

# Red Willow

A HISTORY OF THE  
RED WILLOW COMMUNITY  
AND FIRST SETTLEMENT IN  
SOUTHWEST NEBRASKA  
1869-1873

RED WILLOW COUNTY HISTORY - VOLUME 1

By James J. Sughrue

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*History is Fun!  
With Best Wishes  
James J. Sughrue*

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In every history that has been written about a specific settlement or townsite there has always been something said about prospects for the future and visions seen by those who sought to establish themselves. Throughout much of Nebraska one can hear stories and legends of those who met the challenges and hardships of the undeveloped, new land they found. Some of these were planned settlements, established in the hope of attracting others and were backed by the influence of railroad companies. Many of these failed simply because "Fate" had turned against them, while others continued to grow and prosper. The first settlement in Southwest Nebraska was no exception. It seemed to have everything in its favor: great prospects; railroad backing; numerous investors; and yet it failed. It is the goal in publishing this book to answer some of the questions that have been asked, offering information concerning the background leading to its creation and events which led to its downfall.

The Red Willow townsite was highly promoted, and not only the area immediately surrounding the town, but all of Southwest Nebraska. It has been suggested that the Red Willow settlement was the impetus that caused much of Southwest Nebraska to be settled. If not for this, the homesteaders would still have come, but at a later date.

When the Republican Valley Land Company of Nebraska City elected Royal Buck as president, he accepted the role and served as one of the great benefactors in building this section of the state. In his letters, he promoted settlement through his positive and informative descriptions.

The company had high hopes for the town it proposed building in the upper Republican Valley. It had the railroad backing needed through the Brownville, Fort Kearney and Pacific Railroad who were promising a line into the valley. The military would establish a camp for the protection of settlers, and a new land office was to be built. A county was to be organized around the town and it was to be the center of trade for the whole area. It is interesting to think that these assurances, the promise of free land, and a new home prompted the move west.

## CHAPTER I

### THE SURVEY

But history, to be true, must drop no facts which are vital. The people make the facts. The historian only records them.

When Nebraska became the 39<sup>th</sup> state in the Union of States on March 1st, 1867, contracts were offered surveyors to map its every corner. After months of consideration and after looking at all the variables, Nelson Buck made the decision to try his luck.

Born in Bucksport, New York on April 10, 1808<sup>1</sup>, he began his career in his home state as a music teacher, but after the death of three of his five children, he moved to Peoria, Illinois, where he took up surveying as a profession. In 1840, he moved again to Bloomington, Illinois, where he lived until his wife became sick and died. By 1850, he had remarried and was living in Pontiac, Illinois<sup>2</sup>, where our story begins.

On the 27th of December, Nelson Buck sat at his desk writing a letter to Robert Livingston, Nebraska's State Surveyor General, bidding for a contract. Accordingly, Livingston wrote back, warning it could be a dangerous undertaking. On the 11th of February, 1868, Buck posted a return letter with this statement:

As to the trouble with the Indians, I expected to encounter all this. I am no more prepared to be killed than others are but I think I am just as unlikely to suffer from their depredations as others, and am able to employ such force as will be likely to protect a party of surveyors.

In fact, that part will not deter me from taking my chance. It is not the profit alone that would induce me to make the attempt, but the desire to be employed where I can see the west; so then so far as the fear of Indians is concerned, that has little or no weight in the matter.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Buck left his home in June, 1869, on his way to Lincoln where he would sign a contract to be awarded him on the 5th of July. With him were a group of ten men.<sup>4</sup> Crossing the Missouri River at Plattsmouth, they stayed with Buck's brother John, and remained several days. The Nebraska Herald gave this comment. "We understand that Nelson Buck, Esq., of Pontiac, Illinois, . . . has a contract under Surveyor General Livingston for establishing standard lines in the western part of the state."<sup>5</sup>

H.B. McGregor, one of Buck's men, recalled their departure from Illinois.

One day in June, 1869, we left Pontiac in charge of Nelson Buck, a surveyor of about 60 years of age -- leaving with him -- were five young men, none 20 years of age, myself being the youngest . . . None of us were properly equipped for such an enterprise, it being understood we were to be armed by the U.S. at some point and also to have a soldier escort on our work.

