

Jim McKee: W. W. Cox was a salt boiler and historian



FEBRUARY 21, 2010 10:00 AM

William W. Cox was born in Versailles, N.Y., in 1832, moved to Ohio, and then became a teacher in 1853 in Illinois. During the fall of 1859, Cox visited Nebraska and, while camping west of Arbor Lodge in Nebraska City, feasted on local potatoes and prairie chicken.

Immediately taken by the new Nebraska Territory and its vast possibilities, he went to the land office and made an application. In March of 1860, he brought his family to Nebraska City and sought work as a carpenter. His asking price for a day's work was 75 cents and, though his skills were indeed needed, he finally had to settle for 25 cents and even then had to accept "store pay." Thinking he would at least be able to take his pay out in groceries for his wife and child, he was surprised to find only "old busted up hardware" was available.

Discouraged over his immediate prospects, he chanced to overhear Capt. Donovan describe the Lancaster County salt flats in June of 1861. Cox asked Donovan for a tour, and the following month the pair set out. Cox's account

told of "big flies that infested the low bottoms (which were) a great persuader of their oxen," a drove of antelope and their struggle to make their way through tall sunflowers just northwest of what today would be Ninth and O streets.

Although the salt flats held only "old salt furnaces and two deserted cabins," he fell in love with the tranquility, saying "the July breeze... reminded me of the ... ocean beach ... my world was filled with rapturous delight ... monarchs of all we surveyed."

That summer, Cox and his family moved into one of the cabins and he formed a friendship with Darwin Peckham in "making" salt. When the weather was dry, the salt sold for 25 cents per hundredweight, 50 cents to a dollar when it rained. The pair also rented out large flat steel pans to "pilgrims" who preferred to evaporate their own salt. At one point he noted having traded 5,000 pounds of salt for 5,000 pounds of flour.

That fall, as cooler and shorter days slowed salt production, the Cox family moved in with Capt. Donovan, and in the late fall Cox built a house for Richard Wallingford on Salt Creek, complete with doors of black walnut, the first frame house in what was to become Lancaster County.

On July 4, 1873, Cox was gathering gooseberries along Salt Creek when he was approached by Elder Young and five men from Nebraska City who were scouting a site for a potential Methodist female seminary. That Sunday, Cox's house was the venue for a sermon by Young with "a fair-sized congregation," the first sermon preached in the county.

The winter of 1863-64 proved extremely cold, and salt sales again dropped. The following summer, Cox's house, "just south of the great basin," was the site of the Lancaster County seat election.

The summer of 1864 brought two Indian scares, though both proved groundless. In one case, the nearest hostile was said to be 100 miles distant.

With the continued drop in salt prices, Indian scares and the fact that Cox observed that it really did rain west of Lancaster County, he decided to move again.

In Seward County, Cox became the first teacher in the first district school, established a brief and unprofitable grain business, was a founder of the First Baptist Church, became a correspondent for the New York Tribune, Omaha Republican and other newspapers, platted Cox's Addition to Seward in 1880 and wrote the history of Seward County in 1888.

Though Cox lived in Lincoln only a few years, his impact on the settlement and series of firsts in both the Capital City and Seward County has lived through the decades.

Historian Jim McKee, who still writes with a fountain pen, invites comments or questions. Write to him in care of the Journal Star or at jim@jeebooksellers.com.