

Pioneer Life on Glass: The Balcom-Green Collection

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Henry Arff's Saloon, Main Street Cairo, Nebraska, circa 1905.

The Balcom-Green Collection

From the mid-1890s until the early 1920s, Henry Balcom and his son-in-law Ray Green captured some 1,200 images of central Nebraska. Following Ray Green's death in 1948, the glass negatives stayed in the family. Albert Green, Ray Green's son, remained on the family farm until 1971 and at that point several boxes of glass plates were sold at a farm auction. How many were sold is not known, but it appears that many of the negatives ended up in a thrift store in South Sioux City, Nebraska.¹

Months later, Jay Beckenbach, a self-described "junkie," purchased a wooden crate containing glass negatives from a second-hand store in South Sioux City, Nebraska in 1972. Beckenbach bought the first box for \$10.00 and later returned to purchase four more crates of glass negatives. Papers found in the boxes revealed the photographers — Henry Balcom and Ray Green — and a location, Cairo, Nebraska. Beckenbach published an article in 1979 about the find in *American Preservation* and at the time did not realize the connection between Balcom and Green, noting "why the two photographers had their plates mixed together, I don't know. Perhaps one bought the other's negatives."² Beckenbach counted more than one thousand glass negatives and wrote about the subject matter's variety — ranging from "rural recreation" and holidays,

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to people and farm chores, to agricultural machinery (both horse drawn and steam powered)—and contends that “they give us a rare glimpse of Midwestern farm life during the early years of this century”³ (Plates 1-A & 1-B). Beckenbach also mentions Ray Green’s family trip west in 1910 and that the images record “camping, fishing, [and] sightseeing” including several plates from Yellowstone National Park. The collection also contains photographs of landmarks and street scenes from cities, such as Denver, New York City, Salt Lake City, and St. Louis.⁴ Most of the images, however, are from northwestern Hall County, specifically in and around the community of Cairo, Nebraska. Depicting what Beckenbach describes as “much more than simply the people of the area. They show daily life, the town, the farms, the animals, the workers, and their jobs.”⁵

After Beckenbach’s *American Preservation* article, Jo Riedy, who is a member of the Cairo Roots Historical Society, received a tip about the find from a former Cairo resident living in Texas who had read the article. Riedy promptly contacted Jay Beckenbach who visited Cairo in 1980 to discuss the photographs. The event, termed “Jay’s Day,” was arranged for Balcom-Green descendants and local residents to meet with Beckenbach in an attempt to identify as many of the people and places in the photographs as possible.⁶ Beckenbach was on the faculty at Southern Illinois University at the time but later moved to the University of Florida and eventually lost contact with individuals in Cairo. Then in 2000, Riedy located Beckenbach via the Internet and that ultimately led to the donation of more than 1,000 glass negatives in 2009.⁷ For the first time in nearly forty years the negatives returned to Cairo, an event that Riedy calls the “biggest thing that’s happened in Cairo in forever.”⁸ Since the donation, Mr. Kenneth Harders, long-time resident of northwestern Hall County and avid historian, has cataloged and scanned some 1,200 images.⁹

Balcom – Green Families & Hall County, Nebraska

Henry and Betsey Balcom were married in 1871 in Macon County, Illinois (Plate 2). The couple left Illinois for Nebraska in 1890 and initially settled in Holdrege. Three years later Henry and Betsey relocated to Grand Island, Nebraska and after one winter in Grand Island moved to their timber claim farm three miles east and two miles south of Cairo, Nebraska in northwestern Hall County. Henry, the son of Madison and Hannah Balcom, was born on April 28, 1847 in Oswego

County, New York, and Betsey, the daughter of Joseph and Francis Emery, was born on March 3, 1844 in Worster County, Massachusetts. Henry and Betsey had eight children—the oldest, Mary, was born in Latham County, Illinois on March 24, 1872. Henry lived until January 25, 1934, while Betsey died nearly two decades earlier on July 6, 1917.

Ray Green’s parents, Joseph and Elizabeth, were both born and reared in England. The family left for America and initially settled near Pontiac, Michigan. Joseph and Elizabeth Green had eight children, one of whom was Ray Green, born October 14, 1869, in Tuscola County, Michigan. The family left for Nebraska in 1873 and settled in Hall County, homesteading in Section 34 of South Loup Township. After “proving up” the land, the family bought additional property in an adjacent section from the railroad. After attending a country school made of sod, Ray chose to work on the family farm. On October 20, 1897, Ray Green and Mary Balcom—Henry and Betsey Balcom’s eldest child—were married in Hall County and it “was from his father-in-law that he [Ray] developed an avid interest in photography” (Plate 3).¹⁰ Ray Green died on October 10, 1948 and Mary passed away on September 11, 1952—both are buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery near Cairo, Nebraska. Following Ray’s death, their oldest son Albert Green remained on the family farm until 1971 (Plate 4).

Both families settled in northwestern Hall County, which was organized in 1859 and is one of the oldest counties in Nebraska and was named for Augustus Hall, Chief Justice of the Nebraska Territory.¹¹ Physically, the county’s southern portion is dominated by the Platte River and initially the area was described as having “little natural growing timber,” the Platte River and its islands being the only locations “skirted with considerable timber.”¹²

Town development throughout the Great Plains heavily depended on rail connections, and Cairo was no exception. Communities located on rail lines quickly became hubs for commercial activity, connecting area farmers to a larger network to market products.¹³ The “countryside often housed many of the social institutions of rural areas, but small towns provided most of the economic functions. . . . Main streets provided congregating places for farmers—the grocery, the feed store, the hardware store, the bank, and, above all, the tavern. Perhaps at one end of Main Street were the elevators . . . lined up along the railroad, which gave the town its purpose” (Plates 5, 6, & 7).¹⁴

In 1870 the Burlington and Missouri laid tracks from Plattsmouth,

Nebraska along the Missouri River to Lincoln.¹⁵ As the Burlington and Missouri Railroad line was extended west from Lincoln, company officers organized the Lincoln Land Company for the purpose of locating towns along the line.¹⁶ Cairo, Nebraska—named after Cairo, Egypt—was one such community founded by the Lincoln Land Company in 1886 on the Burlington and Missouri line (Plate 8). One commentary notes that Cairo was known as an “oasis in the bosom of the ‘Great American Desert’” and that a “lady in the Lincoln Land Office followed through with the Egyptian theme as she named the streets on the original town map.”¹⁷ Although Cairo was founded in the 1880s it was not until November 18, 1892 that it was officially incorporated.¹⁸

