

# Kansas Day activities coming in Bird City on Jan. 29

By Marsha C. Magley

Hauling water by sled, from a lagoon located miles from your sod house on a claim; rolling back bedcovers to discover a rattlesnake; sleeping in a wagon or tent through a howling plains blizzard, or having to accept "Beggar Beans" from the government during a time of drought - are not my idea of "The Good Life." Yet, those who did live the life of the sturdy pioneers in Cheyenne County only a little over a century ago and less, somehow survived. Or at least, a good number of them did.

"Homestead Heritage" is the theme of the 85th annual Kansas Day celebration to be held on Jan 29 at the Bird City American Legion hall. The Kansas Day Committee encourages everyone to attend this festivity, which, this year, will highlight the 143rd year of Kansas statehood.

On March 6, 1873, Governor Osborn approved an act creating a number of new counties out of the unorganized territory in the western part of Kansas. One of those counties was Cheyenne, the most northwestern county. Township and section lines were also surveyed in 1873. A survey of public lands was made in 1874, and in 1876, the first cattle ranch, the T-Wrench, was located about 9 miles southwest of the present location of St. Francis, along the Republican River.

In 1879, the first actual settlers, the Heseliuses and Day brothers settled on Big Timber. In 1880, Jacob Buck settled near Wano, and by Aug. 23, 1880, there were enough settlers to justify the establishment of a post office at Wano, with A.M. Brenaman as postmaster.

Cheyenne County was opened for settlement in 1885. The first railroad train to cross the plains of Cheyenne County arrived on July 8, 1888, with big celebrations in both Bird City and St. Francis.

Several of the early homesteaders left recollections of when they came to Cheyenne County. A few abstractions and paraphrases from their writings (Bird City Times, Pioneer Edition) are presented here.

Notes from Irving Anderson (1932) - In 1885, father was working for the St. Joe and Grand Island Railroad. This western homestead fever was in the air. He became exposed and took the fever. We were living in Council Bluffs, Iowa, at that time. He came home and talked things over with our oldest sister, Mother having passed away in 1879, and Sister was keeping house for him. It was decided they would come to Kansas and each file on a homestead and tree claim. It was October, 1885. There was a great rush at the land office at Oberlin, so they just filed on their land sight-unseen. The locator, Mr. McCarty, told them this land was just fine. They were surprised when they came and looked it over, six miles south and four miles east of Wano. They just missed the banks of Sand Creek by about a mile. Father built two shacks

that fall, they were the only ones for miles. The next spring, Father came home, (Council Bluffs), loaded an immigrant car and shipped to Haigler, Neb. Brother Bennett and I came with him, we were just kids. There were a lot of immigrant cars in those trains at that time, one man to a car, but a lot of passengers without tickets also rode those cars, and of all the hiding places you ever saw, you would find them there. There was one where they had a stove so arranged that you went through the oven to get to the hideout. That oven had a high polish when they got through with it.

If it hadn't been for the sod houses, buffalo and cow chips, (and bones on the prairie to gather and sell), perhaps this country would never have been settled yet. The old sod house was sure fine and dandy if you kept plenty of dirt on the roof. If you didn't, a three-or four day rain would get through. It would sure get on your nerves in the night to hear the drip, drip, drip and plaster peeling off the walls with a splash. When you heard this, you knew it was 'pick up your bed and walk.' You had one last resort, and that was under the table.

The Convention Hall of the Valley (Diamond Hall) was where we had the good times. Curry brothers, Everett Kemp, Slifers, Kilmers, Tedricks, Montgomerys, Ellises, Atkinsons, Mrs. Minnie Lawless and other played in 'Grand Opera.' Everett Kemp, soon after, got into fast company and toured the world and was on a radio program in Kansas (1932).

In looking back now, we wonder how we ever got anywhere. The only way was on foot, horseback or wagon, then the cart and buggy. Those that were rich had the two-seated surry with lamps on the side. John Bowers had one of the first autos in St. Francis and it was called the "Queen," two cylinders, double opposed. One cylinder was supposed to help the other. He was hauling passengers when he was not fixing the car. Farmer Shields had the next car. Ben Barks and I started out one morning with a team and buggy. We met Farmer Shields with his red-devil, and something happened. I picked myself up off the ground and found Ben, tangled up in the wire fence. He was laughing, but that was no sign he was not dying. He came out of it alright.

