

## ALEXANDER THADDEUS BIGGS: KANSAS SETTLER

by

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Alexander Thaddeus Biggs was neither famous nor notorious. He was just one of those thousands of dauntless individuals described as a frontier settler. He and his family settled in Kansas early enough to face the hardships of frontier life. He remained to work for the future of Kansas in his own unpretentious way.\*

The character of Alexander Thaddeus Biggs had been shaped long before he arrived in Kansas. He was born in Ohio 31 July 1843, the son of Alexander and Susan Biggs. His parents died when Alex was still a young lad, and he went to live with an older brother, Aaron, and Aaron's wife, Sarah, in Adams' Mills, Ohio. Aaron was a shoemaker, and Alex had to help him in the shop. He worked an average of six hours a day in the shoeshop, but Alex was given the opportunity of his life in Adams' Mills. He was allowed to attend school. He was a well-developed lad of sixteen at this time, so he was placed in the "big class," also attended by a number of young ladies who had already been teaching, and now were at the school to further their education. With his attending school full time, helping Aaron in the shop six-hours-a-day, and "as I was the most backward one in the class I studied several hours a day, so I probably averaged less than five hours of sleep in the twenty-four. I never learned so much in a given length of time in the rest of my life."<sup>1</sup>

Circumstances determined that Alex would become a teacher. At the end of the term, in early 1860, a friend of his who had been attending the Adams' Mills school talked Alex into going with him to the county seat to take the test to get his teaching certificate, and Alex went with him. Both boys got their certificates.

Alex's first experiences as a teacher were disheartening. As the spring term of 1860 drew near, Alex heard of an opening in Olive Center. A young, enthusiastic, sixteen-year-old teacher made application to a village school which had been having problems. One of the school board members admitted the school had "not been well governed." Alex begged the three-man board to allow him to try his hand, even offering to teach for sixteen dollars a month and to board himself.

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\*All of the official papers and memorabilia of Alexander Thaddeus Biggs are in the possession of a granddaughter, Eleanor F. Rice, Emporia, Kansas.

The board agreed to hire him, but with an added stipulation. Written into the teaching contract was a clause forbidding the use of the "rod."<sup>2</sup>

The school house was one large room fitted out with desks and a chalk board. In the center of the room was a huge wood-burning stove using four-foot logs. The building was so close to the road that the students could shake hands with passersby through the windows.<sup>3</sup>

On the first day of school Alex was faced by thirteen of the brightest imps that ever made life miserable for a poor teacher. They all knew of the "no rod" rule, and thus thought the spring term was going to be a picnic. The weather was warm, so the old stove did not have to be fired up, so Alex used the threat of having to stand on top of the stove in the middle of the class as a form of punishment. This threat was not very successful, so by his fourth day of teaching he was totally discouraged.

On the fourth day of school, however, an incident occurred which proved to be Alex's salvation. Will Bowers, the largest boy in school, would not pay attention. He kept disturbing the class, and after two reprimands he stuck his tongue out at Alex. Alex told him to get on the stove, but Will braced himself in his desk. Alex lost his temper. He charged down the aisle, grabbed Will by the shoulders and dragged him onto the floor. He bounced him up and down on the floor several times very hard. "The punishment made a favorable impression on the remainder of the class. When the pupils found I could spank them with the floor they faced right about and no one could ask for better children."<sup>4</sup>

The finding of a successful means of controlling the class led Alex into a long and rewarding career. He completed the spring term in Olive Center, and the following fall taught in the Ridenour district. At the close of the fall-winter term at Ridenour, Alex had something more demanding of his time as did the rest of the United States.

Alex enlisted in the 18th Ohio Infantry on 23 April 1861, and served with that unit until he received his discharge, 28 August 1861. The day he was discharged from the 18th Ohio, he enlisted in the 2nd West Virginia Volunteer Cavalry.<sup>5</sup> Most of his service was in eastern Kentucky and western Virginia.

Not long after returning to Meigs County, Alex married Emily Jane Cornell. They were married 18 April 1866 in Chester, Ohio.<sup>6</sup> They continued to live in Chester where Alex became the postmaster 1 January 1871,<sup>7</sup> continuing that appointment until 1 January 1873.<sup>8</sup>

The family moved to Lincoln County, Kansas during the spring of 1873. The settlers of one hundred years ago may not have faced as many hazards as the frontiersmen of an earlier period, but they still

faced many problems. Weather was one of the major foes of the early settlers. Alex's family encountered a demonstration of the work of Mother Nature shortly after arriving in Kansas.

