

HISTORIC OVERVIEW⁴

Archaeologists know that aboriginal human groups inhabited the northern Great Plains for at least 12,000 to 15,000 years. There is evidence of some prehistoric settlement along the river valleys within the sandhills. Protohistoric Ponca traveled the Niobrara River Basin. Stone artifacts and limited ceramics were located at Kilgore, Merritt, Sparks and Thacher. In 1800 most of central Nebraska was the core area of Pawnee Territory. When Euro-Americans first arrived they entered the meeting ground for the Dakota Sioux, Ponca, and Pawnee Indians.⁵

Other than the Native Americans, the first to explore the Niobrara River was James Mackay in 1795. He crossed the Niobrara downriver from the present location of Valentine, then moved southward. Lt. G. K. Warren crossed the Niobrara just east of the present refuge in 1855 and 1857, and his writings mention the Ponca and the Sichangus Brule (Dakota Sioux).

During the mid-1870s north central Nebraska was among the last areas of the state into which settlers ventured. Early explorers had described the sandhills as "The Great American Desert," a land unfit for human habitation. But eventually settlers came north from Ogallala across the sandhills to the flat land along the Niobrara to the east of the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail Indian reservations.

First came the cowboys, pushing cattle north from Texas for wealthy entrepreneurs who sold live beef for the government issue to the reservation Indians. Many of those cowboys envisioned a cattle ranch of their own someday and later filed homestead claims. The first ranches were little more than a sod or log shack, perhaps a pole corral, and the seemingly endless prairie.

A military presence was established in 1880 at Fort Niobrara near the confluence of Minnehaduzza Creek and the Niobrara River, previously a favorite Indian campsite.

Early in 1883 the Nebraska Legislature established the boundaries of the new county from unorganized territory called Sioux County. The name was selected to honor Lt. Samuel A. Cherry, an officer stationed with the U.S. Cavalry at Fort Niobrara when he was murdered by one of his own men in 1881. County organization was completed April 24, 1883, when Governor James Dawes appointed the first county commissioners. The survey of Cherry County took eight years, from 1874 until 1882.

The town builders came next, as the railroad forged westward. The merchants who supplied the initial basic needs of the other pioneers also helped shape town government.

The stream of settlers increased: the homesteaders and later the Kinkaiders. The homestead act lured settlers to the sandhills with a promise of 160 free acres if the sod was turned. By the early 1900s competition for land had become intense between the cowmen and the plowmen. But the Sandhill prairie itself issued the final verdict as being more receptive to the cow.

There was also a dark side. Boredom resulted in instances of fighting, desertion, and alcoholism at the military fort. Some of the early arrivals were gunslingers, gamblers, and horse thieves, or land speculators whose sole interest was their own personal gain and who soon moved on to new territories.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, historical data obtained from *A Sandhill Century*, Edited by Marianne Brinda Beel, published 1986 by the Cherry County Centennial Committee.

⁵ Franklin, Rachel, Michael Grant, and Martha Hunt. *Historical Overview and Inventory of the Niobrara/Missouri National Scenic Riverways, Nebraska/South Dakota*, 1994.

Not all of the homesteaders stayed, but those who did represent many nationalities and a wide range of talents and professions. They came from Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Ireland, France, England, Holland, Bohemia, Canada, and from other parts of the USA. When it was learned there were more than 50,000 acres available for homestead northwest of Brownlee, some 100 black families settled there and established the DeWitty community.

It was through the efforts of a Cody rancher, a Valentine businessman and State Senator Moses Kinkaid that the Kinkaid Act of 1904 increased homestead allowances from 160 to 640 acres in 37 western Nebraska counties where the sandy soil was suitable only for grazing and 10-20 acres were required to maintain just one cow. Geography and isolation of the grazing lands bred an individualism among rural residents that has persevered; an independence fostered by forced self reliance because of the distance from towns and between neighbors.

Early rural residents built their own telephone lines, invented labor-saving devices, maintained their own roads and provided their own electricity before the Rural Electrification Act. As economics allowed they developed adequate water supply systems, built new houses and landscaped their own lawns. They developed living conditions comparable to those of urban dwellers.