Notes from H.B. Bear (1932) - Coming here in a covered wagon, we landed in Wano, on May 1, 1886. Uhler and Benson were digging a well in the south part of town and went through shale at a depth of 230 feet. We started over the hill south from Wano, the road leading along the west side of the (Wano) cemetery. The wind was blowing and the sand flying. I said to myself: "Have I got to live here five years, until Dad proves up on his claim?" It looked sickening to me. I was 17 years old. We had to haul water for the house from Wano and for the stock from the spring on the

Harkins farm. I have seen as high as five and six teams, some from down on Lawn Ridge, 10 miles south, waiting at Wano well to take their turn to fill up from two to four barrels with water by the bucket. Bill Douglas, who homesteaded over east of us, had been away from home a few days working and when he came in, it was after dark. He turned the covers back and their lay a big rattler in his bed, so he just went to the neighbor's and stayed for the night.

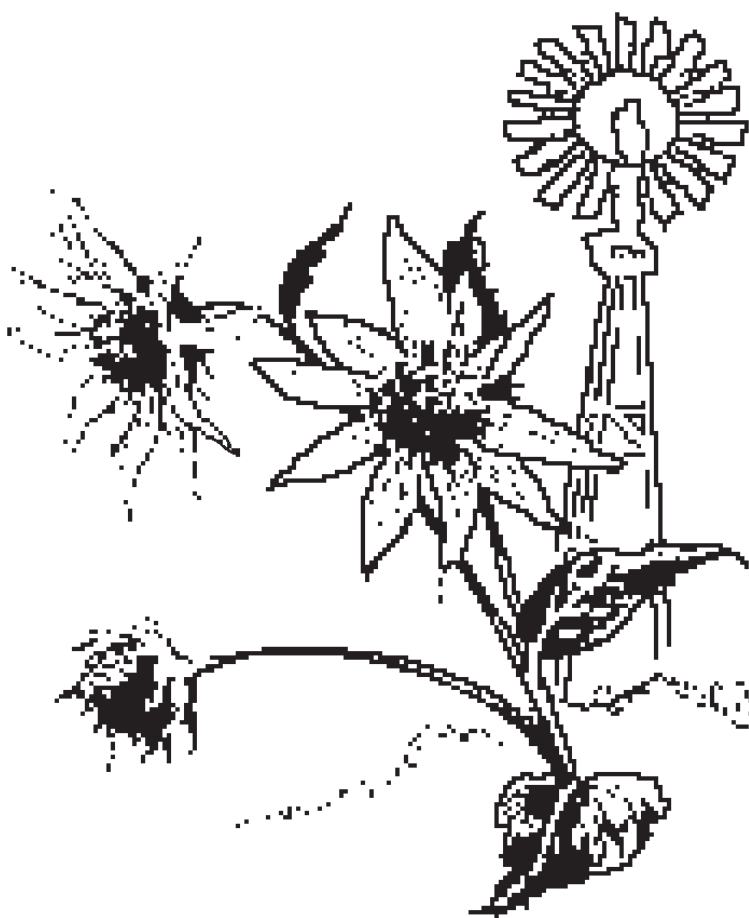
The blizzards were the worst foe of the settlers. The blizzard of 1886 was a very severe one. We began to see the effects of it at about Culbertson, Neb., on our way out here. From Trenton, Neb., until we landed in Wano, I do not believe that we were out of sight of dead cattle that had perished in that storm. There were thousands of heads that perished. The blizzard of April 26, 1901, there was no train in or out of St. Francis for two weeks. The railroad tried hard enough to keep the cuts clear but it seemed impossible. At one time, there were three snow plows between here and Bird City. Mr. Danielson, Mr. Uplinger and Mr. Reinhold were heavy losers. I think their combined losses were around 900 head of cattle.

Notes from James G. Butler in 1932 - Land seekers from the four corners came to this beautiful land, as it was beautiful. The big prairie fire had burned all the old grass off and the new grass was about 2 inches high, making eastern Cheyenne County one big lawn. Not a furrow plowed, was the way it was seen in the last of April 1885. And, looking in any direction, not a building of any description could be seen when we unhitched our team on the corner where C.E. Overturf lived (1932). However, could we have seen Big Timber Valley, we would have seen the prosperous ranch of Mr. Heaton, who came here in '79 and drove his stakes down so tight that he stayed to the end. Also, Mr. W.S. Munn was there ahead of us.

