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“Nebraska Pioneer Saga”:

The Andrews Family and the Settlement of Furnas County, Nebraska

The Homestead Act of 1862 officially opened up Nebraska and the West to organized settlement. It offered an unprecedented opportunity to many hard-working immigrant families to establish new roots for themselves and future generations. However, it was not a surefire ticket to a better life. Many families experienced a great deal of hardships on their quest for the “American Dream”. Droughts, plagues, Indians, sickness, fire, and lawlessness were common, especially early on, as settlers sought to tame the virgin prairie. Many homesteaders became homesick and wondered what they’d got themselves into, eventually abandoning their plot of land.

Only the strongest families physically and mentally were able to endure. This paper examines the story of my ancestors who both homesteaded and endured. It includes first-hand accounts from the people who lived it. They were able to establish roots that last to this day, with their descendants still occupying and working the very same land. In reflecting upon the struggles and challenges they faced, they as well as I realized that it’s the community, connections, and stories that were forged in this new landscape that truly matter and endure to this day.

I was born and raised in a white, two-story, farmhouse on the South side of the Republican River located approximately halfway between Holbrook and Cambridge in Furnas County, Nebraska. My mother, whose maiden name is Andrews, was also born and raised in the very same house. The house has continuously been owned and lived in by the Andrews family and their direct descendants since it was built as a small, single-story farmhouse in 1904. The man who had the house built was my great-great grandfather, Donald Andrews (1867-1923). He was one of 11 children of Thomas Andrews, Sr. (1840-1914) and Catherine Munn Andrews (1838-1927) (Zysset). Thomas and Catherine (Katie) Andrews homesteaded nearby in 1873 and were one of the first homesteaders in Furnas County.



Fig. 1. Kids of Donald Andrews in Front of Home. approx. 1915. Scanned Image.

The title of the first permanent resident of Furnas County belongs to Isaac “Ben” Burton. He established the Burton’s Bend trading post in 1870 about 4 miles away, near present-day Holbrook. The trading post sold supplies to buffalo hunters in the area initially (Perkey). Furnas County was officially organized in February 1873 (Graff), 7 months before the Andrews family would arrive.



Fig 2. Original Burton’s Bend Trading Post. pre-1935. Web. 1 May 2018.

<<http://www.casde.unl.edu/history/counties/furnas/holbrook/>>. Digital Image.

The Western Republican River valley was primarily a buffalo hunting ground for the Pawnee before White settlement. As settlers encroached, bands of Cheyenne and Sioux retreated into the valley and were mostly driven out after General Carr’s Republican Valley Expedition of 1869 came up the Fort McPherson Trail nearby (Perkey). The valley was now open for settlers and in June 1873, Thomas Andrews and several others went to scout it out. They’d struggled with “ague” sickness from the Missouri River wetlands on their farm located near present-day Missouri Valley, Iowa. They’d heard that in the Republican River Valley this sickness couldn’t exist. The area had been blessed with a wet spring and they returned with “glowing” accounts of its beauty (Andrews).

They decided to set out for their new home in early August. They loaded up their belongings and 5 children in two wagons and set out on a three-week journey accompanied by their 60 head of cattle and 12 horses. Along the way they saw many wounded Pawnee Indians returning from the battle at Massacre Canyon (Andrews). A hunting party of about 700 Pawnee had been ambushed by a warring Sioux Party. The Pawnee were caught off-guard, outnumbered, and retreated. The arrival of a Cavalry unit of the US military staved off further bloodshed. The battle left 56 dead and over 100 captured or wounded. This was the last battle between two tribes in North America and the defeated Pawnee soon moved to a reservation in Oklahoma (Riley).

Catherine also recalls being told that Indians were approaching only to find out that it was just surveyors coming to map out what would become neighboring Gosper County, which she says received its name the very same day (Andrews). Gosper County was named after the Secretary of State, John J. Gosper. Daviesville would be chosen as the initial county seat, being that it was the site of the first Post Office (Gosper).

Daviesville is located about 10 miles Northeast of where the Andrews' would settle. It was also 1 mile West of where my Dad's family, the Stagemeyer's, would homestead and continue to live today on the Muddy Creek. A courthouse was approved, but funds weren't acquired and it was never built. In the meantime, county records were kept in official's homes. When Gosper County was finally formally organized almost 10 years later the county seat was moved to nearby Homerville. It was ultimately relocated to Elwood after the railroad came through (Gosper). Today there are no signs of Daviesville other than the remnants of a road and

some old foundations. A local resident was able to find some Civil-War era military gear among other items while metal detecting.

