

*History of . . .*

## **Stanton County,**

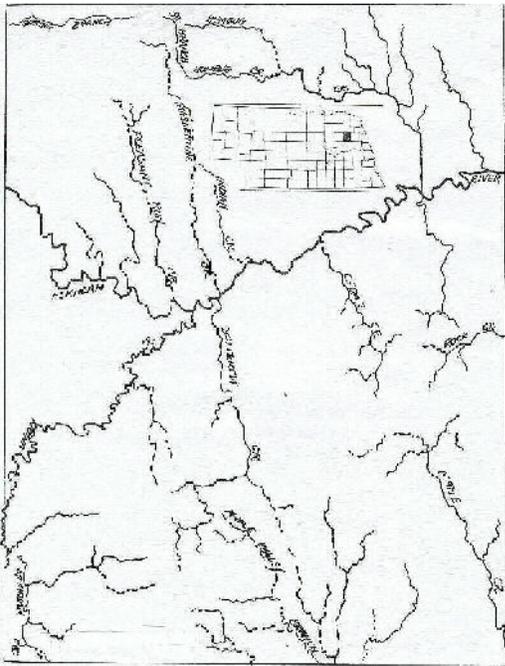
Nebraska

### **Physical Description**

Stanton County, one of the smallest of Nebraska's ninety-three counties, is located in Northeast Nebraska. Its official designation is Townships 21, 22, 23 and 24 North of the Base Line which forms Nebraska's southern boundary, and Ranges 1, 2 and 3 East of the Sixth Principal Meridian, that forms the County's western boundary. This western boundary, along which lies the Meridian Highway, Highway 81, is described as Longitude 97° 22' 27", its northern boundary, is on the Sixth Standard Parallel (north), Latitude 42° 05' 23".

The rectangular county, eighteen miles wide by twenty-four miles deep, is in the third tier of counties south of the Missouri River that forms a part of the northern boundary of the State, and is also in the third tier east from the State's eastern border. The area of its twelve townships is approximately 432 square miles.

Stanton County is bounded by Wayne County on the north, Cuming County on the east, Colfax and Platte Counties on the south, and Madison County on the west. The altitude at Stanton is 1,472 feet, and Pilger is 1,410 feet above sea level. These towns lie in the Elkhorn Valley, but the elevation of the highest area is located in the southwestern part of the county. This area does not exceed the lowest area by more than 200 feet. The prevailing slope is eastward, the direction in which the Elkhorn River flows.



The county is traversed from west to east by the Elkhorn River, hence is part of the Elkhorn Valley. The Elkhorn River enters the county on its western side six miles south of the northern boundary line. It flows in a decidedly southern and eastern direction for one third of the width of the County, then flows more leisurely northeast until it leaves the county on its eastern boundary almost exactly opposite the western point of entry. The valley of the river varies from three to six miles in width. The Elkhorn River with its tributaries accounts for approximately four square miles.

Stanton County consists of areas of bottomlands and stream terraces, mixed sand and clay uplands, and a small area of sandhills. The mixed clay, sand and slit uplands comprise the major soil type in the

county. This soil type is suited to agricultural production. The small area of sandhills is located mainly in two areas south and southeast of the town of Stanton. The bottomlands are located mainly along the Elkhorn River and its major tributaries.

Stanton County is primarily an agricultural county specializing in livestock feeding. It has many large livestock feeders in its boundary, which consistently produce prime beef for eastern markets. Pork production and dairy production are also a productive industry. The main crops of the county are corn, alfalfa, oats and soybeans.

The climate is typical of northeast Nebraska and well suited to grain and livestock production.

Buffalo herds grazed in Stanton County; along the river deer, elk, antelope, raccoon, otter, beaver, muskrat and mink fed; coyotes and wolves had dens in the hills; prairie chickens, quail, grouse, wild duck and geese furnished food for the hunter and early settlers.

Cottonwoods, some of them large enough to be cut into lumber for building, willow, ash, bow-elder, hackberry, red and white elm, basswood, some oaks, maples, and cedars, furnished fuel for the early settlers. It was the custom for the settlers to acquire a timber tract in order to have fuel.

The early settlers used wild grape, chokecherry, wild gooseberry, a few wild strawberries, and even buffalo "plum" as fruit. On the lakes or sloughs formed by the river or its tributaries, wild ducks and geese fed. Fish in the river, channel cat, perch, bass, and bullheads, augmented the food supply. The river itself furnished drinking water, clear or of a slightly milky color. A few springs were also used by early settlers for water.