Early Photography & The Balcom-Green Collection

Several individuals played key roles in developing early photographic techniques, among them are Joseph Niepce, William Henry Fox Talbot, and Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre, who is most often credited with inventing modern photography in 1839.¹⁹ These early images, referred to as daguerreotypes, could not be copied and were difficult and dangerous to produce. Daguerreotypes were created by placing silvered polished copper plates, sensitized with iodide vapor, in a wooden box then inserting them in a camera. After exposure the “plate would be developed in a mercury vapor. This process attached mercury to the silver iodide in proportion to the amounts of light each part of the plate had received and a positive image appeared containing tremendous detail.”²⁰

Photographic processes changed rapidly in the next few decades, quickly replacing miniature portraits in popularity.²¹ In the late 1840s, Frederick Archer began making negatives using glass as a support which further enhanced detail.²² Described as the “wet collodion process,” this method involved pyroxyline dissolved in a “mixture of alcohol and ether to which was added bromide and iodide salts. This [mixture] was coated on glass plates and when dry the plate was placed in a bath of silver nitrate. While still wet, the plate was exposed in the camera and developed in proto-sulphate of iron or pyrogallol acid.”²³ Although the process was complicated and cumbersome, the wet plate technique revolutionized photography and stimulated the market for “portraits of family, friends, and public figures.”²⁴

Wet plate photography remained in vogue until the late 1870s, when Richard Maddox, an English physician, found that a “coating of gelatin

and other chemicals could capture images on glass plates even when dry.”²⁵ The dry plate process solved several problems that had long plagued photographers.²⁶ With the dry plate method, “photographers could prepare plates beforehand and store them until needed or purchase prepared dry plates from a factory. After shooting a picture, the photographer didn’t need to hurry it into the darkroom, but could wait and develop the image at a later time.”²⁷ Not only had cameras improved, but dry plates also recorded images in less than a second of exposure time which allowed moving objects, like trains, to be photographed.²⁸

Balcom and Green were dry plate photographers and had the luxury of capturing images and then returning to the farmstead to develop the glass negatives. Family members recall that an upstairs bedroom at the Balcom place had been converted into a darkroom, where children were not allowed to venture.²⁹ During the time Balcom and Green continued to employ dry plate technology, several significant changes in photography took place. In the late 1880s, for instance, the Eastman Dry Plate Company located in Rochester, New York introduced the Kodak camera which was intended for “casual use by middle-class consumers.”³⁰ The Kodak camera came loaded with a roll of paper coated with light-sensitive material and contained 100 exposures. After pictures had been taken, the camera was returned to the company, “snapshots” were then developed and the camera was reloaded with film and sent back to the photographer. Further developments occurred just after the turn of the century when brothers Auguste and Louis Lumiere patented a process called autochrome, which created glass transparencies in full color.³¹ Despite these advances, Henry Balcom and Ray Green continued to use dry plate technology to capture images. Only conjecture remains as to why they did not embrace new methods and techniques, possibly because they had mastered the dry plate technique or it might have been a matter of costs.

The Balcom-Green collection contains a number of images of prominent American icons and landscapes, ranging from the construction of the Manhattan Bridge and the Statue of Liberty to Old Faithful and downtown San Francisco.³² The majority of the photographs, however, were taken in and around Cairo, Nebraska, an area just west of the 98th meridian in northwestern Hall County and just south of where the South and Middle forks of the Loup River join and turn north to Dannebrog and St. Paul. Settled well before irrigation turned this area into one of the most agriculturally productive regions in the United States, the

photographs “peel away the West’s romantic image” and show the harsh realities that confronted the pioneers including blizzards, dust storms, fires, and floods (Plate 9)³³

Balcom and Green were more than hobbyists; they were both skilled photographers who were able to master the logistics of early photography and they wisely chose landscapes and settings to capture life in central Nebraska a century ago. Financial arrangements between Henry Balcom and Ray Green are not known—there is no record of either Balcom or Green advertising their services in local newspapers and neither is listed in business directories—but they undoubtedly were compensated for some of their work, which included church and school functions, as well as family gatherings and local businesses.³⁴

Photography was more than a passing fancy for Balcom and Green, yet neither one depended on photography to make a living. This is a critical point for two reasons. First, since the vast majority of commercial images “were made for money, there is a major bias running through most collections of photographs made by commercial photographers.”³⁵ Balcom and Green were not bound by financial interests and customer demands. As a result, the collection’s subject matter is not limited. There are a number of families in their “Sunday best” but most photographs show families and settings as they were—raw and uncensored—and capture not-so-glamorous, every-day farm chores like peeling potatoes and husking corn. Second, not being commercial photographers Balcom and Green were not burdened with financial responsibilities that often plagued professional photographers.³⁶ Financial concerns meant that many early Great Plains photographers moved frequently; “itinerancy was a fact of life for many western photographers.”³⁷ When a studio first opened, curiosity drew a clientele, but as the “novelty waned, the photographer was left with the off-again, on-again business of day-to-day portraiture. In a community of five hundred to one thousand people, the market for such work was exhausted quickly and the studio declined.”³⁸ Balcom and Green, on the other hand, stayed in one location for an extended period, a much longer time span compared to most Great Plains photographers.³⁹

Because of their longevity, Henry Balcom and Ray Green captured several remarkable changes in America, specifically, the transformation of the Great Plains.⁴⁰ Much of the initial transformation was related to the Homestead Act. Described as one of the “most important land acts in the history of the world,” the Homestead Act was passed in 1862

and played an instrumental role in Nebraska’s settlement, especially in central Nebraska.⁴¹ Between 1860 and 1890, Nebraska’s population soared from less than twenty-nine thousand to almost one million.⁴² Early pioneers were hungry for land and the Homestead Act gave many an opportunity to come west for a piece of the dream.⁴³ The Balcom-Green collection contains portraits and/or farmstead photographs of at least nine homesteaders in the Cairo area—Joseph Green, Irwin Herrick, Archibald McNair, William O’Field, Carl Schaub, James Smith, John Stoeger, Phillip Stoeger, and Levi Watson.