Thomas and Catherine arrived on September 1st, 1873 on the North Bank of the River West of Burton's Bend (Holbrook). What had looked like a fertile valley in June now resembled more of an arid desert after a hot, dry summer. Grasshoppers had done their damage and left little forage for the livestock. They crossed to the South side of the river where they would settle. For the first 6 weeks, their shelter consisted of the box of their covered wagon on the ground using the canvas as a roof. They also constructed a kitchen/dining room shelter made out of brush and timber. They made it their home while they worked on digging a "dugout", which was ready before Winter set in. Catherine states that it was a "cozy apartment until spring, but snakes became a problem" (Andrews). Years later my grandpa recalled a neighbor boy being killed after horses caved in an abandoned dugout he was playing in.

The families first few years on the prairie were very challenging, especially with 6 children under the age of 11 at this point. Catherine says they lived amongst "horse-thieves and those escaping justice from the East". A neighbor had all of his horses stolen and Tom and Katie lost 1 of their mares to thievery. They also lived amongst the remaining buffalo, with Katie recalling one in particular coming over the hill right upon her and her young sons. They subsisted on buffalo, beef, and pork meat primarily in those first years. It was almost 5 years before they were able to raise anything of significance with fire, grasshoppers, and drought all taking their turn. Many were forced to leave or left to chase gold in the West. The family was forced to send all their cattle to Kansas for grazing after a fire destroyed all their forage (Andrews).

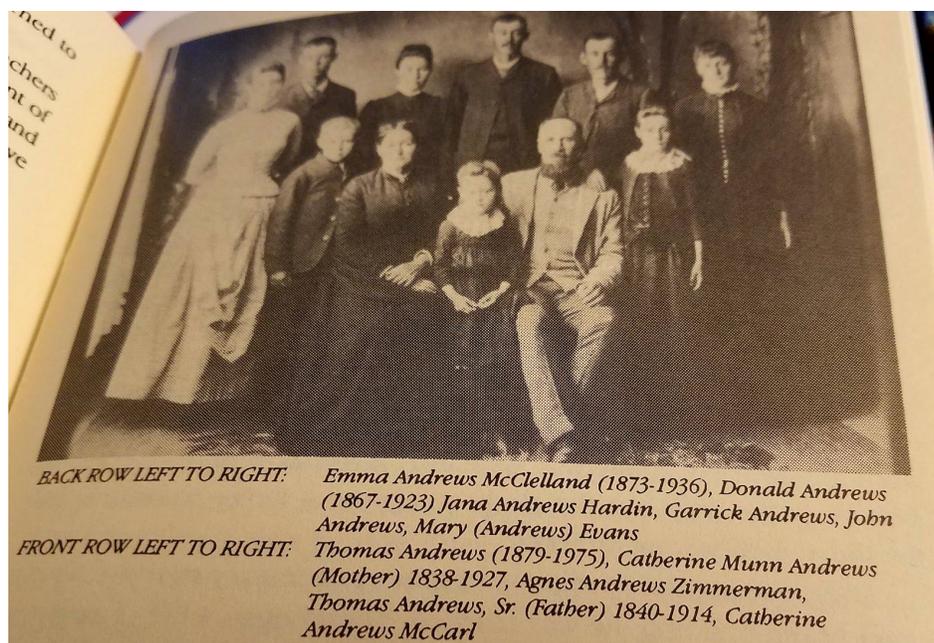


Fig. 3. Thomas Andrews Sr. and Family. Catherine Andrews: Frontier Pioneer. Marilyn Zysset 1982. Page 27. Digital Image.

A sod schoolhouse was built in 1874 and a reverend from nearby Beaver City would occasionally come to preach. A local doctor, Doctor Hobson, would also visit occasionally. This helped boost morale and bring families closer together. In 1879 the family moved into a log frame house with 2 porches. Also around this time, the present-day town of Cambridge started to develop after a flour mill, post office, and store were opened on Medicine Creek. Catherine talks of the many names Cambridge had during its early years, including: Pickleville, Northwood, Lickville, Scratch Pot City, and Medicine. By 1880, the railroad came through the area and was a boon for development (Andrews).

In 1888, Thomas went back to England to import purebred cattle and horses. In 1889 he imported the first clydesdales and shorthorns in the region. He was the first to import the

Cruickshank, a beefier line of shorthorn to Nebraska (Zysset). For his contributions, Thomas Andrews was inducted into the inaugural Nebraska Hall of Agricultural Achievement in 1918, 4 years after his death. The following year, inductees included the notable Robert Furnas and J. Sterling Morton. Catherine went on his behalf and gave a moving speech. Thomas was a business partner with A.C. Shallenberger of Alma who served as Governor of Nebraska from 1909-1911. Shallenberger said of Thomas Andrews:

“His integrity and judgement was so profound that all who came to know him were better for it. No man in America, connected with the livestock business was more highly respected and admired, and he had come to stand as a Nestor to the younger man, and a type of all that a real farmer and stockman should be. Men who met him never forgot him, but always spoke of him with admiration and respect.