Cherry County's population peaked in 1920 at 11,753. In 1919 there were 43 post offices in the county. At one time or another there were 99 post offices established throughout the county. Stores were not operated in conjunction with every post office, but some of those that did include them were Newton, Rolf, Kennedy, Elsmere, Oasis and Simeon.

Most pioneers came intending to farm. They plowed and planted, and the wind and sand blew. The sandhills were devastated during the droughts and cattle succumbed to the relentless winters. Discouraged homesteaders gathered their meager belongings and left. Those who stayed looked for additional means to supplement their incomes. Produce, hogs, chickens, eggs and butter provided extra income. People found outside jobs on large ranches and sawmills, and some opened stores and applied for post office permits. Hunting and trapping for eastern markets, hauling freight, and bone picking were also used to augment incomes. As some homesteaders gave up, neighboring ranch sizes increased.

World War I was followed by hard times, though some established ranchers increased their land. Ten years of drought, depression, and an outbreak of scabies during the 1930s took its toll. By 1938 most of the 160 acre homesteads and 640 acre Kinkaid's that had checkerboarded much of the county in 1919 were gone. By 1940 many ranches in the western two-thirds of the county ranged between 20 to 80 sections or more.

Cherry County sent 942 men to World War II and lost 38 of them. Shortages, rationing, and a freeze on the sale of farm implements all affected life in Cherry County during the war and post war years. Cherry County soldiers also served in the Korean conflict during the 1950s and in Vietnam during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Longtime ranchers watched as land prices inflated to historic highs just 50 years after the Great Depression. Land prices peaked in 1982, with some ranches selling for nearly \$250 per acre. Prices dropped again during the recessions of the 1980s but in some parts of the county have again exceeded the \$250 per acre mark as land uses other than ranching drive up values.

In 1983 Cherry County celebrated its centennial with many special events and projects. Perhaps the biggest and most lasting was the completion of a two volume history of the land and the people of Cherry County. *A Sandhill Century*, edited by Marianne Brinda Beel was published

in 1986 by the Cherry County Centennial Committee. The work provides a lasting insight into what has made Cherry County what it is today.

ANNUAL LOCAL CELEBRATIONS

Valentine's Day, 1884 Days (April), County Fair (August), Old West Days and the Cowboy Poetry Gathering (October) are all celebrated locally in Valentine. Each summer Sparks hosts the Old Settlers Reunion, Cody sponsors Circle C Days, and Wood Lake holds an annual barbecue.

LAND OWNERSHIP

The majority of the land within Cherry County is privately owned. Private ownership accounts for 3,406,729 (3,370,456.937) acres. This category includes private, non-profit lands such as the Niobrara Valley Preserve, owned by The Nature Conservancy. About 36 percent (19,366 (16,171.7) acres) of this 54,000 acre tract lies within Cherry County.

The state of Nebraska owns or leases 227,271 (232,042.78) acres within Cherry County. 221,861 (218,090.5) of these acres are Board of Education lands (commonly called "school sections") and are scattered across the county. Originally, sections 6 and 36 of each township were designated as school trust lands; however the configuration has changed slightly through the years as a result of land exchanges. Most of the remaining state-owned acres are managed by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, and include a number of wildlife management areas (Table #2 below and Map #3, page 8). The Middle Niobrara Natural Resource District manages a small parcel adjacent to the Niobrara River south of Sparks.

Table #2: NE Game and Parks Commission Areas Owned or Leased in Cherry County'

<u>Name</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>Acres</u>
Anderson Bridge	Wildlife	137.00
Ballards Marsh	Wildlife	1,561.50
Big Alkali	Wildlife	889.40
Borman Bridge	Wildlife	159.10
Bowring Ranch	Historic	325.00
Cottonwood Lake	Recreation	240.00
Merritt Reservoir	Recreation	9,052.80
Rat & Beaver Lake	Wildlife	242.70
Schlagel Creek	Wildlife	600.00
Shell Lake	Wildlife	380.00
Smith Falls	Park	248.00
Valentine Hatchery	Fisheries	886.06
Willow Lake	Wildlife	440.00