Opportunity, though, was accompanied by hardships that previous generations of pioneers never had to face. The “tree-less prairie required none of the back-breaking labor of clearing forests,” but the Great Plains presented different challenges.⁴⁴ In addition to the absence of trees, the harshness of the Great Plains environment was and is highlighted by erratic precipitation totals and extreme weather events, a “feature that makes the whole aspect of life west of the ninety-eighth meridian such a contrast to life east of that line”⁴⁵ (Plate 10).

Despite the obstacles the settlement frontier surged westward onto the plains, and with the surge and changes to farming techniques came prosperity (Plates 11-17). In Hall County, the size and value of farms dramatically increased during the time that Henry Balcom and Ray Green were capturing images (Table 1). Early Balcom-Green images depict sod houses and hastily constructed outbuildings, while later photographs show progressive farmsteads that contained large barns and frame houses (Plate 18).

The Balcom-Green collection makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the history and settlement of the central Great Plains by providing an intimate look into Nebraska’s past (Plate 19). The images capture private moments that illicit strong emotional responses, from the sadness of an infant’s funeral to the joy of school children having ice cream (Plates 20 & 21). The subtle nuances of pioneer life (rain barrels at the ends of downspouts, for instance) are also depicted in the photographs in addition to the more significant symbols of progress—horses, cattle and hogs, frame houses and hay barns, shocks of wheat, steam engines, and new motorcars (Plates 22-28). Beyond landscapes and material advances, the individuals and families portrayed in the photographs convey a sense of achievement and the determination of the men and women who settled the Great Plains is evident (Plate 29).

*Special thanks to Mr. Chris Epping of Funk, Nebraska who assisted in identifying various steam engines and agricultural implements portrayed in the Balcom-Green collection.

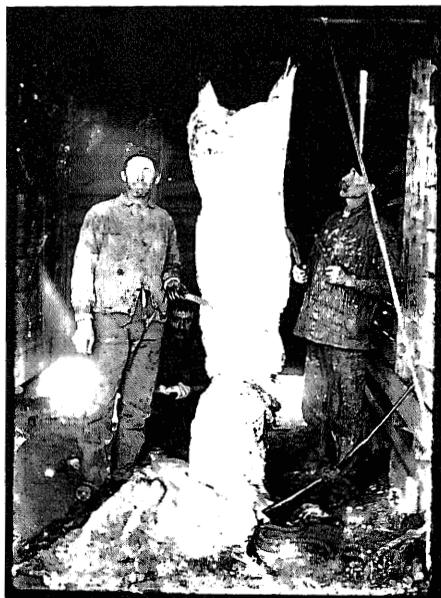


Plate 1-A—Butchering Day at the Balcom Farm



Plate 1-B—Butchering Day at the Balcom Farm

Folklorist Ellen Brinsmade (1952: 39) comments that “people who live on the land learn to take in their stride such unpleasant but necessary chores as butchering the meat supply.” This image is of William Balcom, Ray Green, and Henry Balcom doing just that. This process produced meat, in addition to necessities such as lard and hides.

In addition to the photos of butchering day, the Balcom-Green collection contains a number of images that highlight the division of labor—one image, for instance, captures Dolly Graves and Henrietta (Balcom) Garland peeling potatoes and dressing chickens at a home in Burwell, Nebraska. Another image portrays Mary Green’s new Montgomery Ward treadle sewing machine. Historian Mary Neth (1994) states that the “division of labor on farms can be viewed on a sliding continuum from a strict division of labor in which women are exclusively responsible for work in the house while men are responsible for all work outdoors, whether in barnyard or field, to one in which women participate in all aspects of the farm’s labor.”⁴⁷ The division was (and still is) affected by family composition and size of farm, amongst other issues.

Henry and Betsey Balcom were married in 1871 in Macon County, Illinois and eventually settled near Cairo, Nebraska in the 1890s. They managed a prosperous timber claim farm east of Cairo, the quasi self-sufficient farmstead was said to have a fish pond, honey bees, an orchard, and a smoke house for meat—somewhat typical of many farms at this time. Henry and Betsey had eight children, the oldest Mary wed Ray Green in October of 1897. Another daughter, Flora, was born on January 28, 1877 and married William Henry Tracy on March 8, 1899. Mr. Tracy was a Civil War veteran from Ohio who was nine years older than Flora’s father. William died on November 4, 1918 and Flora lived until January 10, 1971. At the time of her death Flora was the last surviving Civil War widow in Nebraska.⁴⁸



Plate 2—Henry and Betsey Balcom

On October 20, 1897, Ray Green and Mary Balcom—Henry and Betsey Balcom’s eldest child—were married in Hall County, Nebraska. Ray and Mary had three children—Albert, Julia, and Joseph. In addition to farming, Ray and Mary operated a general store referred to as the Greenville Store, an “enterprise connected to some extent with the Farmers’ Grange movement.”⁴⁹

Albert Green

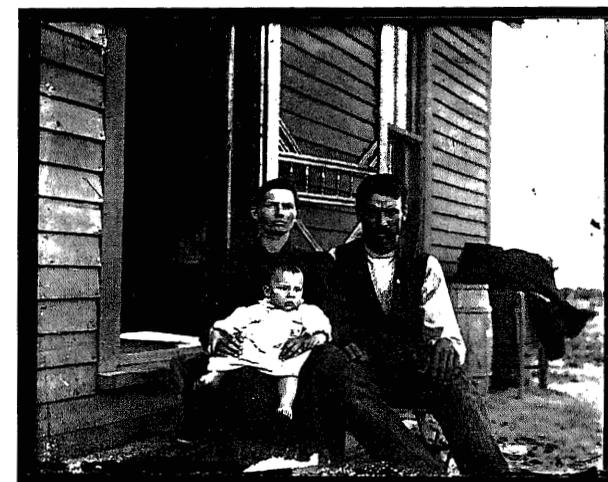


Plate 3—Ray and Mary Green with their son Albert



Plate 4—Albert Green

was Ray and Mary Green's first child, born on October 23, 1899 on the family farm southwest of Cairo that had been homesteaded by his grandfather Joseph Green. Albert lived on the farm his entire life, attending a country school near Cairo and later attending the Grand Island Business College. Albert retired and moved to Cairo in 1972 and died soon thereafter. Ray and Mary are both buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery southwest of Cairo.⁵⁰

According to the Cairo centennial book, Henry Arff was the first saloon proprietor in Cairo. Arff came to Cairo from Omaha where he ran a saloon at 54th and Center Streets. Arff's Saloon in Cairo opened in the late 1890s and Henry and his family lived in the second story.⁵¹ Rumor has it that Triphena Bishop, a member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, on one occasion went to Arff's saloon and "cleared the shelves." This photo was taken around 1905 with Henry on the second floor landing holding his son



Plate 5—Henry Arff's Saloon, Main Street Cairo, Nebraska

John Henry. Henry died in 1910 and his wife, who was twenty-three years younger, eventually remarried and moved to Oregon.

