

Traer

where the bluffs meet the creek

Tour to visit town

Community flourished in early days

By MARY LOU OLSON
Traer, along the Beaver Creek in northwest Decatur County, once was a bustling community that drew early-day settlers to town to stock up on supplies and even take time for some entertainment.

All of that is now history, but those who join the Oberlin Arts and Humanities Commission tour on Sunday will hear about the early days in a presentation by Jim Wesch.

The group will meet at 2 p.m. at The Gateway parking lot, then go in cars and the county bus to see Elephant Rock, Traer, then on to Herndon for a slide presentation by Julie Hafner and tables of memorabilia of both towns at the Herndon Senior Center.

Platted in October 1887 by Anselmo B. Smith, a surveyor with the Lincoln Land Co. of Lincoln, Neb., Traer is surrounded by rocky limestone bluffs on the south and east.

An earlier townsite, southwest of the present town, was called Connorsville. It was relocated and named Traer when the Beaver Valley Railroad was built though the area in 1887.

Jesse Couse, the first postmaster, named the town for his home town of Traer, Iowa. As early as 1882, deeds on file show Joseph Turby, F. Kimball, Dennis St. German and Benjamin Bird as early settlers.

Other early landowners were T.J. Patterson, Julia Adams, D.C. Porterfield, Charles Magers, C.A. McCartney, H.E. McCartney, Martha Walton, Gustav Wudtke, F. Anderson, J. Nemith, W. Waldo, Fred Helmkamp, N. Rathbun and James Lazaroff.

One of the first stores was the R.S. Thomas Mercantile, which sold everything from shoes to threshing machines.



SATURDAY AFTERNOON brought many to Traer when it boasted of many businesses in the early 1900's. Transportation still included the horse and buggy, but many had purchased cars, which lined Main Street.

A dry-goods store and grocery was built in 1907 by L.G. Salade.

The Patterson Hotel, Thomas Mercantile, a barbershop, hardware and furniture store, lumber yard, Pearson's Creamery, Rathbun Livery Barn, a drug store owned by Gus Fleckenstein, and the First State Bank, were just a few of the town's businesses as the population grew to some 300 around 1915.

Early doctors serving the area included J.B. Little, A.L. Nickolls and A.P. Fleckenstein. A newspaper, the *Traer News*, was first published Feb. 20, 1918. It was printed in Herndon.

Mail began arriving at the first post office in 1883 and telephone service reached the area in 1910, with the first central office located in the back of Gus Fleckenstein's drug store.

Bob Francis and Louis Drath built the Traer elevator and later sold it to Waid Waldo in 1905. He sold it to Harold Demmer and Carl Schreiber and after Mr. Schreiber's death, Richard Grafel became a partner in the business, D&S Grain. His sons, Dan and Greg Grafel, have operated the business since his death on Dec. 1, 2005.

In 1907, a frame school was built, with a two-year high school added in 1912. The first teacher in the area was John Constable, who taught in a dugout in 1881. Still a land-

mark in the community is the Traer schoolhouse, built of rock obtained from the W.E. Humes farm south of town. The building project began in August 1936 as a Works Progress Administration program. It cost \$30,000, with \$11,000 coming from community bonds.

Churches over the years included the Congregational, Methodist, Assembly of God and Community.

