

WALNUT CREEK

When Early Settlers Came --- Who They Were

The first settler of Walnut Creek was Joseph Holcomb, who came to Webster county in the month of September, 1870. Mr. Holcomb was not only the first settler of Walnut Creek, but he was also the first printer who made his home in the county. A printer by the name of Hoffman had arrived at Guide Rock during the summer, but he afterwards removed to Franklin county, where he founded a paper. Mr. Holcomb's only connection with the newspaper business in Nebraska was as an occasional compositor for the Chief during its first two or three years. There is an amusing story connected with Mr. Holcomb in early days, which we trust "Joe" will pardon us for telling.

In the Sunday School at Inavale, the teacher—Mrs. Groat, we believe—asked her class of little girls to give the name of the earthly father of the Savior. This seemed to stagger the class and nobody ventured to answer. The teacher undertook to help their memory by suggestion. She first pronounced the letter "J," but the children stared blankly at her. After waiting a little while, the teacher went a little farther and pronounced the syllable "Jo." A bright smile glowed on one little cheek and a little hand was uplifted. "Who was it?" eagerly inquired Mrs. Groat. The answer came with a brisk explosiveness which startled the poor teacher as if a bunch of firecrackers had been lit off, "Joe Holcomb."

Mr. Holcomb was not the first to take a homestead in Walnut Creek.

As Charley Gurney was coming out with "Father" Brice's yoke of oxen and when the latter was returning from Beatrice, in the first days of October, 1870, they were overtaken by a wagon drawn by horses. In this wagon were Elder Kennedy, generally called "Grandpap" and his son, Thomas Kennedy, with James Vaughan and William Fennimore and perhaps William McKinney and August Pierstorff. These parties selected their lands on Walnut Creek and returned to get their papers in time to meet Gurney, Roats and Brice still plodding along with their slowgaited oxen.

Of these last-named parties, Pierstorff and McKinney returned and made their home for the winter in a dugout, on the bank of Crooked Creek, just north of Mr. Ryan's

is so young, his son is often spoken of as his brother; so young that the mother of his wife — Great Grandma Hummel, that was until last winter—is youthful enough in appearance and activity to have been again sought and won in marriage.

Grandpa Holdredge, the son, lives in Inavale and Grandpa Holdredge, the father, had just returned to this county from a visit to his eldest daughter in Enid, Oklahoma.

In the fall of 1871, the following families were settled in the neighborhood: The Kennedys, Jesse ("Grandpap" or "Elder") and his son Thomas; the Holcombs, Joseph and his sister, Mary, now Mrs. Arneson; William Fennimore and his three sons, William, Zackary and Jackson; William McKinney, James Vaughan, James Murphy and family; John Deolen, Uncle Thomas Jones, with his three boys, John, Joe and Tom, the latter but a lad and five girls; Uncle Johnny Mitchell with his two boys and three girls; the Arnesons with two boys and three girls and George Heaton and family.

Walnut Creek became immediately distinguished for the number and beauty of its big girls. The Jones family rather took the lead, in this respect. There were, first, the two twins, Mary, now Mrs. Ed Smith, and Bessie, who married William Fennimore, Jr.; then Sarah, who became Mrs. James Frazier; Kate, who is now Mrs. John Fulton of Riverton and Maggie. Such a dugout of blooming beauty was probably nowhere else in the state, or for that matter, the entire west. There was not a single one of the girls who would not have been regarded as singularly attractive, were it not for her sisters, who were equally, or more, charming.

Next in order came the Mitchell girls. They did not live within the county, nor can this writer describe their appearance.

The Holdredge location having interfered with their father's first intention, he took up his quarters just across the line in Franklin county. But his eyes and affections were always bent towards Webster. Mrs. Pierstorff, his eldest daughter, was already settled on the creek with her husband. Anna soon came on this side of the line as the bride of Joe Jones. Martha later took up her home on this side also, as the

do was to return to the Blue and seek work during the winter. He was fortunate enough to find employment about a mill, receiving flour for pay. Part of this flour he was enabled to exchange at the grocery store for other provisions, and he found himself in the possession of a corner of the flour and provision stores of the neighborhood. George had his option, either to play the hog and gouge his neighbors for all they would stand, or play the man and share with his fellow pioneers on fair terms. He chose the latter course, as anybody who knows George would imagine. Years afterward, he heard that Dan Norris had a sorghum mill and George thought he would like to get some pie plant ground into wine. He went to Norris's and asked the privilege of using his cane mill. After he had used the mill all he desired, he offered to pay for the privilege. Dan Norris asked him if he remembered the time when he had come to him begging for flour. George had forgotten it. But Norris said he had not and George was welcome to anything he had for him in return for letting him have that flour at its real value.