C.M. North, from DeWitt County, Illinois, began importing and breeding draft horses in the late 1880s and opened a firm in Cairo, Nebraska in 1900. In the early 1900s North formed a partnership with W.C. Robinson of Cairo. Soon after the partnership the



Plate 6—North & Robinson, Cairo, Nebraska

business expanded to the point that the firm hired Ed Babylon from Belgium to care for and train purebred draft stock. North & Robinson also had an interest in a large ranch in Morrill County near Bridgeport, Nebraska. The firm operated through World War I but eventually closed in the early 1920s.⁵²

Dr. Marcus Piersol was born in Lewistown, Illinois in 1871. Dr. Piersol graduated from the Nebraska School of Medicine in 1901 and later married Opal Waite in December of 1902. Opal operated the Piersol Drug Store and Grocery in Cairo for many years and also managed their land holdings.⁵³ This image contains an interesting example of continuous architecture, a unique combination of Dr. Piersol's office and residence located on the western edge of Cairo.

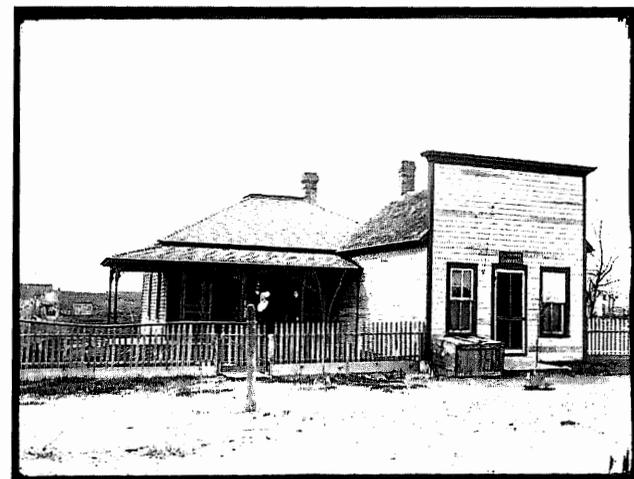


Plate 7—Dr. Piersol's Office



Plate 8—Cairo, Nebraska

Organized by the Lincoln Land Company, Cairo, Nebraska was founded in 1886. Named for Cairo, Egypt and located on the Burlington and Missouri line, Cairo was known as an “oasis in the bosom of the ‘Great American Desert.’” In 1900, Cairo had 224

residents, and by 1910 the population had increased to 364. Cairo peaked in population at the 2000 census at 790 and at the 2010 census Cairo’s population stood at 785.⁵⁴

In brochures and early county histories central Nebraska is often portrayed as having a mild and pleasant climate.⁵⁵ Geographer Bradley Baltensperger (1985: 58) notes, for instance, that Nebraska “boomer” literature was one of abundance, prosperity, and similarity or superiority to the rest of the Midwest. The soil was labeled fertile and virtually inexhaustible. . . . Winters were said to be pleasant, mild, and short. Rainfall data presented the state as comparable to the Midwest,

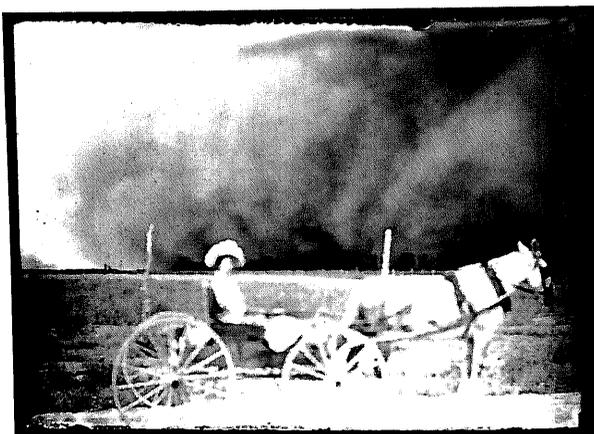


Plate 9—Dust Storm Near Cairo, Nebraska

particularly growing-season precipitation.” These promotional materials apparently forgot to mention blizzards, droughts, and, of course, grasshopper plagues. A Hall County history book published in 1920 does a fairly accurate job of portraying central

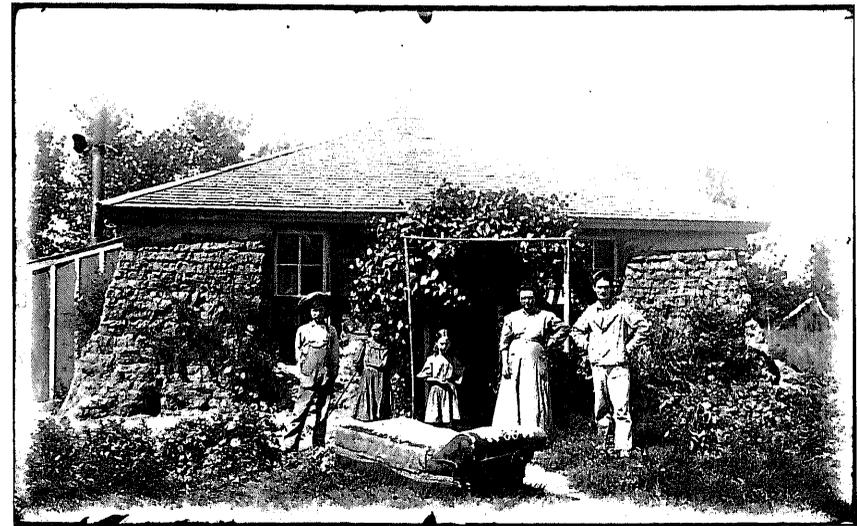


Plate 10—Allen Family

Nebraska’s climate, noting that the county has a transitional climate between that of the “north-central Mississippi Valley and the semi-arid climate of the high plains.”⁵⁶ The account continues, the “annual precipitation when normally distributed is sufficient for successful farming, without irrigation or rigid adherence to dry-farming methods. In some years, however, crops have been almost complete failures on account of droughts, and they suffer some injury on certain soils nearly every year.”⁵⁷ Additionally, grasshoppers were referred to as the “green imps of Satan” and one early pioneer stated that they “pounced upon us in bewildering hordes” and another account described them as “mowing the prairies.”⁵⁸ Dust storms, like the one captured by Balcom and Green, were yet another issue that confronted pioneers. Long before the dust-bowl days of the 1930s, so-called dry farming methods which relied on frequent tillage set the stage for immense dust storms and soil erosion.⁵⁹

