

## CHAPTER II

### DETERMINATION

It is the van of civilization,  
the incarnation of enterprise,  
and hope and confidence,  
that pushes men  
out into the wilderness.

On an August day in the year of 1867, seven companies of George A. Custer's Seventh Cavalry and two of the Eighth Kansas Regiment were camped somewhere in what is now Furnas County. It was here that C.A. Danforth, one of the Kansas militia, first saw the land which he would later claim for himself, and the memory of it stayed with him. One other in the troop had been similarly affected. I was he who said, amid sneers and laughter, "Someday people will live right here."<sup>30</sup>

Almost two years later, Victor Vifquain, of Lincoln, took the idea in earnest and when he formed an exploring party to investigate the Republican Valley C.A. Danforth was among them. He was so highly impressed with what he had seen.

How clean and wild, and beautiful  
it all looked to me. There were  
buffalo by the thousands, elk in  
herds of an acre or more . . .  
antelope everywhere on the upland,  
black tailed deer in the canyons,  
white tails in the main valley, and  
turkeys almost always in sight along  
the Beaver and the Sappa.<sup>31</sup>



It was late August when Vifquain's party visited the valley, and it is with almost certainty that no one knew of the Indian depredations that had occurred 40 miles west of them.

On the other side of the state, far removed from the Nelson Buck tragedy, people of Brownville were striving to complete another project that would push the settlement of the west. It was known as the Brownville, Fort Kearney, and Pacific Railroad.

The idea for this road was actually conceived as early as 1856. It was to be built from Quincy, Illinois or Keokuk, Iowa respectfully, via Brownville, to New Fort Kearney, then to the western edge of territorial Nebraska. However, due to the troubled times prior to and followed by the Civil War, these thoughts were abandoned "and it was not until the proposed extension of the Mississippi and Missouri River Air Line Railroad across Missouri after the conflict that hopes of an intercoastal rail connection were revived in southern Nebraska."<sup>32</sup>

By 1867, the railroad's promoters thought Brownville the ideal location for its terminus in Nebraska and the people of that place voted bonds to push its construction. It was not until 1869 though, that the route of the B.Ft.K. & P. was finally settled. It would pass from Brownville through Tecumseh and on to Beatrice. From here it would cross the Little Blue River and extend itself across the Republican Valley to Denver.<sup>33</sup>

Railroad officials had been trying to get a federal land grant to help encourage the progress of its line. On the 13th of June, 1870, it came through, "granting alternate odd sections of land, ten to the mile, to the Midland Pacific [of Nebraska City] and the Brownville, Fort Kearney, and Pacific, all the way to Denver." Four months later, on October 4th, after more than three years since its incorporation, ground breaking ceremonies took place.<sup>34</sup>

After only ten miles of ties had been laid in preparation for the rails, it was learned that the B.Ft.K. & P. was having financial difficulties.



While the railroad had spent over \$51,000, it had only \$11,000 in cash assets. In September, 1871, the B.Ft.K.&P. underwent a complete reorganization "when it contracted with Benjamin E. Smith and William Dennison of Ohio, and with Joel N. Converse of Indiana to complete the construction of the line."<sup>35</sup>

The name of Joel N. Converse is to be remembered, because it is here that he becomes a part of this story and it is because of him that we can tie everything that has happened into what is to follow. He was living at Nebraska City at this time and worked for the Midland Pacific Railroad where he was Superintendent of Operations. Now he held the same position in Brownville.

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At this point, we leave the Brownville, Fort Kearney, and Pacific Railroad because its relation to this story has been told, but to sum up what happened to it can be said easily; it failed. Ten miles of track was put down under the direction of Converse, but no more than that. Construction stopped sometime in late 1873, and in November, 1874, when work was being done to dismantle the tracks already laid, the lawsuits mounted<sup>36</sup> and continued until 1883, when the Burlington and Missouri Railway took over its interests.<sup>37</sup>

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Twenty miles north of Brownville was the seat of government for Otoe County and its people were an enterprising group. In 1869, Nebraska City was a thriving community built on the trade of the Missouri River, and it was continually growing. This was seen by the newly constructed Barnam House, a hotel on the corner of eighth and Main streets. It was a huge building for its day, four stories high, with fifty rooms; it was a marvel to see.



When John Black arrived here from Ohio, he must have been excited by this progressive city, and with the business prospects it held, he decided to stay.