Of these old residents some interesting stories are told. "Grandpap" Kennedy bears the name of being a good man and an able preacher of his style. He was emphatically a preacher of the old school. When R. B. Fulton came to the county, he heard of church services at the dugout up the creek. Everybody who knows him, knows that he would not neglect an opportunity of attending religious services on a Sunday. He therefore insisted on his wife and daughter, Lillie, (Mrs. Clinton Rinker, subsequently) attending divine worship with him. The women, just from the east, unacquainted with western women and customs, thought, woman like, that they must appear at their best before strangers. Accordingly they were at extra pains to make themselves presentable. Red Cloud people know what a dressy woman Grandma Fulton is. That day she outshone herself. She went to church with one ribbon on her hat and her daughter actually wore a hat with two ribbons and one flower. Being strangers, they naturally attracted some attention from "Grandpap's" audience, es-

pap" and his son, Thomas Kennedy, with James Vaughan and William Fennimore and perhaps William McKinney and August Pierstorff. These parties selected their lands on Walnut Creek and returned to get their Roats and Brice still plodding along with their slowgaited oxen.

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The First Birth in the County

While living in this dug-out, there was born to Mrs. McKinney, a boy, who, because he was the first child born in the county, was named Charles Webster McKinney.

Stockade

In the spring of 1871, the residents of Walnut Creek began the construction of a stockade on Elder Kennedy's place. This was a small affair and was never completed. James Vaughan declared that there might be a chance of their being attacked by Indians and killed in that way, but there was an absolute certainty that they would starve to death unless they broke out some ground and began the raising of crops. The view prevailed and Walnut Creek postponed the Indian subject for further debate.

The Holdredges

In the spring of 1871, H. H. Holdredge appeared within the boundaries of the township and Jim Vaughan and William McKinney helped him to find and locate a piece of land. Mr. Holdredge's settlement proved a sad disappointment to August Pierstorff, who had taken his land in continuous forties along the creek with the idea of holding the adjoining land on the east open for his father-in-law, Uncle John Mitchell. After making his entry, Mr. Holdredge returned to the eastern part of the state, sending his two boys out to break out some prairie and plant the breaking to sod corn for winter feed. When he returned in the fall he found several other settlers in the vicinity, some of whom had brought stock which had devoured his sod corn.

Mr. Holdredge and wife are entitled to the credit of being the oldest couple now living who settled in the southwest part of the county in the first years. The old gentleman is eighty-two and his wife is seventy-two years of age. The old couple are entitled to another distinction. Their son, Himan, is the youngest grandfather in the county. Why, Grandpa Holdredge

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Now, if anybody thinks that Walnut Creek township, albeit it was so far from Red Cloud, and so difficult of approach, was any other than the liveliest, gayest, happiest locality in western Nebraska, he is very much mistaken. And yet, Joe Holcomb, living in the midst of all this variety of sweet, attractive grace has been proof against every feminine chosen. Thirty-four years is a long while to keep a bad resolution. But Joe has done it.

What difficulties those pioneers encountered in the way of providing themselves and their animals with food during that first winter, need not now be repeated. One incident stands out a little more notably than the rest because of its aftermath. George Heaton, when he looked over the situation, concluded that the thing for him to

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In the winter of 1875, J. S. Gilham was invited to deliver an address to a farmers' meeting in Walnut Creek. Being young and ambitious he prepared himself at some pains, wrote out an address, committed it to memory and recited it to the audience. When he was through, others were called upon to add to the exercises. Among them was "Uncle" John Mitchell. "Uncle" John arose and began with a quotation from the poet Gay, something like this—"His head was silvered o'er with age and long experience made him sage."

He spoke with an unpremeditated eloquence that put the boyish effort of the young collegian and lawyer far away in the shadows of the rear. "Uncle" John died two or three years ago at the advanced age of 90. His two sons, Robert and John, still live in the vicinity. In some way we have got into our head that "Uncle" John was one of those Scotchmen, who found it agreeable to leave Scotland on account of their political opinion, and the boldness with which they were asserted.

—By John W. Mitchell