The lack of timber resources forced pioneers to be creative when constructing dwellings. Many Great Plains pioneers resorted to using strips of sod, often referred to as “Nebraska Marble,” for construction.⁶⁰ Sod houses proved to be excellent insulation “against the intense heat of Nebraska summers and the cold of winters.”⁶¹ However efficient sod houses might have been their use for the most part was short-lived. Though some “soddies” had plastered walls and were used for many years, the more “typical pattern was to tolerate the dampness and dirt floor only until the family could build a frame house. The conversion

often occurred after settlers had become prosperous enough to afford lumber imported by rail from the Upper Midwest to the treeless plains.⁶² The Allen family's soddie was just a few miles north of Cairo near the Hall-Howard county line. The presence of a shake shingle roof, brick chimney, and kitchen addition suggests that this was a more permanent structure compared to many soddies.

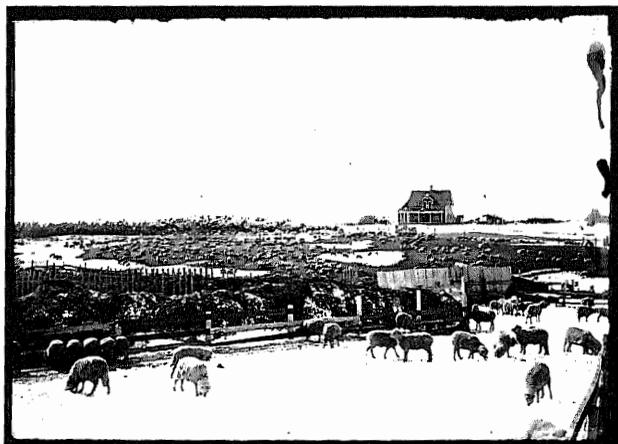


Plate 11—Sheep at Patrick Swan's Farmstead

located a half mile north of Cairo, Nebraska. Patrick was born in Dublin, Ireland and came to America at age fifteen and initially settled in Iowa



Plate 12—George Wingert Family, Cairo, Nebraska

Nebraska from 1880 until approximately 1900 was "one of the greatest sheep-exporting states of the country."⁶³

The peak year of sheep production in Nebraska was 1897, when over a million head were finished in the state. This image is of Patrick

Swan's farmstead

prior to his arrival in Cairo in 1897. In 1920, Patrick and his wife retired and moved to Long Beach, California. His obituary states that he was known for "his integrity and honesty and for his Irish wit."⁶⁴

George Wingert and Emma March were married on March 23, 1890. George and Emma had four children—Fern, Ida, Jean, and Edna—who are all in this photograph.⁶⁵ Prior to arriving in Cairo in 1886, George spent time prospecting for gold in the Black Hills and was a trapper on the Loup River in western Nebraska.⁶⁶ The Wingerts were involved in a meat market and grocery store in Cairo in addition to shipping livestock. The Wingert family image contains a nice example of a Perkins Windmill, known at the time as one of the most visually appealing windmills available. Farmers in the Midwest and Great Plains first popularized windmills before ranchers further to the west.⁶⁷ Early examples were often mounted on wooden towers, in time galvanized steel towers, which were much more durable, replaced wooden models. The Perkins Windmill company was founded by Palmer Perkins, who patented a solid wheel windmill in 1869.⁶⁸ The company, from Mishawaka, Indiana, was in operation from approximately 1870 until the mid-1920s. One drawback to early windmills like this Perkins example was the exposed gear. On later models the gearbox was enclosed, which protected the mechanism from the elements and greatly improved performance.

Plains scholar Christina Dando notes that "photographs taken by Plains settlers serve to document their ties in this new place, ties that were both physical as well as personal. The most obvious are the homes."⁶⁹ This photograph of George Broadwell's family is one of dozens of similar Balcom-Green images of pioneer families standing in front of their residences.

George William Broadwell was born in 1868 in Springfield, Illinois. In 1888, Broadwell moved to Grand Island, Nebraska and became a brick mason and by the late 1890s he was a general contractor—part of the business included moving houses. Broadwell

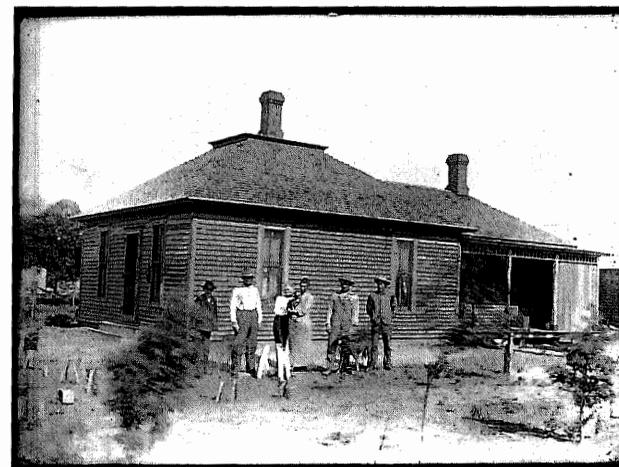


Plate 13—George Broadwell Residence



Plate 14—James Lesher Farmstead

A family of thirteen children, James B. Lesher was born March 9, 1853, in Northumberland County, Pennsylvania. James spent his early life on the farm and received an education in Pennsylvania public schools. After brief stops in Michigan and Indiana, Lesher eventually located in Hall County, Nebraska on March 1, 1887 where he raised livestock.⁷¹ This scene is typical of many farmsteads in the Great Plains at this time. A half dozen or more buildings—barns, chicken coops, corn cribs, garages, and shops—were common and the collection often covered several acres.⁷² This image also demonstrates the common, and efficient, practice of having cattle and hogs together.