Besides myself, I will name some of the old boys that were of the yesterday, so long gone, that are here yet and that I know of them living and their whereabouts: Seth Ross, St. Francis, Charley Moring, Rock Creek, Colo., District Judge, and one of the boys that helped dig our first well. While he rested, he would read law. George Lusk, another boy who helped on the first well, lives at Galesburg, Ill. Julia Slater and her sister of Washington, homesteaded about where the Martell farm was. They are yet holding their old timber claim. Charley Witham, Bird City, can be seen most any day walking around with his cane under his arm. Not quite as spry though as he was. He must have worn out too many shovels. Henry Weaver is still down on the Dry Beaver. Fred Lebow and Paul Phillips are both here yet. Both were quite young when they came. They are stayers

though. Clarence Johnson lives at Belvedere, Ill., age 76. J.D. McKinney lives at Menlo, age 84. Byron Benton, Colorado Springs, age 78. They were the three first carpenters we had here. Lester Benton, Twin Falls, Idaho. The two Benton boys were camped on the NE 19-3-37 when we came in and were caught in the blizzard of Jan. 6, 1886. They were on the road from Benkelman with supplies and the team played out in the deep snow north a short way from the Pelstrom farm. They could not see any shelter so unhitched, fed the team and blanketed them and then shoveled a hole in the snow and made their bed. They soon were snowed under. When they crawled out, to their surprise, the Tigerstrand boys' sod house was a short distance from them. They were not long in getting there and found four or five men there, and when Emil (Tigerstrand) heard the trouble, he and his brother went and got the team and took them in the house too and cared for them till the storm was over.

Notes from Fred D. Cram (1932) - We departed St. Anthony, Iowa, in a wagon, called a schooner, on Oct. 1, 1886, and made a 28-day journey to Cheyenne County. Our old gray mare, Doll, had colic. A man at Benkelman spit some tobacco juice into her mouth, as far down her throat as it would go. Whether it cured her or not, I do not know, but she got well shortly and we finished our trip. Arriving at the place, five miles northwest of Bird City, we took possession of the dugout which Dad had constructed after deciding that a frame shanty on the hilltop was too likely to stray away. I often wonder what Mother thought when she first saw our



nest. She had never been used to a mansion, however, having pioneered as a girl. But she never voiced her disappointment at the appearance of her new home, if she experienced any. In later years, when we had moved up on the hill, into a house moved out from Bird City, I heard Mother speaking of going to the hilltop and looking off toward dear old Iowa. But for the most part, she kept such thoughts to herself, and she was always a loyal booster for Kansas.

We never used tumble weeds for fuel after the first winter. We used corn stalks. Part of the duties of the later afternoon was to gather stalks from the field and

transport them, by arm power, to a certain place in or near the house. As they were needed, they were taken in arm lots to the stove side, where a large box received them as they were cut into proper length for our stove. We became quite expert at cutting stalks. That was usually Dad's job, but of course, being pioneers, any of us could pinch-hit in an emergency. I remember that once when Ed came up from Emporia or Concordia, he went out and helped gather stalks. Ed was an older half brother and he later became one of the substantial citizens of Cheyenne County.

## Church Basement ladies are back with all new musical

The fourth installment of the Church Basement ladies series of Musical Comedies, A Mighty Fortress Is Our Basement, will be presented at 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 21, 7:30p.m. in the Oakley High School auditorium.

The popular series began at the Plymouth Playhouse in Minneapolis with the first installment, "Church Basement Ladies," in 2005.

In the latest installment, these "bulwarks never failing" are at it again. The year is 1960 and a reformation is underway. With a new crop of Confirmands, Beverly, the youngest of the bunch, dons her first pair of high heels for her confirmation ceremony.

Mrs Snustad, the matriarch of the kitchen, wins top honors at the County Fair for her "Grand Champion" pickles. Mavis, the

able-bodied farm wife, must find a way to deal with the new "Super Highway" which cuts through her farm. Karin, the real homemaker of the kitchen, finds new freedom behind the wheel of her husband's pickup truck and must reconcile a new world of change for her daughter, Beverly.

Pastor, who has always found strength and solace in the church basement, has found new love and announces his impending nuptials. The Church Basement Ladies are once again required to face change head-on. Against the changing tide, these pillars of the church stand strong in their faith and in their friendships with more crazy antics, more great new songs and more lessons reluctantly learned.

With all new music by composer Drew Jansen who

wrote the music and lyrics for the past Church Basement Ladies installments and script by sketch comedy writer, Greta Grosch, who also penned the sequel and the Christmas version, A Mighty Fortress Is Our Basement continues to be inspired by the writings of author/humorists, Janet Martin and Suzann Nelson. Audiences from coast to coast have fallen in love with these residents of the church basement, and all agree that each new installment gets better and better. What's more, you do not have to have seen past installments in order to know what's going on.

Admission to this Western Plains Arts Association sponsored event is with season ticket or at the door.

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