

## History of Buffalo County by Bassett

### ERASTUS SMITH

One of the earliest settlers in the northern portion of Buffalo County was Erastus Smith, who made settlement in 1874, at the point where is now the Town of Ravenna. Mr. Smith brought with him a herd of some thirty-five head of shorthorn cattle, the first registered cattle of that famous breed to be brought into the county. He engaged in the cattle business keeping an average of one hundred and fifty head of registered and grade shorthorns.

Realizing how greatly settlers in Buffalo County were handicapped by lack of knowledge of climatic conditions, more especially as respects annual rainfall, in co-operation with the weather bureau of the University of Nebraska and the United States Department of Agriculture, in the year 1878 Mr. Smith began keeping a daily record of temperature and rainfall and which he continued until his death in 1909, a period of thirty-one years and which record is still (1915) being kept by members of his family. Mr. Smith was one of the most faithful and painstaking reporters connected with the weather bureau service. In the earlier years it was required that the temperature be taken three times in twenty-four hours, at 7 A. M., 2 P. M., and 9 P. M.; it is related that in the thirty-one years in which Mr. Smith kept his record some member of his family was always at home to make the record at the time required.

When Mr. Smith came to Buffalo County he shipped his household goods, six head of horses and grain for his teams and provisions for his family to last a year, to Kearney; disposing of one horse he loaded his belongings onto wagons and with the members of his family started for the new home, some twenty-five miles distant, crossing the South Loup River at Peter's Bridge; in that portion of Buffalo County to which he journeyed, there were no settlers, the streams unbridged, and his sod house was the only habitation. In crossing the Beaver, near his claim, the wagon containing his household goods and provisions upset, all his goods were lost in the stream, including a cook stove, and three of his most valuable horses were drowned.

In those early days the Union Pacific Railroad Company having secured a decision from the courts which enabled it to evade payment of taxes on its lands, and there being very few settlers in the northern part of the county, it was many years before there were children enough of school age, and taxable property sufficient to warrant the establishment of a school within reach of the few settlers there located, and hence it was that Mr. Smith and his few neighbors were located in a school district, and paid taxes to support a public school, whose schoolhouse was in the Wood River Valley of the Platte some twenty miles distant. Also as a matter of history, but not pleasing to record, it might be added that all crops planted the first year by Mr. Smith and the members of his family, including a large garden, on which his wife expended much labor, took much pride in, and set great store by, was entirely destroyed by migratory grasshoppers, which even dug holes in the ground that they might get the last tiny rootlet of an onion.

In the year 1886 the Burlington Railroad was built into Garfield Township and Ravenna was founded and became a division station. Mr. Smith sold to the Lincoln Land Company a two-thirds interest in the townsite of Ravenna, he retaining every third lot.

In the early history of Buffalo County the Platte and Wood River valleys in the

southern part were first settled by homesteaders who engaged in farming operations, while the northern part of the county, as well as the counties of Sherman and Custer were largely given over to cattle ranches; when settlers began to take homestead claims in this section there was much friction between the cattle men and the homesteaders; out of such friction grew the Ketchum-Mitchell-Olive tragedy and the killing of the cowboys by the sheriff of Custer County. It is true that some of the early settlers in that region "rustled" cattle found on the range and it is also true that cattlemen, by intimidation and by force endeavored to discourage and keep out would-be homesteaders; in the contest the homesteader prevailed and occupied the land as it was right and best that he should; the homesteader established a home for himself and his family, organized school districts, erected schoolhouses and supported public schools, instituted churches, bridged streams, laid out and improved public highways, enhanced the cause of civilization, while the so-called cattle men occupied the public range with their large herds of cattle but contributed nothing to the development of the resources of the country or the upbuilding of the community.

**Land Patent Index** – S ½ NE ¼ & SE ¼ 8-12-14

**School Census Records** –

1880 – District #25 – NE ¼ 8-12-14 – Children: Laura, Mary, Charles ( ages not given)

1881 – District #25 – NE ¼ 8-10-14 – Children: Laura, Charles, Mary [ages not given]

1882 – District #25 – NE ¼ 8-12-14 – Children: Laura, Mary, Charles [ages not given]

1883 – not listed

1884 – District #69 – 8-12-14 – Children: Laura 18, Mary 16, C D 14 male

1886 – E. Smith #69 – tax payer

**Poll Tax book** –

Listed in 1891-2;1892-3; 1893-4

**Buffalo Tales**, August 1978, “Early Post Offices in Buffalo County”

Erastus Smith was the first settler and first postmaster of **Beaver Creek**, appointed December 11, 1878. When the Burlington built across northeastern Buffalo County, Beaver Creek became **Ravenna**, the name change effective July 23, 1886.

**From Ravenna Book** –

Erastis Smith was 49 when he came to Nebraska. He was influenced by railroad advertising to come to this territory. The ads said cattle could be turned out all winter, live and grow fat on Buffalo grass. He brought 35 head of purebred cattle from Iowa.