He had with him a shipment of Bois d'ark seed, otherwise known as Osage Orange or Hedge Orange, and he opened up a nursery. Since it took at least three years to produce a hedge plant from seed until it was ready to sell<sup>38</sup>, and he could find few to buy his seed, he turned his attention to selling trees and shrubs. This allowed him to travel.<sup>39</sup>

If he was in Nebraska City the day the newspaper headlines reported Nelson Buck and his party of surveyors killed, he may not have paid much attention to it because his interests were not in the Republican Valley. This was before he met Silas Garber of Red Cloud.

In one of his rambles through the state, Black ventured into the eastern fringes of the Republican Valley where he met Garber. In conversation with him, he told Black of the valley further west, "of a lovely climate out in the thermal line, of the nutritious buffalo grass, the wondrous herds of buffalo that blackened the face of the earth from river to river, and beyond where dewes were a stranger and only fresh flowers fell."<sup>40</sup>

Black wanted to see it with a passion, but he had other ambitions. When he got back to Nebraska City, he began singing the praises of the Republican Valley and spoke of a new settlement, a new town.<sup>41</sup>

Others had been there too. J.V.D. Patch, one of the jewelers in town, had gone into southwest Nebraska and the newspapers reported him as saying, ". . . the Republican Valley is destined to become a great agricultural and stock growing section."<sup>42</sup> Samuel Tate, who worked with the Midland Pacific and B.Ft.K. & P. railroads had also been there. In fact, he had had a herd of cattle that he turned loose at Cottonwood Springs in the fall, and in the Spring, when rounding them up, would visit the different tributaries of the Platte and Republican rivers. One of these had taken him to the mouth of Red Willow Creek.<sup>43</sup>



Black wasn't aware of these facts the day J.V.D.Patch approached him in the fall of 1871. Black must have shared the story of his trip into the Republican Valley and of his visit with Garber, because Patch invited him to a land meeting he and some other men were putting together. "No," he said, "I am not interested, no business there, don't want to go," but when Patch insisted he changed his mind.<sup>44</sup>

After nearly fifty years, he recalled that night. "On entering the half lighted hall a half dozen faces were visible. Three other acquaintances came in."<sup>45</sup> J.N.Converse was one of the men attending the meeting, and it is without a doubt that he was there in the interests of the B.Ft.K.& P. railroad.

Here it was decided they would call themselves, "The Republican Valley Land Company of Nebraska," filing it according to state law. With a Capital stock of \$100,000 dollars, they divided it into ten thousand shares to be sold at \$10 each; five percent to be paid in at the time of subscription, with the remainder payable as the board ordered.<sup>46</sup> Fifteen thousand dollars worth was put on the market.<sup>47</sup>

Articles of Incorporation were written and the company's goals set down on paper. Most of these have been lost, but one has survived that states clearly what was intended.

Art. 1. The undersigned associate themselves in accordance with the laws of the State of Nebraska, for the following objects, to wit: To locate townsites; to survey the same into blocks, lots, streets, alleys, and parks, to erect suitable buildings therein for stores, shops, manufactories, and other buildings; to buy and sell real estate and other such personal and mixed property as may be deemed necessary for carrying out the objects of this organization; to organize colonies and otherwise promote the settlement of the country



lying along the Republican river and its tributaries is said State; to arrange for the transportation of emigrants and their goods and effects to Nebraska on the most favorable terms; and to do all other things whatsoever that may be thought necessary to advance the interests of this association or carry out its objects.<sup>48</sup>

On the 14th of October, 1871, it became official when legal papers were signed showing incorporation. The Republican Valley Land Company of Nebraska was the newest and most enterprising business in Nebraska City.<sup>49</sup>

When the group reconvened on Saturday of the following week, it was for the election of officers. Royal Buck was elected President; J. Sterling Morton, Vice President; B.M. Davenport, Secretary; J.V.D. Patch, Treasurer; with J.N. Converse, Samuel Tate, W.W.W. Jones, J.H. Madison, V.C. Utley, John Roberts, and John Black, Directors.<sup>50</sup>

It was at this meeting or one that followed shortly after that someone proposed sending an exploring party into the Republican Valley to view its lands and survey the townsite which would set their goals in motion. Samuel Tate spoke at this time, telling of his cattle at Cottonwood Springs and the spring round up on the Platte and Republican tributaries. He told them that one of these had taken him to the mouth of Red Willow Creek "and that it was truly a picturesque landscape."<sup>51</sup>