## **History**

Between the years 1856 and 1862 the area which now comprises Stanton County was known as Izard County. It was named in honor of Mark W. Izard, second territorial governor of Nebraska. Izard County included 16 townships. The name of the county was changed in 1862 to Stanton. The county was named for Edwin M. Stanton, War Secretary to President Abraham Lincoln. Stanton County was organized three years later and at that time the four eastern townships were added to Cuming County. Since that time the county boundaries have remained unchanged.

Cattlemen, hunters, and Indians inhabited what is now Stanton County prior to 1865. Rangeland was free and cattle raising profitable due to the prairie grasses which covered the county.

The Pawnee Indians lived in the region along and around the Elkhorn River. As the white man crowded the Indians from their territories, hunting grounds were sought, and rival tribes of the Pawnee, Omaha, Ponca and the Sioux fought over the food supply in the Elkhorn Valley.

As settlers began arriving in Stanton County, they were anxious to establish their farms. For those arriving with little cash, homesteading was the answer. Others, with more capital, opted to purchase their land outright. The Burlington and Missouri Railroad owned 3,510 acres in Stanton County as part of their government grant and this land was made available to those who had the cash.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 opened the territory of what is now Nebraska to settlement by whites. Nebraska was organized as a state in 1867. The general directions of settlement proceeded from the southeast corner of the state to the north along the Missouri River and westward along the Platte and Elkhorn Valleys. The rich farmlands of Stanton County beckoned prospective settlers after the close of the Civil War. Immigration was easier with the coming of the railroad in 1879. The federal government did much to encourage settlement of frontier lands. The Preemption Act of 1841, the original cornerstone of the nation's land policy, was the method by which settlers of territorial Nebraska secured their land. The

Homestead Act of 1862 provided up to a quarter section of "free" land to head of families who had paid the \$10 filing fee and resided on or cultivated the land for five consecutive years. The Timber Culture Act, approved in 1873, was supplemental to the Homestead Act. It provided that a homesteader could acquire an additional quarter section by planting 40 acres to trees and caring for them for 10 years. Along with the purchase of land from the railroads or private individuals, these federal acts made it possible for new settlers to acquire the land necessary to support their families.

The population began to increase between 1867 and 1869 and as settlement pressure increased, cattlemen were pushed further westward. Settlers first located in the county's bottomlands where water and fuel were easily obtainable. Later arrivals spread into the uplands. The early settlers suffered the hazards of pioneer life – blizzards, prairie fires, lack of food and clothing.

The first permanent settlement in Stanton County was established on Humbug Creek, a tributary of the Elkhorn River located in the northeastern part of the county, in September of 1865. Charles F. Sharp, Mitchell B. Sharp, F.M. Scott and Jacob Hoffman became the first settlers in this area. Before either of the county's two towns were platted, this little settlement boasted a store and log schoolhouse. Unfortunately, this early settlement did not grow into a town.

In October, 1866, the Legislature called for an election "at the Humbug Settlement" to establish the county seat for the county. The unnamed county seat was merely a location near the center of the county awaiting residents and buildings. With no proper county seat, county business and the commissioner meetings simply moved with the Clerk. The first Commissioner's proceedings were recorded on January 23, 1867.

In 1869, a petition asked the commissioners to set an actual site other than the proposed town near the center of the county. Since most of the county population was located near the Humbug Settlement, which was not near the geographic center, they proposed a site toward the east of the present town of Stanton. The contest was won by eight votes, but the election was nullified by the courts, thus preserving the still unnamed central location.

At about the same time, a colony of Germans from Wisconsin settled nearby the central location. As a result, the town began to grow.

Roads were laid out, mail routes and post offices established before the coming of the railroad in 1879. The railroad was completed across the county increasing the number of persons settling in the county. By 1890, all the desirable land had been settled under the homestead and preemption laws.

Pilger, located 10 miles northeast of Stanton, is the only other town in Stanton County. It was platted in May of 1880, and named after Peter Pilger, owner of the original town site located in Pt SW 35-24-3.

In September of 1974, Sanitary and Improvement District #1 was organized in the northeast corner of Stanton County. A subdivision of homes has been constructed in section 18 of Spring Branch precinct near Norfolk. This area accounts for at least 1/3 of the county population.

