

OPENING OF THE SANDHILLS

by Joella Waddill

In this day and age one hardly tops to think of the pioneers who came in and settled this country in which we are now living. Only a few people seem to realize the hardships and difficulties which the pioneers encountered in settling in this western country. The only ones that can really describe pioneer life are those who have had the actual experience. There are very few "old timers" left in this western country.

Everyone has probably heard of Jim Dahlman, the cowboy mayor. He is one of the cowboys who have passed away. He was from Texas as were my father's folks. My grandmother used to dance with Jim Dahlman when they were in Texas/

Mr. Dahlman decided that he wanted to go north, so Bennett Irwin my grandmother's brother said he would accompany him on his northern journey. Bennett had \$350 which he divided with Jim and so started on their exciting adventure/

They arrived in Omaha one cold day in March, 1878. They were not dressed properly to face the cold and snowy Nebraska because they were from the sunny south.

It certainly must have been an interesting sight for them to gaze upon snow and ice for the first time in their lives.

Bennett and Jim traveled on the Union Pacific to Sidney and from there took a stage north. Anyone living in Nebraska knows how bad a Nebraska blizzard can be, but these young Texans who had for the first time seen snow were altogether unprepared for a blizzard. The stage in which they were riding was so crowded with people that they had to take turns walking. The snow was six inches deep and neither Jim nor Bennett had any overshoes. They were certainly

Page two (2)

in a predicament.

Finally they arrived very tired from the trip at the Newman Ranch in western Nebraska. This ranch was located at the mouth of the Antelope Creek on the Niobrara, just twelve miles east of where the city of Gordon now stands. The ranch was one of the large cattle ranches handling from ten to fifteen thousand cattle.

The foreman of the ranch was Billy Irwin, Bennett's older brother. He gave the boys a warm welcome which they appreciated very much after such a hard trip. They were also assured jobs for the summer, which sounded interesting to them.

Bennett Irwin became one of the most trusted lieutenants of Mr. Newman. His brother Billy left the ranch and started a ranch of his own which was called the Irwin Ranch. Bennett Irwin became foreman of the Newman ranch when his brother left.

Bennett was of a very friendly nature and was able to get along very well with all the cowboys. He soon became a married man and his wife, who was very charming in manner and courteous and kind was loved and admired for 200 miles around. She was worshipped and respected by every cowboy. The cowboys always knew it was Sunday because Aunt Lou always dressed up and sat around doing nothing only the necessary things.

The ranch was located in the heart of the sand hill region. The sections of country north and west of the Niobrara was used for winter and summer range up to 1878. South and east of the river was known as the sand hill desert and was considered unsafe for man or beast to roam in. Line riders were stationed along the edge of the sand hill desert to keep the cattle from drifting into these hills during the storms. A terrible thing happened though in March a terrific snow storm drove the cattle through the line. The line

riders could do nothing but seek shelter. The result was that thousands of cattle made their temporary home in the dreaded sand-hills. Mr. Newman had over six thousand head in this predicament. Nothing could be done just then and of course this caused much anxiety to the owner of the herds.

Billy Irwin the foreman at this time suggested to Mr. Newman that if he were allowed to select his men and horses he would undertake to gather the cattle.

The arrangements were made and the outfit started on the 15th of April 1878. The second day out they encountered one of the worst blizzards any of them had ever seen which lasted three days. The only thing they could do was to keep warm the best they could. Eddie Vallentine my father's uncle absolutely knew he was going to freeze, because he was just from the south. He kept saying he would never see his Mary (his wife) again. This became a joke among the boys because Eddie said it so often.

The only fuel they had was what could be hauled for cooking and what cow and buffalo chips could be gathered.

However when the storm was over they gathered up the saddle parties and started to look for cattle. They soon began to strike cattle perfectly contented in their new home. Thus was the story of the opening of the sand hills which is now the great hay meadow country of the west.