Information told to Ravenna librarian, Lois Johnsten by Clara Hlava, a girlhood friend of Erastis' daughter, Eva Abigail Smith Buell –

He was tall, had a long white beard, stood up straight. A railroad representative came to the Smith soddy to discuss establishing a town on their land. They discussed names such as Smithville and Smithton but could not decide on a name. One of the Smith daughters was studying her geography lesson at the table. Someone suggested using the map in the book to find a name. The daughter stuck a needle in the map. It landed near Ravenna, Italy. – that is the unofficial version of how the town got its name.

**Erastis Smith's Obituaries** – (summaries)

*Semi-Weekly Hub*, December 23, 1909

He died Sunday morning, December 20. He was born in 1830, homesteaded here in 1874. Survived by two daughters, Mrs. Herbert Smith of Ravenna  
Mrs. S. H. Buell of Grand Island

*Kearney Morning Times*, December 21, 1909

He was nearly 80

Survived by 6 grandchildren, 2 daughters and son-in-law, Mr. Davidson

*Kearney Evening Hub*, January 1910

Includes the Bassett's biography

**BIOGRAPHICAL SOUVENIR OF BUFFALO COUNTY, p 208-9**

**ERASTUS SMITH**, a retired capitalist, at Ravenna, Buffalo county, Nebr., was born near Shelbyville, Ind., August 3, 1830, and was reared on a farm until seventeen years of age. He received his education at the common schools, and at the seminary in Shelbyville, in which latter institution he studied civil engineering, following this as a profession for many years, and helping to locate and build a number of railroads. His father, Jonas Smith, was a native of Vermont and a farmer, who moved to Indiana in 1818, and settled near Shelbyville, where he ended his days in 1852. His wife, the mother of Erastus, was Abigail, daughter of Elisha Mayhew; was a native of Maine, and both of English descent, the ancestors having come to American before the Revolutionary war. The children born to Jonas Smith and wife were twelve in number, of whom Erastus is the fourth.

At the age of twenty-four years, Erastus Smith went to Iowa and entered four hundred acres of land near Des Moines, lived there two years, and then sold out and came to Nebraska, in 1856, and located in Omaha, where he was engaged in real estate business until 1858. He then became a commercial traveler, and when the war broke out, in 1861, he was at Burning Springs, West Va., in the interest of oil wells. Of course, his business

was brought to a standstill through the war. Mr. Smith then went to Polk county, Iowa, and for several years taught school, and for ten years engaged in farming. In 1874, he came back to Nebraska and settled his homestead on the northeast quarter of section 8, township 12, range 14, and at once began improving for a farm and cattle ranch; he also located a timber claim, and bought five hundred and forty acres of railroad land in addition, and continued farming and stock-raising in later years, keeping on hand an average of one hundred and fifty head of graded Durham cattle. January 1, 1886, the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company began to push their road through, and the same month Mr. Smith sold to the Lincoln Land Company a two-third interest in a section of land for a town site, he retaining every third lot. The town was laid out in June, 1886, the first lots were sold in July, and Mr. Davis, banker, erected the first building. The town has had a steady and healthy growth, the population on January 1, 1890, being one thousand. The sale of lots and land by Mr. Smith has placed him in most comfortable circumstances financially, and he has retired from active business, with the exception of looking after his town interests, as he has some buildings for rent or for sale. Mr. Smith is the pioneer of his township, and about his first experience was the loss of his crop by grasshoppers in 1874 and 1876, which disaster, at that time, was a serious loss, but he possessed indomitable courage and energy, and went to work to recover his fortune, and it will have been seen that in this he has been successful. His neighbors in the early days were but few, and for several years his children were the only children within nine square miles, with section 8 as its center.

In 1864 Mr. Smith was married, in Iowa, to Miss Mary J., daughter of Aaron and Mary J. (Dudley) Pearson, of New England. Mr. Pearson was a cattle dealer, and died in Iowa in 1874. The marriage of Mr. Smith has been blessed by the birth of five children, as follows -- Laura, who is married to Charles Davidson; Mary B., married to F. P. Boyd; Charles D., who died in December, 1886, at the age of seventeen years; Eva E. and Clara, at home. Mr. Smith in politics is a republican, and while a resident of Iowa was a member of the Masonic fraternity, but the absence of Masonic lodges in the West caused him to become delinquent, and he is now non-affiliating.

Mr. Smith does not owe his prosperity simply to good luck; it is the result of his own foresight and prudence. His early experience as a civil engineer on railroads, and the geography of the country before him, satisfied his mind that a railroad would be run to the Northwest, and he located his land with a view of availing himself of any benefit that might accrue from its construction. He has not reasoned in vain, nor has he been disappointed. The road has been built, the town is here, and wealth has resulted to reward his sagacity and business tact.