Plate 15—Charles and Alma Haux Residence

also represented the Fourth Ward on the Grand Island city council from 1901-1917, having a street named for him. Broadwell married Minnie Balcom, Henry Balcom's niece, and died in 1920.⁷⁰

The son of Daniel and Sarah Van Kirk Lesher and the fifth in a family of thirteen children, James B. Lesher was born March 9, 1853, in Northumberland County, Pennsylvania. James spent his early life on the farm and received an education in Pennsylvania public schools. After brief stops in Michigan and Indiana, Lesher eventually located in Hall County, Nebraska on March 1, 1887 where he raised livestock.⁷¹ This scene is typical of many farmsteads in the Great Plains at this time. A half dozen or more buildings—barns, chicken coops, corn cribs, garages, and shops—were common and the collection often covered several acres.⁷² This image also demonstrates the common, and efficient, practice of having cattle and hogs together. A tremendous number of hogs were fattened in feedlots by “cleaning up” after cattle.⁷³

Charles Haux was born in Germany in 1863 and arrived in Hall County at the age of sixteen. Initially Haux worked at a grocery store

in Grand Island and in 1893 he took over a farm six miles southeast of Cairo.⁷⁴ Haux managed the farm until 1905 when he entered the hardware business in Grand Island. Haux was a neighbor to Henry Balcom, living just three miles apart. In this photo, which Balcom labeled “Lunch at the residence of Charley Hocks,” Charles and Alma are seated on the right side. Charles died on June 8, 1938 and is buried in the Grand Island City Cemetery.⁷⁵

Hugo Hehnke was born in Wandsbek, Germany in August of 1877. Soon thereafter Hugo came to the United States with his family and settled near Grand Island, Nebraska. After attending public schools and the Grand Island Business College, Hugo moved to Cairo to operate a general store. Hugo and Bertha were married on February 6, 1901 and eventually had five children—Josephine, Robert, Dorothy, Bertha, and Hugo.⁷⁶ After their time operating the Cairo Mercantile Company, the Hehnkes moved to Paxton, Nebraska. An advertisement in the *Cairo Record* indicates that their property is available: “For Sale: Modern Six-Room Cottage. This house is in good condition, is situated on a lot and a half of ground, with nice shade trees and a good lawn. In addition there is a garage, wood shed, coal shed, and chicken yard. This property is priced right, for a quick sale. Inquire of C. Hugo Hehnke or G.C. Raven.”⁷⁷ The windmill in the background was produced by the Stover Manufacturing Company of Freeport, Illinois. The company was organized in 1881 and in 1883 began producing windmills in conjunction with a number of other Freeport operations. Stover Manufacturing was in business until 1916 when it became the Stover Manufacturing and Engine Company.⁷⁸

William O’Field was born in 1824 in Lancashire, England. After coming to the United States, William served with the 1st New York Light Artillery, Company

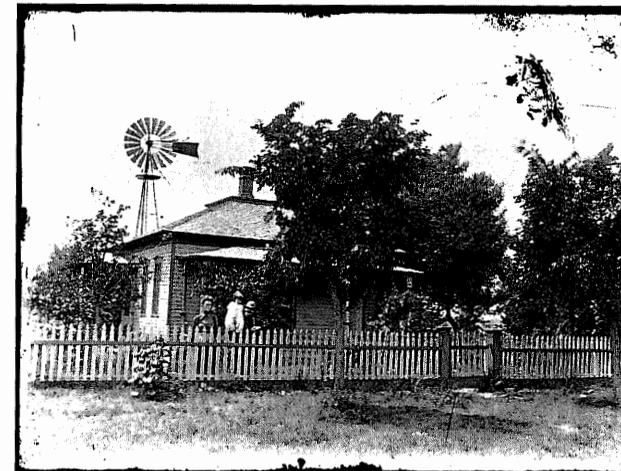


Plate 16—Hugo and Bertha Hehnke’s Residence



Plate 17—William O'Field Homestead

out.”⁷⁹ Mary O'Field stated that the way neighbors knew of each other was to look over the level Nebraska prairie and note where smoke was rising from chimneys. William was later issued a patent on June 30, 1876 for his Homestead Certificate #938 for the southeast quarter of Section 24, Township 12 north, Range 12 west.⁸⁰ This image contains an “I X L” windmill in the background, a popular model found in the Great Plains from the 1880s through the 1910s, which was produced by the Phelps & Bigelow Company from Kalamazoo, Michigan.⁸¹

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, barns across the Great Plains were indispensable. Barns were often the “largest single investment many farmers” made and “a lot of careful calculating” was done prior to construction.⁸² These functional structures often contained hay lofts, grain storage, and places for implements and



Plate 18—Barn on the John Hargens Farmstead

B, during the Civil War, mustering out in June of 1865. Soon thereafter William married Mary Pedley on August 7, 1865—they went on to have eleven children. William and Mary homesteaded on 160 acres just south of Cairo, Nebraska in the early 1870s, first living in a “dug

livestock. Barns, however, were more than just utility buildings -they were symbols of success. This impressive structure was located on John and Mollie Hargens' farm near Cairo and just one-quarter of a mile from Henry Balcom's farm. John (b. 1855) and Mollie (b. 1854) were both born in Germany, came to the United States in 1881, and settled near Cairo in 1894. John and Mollie had fifteen children over an eighteen year span, two of which are pictured—Reimer (b. 1882) and Henry (b. 1889). John Hargens died on July 16, 1934 and Mollie lived until March of 1941.⁸³

In the spring of 1894 an Ohio man named Jacob Coxey led several hundred men (Coxey's Army) on a march toward Washington, D.C. The financial panic of the early 1890s had left many without work and Coxey contended that “missing jobs had something to



Plate 19—Coxey's Army

do with missing money” and Jacob Coxey made money the center of the story. He even named his infant son, who was along on the trip, “Legal Tender Coxey.”⁸⁴ The Nebraska connection to Coxey is William Jennings Bryan, who ran for president in 1896, 1900, and 1908 and warned “that capital was exploiting the worker and that hard money—the gold standard—would strangle farming.”⁸⁵ Joseph (b. 1907) and Julia Green (b. 1904), children of Ray and Mary Green, are the two children in the front row.