Each of us took what we had; Mr. Buck had a fine rifle, but a muzzle loading, one had a rusty shot gun, another an old army revolver, myself, I had an army Springfield Carbin -- but with only ten cartridges for it. Harm; it was all a dream with us and we thought little of any danger.

I do not recall just how many days we were at Plattsmouth, but a week or two. I recall I was there on July 4, 1869 and saw the party of notables drive the first spike in the R.R. then being run out of there -- six more men were recruited while there, four about our ages, one about . . . twenty five (a scout) and one possible 50, a teamster of them all. I can only recall the name of the teamster Levi Minoslouski. . . .<sup>6</sup>

After signing papers on July 5th, Mr. Buck was given orders to survey these lines:

1. The fourth guide meridian west from the base line to the first and second parallels, 48 miles.

2. The first standard parallel north from the third to the fourth guide meridian, 48 miles.

3. The exterior lines of townships 5 to 8 inclusive, of ranges 25 to 32 west 312 miles, a total of 408 miles.

By the 21st of the month, Buck and his party found themselves at Fort McPherson. Buck, himself, was writing another letter to the Surveyor General, this time in concern for his men. He was expressing regret that he did not procure arms at Plattsmouth, but stated that he had made application to the Department of the Platte for six Spencer rifles and 200 rounds of ammunition for each. Even so, he wrote that several of his party had become discouraged with reports of hostile Indians and wanted guns to defend themselves if they were attacked. This was the last communication from Buck.<sup>8</sup>

Years later, H.B.McGregor said he had left the surveying party because it was so poorly armed. He described the circumstances that led up to this situation.

We camped and waited here (Fort Kearney) some time, officers and privates warning us that we would be killed if we ventured far poorly armed or without an escort. I know that Mr. Buck made every effort to get arms and an escort, but without avail from day-to-day and finally, in despair, he set out anyway, supplies and money both getting low. About ten days after leaving the fort Mr. Buck told me to go back to the fort with John Nettleton and wait for an escort and arms, and pilot them to the locality they were in as he was about in his territory and would begin running lines . . . . We got into the fort all right and told our errand but there was nothing there.<sup>9</sup>

On the 2nd of October, 1869, Deputy Surveyor W.E. Daugherty; who was also in the west, wrote to the Surveyor General with information that he was unable to find Buck's lines run and that his "only recourse was to run them." He found no sign of Buck until he came to the standard corner east, where he found "a lot of stakes." Tracing wagon tracks for nearly three miles he found where Buck had camped on the north side of Beaver Creek. Continuing on, he found another camp on the south side where he also found an empty water keg. Relating further to the hostilities, Daugherty wrote, "I will have to leave contract unfinished. . . . The country is full of Indians," and he ended it by stating, "We have had to fight our way through all this trip, even with an escort."<sup>10</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Duncan, in company with 473 men were in the Republican Valley throughout September and October, scouting for any refugees left following the Battle of Simmit Springs, which had taken place in June.



On the 21 of October, Duncan reported having found a deserted "white man's camp. The day was cold with a light covering of snow and they paid little attention to it. The camp appeared to be about six or eight weeks old."<sup>11</sup> Duncan also noted some camp furniture, a tripod, and a carbin rifle all broken, but he said they saw no signs of violence.

On the 24 of the month, while camped on the Medicine Creek, Duncan received a dispatch to send a scouting party in search of the Nelson Buck party, surveying in the Republican Valley and missing since August. Duncan at once realized that the camp he had seen on Beaver Creek was probably that of Buck's.<sup>12</sup>

The Nebraska Herald was the first to report that Buck and his party had been killed by Indians.

Mr. B. entered the field in the latter part of July last and up to the 2nd inst. had not established a single corner or run a foot of line. His track was found and an empty water keg found near one of his camps . . . Coupling this with the fact that Gen. Duncan found two surveyor's tripods in the camp of Indians . . . we fear Mr. Buck and his party have fallen victims to the hostile Indians.<sup>13</sup>

To add further, this same paper reported two weeks later the first hand confession of an Indian squaw captured by General Duncan's men on the 26th of September. She said that on or near the 20th of August, a band of Indians under Pawnee Killer and Chief Whistler were crossing the Republican River between Frenchman's Fork and the Red Willow on their way into the Beaver Valley.

