

Trailing the Boslers From Pennsylvania to Nebraska

By Christine Musser

1500 Words

My first journey to Nebraska began one crisp fall day in New Kingstown, Pennsylvania. Walking through an old cemetery there, I found a large granite headstone inscribed: “David B. Herman, Dec. 29, 1844 - killed by hostile Indians - May 20, 1876 - In western Nebraska on North Platte River, near the Sidney Crossing of the main road to Red Cloud and the Black Hills, aged 31 yrs, 7 mo’s, & 19 d’s.”

Who was this man that such detailed description had been written about his death? Why wasn’t he buried where he died, as so many others were at that time? The Nebraska State Historical Society provided some answers. I wrote them, and they replied, “David B. Herman was the ranch foreman for the Bosler B Bar Ranch, located in western Nebraska. He was killed while fording the North Platte River at Clarke’s Bridge. On his person, he had \$2, 000 in cash along with a check from the Sioux City Bank. These items were strewn all over the land. His clothes were removed and taken as well as his pistol. The cattle he was in charge of were also scattered about.”

I was surprised to see the name Bosler in the letter, for I knew it well from visiting the J. Herman Bosler Library at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The Bosler family, a little investigation in Pennsylvania revealed, had been in Carlisle’s early history and had donated money throughout the United States for building libraries, schools, and jailhouses. They didn’t have money like the Carnegies or Vanderbilts; they were what was called “second-tier entrepreneurs.” Still, they claimed enough money to run in the same social circles as U.S. senators and even presidents. The source of their fortune was the cattle business in the West, notably Nebraska. There were four Bosler brothers and one, James Williamson Bosler, seemed to especially love Nebraska. He never called the West home, but he always felt drawn to the prairies. Thinking of him I wondered, could I go to Nebraska and find any semblance of open spaces that were such a lure 130 years ago?

I flew into Rapid City, South Dakota, on an October day and drove U.S. Highway 385 south to Nebraska, traveling a route running parallel to the 1870s road that gold seekers took from Sidney

to the Black Hills. I crossed the state line expecting to see flatlands, dirt, and no trees whatsoever. Instead, I drove into the Pine Ridge division of the Nebraska National Forest, a place of towering ponderosa pines. It was beautiful, but looked more like Pennsylvania than the “Great American Desert,” as this region was sometimes called in the 1800s. I found myself hoping the landscape would change, and soon it did. The sky opened up, and I gazed in awe at the vast view of tall golden-brown grass, dry tan-colored hills, and old barns that stood far off the highway against backdrops of a few scattered cottonwoods. The sky seemed to be always moving and changing. I felt I could follow this road to the end of the earth, and I sensed, too, that I’d found the very land the Boslers, and their foreman knew.

I noticed a train moving down the tracks to my right. Could these tracks have replaced those of the Bolser years? I recalled Nebraska railroad stories the Boslers recounted, of Indians riding alongside steam-powered locomotives, trying to outrun them, and of trains having to stop because of buffalo on the tracks.

I pulled into the town of Bridgeport, on the North bank of the North Platte River, and the librarian there showed me a book by Clark Fuller, Pioneer Paths. It described old ranches in the vicinity and noted the “Bosler Brothers were north of the river and the present town of Gering.” From other sources I learned ranch headquarters were originally at Lewellen, then near Bridgeport, and that the ranch accommodated 40,000 to 50,000 head of cattle, ran 150 miles along the North Platte, and eventually extended into Wyoming (Bosler, Wyoming is named for James Williamson Bosler). Nellie Snyder Yost’s book, Call of the Range, pinpointed the ranch headquarters on Brown Creek, nine miles east of Bridgeport. All buildings were soddies, she wrote. Twenty-five men rode on spring roundups, 15 were kept busy on the ranch through summer, and eight stayed on to handle chores over the winter. And, Yost added, “There wasn’t a woman anywhere within the 640,000 acre B Bar Cattle Kingdom.”