Little is known about Ray Green's political views; however, he was an active Grange member.⁸⁶ The Grange or Granger movement officially began in 1867 and sought to eliminate middlemen in farming operations by establishing cooperatives; the movement also fought against railroad abuses and credit concerns. The Grange movement was quite active in Nebraska—by 1874 there were 596 Grange chapters in the state, the “largest per capita of any state in the Union.”⁸⁷



Plate 20—Postmortem Photography

Cecil Brayton, son of Lester and Nellie (Balcom), was born on March 8, 1905 and died on March 30, 1911. Grieving family members often called on photographers to preserve images of loved ones. The genre known as postmortem photography first appeared in the 1840s, grew in popularity in the 1880s, and remained common into the early 20th century. “Most postmortem photographs were of children.”⁸⁸

The District 59 School was located two miles south and one-and-a-half miles west of Cairo. The school opened in 1880 and the original structure was made from sod. In 1893 the sod structure was replaced by a frame building. In 1963 a new school was erected and the older frame building was demolished. District 59 was eventually consolidated and closed in 1975.⁸⁹



Plate 21—Ice Cream Social at the District 59 School

Corn has been a principal crop in Nebraska for well over one hundred years.⁹⁰ Many Nebraska pioneers came from Corn Belt states and brought corn production with them to the Great Plains. Corn was not only vital for livestock feed, but after it became a staple crop produced in tremendous quantities and shelled by machines it also became a fuel source.⁹¹ Several photos in the Balcom-Green collection show mounds

of cobs near farmhouses waiting to be used for cooking and as a heat source. This image is from Harry Slawson’s farm located four miles south and three-quarters of a mile east of Cairo. Henry Slawson was born June 28, 1870 at Gloversville, New York.⁹² Henry married Ida Foland in 1891 and they came to Nebraska seven years later. They rented a farm near Cairo until 1919 and then moved to Wood River, Nebraska where Henry delivered mail until 1935—Henry died on August 23, 1944.⁹³ The farm in the distance belonged to Henry Harris Boring who was one of the first homesteaders in northwest Hall County. Boring and his brother came from Indiana in 1872 and spent the first winter in the box of their wagon. It was said that Boring could stand on a hill southwest of Cairo and see houses in Grand Island some fifteen miles across the flat, treeless prairie.

Nebraska has long been known as the “Beef State.” Agriculture, in particular livestock production, has played a significant role in the state’s development and history. In regard to cattle production, Nebraska has for decades been home to extensive ranch

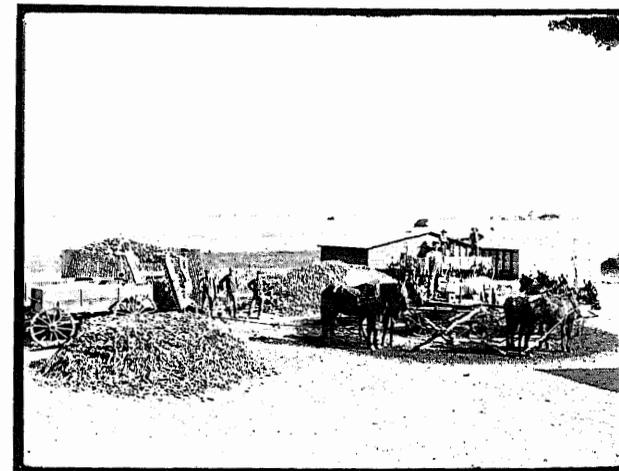


Plate 22—Shelling Corn on the Harry Slawson Farm



Plate 23—Cox and Reimers Cattle Herd

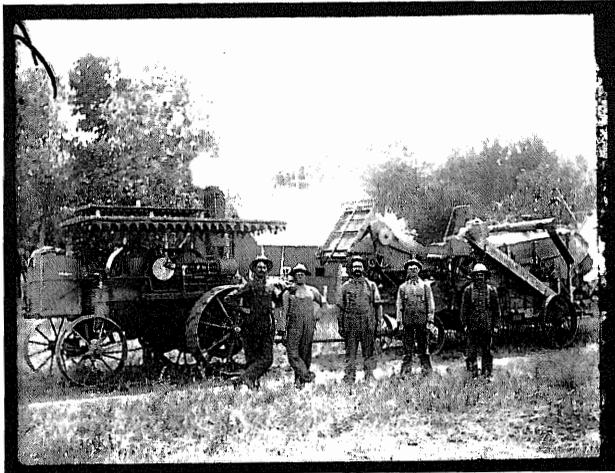


Plate 24—Threshing on the Henry Balcom Farmstead

behind Texas for the number of cattle on feed and the overall number of cattle.⁹⁵ This Balcom-Green photo is of the Cox-Reimers cattle herd. John Edward Cox, a native of Indiana, attended school at Hampton, Nebraska and later spent a year at the Omaha Business College. Cox's first business connection was with an Omaha stock commission house where he worked as a bookkeeper. In July of 1901, Cox moved to Cairo to embark in an elevator and livestock venture with Mr. Reimers. Cox later built the first alfalfa mill in Hall County near Cairo and served one term in the Nebraska Legislature.⁹⁶

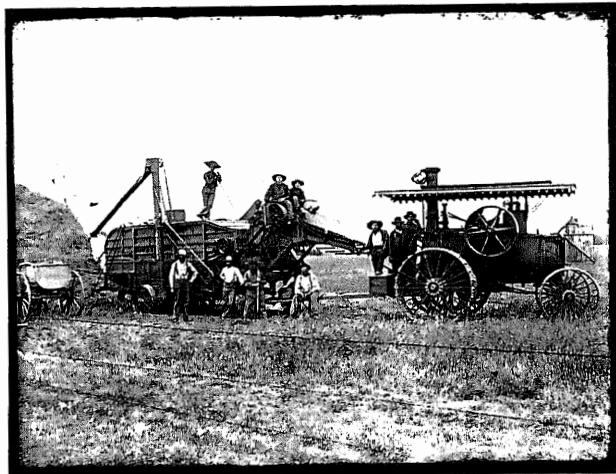


Plate 25—Brewer Threshing Crew

lands and corn-belt style feedlots.⁹⁴ So important is cattle production that historian James Olson (1955: 191) referred to the cattle industry as "Nebraska's most important economic activity." Nebraska today continues as a major beef producing state, ranking second

The five gentlemen are standing in front of a "New Huber" return flue boiler steam tractor which first appeared on the market in 1885. Huber produced these machines, along with all types of farm implements, in a variety of sizes, ranging from small 8 H.P. engines to

large 30 H.P. models.⁹⁷ This mid-size Huber model is pulling a Huber threshing machine produced in Marion, Ohio. The 1903 Huber catalog boasted that "we were the first to mount the Engine on springs; the first to use a cushioned gear; the first to use an all-spur compensating gear; and other improvements that we might mention without number."⁹⁸ Another advantage for Huber was that all engines were "left hand," meaning that the engine is on the left side as the driver looks forward.