"Four young men were far in advance," she confessed. "One of them came back and reported that the other three had been killed by some white men and that one of the white men had been killed by them, These white men were not soldiers."<sup>14</sup>

Continuing her story, the women and children went into the brush along the river as the men rushed off toward the Beaver. They did not return until dark, she said, reporting five more of the white men had been killed, their wagon destroyed, their food rations and animals taken. According to the Indian squaw, the remaining surveyors had taken refuge in the bushes of Beaver Creek and were not killed in this battle..<sup>15</sup>

Of course, the Buck family in Illinois was given news of the depredations, and Willard P. Buck, eldest living son of Nelson Buck, came to Nebraska seeking any kind of proof to substantiate the report.

Messrs. W.P.Buck and O.N.Chaffee from Omaha went out with the supply train in search of a surveying party which was under the charge of Mr. Buck's father . . . . Sometime since, Lieutenant Peter V. Haskins, H. Company, 5th Cavalry, found some surveyor's instrument in the Republican River region, and goes with the train to point out the place . . . .<sup>16</sup>

By the 11th of November, newspapers reported Willard Buck back at Fort McPherson, and published a letter from him to General Emory.

Dear Sir:

In relation to the search for Nelson Buck's Surveying Party, I am fully satisfied that it was his surveying party that was killed on the brand.

I found three wagons (or parts of them, which, from the description that I got of them, are undoubtedly his wagons,

and I also found the transit box (smashed) and the solar \_\_\_\_\_, supposed to be his. Some parts of harness, pieces of book covers, and also one small piece of paper or bill, with the name of Buck on one side and some figures on the other -- which, I suppose, was part of a bill of goods bought at Clark and Plummer, Plattsmouth, Nebraska.

The tripods found by General Duncan, I am sure, are the old transit tripods and the Spences Carbin, found also by General Duncan's party, I think, is the one he took with him when he left home.

These are the facts, as far as I know, in relation to the party, as no bones were found to tell whether the party were killed or taken prisoners.

[signed] W.P. Buck<sup>17</sup>

Upon their return to the reservation at the Whetstone Agency at Fort Randall, Dakota Territory, Captain C.D. Poole was ordered to conduct an intense investigation of the Indians in question. He sought out a number of influential leaders from under his charge, including Spotted Tail, Swift Bear, Pawnee Killer, and another named Thigh, of whom he said, "I have found quite reliable on other matters."<sup>18</sup>

Spotted Tail said, more or less, that he had nothing to do with the murders, and said one of his party had informed him of an attack on twelve surveyors, of which six had been killed. Pawnee Killer told substantially the same story.

Thigh told a somewhat different story however, and gave an account as told him by one of Pawnee Killer's band, that eight white men had been killed. At the same time, three others were seen escaping into Beaver Creek.<sup>19</sup>

In his report, Poole relates that another of Pawnee Killer's band approached and offered to sell him "a large pocket book, the kind usually carried in the breast pockets of coats." In it he found a receiver's receipt from the land office in Lincoln belonging to Vincent F. Brown, dated June 10, 1869; "also a card, upon which was written, in pencil, Miss Hattie Ball, Knoxville, Tennessee; on the reverse side printed, American House, Lincoln, Nebraska."<sup>20</sup>

When he wrote "Among the Sioux of Dakota," twelve years after these events, Captain C.D. Poole recounted his investigation of Pawnee Killer, who was believed to have led the attack. His appearance must have been striking, as Poole describes him:

His face had a lean and hungry look; he was long and lank and reminded one of a prowling wolf. He seldom smiled while talking with his companions but stalked about with his blanket wrapped around him as if expecting at each turn to pounce upon the enemy or be himself attacked. He had a murderous looking set of followers and all indications pointed to the fact that they had come red handed from killing an innocent party of white men, on the Republican River in Nebraska.<sup>21</sup>

After some persuasion, Pawnee Killer admitted the stories were true, that his hunting party had discovered a group of surveyors. There was one man in camp cooking over a fire when a few of the young Indian men approached. They were going to ask for some food. When the surveyors, returning to camp, hid themselves in a clump of brush and fired upon the Indians, this commenced a fight in which eight of the twelve were eventually killed.

