Sweetwater

In 1982 Linda Wilke, descendant of one of the early settlers at Sweetwater, wrote a history of this settlement on the north edge of Buffalo County. She was kind enough to donate a copy to the Archives. While there are also various miscellaneous pieces of information in our archives about Sweetwater and the surrounding area, this history has provided the basis for the following article.

Beaver Creek

Once it was called the Sweetwater Creek or McGee's Creek, but more commonly Beaver Creek. Now it's called Mud Creek. There are two legends about the origin of the name Sweetwater. One is that a wagon carrying a substantial amount of sugar tried to cross the creek and upset, dumping sugar into the creek. The other, more likely story, is that early settlers to the region found the water to be less alkaline, sweeter, than in states from which they had come.

The stream originates in Sherman County somewhere north and west of Hazard and winds its way southeast into Buffalo County, turns back north briefly, then south again to empty into the South Loup at Ravenna. If one were to take a piece of string, wad it up and squeeze it tightly, then toss it out on a table, one would see what a winding course this creek takes.

When the first settlers came to the area Beaver Creek was clear with a sandy bottom. As has happened to so many streams in Nebraska, when the land was settled and prairie broken to plant crops, the clear water and sandy bottom disappeared. Some time through the years the Beaver Creek became Mud Creek.

In those early days, the bridge across the Beaver consisted of logs long enough to reach from one bank to the other. These were covered with poles and brush. Next came a layer of hay and sod, and finally dirt. The bridge would last until the next flood when it washed away. Then a new one would be built.

Bridge standards were adopted by the Buffalo County Board of Supervisors in 1908 and they contracted with the Standard Bridge Company of Omaha to build bridges across several streams in the county. The following year an 80-foot pinned pony truss bridge was built across the Beaver, now called Mud Creek. With maintenance and repair over the years, this historic bridge is still in use today.

Early Settlers

The first people to live in the Sweetwater area were the a prehistoric Plains Village culture called the Itskari Phase who lived here from the early 1200's to the mid-1400's. They probably were the ancestors of the Pawnees who were living in this part of the state when the first white settlers came. Remains of Itskari storage pits, earth lodges and trash deposits have been found in this area north of the South Loup River.

Settlement by people from eastern United States and Europe did not begin until about 1870. When John McGee brought his family to settle in Buffalo County in 1873, he selected a spot on the bank of Beaver Creek in what is now Beaver Township near the Sherman County line. The trail used to bring supplies from Kearney to Loup City crossed the Beaver at this point. It was also on the route used by travelers going west from Grand Island. McGee established a ranch here, probably a sheep ranch, and kept a

general store for the convenience of travelers. When the stagecoach route between Kearney and Loup City was established, his ranch became one of the stops. It cost $2 to ride the stage from Kearney to the McGee Ranch. The McGee Ranch was officially named Sweetwater when a post office was established there December 21, 1874.

When Erastis Smith (founder of Ravenna) came to Buffalo County he rented a house in Kearney where his family could stay until he finished a home for them on their claim east of Sweetwater. But then the floor of the house in Kearney collapsed under the weight of their possessions. So they loaded up everything and went to McGee's Ranch to stay until the dugout was completed – 5 Smiths, 4 McGees, 2 room house.

Three other early settlers in the Sweetwater area were the Crostons, Roberts, and Hodges. Mr. Croston was a Civil War veteran from the north, who had fallen in love with a southern girl. Because of family opposition they eloped and came to Nebraska. After spending some time in the Grand Island area they moved to a claim on Beaver Creek on the Sherman County side of the county line.

The James Roberts family came to Nebraska from Missouri where they were said to be friends and neighbors of the James brothers.   James Roberts worked for the Union Pacific when it was being constructed. Attracted to this part of the state he brought his family from Nebraska City to Grand Island and then on to a claim on Beaver Creek in Sherman County near Sweetwater.

Bob Hodges was one of the first to settle in Beaver Township. He came in 1873 but, although he lived in the Sweetwater area, he did not immediately file for a homestead. He rode for the Olives in Texas and here. The Olives had a cattle ranch in Dawson County. Sweetwater was on the dividing line between the cattlemen and the settlers at that time. Because Hodges could play the fiddle, he was called upon to play at many social events around Sweetwater in those early days. It was said that he knew three songs.

The McGees left the area late in 1876 and for a couple of years his store was operated by James Goff. Goff was a farmer and may have been the original owner of the Sweetwater townsite. Then Henry Beyer and his wife came to Sweetwater and took over the mercantile business. Beyer built a new store with living quarters on the second floor.