### **Courthouse**

Though there were practically no funds available, all agreed a county building was needed, so \$300 was borrowed, and in April, 1871, a 16x22 foot frame building was erected in Pt NESE 20-23-2, thus the first county courthouse was designated. This building was located approximately 3 blocks east of the present location.



In 1883, a courthouse was constructed on Block 26 of Lehman's Addition in the City of Stanton. This building was constructed 3 blocks west of the first county building.

Courthouse Photograph around 1912



In the early fall of 1930 repairs were made on the 1883 structure. The steeple was removed from the building and a new roof was put on.



Stucco was applied to the outside of the building and the inside was repainted and updated. This building served the county for 91 years.

After becoming outdated and in need of repair, it was decided to construct a more modern courthouse. In 1976 the present courthouse was constructed directly behind the old courthouse.



This is a picture of the courthouse as it appears today.



## **The People**

The ethnic diversity of the people who settled and made their homes and livelihoods are an important part of the history of Stanton County. Evidence of the various ethnic groups is indicated by the institutions which they founded, churches, cemeteries, and fraternal organizations.

A large number of Germans settled along Humbug Creek near Pilger and along Union Creek south of Stanton. Many of these people had originally settled in Wisconsin but had found that area too densely forested. They found the Elkhorn Valley well suited for their needs.

Bohemians settled in the southern part of the county near Haymow Precinct and the town of Stanton. This was really an extension of the Bohemian settlement in Colfax County to the south. Many who settled near Haymow Precinct had originally settled in Dodge and Cuming Counties.

There was a strong Scandinavian presence in Stanton County. Swedes were the most numerous, accompanied by smaller numbers of Danes and Norwegians.

It was reported Danish Lutherans lived in the vicinity of Pilger. A colony of Swedes founded the Bega settlement in the northern part of the county. The Norwegians tended to mix readily with the Americans; however, there is a Norwegian Cemetery located in Elkhorn Precinct.

## **Agriculture**

Nebraska is a large state with a variety of soil types and differing climatic conditions, which make it necessary for the farmer to adapt farming practices to local conditions. It should also be noted there are few distinct areas where abrupt changes in farming practices are evidenced.

Stanton County is included in the Northeast Nebraska Intensive Livestock Production (NNILP) area. In this area crops are grown more for their value as livestock feed than as a cash crop.

The soils of the county are able to retain a large amount of water and plant nutrients, which make them suitable for growing a number of crop types. Corn, alfalfa, plus some wheat and oats are grown in this region. These are grown due to their adaptability to environmental conditions and their appropriateness as livestock feed.

Sod corn was generally the first crop grown by the settlers. As settlers came into northeast Nebraska, they brought with them the same agricultural practices they had known in the Midwest Cornbelt. The corn, as well as game and beef, provided food to the early settlers. As conditions on the homesteads became more stable, wheat, oats, barley, and garden vegetables were grown. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, real

advances in scientific farming began to have an impact on production. Crop rotation, seed selection, higher quality livestock through selective breeding, and research into plant and animal diseases was advances in agricultural practice.

Corn has been the leading crop in Stanton County since farming began. Wheat was an early important crop and was second only to corn until about 1900. It was utilized as both a food and cash crop. Another reason for growing wheat was that settlers came from regions where wheat was a profitable crop.

As farmers became better established, livestock became an important source of revenue. Consequently, more feed grains were needed. Oats, which were an important feed crop, as well as adapted to soil and climatic conditions, came to be grown more.

By the end of the 1930's, the intensive livestock system of farming was in full flower with northeast Nebraska having more livestock per section than any other area of the state. Cattle and hog feeding are the main livestock enterprises. The value of livestock has increased though time. In recent years, soybeans have become increasingly important as a cash crop.

The acreage of irrigated cropland has also been on the increase. Wells are the major source of water for irrigation but some water is pumped from the Elkhorn River. The use of center-pivot systems caused major increases in the number of wells drilled in the county for irrigation purposes.

### **Final Comments**

The Stanton County economy is, and always has been, based on agriculture. The agricultural base is characterized by intensive livestock production with more grain grown for feed than as cash grain. The two towns in the county, which serve the rural population, have remained relatively small. The county was populated by people from many states and foreign countries who came together to establish the rich social fabric which remains today.

(compiled Jan, 2002)