The area of North Central Kansas has rich farm land, with rolling hills and wooded areas along the streams. It was a very good place to homestead in the 1870s. The Biggs family moved into the area. They set up a tent for shelter until they could get themselves organized. Alex contacted W. T. Prescott, the County Surveyor, to come and survey their claim. As they were surveying the claim, the weather conditions began to change. As so often happens in late spring or early summer in Kansas the sky began to grow dark, the clouds began to roll and the lightning began to flash. The storm swept in, bringing with it heavy rain and very large hail, which promptly shredded the tent the Biggs were living in.

The neighborliness of the frontier went into effect. Mr. Prescott took Emily and the children (the Biggs had two at that time) home to live with his family until Alex could build his own shanty. In fact, they lived in the Prescott house for many months, while Alex built their house, and while he and Mr. Prescott skinned cattle and gathered buffalo bones and hauled them to the railhead that summer.<sup>9</sup>

Alex and Emily began to settle into frontier life. They found that living on the frontier was expensive. Flour was six dollars per one hundred pounds, bacon was twenty-six cents a pound, eggs were fifty cents a dozen, and chickens were one dollar each. The Biggs bought thirty-five hens from Owen Healey, so they could have eggs for eating and selling. The first time the Biggs' hens began to lay, Alex set out to walk to Wilson Station where there was a small store. He left home about two o'clock in the afternoon. The neighbors had said that Wilson Station was about nine miles away, but it turned out to be twelve miles. "I thought nothing of a matter of an eighteen mile walk, but I had seventeen dozen eggs and a Spencer Carbine, and while the load seemed light at the start it felt like a ton before I got to Wilson Station."<sup>10</sup>

The owner of the store talked Alex into spending the night because the threat of wolves was so bad. "There were plenty of the big gray wolves, but they went away with the buffalo."<sup>11</sup> Alex arrived home the next morning with lots of groceries, but with an aching back and blistered feet. He had sold his eggs for fifty cents a dozen.

By 1876 Alex had returned to his first love - the field of education. He was elected Superintendent of Education of Lincoln County in 1876.<sup>12</sup> He kept this job off and on for the next thirty years. When he did not hold the position of Superintendent of Schools, he was a teacher. In those thirty years he also organized, supervised, and administered normal schools for Lincoln County. He started the first Normal School in Lincoln County in 1877, and by 1893 there were 152 students in his

school at Lincoln.<sup>13</sup> Alex spent most of his life in Kansas training people for a better future life not only in Kansas but all over the United States.

Life on the Great Plains was not an easy one at any time. Tragedy struck the Biggs family in 1880. By this time there were four children: Emma Estell, born 27 February 1867; Guy Cornell, born 20 February 1870; Henrietta, born 5 April 1875; and Roy Alexander, born 30 June 1878.

Henrietta contracted diphtheria in the fall of 1880. She died, "October 14, 1880, 11:30 at night. 'Suffer little children to come unto me,' 'Our darling wild rose has gone to bloom in heaven.'"<sup>14</sup> Just over a month later Emma Estelle died of the same disease. Emma died "November 19, 1880; at sunset, gone to meet Ettie."<sup>15</sup> These notations were the usual, instead of the unusual, in a frontier family Bible.

The Biggs were blessed with another daughter a few years later. Anna Alice was born 7 February 1886.<sup>16</sup>

Alexander Thaddeus Biggs led a long and eventful life. He started buying land in Lane County, Kansas in the early 1900s. When he retired from public life in 1907, he and his family moved to Healy, Kansas, where both he and Emily died. He died 21 August 1913.<sup>17</sup>

Alexander Thaddeus Biggs may not have gained great fame in his life time, but he gained something just as lasting and satisfying. He braved the rigors of the Kansas frontier and emerged a better man, and in his own quiet way made life for hundreds of Americans better for his existence. What better epitaph for a person than "I led another human being to seek knowledge?"

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Leader, Pomeroy, Ohio, 23 May 1907, p.5.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>A. T. Biggs, Orbitello, Kansas, letter, 26 July 1888, to General J. C. Black, Director of Pensions, Washington, D. C.

<sup>6</sup>Bible Records from the Bible of A. T. Biggs, Holy Bible, New York: American Bible Society, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup>Post Office Commission, issued to A. T. Biggs, 24 January 1871, by the Postmaster General, Washington, D. C.

<sup>8</sup>May L. Garen notarized statement and receipt of material for the takeover of the post office at Chester, Ohio, 1 January 1873, sent to A. T. Biggs, Lincoln County, Kansas.

<sup>9</sup>The Sylvan Grove News, Sylvan Grove, Lincoln County, Kansas, 28 May 1903.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>County Clerk's Office, Lincoln County, Kansas, Commission of Election, for A. T. Biggs to be Superintendent of Public Instruction, 13 November 1876.

<sup>13</sup>Normal Institute Enrollment, Lincoln County, Kansas, August, 1892.

<sup>14</sup>Bible Records from the family Bible of A. T. Biggs.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.