Some time later a friend and family stopped while passing through. A blanket was hung across the upstairs living quarters to provide privacy for each family. The next morning the two men drove to Kearney to get supplies for the store. It was late at night by the time they got back. They put up the horses and, exhausted, fell into bed. There followed a great commotion by wives and children. The men were in the wrong beds.

A group of Norwegian immigrants who had been living in Chicago moved to the area just west of Sweetwater in 1880. There were also some Danes living here. These settlers formed the Sweetwater Scandinavian Evangelical Lutheran Congregation in 1882. At first they met in homes. Finally after about 10 years they built a sod church and then in 1903 a frame building was erected. Since members of the congregation were from Hazard as well as Sweetwater, they talked for many years of moving. Finally in 1940 the church was moved to Hazard where it is now known as Faith Lutheran.

Sweetwater

All this time Sweetwater was located on the bank of Beaver Creek. Then in the summer of 1886 the Burlington Railroad's Grand Island & Wyoming Central branch was

constructed from Grand Island to Broken Bow. The route came in to Buffalo County at St. Michael. Ravenna was founded and became a division point. From there the railroad was built in a northwesterly direction more or less following the winding Beaver Creek. Because of the turns in the course of the creek and because the railroad was on the north side, it missed Sweetwater by about half a mile. Henry Beyer moved his store north to the railroad. Sweetwater was platted in a V with the railroad forming the southwest boundary, the section line on the east, and the Sherman county line on the north. In fact, the street along the north edge of Sweetwater is Sherman Street.

Beaver Creek must have had a good steady flow of water because it wasn't long before there were three grain and flour mills in operation at Sweetwater. Two were located south of Beyer's store and the third one farther west. The Sweetwater Mill stayed in operation the longest. This mill was built and operated by brothers, Herman and Henry Wilke in 1886. In May of the following year the *Kearney New Era* reported that this mill was one of the "solid improvements on the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad to Broken Bow….The roller mill has a capacity of 100 barrels a day and utilizes the finest water power in the state."

Three years later, in 1890, the town of Sweetwater was hit by a tornado, a cyclone as it was called then. The Sweetwater Mill was destroyed. *The Ravenna News* reported, "The Sweetwater Mill, one of the best and finest roller mills in central Nebraska, had evidently been raised into the air, crushed together by some tremendous force, and dashed to the ground again, a series of shapeless ruins." Several days after the storm a part of the mill's roof was found six miles away.

In 1899 Herman Wilke formed a partnership with Andrew Rosvold, a Norweigan settler living just west of Sweetwater, to rebuild the Sweetwater Mill. They rebuilt the building and then, apparently, Andrew painted the interior. He died that summer from inhaling paint fumes. In September a notice appeared in the *Kearney Hub* announcing that the Sweetwater mill would be operated by Herman Wilke and Mrs. Rosvold, widow of his partner. The mill continued to operate until the late 'teens.

Sweetwater has never been a very large town since Ravenna had been established and was growing just five miles east. But it did have the usual variety of businesses. Besides the Beyer's general store there were a couple of blacksmiths and a miller listed in the 1885 Nebraska census. Then a millinery shop opened and by the turn of the century the town even had a softball team. Other businesses in Sweetwater included a grain elevator, a bakery, a lumber business and a bank. A Presbyterian congregation had formed but they did not build a church until three years later. Out in the country the Sweetwater Scandinavian Evangelical Lutheran congregation included members from both the Sweetwater and Hazard communities. Although they talked about it for many years, the church was not moved to Hazard until 1940.

The Sweetwater community has faced other hardships besides the tornado in 1890. In the 1870's when the first settlers were arriving there was drought and grasshoppers. There were Indian scares since this territory was used by both the Sioux and the Pawnee – who were not friendly toward each other or to the white man who was encroaching on their land. Located so far north of the Union Pacific Railroad, there was a shortage of supplies. The trip to Kearney and back by wagon was a long one. Once the town was platted and businesses were being established, the buildings were constructed of wood. Apparently there was no brickyard in the area and hauling in brick was too

expensive. As a result there have been several fires in Sweetwater over the years, each taking two or three businesses.   Sometimes the businesses rebuilt, sometimes they didn't.

Today there is hardly a trace left. But as you drive along Highway 2 from Ravenna to Hazard, watch for a sign along the railroad track at the county line that says "Sweetwater".

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