On the 4th of November, the board of directors passed this order:

That the president of this company be directed to organize such an exploring party from the directors and stockholders, as will be necessary -- not less than ten in number -- with Lathrop Ellis as engineer, and proceed to the Republican Valley at the earliest



practicable day, and locate a townsite, and report his doings to the board of directors for their action.<sup>52</sup>

Royal Buck now took charge of his office and appointed John Roberts, John Black, and W.W.W. Jones from the company directors. From a list of nearly sixty stockholders he chose John Longnecker, L.K. Sitler, Wm. Byfield, Frank Usher, William McKinney, and J.M. Davis. Along with himself as head and Lathrop Ellis surveyor, Buck's exploration party consisted of eleven men.<sup>53</sup>

In a period of less than two days, Mr. Buck had contracted with and equipped two wagons "with supplies for a thirty days trip," and started them toward School Creek, near Sutton, Nebraska, where they would stop. He appointed J.M. Davis and L.K. Sitler to supervise the overland route, assuring them he and the others would join them in a few days.<sup>54</sup>

The Republican Valley Land Company means business. Teams were started out yesterday, in charge of Mr. McDavis and Mr. Waterfall, loaded with provisions, camp fixtures, &c, with instructions to move on to School Creek, about 130 miles west of here, and the present terminus of the B. & M. road. About next Thursday the directors of the company and some of the stockholders will go by rail to School Creek and join their teams.<sup>55</sup>

In 1929, C.J. Ernst remembered being in Nebraska City during these exciting times. He was seventeen years old in 1871, and was employed at a local bookstore. He was also living at the Barnam House, which he said was "a very nice and popular boarding house . . . ." Of the eleven men who made up the exploring party, Ernst said he knew them all personally, that at least five of them "boarded in the same boarding house with me."<sup>56</sup>



The array of camp kettles, tin plates, etc., etc., purchased by the committee of the Republican Valley Land Co. reminds up of our old freighting days.

The soft handed men who are preparing for the overland trip will find "Jordan a hard road to travel," should they be overtaken in their peringrinations by one of our regular winter snow storms. They will realize the difference between camping on the prairie and boarding at the Barnam House.<sup>57</sup>

At 3:30, on the afternoon of November 9th, Royal Buck boarded a Midland Pacific rail car with eight other of his crew members for a three and a half hour train ride into Lincoln. When they arrived, all gathered at the Clinton House where they would spend the night. After supper, the party split up: Jones and Roberts went in search of the B. & M. depot, buying tickets to Sutton the next day; Royal Buck, with Ellis and Black went to the Capitol where they hoped to see the governor and obtain a few guns with ammunition. Finding him not at home however, and learning there were no guns to be had, they returned to the hotel. Before going to bed that night, Buck wrote of all that had happened since leaving Nebraska City.<sup>58</sup>

He gave a short, but very detailed account of his men in their activities and of progress made. Mr. Buck was a highly intelligent man who was interested in nearly all aspects of life. Born in Great Bend, Pennsylvania on May 2nd, 1820, he began his career as a school teacher before purchasing the Madison, Wisconsin Express in 1848. He came to Nebraska City in 1860, took over editorship of the Nebraska City Press, and became involved both socially and politically.<sup>59</sup> When elected president of the Republican Valley Land Company, he was a well respected man throughout the community. When asked to use his writing skills on this trip, he did so with good effect.



November 10  
Lincoln

Five o'clock! shouts the porter at the Clinton and some of our party of nine were seated around the office stock waiting for breakfast. At 6 aboard the bus for the cars -- found them on the move -- trailed and got aboard in great haste. At 10 were safely landed at School Creek, Sutton. Teams were not in sight - pitched tent - boys busied themselves trying guns & c. At 4 o'clock teams put in appearance, much to relief of all. Cook McKinney soon had supper under way; prairie chicken and duck, together with hot rolls, coffee, each man with plate, cup, knife . . . . After supper called order, Roberts chosen captain with powers to appropriate duties: McKinney and Longnecker, cooks; Byfield and Usher, wood and water; Black and Jones, tentmen -- all abed. Black and Jones, McKinney, Longnecker, Byfield, Usher, Roberts, Ellis, and Buck, all in tents -- teamsters in wagons. <sup>60</sup>