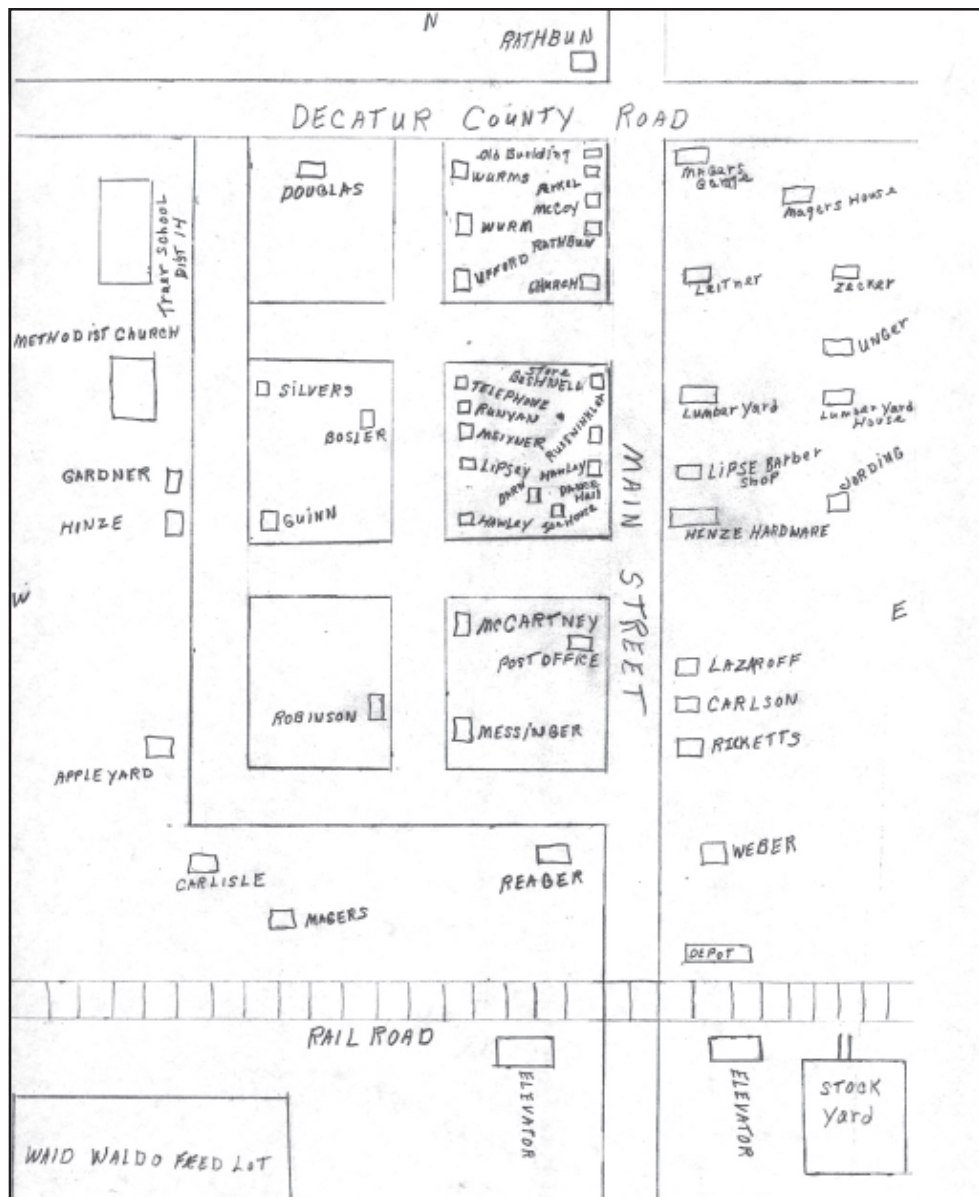
Elephant Rock, a mile south of Traer, served as an important landmark for early-day military expeditions, surveyors and cattle drives from Texas to Nebraska.

During the Carr Expedition in 1869, troopers sighted a group of Indians five miles east of Elephant Rock and pursued them to the vicinity of the rocks, where a fierce battle took place. Twenty-five Indians were killed and 50 wounded while three soldiers died.

Guide Buffalo Bill Cody and Maj. Frank North were jumped by Indians west of Elephant Rock while scouting ahead on another expedition. They sought safety in the rocks and held off the attack until troopers arrived.

Memories of growing up at Traer are vivid for Elaine (Runyan) Leitner of Oberlin, whose father, Claude Runyan, ran the elevator for more than 18 years.

"Traer, what a wonderful little town," she said. "I moved to Traer when I was in second



A MAP OF TRAER (above) as it was in the early 1930s was drawn by Jerald Leitner of Oberlin, who once lived in that area.

grade and Doris McCartney were Della Wurm, Carlisle. We all graduated in my teacher. My class- Leonard Jording and Lila Oberlin later.

"We had lots of floods and the kids had so much wading in the flood waters. When I was in fifth grade, I helped Melvin and Lois Stimbirt in the telephone office in Traer."

"Sleigh riding was so much fun, and my dad built a big bobsled and Bob and Ann Leitner, and Carl and Clara Schreiber pulled a load of kids behind their car. Literaries brought people from far and near."

"It was at one of the literary programs that Jerald Leitner, who later became my husband, first noticed me. He came and sat down by me and gave me a Snickers candy bar. During our courtship, we double dated a lot with Bea McCoy and Hank Wolfram, who also later married. Jerald later operated a repair shop in Traer and I drove the school bus."

Marcia (Schreiber) Emig and her sister, Judy (Schreiber) Marietta, grew up at Traer and remember the old telephone central office, owned by Lee and Clara Carlisle, the little grocery, Evelyn Silvers as postmaster, the Traer Beavers 4-H Club, Traer Belles, an extension club for the local women, and fun times at the card parties, literaries and pheasant feeds held at the native stone schoolhouse.