He has finished a long life of noble work well done, and the world is better that he has lived. His manhood was of sterling metal and without alloy. And to such rare men, friends and friendship held fast. When Brutus came to die, he said the held it as his best remembrance - ‘That in all my life I never found a friend but he was true to me.’ And it is given to but few men to have had as true and lasting friends as Thomas Andrews.

This new state of Nebraska will long feel the influence of his long, honorable, and useful life.” (Zysset)

Catherine would go on to live until the age of 89 and passed away on May 31st, 1927. In 1915, Catherine wrote a short memoir titled, *From East to West*, on some paper pasted on the back of an almanac (Zysset). In the same vein as Nebraska great Willa Cather, Catherine carried some resentment about leaving her old life behind to come to Nebraska. However, it was a

love/hate relationship that she had. Like so many other pioneers, it was the hardships that they endured which forged the resourceful, appreciative, and battle-tested people they would become. As Catherine says in the end of her memoir: “Today, I am going down the valley, facing the sunset and evening star. And I hear a voice calling, “Come, Katie.” “Yes, yes, I’m coming.” God bless the Republican Valley. Though it has caused me many tears and heartaches, yet it is ‘Home Sweet Sweet Home.’ ” (Andrews)

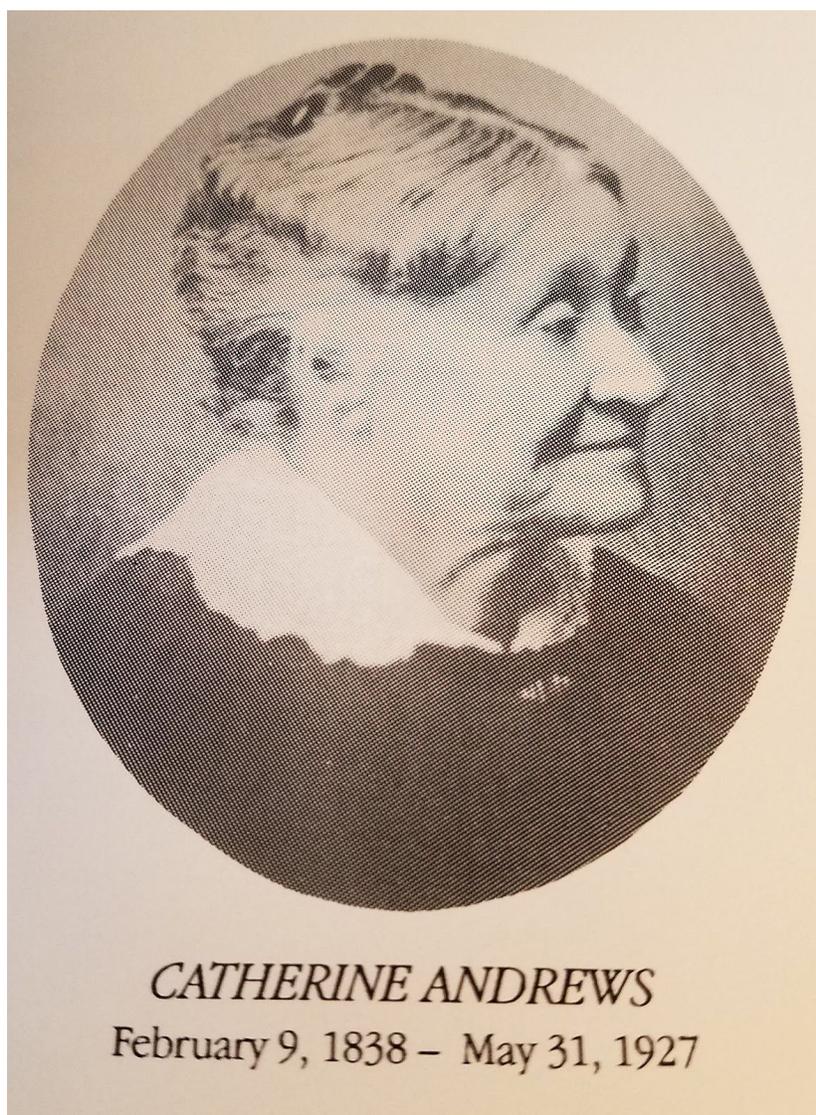


Fig. 4. Catherine Andrews. *Nebraska Pioneer Saga*. Digital Image.



Fig 5. Aerial Picture of Andrews Farm. approx 1980. Scanned Image.



Fig. 6. Sandra Stagemeyer. Picture of Andrews House. 2016. Digital Image.

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