By the 11th, the party was traversing the Nebraska prairies following the grade of the B. & M. to Fort Kearney where, turning south and after crossing the divide, arrive in the Republican Valley at the present site of Orleans. <sup>61</sup>

In 1876, to commemorate the centennial anniversary of American independence, Royal Buck was asked to write a history of Red Willow County. In telling of his party's travel across the state, he spoke of arriving at Arapahoe in Furnas County on the 17th of November. Here, a severe snowstorm overtook them and they were forced into camp where they remained until the 20th. <sup>62</sup>



Because the snow was deep, their progress was very slow. They did however reach "Burton's Bend" where they met the owner, Ben Burton. He had "some fine racks of hay" which he sold Buck at two cents per pound.<sup>63</sup>

The group pushed on until they reached the Medicine Creek near Cambridge. Again they were forced to stop, because the ice was not strong enough to carry them all at once. This was found out when the "hind wheel of one wagon dropped through the ice to the hub."<sup>64</sup> The problem was solved by unloading each wagon, carrying their freight across by ropes, and leading the horses one at a time, until all reached the opposite shore.<sup>65</sup>

Continuing on, Buck described the final leg of their journey to Red Willow.

While we camp for the night [on the Medicine] about twenty teams loaded with buffalo meat killed near Red Willow come in . . . . In this party is a man named Weber, badly frozen, having been lost in the late storm. . . . On the afternoon of the 22nd we go into the grove on the bank of the Red Willow near the mouth. Next day we spend in making an examination of the country and unanimously agree that this is the "Eureka."<sup>66</sup>

The next morning, all were up early and about their duties in surveying the new town. There was some difficulty in locating section lines and corners, but this was because of what Buck called the "fraudulent manner in which the surveys were made, and the deepness of the snow."<sup>67</sup>

The land they wanted on the east side of Red Willow Creek was soon discovered to be a school section. They then chose an area on the west in section 17, township 3, range 28 west. "Our town site selection is on the second bottom with a part of it rising gradually still higher, thus giving us something of a variety, and views that overlook the entire country . . . .



Beside this, it is so situated that water can be taken by pipes from Red Willow . . . and brought into all parts of the town." <sup>68</sup>

Several of the men selected homestead and preemption claims, and on the 28th, the party gathered for a political meeting, electing W.W.W. Jones chairman and John Black secretary. A religious service followed in which they "offered prayer and thanksgiving to God for his kind care and protection of us during our almost perilous journey." <sup>69</sup>

They then proceeded to name the town. Several names were suggested, but by a unanimous vote it was decided the town would be called Red Willow and efforts would be made to "secure the organization of a county 24 by 30 miles" to be called the same, Red Willow. <sup>70</sup>

The Thanksgiving holiday was celebrated here as well. John Black recalled eating "our dinner in the camp . . . by our log fire . . . ." <sup>71</sup> Mr. Buck broke open a bucket containing cake sent by his wife. After eating their fill, Black said, all agreed that the first park in the new town would be named after her and called "Pamelia Park." <sup>72</sup> Black remembered further that even though "The snow was deep; the weather very cold, President Buck returned thanks." <sup>73</sup>

At one time during this expeditionary trip Royal Buck chose to be by himself. Away from the others, he sat and wrote these thoughts into his diary.

I take spade and stakes and go out to plant peach pits and bulbs found in my carpet bag and wend my way to selected homestead, select the ground and shovel off the snow spade up a trench about ten feet long, plant in tulip bulbs and peach pits, and as I cover up the ground again with snow, and as I sit in the snow bank by the side of my planting I involuntarily lift up an audible prayer to my heavenly father to bless the planting  
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that fruit and flower may bloom together and gladden the hearts of household and friends --- that God also will bless the planting of the new town and those who have planted it and that all together may be prospered in all their plantings and that God may be glorified and his kingdom be built up here on this virgin soil. And as I prayed a little bird lit upon my shoulder and chirped about my head and again rested on my coat as it was spread out on the snow. I am not superstitious --- do not believe much in signs and omens, but it did seem that here was a significant expression --- a promise of good.<sup>74</sup>

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The return trip to Nebraska City was as difficult, if not more so, than the one coming out. On the 3rd of December, while encamped west of Orleans, they were overtaken by another snowstorm which proved quite severe. Including himself, Buck had only nine men in his party. Apparently, the few settlers in the valley had given him their letters and he'd sent Jones and Roberts ahead with the "mail sled."<sup>75</sup> Now, as the storm encompassed the area, they were separated.