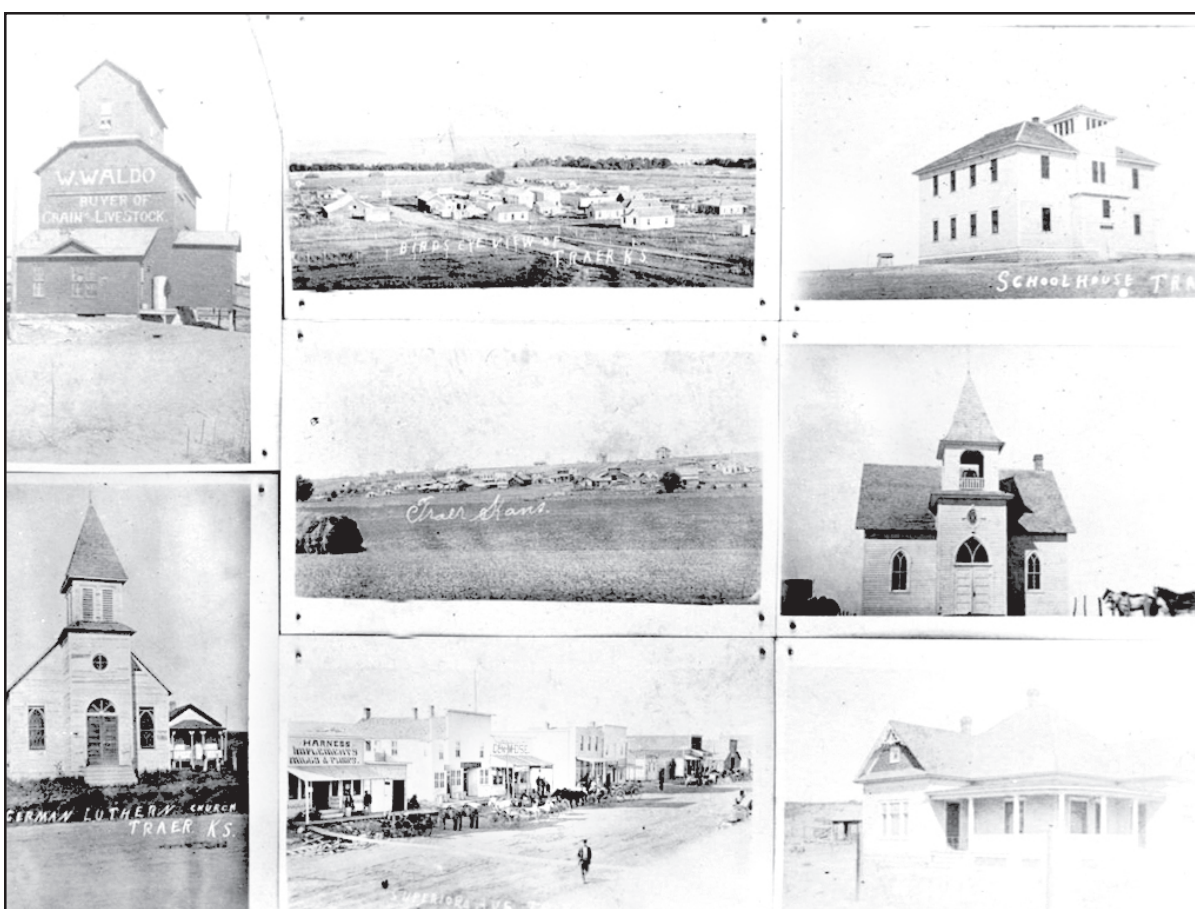
"The 4-H Council gave a calf to each club, who fed it, then showed it at the county fair," Mrs. Emig recalled. "Each club got to keep the money from selling the calf."

"The Traer 4-H members and their parents always went to a corn field owned by Dutch Anderson, who let us pick up corn that the picker missed to feed our calf, then we enjoyed a wiener and marshmallow roast with lots of real hot chocolate."

"I graduated from Traer Grade School in 1962 and my classmates were Ernest May, Jerry Leitner, Royce Leitner, Loy Hodson, and Joyce Wolfram. Teachers included Fern Moore, Peggy Kelly Poore, Elmer Carlson and Herbert Graves. Emma Siegfried was the cook, and she made the best rolls."

Now, the town has only a few residents and businesses have dwindled to just the D&S Elevator. The only full-time residents in Traer are Maralyn, Rocky and Clayton Courange, Bill DeKnight, Eldon Helberg, Adam Steinmetz, and Dustin Fisher.

The tour is a season ticket event for Arts and Humanities or \$10 for adults and \$5 for students in grades 7-12. Elementary students may attend free if accompanied by a parent. For details, call Ella Betts at (785) 475-3557 or Mary Henzel at (785) 470-0218.



SCENES DEPICTING life in early-day Traer (from upper left, clockwise) include an elevator owned by Waid Waldo; a bird's-eye view of the small town in the early 1900's; the frame schoolhouse, offering grades 1-10; the Methodist Church; the home of Waid Waldo, prominent rancher and businessman; businesses on Superior Avenue; the Congregational Church on Main Street; and (center) a view of Traer from the Beaver Creek.