The four remaining had entrenched themselves and succeeded in killing three Indians before the battle was over, but they had destroyed the camp and everything that was in it. Pawnee Killer, however, could not tell what became of those who survived (nor would he tell what became of those who died) but guessed they had fallen prey to another band of Indians known to have been in the area.<sup>22</sup>

No one knows just how many died in the actual fight, anywhere from five to eight; regardless, no one from the Nelson Buck party was ever seen or heard from again. The names of those killed were "Nelson Buck, J.L.Logan, J.C.Haldeman, H.L.Levi, F.C.McFarlane, J.R.Nettleton<sup>23</sup>, W.McCulllok, Jas. Wolteman, J.V.Brown, Linden L.Crocker, and Stanley Meecham."<sup>24</sup>

Until the summer of 1873, when the Beaver Valley was being settled, the disappearance of Nelson Buck and his party remained a complete mystery. Of that summer, Mr. John Conners told of finding "a number of bones" in the creek bend and the "running gear of a wagon in the creek behind some box elder trees." He took these to a woman nearby who "understood the anatomy of the human body," and she identified them as human bones.<sup>25</sup>

Also that summer, a young boy named Thomas Plumb, while fishing along the Beaver, found portions of a wagon and its wheels in the creek bed. He even found some parts of the surveying equipment and a chain.<sup>26</sup>

In 1939, to mark the 70th anniversary of the Buck Massacre, A.C.Furman published an article he had written years earlier. In it he told of an interview with Thomas Plumb, who took him to the actual sight, in "an open field bordering on a curve of Beaver Creek, just a half mile from the Kansas-Nebraska border . . . ." Arriving at the spot, Plumb kicked his heel in the dirt and drew a circle.

Right here was where we found their camp fire. It was burned bare and there was plenty of charcoal left. You know the buffalo grass

would not grow on an old fire place for several years.

All around here their stakes were scattered, probably six or eight big native timber stakes about three or four inches square which seemed to be intended for section corners. And there were a lot of smaller stakes, about like picket pins . . . . The Big stakes had been hewn square, and had letters or figures carved on their sides. They would have been three or four feet above the ground after being driven.<sup>27</sup>

Pointing to a sharp bend in the creek about 400 feet directly south of them, Plumb continued,

Well, a log got lodged at that sharp turn and this whole north and south channel was filled with driftwood. About half way of the driftwood right in the creek bed, was where we found the wagons. One was a heavy old boy, and the other was a light spring wagon.

Right over there, (pointing to the southwest) on this bank of the creek, Bill Shockley and I . . . ran onto a wood-rat's house and in it we found several feet of surveyor's chain and twenty or more rim-fire cartridges. The brass was covered with verdigris and we thought the powder would be no good, so we tore 'em up and used the bullets to mold balls for our guns.

Later I found a silver spoon and an old sword belt in another wood-rat's house farther down the creek. But perhaps they had been dropped by some hunters.<sup>28</sup>

Plumb also told of finding a number of bones which he believed were of one of the members of Buck's party.

Right over east there, just this side of where Perry Plumb's sod house used to stand, in the bottom of the little swale, there is where Perry and I found the hip bone, ribs and finger or toe bones of the man I was telling you about. We were breaking sod to build a sod house when we uncovered 'em, right up near the surface.

Bradley Duckworth found the skull of a white man, all except the lower jaw, right around here somewhere . . . . And Lem Daniels' little boys found an old compass, all brass, on the quarter west of this . . . . The boys found it along the creek some little distance north of the Kansas line.<sup>29</sup>

The story of Nelson Buck and his men is tragic and probably shocking to the people who read about him in 1869. This incident may have slowed the process, but it didn't stop. Though Buck and his men lost their lives in the first attempt to open this part of the state for settlement, others would follow. Southwest Nebraska would not remain in the shadows long.