The wind blows fearfully and the snow is flying briskly and O! how cold! We feel that we ought to drive 15 miles today, but is it safe? We wait two hours -- it gets no better, teamsters say start and we strike tent and pack our baggage and drive a half mile and all say: No farther!



We drive to a cabin for hay and Mr. Ellis and myself seek shelter in it. We find a Wisconsin family by the name of Morse. We take our blankets and stay -- the wind is blowing and drifting and sifts through the logs and we keep our coats and wrappings on as we sit around the cook stove -- green wood! we shake and shiver as badly as in camp, and it is as hard to keep warm as any place we have been in. Mrs. M. gets supper consisting of fried bacon, corn griddle cakes, coffee, butter, potatoes. The latter we have not had before since we left home. We sit by the stove -- our backs to the stove to eat and our fingers are so cold that we can hardly hold our knives and forks, but we eat a hearty meal and feel warmer.<sup>76</sup>

While Buck and the others were at least able to find shelter, Jones and Roberts were not. They "spent the day in the creek bed with little or no fire, only a cold bank for shelter." The next day, when Buck and his men were able to move, they came upon the site where the two had withstood the storm. There they found a note stuck to the end of a root that said, "This is the bitterest day of my life, Jones."<sup>77</sup>

Shortly before he died in 1914 at the age of 71, W.W.W. Jones wrote the Nebraska State Journal. Although in his letter he told primarily of his years as Nebraska State Superintendent of Instruction (1881-1887), he also remarked about the winter he was experiencing in Colorado, saying it reminded him "of the terrible storm which overtook the "Royal Buck" exploring party . . . just forty-two (1871) years ago."<sup>78</sup>

Newspaper reports began to appear, telling of the storm the Republican Valley exploring party had been caught in; stories of men freezing to death.



Reports reach us from Lincoln that a large number of men have frozen to death out west during the late storm. Some fears are entertained regarding the safety of our Republican Valley Land Company. We hope to hear from them soon.<sup>79</sup>

Fears were quieted however, when John Roberts reached a point where he could telegraph his wife, assuring her that "all were safe and well."<sup>80</sup>

When the passenger train rolled into Nebraska City on December 10th, nine men deporting it gave glowing accounts of the adventure they had had.

The remainder of the Republican Valley Land Company's exploring party arrived home same and sound last night . . . . They and their families feel uncommon jolly and all are enthusiast to go to the new town early in the spring.<sup>81</sup>

Among the stories they told were tales of buffalo hunts in which four had been killed; of elk and deer and antelope. To show their quests of the valley, each man brought home a turkey for Christmas dinner. "They reported that country is chuck full of game, bountifully watered, and full of young growth of timber."<sup>82</sup>

Enthusiasm ran high during the days that followed. Letters were written: to the State Superintendent of Immigration and Department of the Platte, that a company of soldiers be placed at Red Willow for protection of settlers; to Senator Hitchcock in Washington D.C., in efforts to create a new land district of the Republican Valley and make Red Willow home of the U.S. Land Office; to the Postmaster General, for the establishment of a Post Office at Red Willow; and to Governor James,



petitioning an area be set aside 24 by 30 miles and called Red Willow County. The Chronicle gave this comment: "The members of the Republican Valley Land Company are greatly elated over their prospective fortunes in the 'Far West'".<sup>83</sup>

At the end of December, the stockholders held a meeting which was "well attended" and where "important business" was transacted. They were told that the B. & M. had built into Beatrice and were surveying nearly one hundred miles west. They no longer looked for the Brownville, Fort Kearney, and Pacific Railroad to build its line westward.<sup>84</sup>

It can not be, that a valley of land so extensive and fertile as this and lying as it does as a connecting link between large and wealthy settlements and towns east and west, can long remain isolated.

Railroads will surely soon find their course along this river, and a finer and easier grade cannot be found in the State outside that along the Platte valley, and we are assured by eminent railroad men that even now several lines are contemplating the project of being "first on the ground."<sup>85</sup>

It made little difference which railroad connected Red Willow to the outside world. If the town was to become well established in southwest Nebraska, it had to have rail service, or at least the hope for it in the near future. The men of the Republican Valley Land Company felt assured they would have it.

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