On Bridgeport’s wide streets, it was easy for me to conjure up images of the cowboy era: trail dust; smells of sweat and manure; bawling cattle; yelling cowpokes. Actually, I learned later, Bridgeport wasn’t much of a cowtown, but Sidney and Ogallala certainly were. Nights turned

wild in those places when cowboys rode in off the trail. At least one Bosler brother was present one evening at Ogallala's Leach House when fifteen shots were fired into the room where he sat talking with several men. A lamp shattered, as did every window, but the men escaped without a scratch. Later they learned a brawl had broken out in the nearby Tucker Saloon. When the fight spilled into the street, the only light the brawlers spotted was a lamp illuminating Bosler's conversation. The Brawlers decided the light should be out, so out it went.

If the Boslers rubbed shoulders in fast social circles in the East, they associated with an internationally known personality in Nebraska, too. Buffalo Bill Cody wintered his cattle with the Boslers', and in the springtime showed up for the roundup supplied with cigars, snakebite antidotes, and whiskey. Actually, Bosler accounts say, Cody didn't help much at roundup time. But it seems everyone found him entertaining.

The ranch reaped a golden harvest by buying Texas cattle, grass feeding them on the Nebraska range, and then selling them to Indian agencies. Like so many big businesses of any era, the Bosler operation wouldn't be immune to scandal. The ugliest charge, never proven, came from surveyor Alex Schleigal. One of his assistants was found hanging from a tree near Sidney, with a sign that read "Horse Thief." Schleigal was scheduled to survey Bosler rangelands, an activity the Boslers opposed because they saw it as the first step toward opening the country to homesteaders. The surveyor believed his assistant died not because he was a horse thief, but to scare the surveyors away. The surveying, however, was completed without further incidents.

The most notable Bosler scandal - literally a federal case - came about after a Yale University paleontology professor showed up at Red Cloud Agency and asked Red Cloud if he might explore for fossils. Red Cloud said he could if he promised to report to Washington that the agency wasn't receiving promised supplies of beef, flour, and corn. Samuel Walker, Board of Indian Affairs clerk investigated and wrote, "Neither is there any record of the amount of beef received at the agency, other than copies of the receipts issued to the contractor, which Mr. Bosler, who is really the beef contractor, informed me he made out himself." Further, Walker reported, the price the government paid for Bosler beef was established by weighing only the

largest animals, before a proper scale being set up.

“I think it clear that fraud was intended,” Walker wrote and accused Boslers and the Red Cloud agent of collusion. However, the Boslers were exonerated. They made a big profit, the investigative committee decided, but earned it legally.

Among those questioned at the hearing was ranch foreman David B. Herman, whose headstone pointed me in the direction of the Boslers and Nebraska in the first place. I learned Herman was a cousin to the Bosler Brothers and held a law degree from Pennsylvania’s Dickinson College. His 1876 murder on the North Platte happened the same spring the Black Hills gold rush hit full stride, just a month before Custer and his troops died at Little Big Horn. Tensions ran high although - as the Carlisle, Pennsylvania paper reported - the Bosler ranch was far from the Black Hills and it was “perfectly quiet in that section, there being no trouble with the Indians.” The fact that his clothes had been taken but the money hadn’t, the paper noted, is what made the Indians suspect.

It turned out, the Bosler ranch didn’t survive much longer than its foreman. In 1883, James Williamson Bosler died, and older brother J. Herman Bosler decided to sell the cattle and land holdings to William Paxton’s Keystone Cattle Company. That enterprise eventually became the Ogallala Cattle Company.

Now the Boslers’ Nebraska story lives mainly in local history books, and one chapter is recorded in granite at a Pennsylvania cemetery. I wonder, do the geographic details on the headstone appear as testimony to the empire the Boslers and their cousin believed they were building out West? After all, there’s no mention of David B. Herman’s family, law degree, or the fraternity that participated in his funeral. Instead, we’re left with references to western Nebraska, the North Platte, and the main road to Red Cloud and the Black Hills.

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