending them to the post office box: BCHS, PO Box 523 Kearney NE 68848.

We appreciate your support!

Director's Report

-The **Kearney Public Library** called and offered us a display case for the month of October. Molly prepared the items and also set it up in the big display case in the main lobby area. It will be up until the first of November.

-I submitted a 2010 Kearney Keno grant application for \$2659.76 to repair the log cabin.

**Update: The grant was awarded in the full amount!! Jim Miller will oversee this project.

-The **Midwest Paranormal Investigators (MPI)** said that the last 2010 event, "Trails & Rails...& Wails", would be a full fundraiser for BCHS. In the months prior, all proceeds were split with MPI. Friday, Oct. 15 from 6:30 pm to 1:30 am, 51 people came out to do ghost hunting. The 51 included the MPI guys, the ambassadors, media personal, and 38 paid attendees. **BCHS made \$1140.**

-There is a family from eastern Nebraska that came in for a tour and I learned they are descendants of the Oliver family. They drove back to do research in our archives and wrote a very nice thank you letter to Mardi and sent in a \$20 donation. They will be back to continue their research soon.

Be sure to Join the Buffalo County Historical Society group or the Buffalo County Historical Society/Trails & Rails Museum fan page on Facebook!



Trails & Rails Museum
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