In 1887, John McDonald arrived in Minneapolis, Minnesota and formed the Minneapolis Threshing Machine Company. Initially the company produced only threshing machines but sold steam traction engines built by Huber Manufacturing in Marion, Ohio (See Plate 24 for a more detailed account of the New Huber steam engine). This wooden, forty-inch Minneapolis Threshing Machine was manufactured in the 1890s—after 1898 the company produced galvanized steel machines. In 1929, Minneapolis Threshing Machine Company, along with Minneapolis Steel & Machinery Company and Moline Plow Company, was purchased by Minneapolis-Moline Power Implement Company.⁹⁹ This Balcom-Green photo of Martin Brewer's threshing outfit was taken around 1907. Brewer was born in a sod house on his father's homestead two miles west of Cairo and as a young man established a threshing outfit in the Cairo area. Brewer later moved to Doniphan, Nebraska where he labored at digging wells and erecting windmills, eventually passing away at Henrietta, Texas in 1972.

Standing on the right side of this photo is Levi Orval Watson, along with his sons, at his homestead four miles east and one mile south of Cairo. Watson was born on August 26, 1847 in Cattaraugus County, New York and spent time early in life as a teamster in Chicago. In the fall of 1872 a group left Illinois in a caravan of ox teams and came



Plate 26—Stacking Hay at the L.O. Watson Farm

west to Hall County, Nebraska and settled near one another in Mayfield Township. Among the group was L.O. Watson, who took his homestead claim east of Cairo, where he built a frame house, sod barn, and set out three acres of trees—all part of “proving up” his claim.¹⁰⁰ Watson and his boys are using an overshot stacker and sweep rake to stack hay. Throughout the Great Plains many farmers preferred to stack hay outside because the annual crop was often too large to fit in most barns. Different types of hay stackers were used to complete the job; two common types were the overshot and swinging stacker. Both looked similar to sweep rakes attached to a frame. Hay was piled on the teeth and then “lifted with the aid of a horse, rope, and pulley. As the horse pulled on the rope, the fork lifted up over the frame and tossed the hay onto the stack.”¹⁰¹ Alfalfa was (and still is) an important forage crop in the early settlement of the Great Plains. Today Nebraska produces nearly five million tons of alfalfa hay annually and well over one million acres are devoted to the crop.

Eleven men and boys along with thirteen horses are operating a variety of rakes, mowers, and a beaver-slide hay stacker in this Balcom-Green image. Hay loaders were typically attached to wagons.¹⁰² Henry Balcom labeled this photo “Stoeger hay stacking at St. Michael” — St. Michael is a small community in extreme northeast Buffalo County, Nebraska, just a few miles west of Cairo. John Stoeger Sr. was born February 4, 1832 in Bavaria and came to the United States in 1854 with his family. John married Mary Kemptar, who had two children from a previous marriage,



Plate 27—Stoeger Family Hay Crew

in the early 1850s and they went on to have eight more children. The family initially settled in Indiana, then Illinois, before arriving in Nebraska in the late 1870s. John Sr. had taken a homestead claim near Cairo and lived until 1905. One son, John Jr., was born

on October 25, 1858 and he also lived in the Cairo-St. Michael area and was part of a large family farming operation.¹⁰³

In regard to agricultural history, steam engines dominated from the mid-1880s until approximately 1912. By the 1920s,



Plate 28—Threshing on Ray Green’s Farm

steam engines had been replaced by gasoline powered tractors, which were more efficient and reliable. This image from Ray Green’s farm is of a Case steam engine along with a Case water wagon and a Mitchell farm wagon. By the early 1900s, J.I. Case Threshing Machine Company was producing more steam engines and threshing machines than any other competitor.¹⁰⁴ The model in the photograph appears to be a 20 h.p. Case steam engine, weighed just shy of 16,000 pounds, had a forty inch flywheel, and back wheels that measured five feet six inches in height.¹⁰⁵ The Mitchell Wagon Company was established in 1834 and over time the firm produced a variety of buggies and wagons and was eventually purchased by John Deere in 1917. Finally, in the threshing photos it is important to note the number of people involved. Steam threshing crews required several men to operate the engine (an engineer, a fireman, and a water hauler, for instance) and feed the threshing machine at the same time.¹⁰⁶ Since the early 1900s many rural communities have witnessed population declines as mechanization has replaced labor demands on the farm.

James Roswell Birge, a descendant from one of the first Puritan settlers in Connecticut, was born March 5, 1828 at Winchester, Connecticut, the son of Roswell and Amanda Birge. James and his second wife Frances were married in 1884 and settled four miles west of Cairo on “school land.” Upon Nebraska’s admission to the Union on March 1, 1867, the state received 2,797,520 acres of land for the “support of the common school.”¹⁰⁷ The original endowment represented nearly one-eighteenth of the entire state, with nearly half the original allotment being sold



Plate 29—James and Frances Birge

of Batavia, Illinois. GEM open back-gear steel windmills were first produced in 1891, and production continued through World War I. This model appears to be a weighted-lever governing system, which was introduced in 1894, and this example was sold by a supply company from Omaha.¹⁰⁸

Table 1—Hall County Average Assessed Valuation Per Acre of Improved Land—1880-1920

Year	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920
Price/Acre	\$3.41	\$3.76	\$3.71	\$9.34	\$71.69

Source: Sheldon 1936: 338.

to individuals, most of the sales occurring before 1900. The house in this Balcom-Green photo still stands and the land is still leased from the state to support public schools. The GEM wooden windmill was produced by the U.S. Wind Engine and Pump Company

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