

SOME SARPY COUNTY TREASURES

By Phil Kaldahl

Sarpy County Historical Society

Sources: Gary Iske: Nebraska

State Historical Society:

City of Bellevue;

National Register

The Sarpy County Historical Society is one of the private and public organizations devoted to identifying and promoting the rich treasures of the present and the past that can be enjoyed in Sarpy County. The Society, the cities, the chambers of commerce, Sarpy County Government with its Tourism Department, community groups, and others interested in Sarpy County should share in combined efforts to identify and promote Sarpy County's many rich offerings.

In an effort to promote sharing, this listing of Sarpy County Treasures has been started by the Historical Society. Others are invited to add to this list which could be more complete than the materials in printed promotional materials, oral presentations, or electronic Web sites. Send comments and suggestions to philipkaldahl@yahoo.com.

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORICAL PLACES

The Nebraska State Historical Society provides a list of buildings, sites, and districts that have been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Even though a building can lose its designation after it has been moved, the State has continued to list two Sarpy County buildings and a bridge that have been moved. The structures have maintained their historical integrity; however, they have been moved and the National Register may wish to remove them. We in Sarpy County should continue to recognize these buildings and structure if they lose their designation. The Sarpy County Historical Society has helped with the lengthy application process to have some of our treasures placed on the Register and owns two of them.

Here is a Sarpy County's listing of places on the National Register. Readers are encouraged to think of other places and sites that should receive this national recognition.

1. The City of Bellevue has an official historical marker inside the front door of Bellevue City Hall. Early Bellevue is not on the listing of Historic Places. However, the marker recognizes Bellevue for being the first permanent community in Nebraska. If Old Bellevue is not listed as a Historical District but is recognized as the first permanent Nebraska Community with no boundaries listed, an effort could be made to clarify this marker. Two historic districts, some buildings, and some individual sites in Bellevue are on the National Register.

2. The Old Presbyterian Church in Bellevue is on the National Register and has an official Historical Marker in front of it. This is Nebraska's first church. It is still standing. It is owned and cared for by the City of Bellevue. It is in excellent condition and is often used for weddings and tours.

3. The Fontenelle Bank Building in Bellevue is on the National Register and has an official Historical Marker in front of it. It may be the oldest commercial building in Nebraska. The bank in Old Florence, Nebraska, may have been built in the same year. The Fontenelle Bank was the first permanent Sarpy County Court House. After the 1875 vote to move the Sarpy County Seat to Papillion, this building became the Bellevue City Hall and remained so until about 1954. The building is owned by the City of Bellevue and has been kept in good shape. The City and the Sarpy County Historical Society have put historical displays on both floors of this building which is opened for tours.

4. The Hamilton House in Bellevue is on the National Register AND DOES NOT HAVE AN OFFICIAL HISTORICAL MARKER IN FRONT OF IT. This is the oldest residence in Nebraska that is still lived in. Probably, only the Bellevue Log Cabin is older. The home is named for Rev. Hamilton who was the second head of the Presbyterian Mission located next to this building. Rev. Hamilton moved with the Omahas to Thurston County in 1855, one year after the Omahas gave one square mile of this land to start the City of Bellevue. When the Patricks purchased and refurbished the building as their own residence, they maintained the integrity of the building and Mrs. Patrick filled the home with prized antique furniture, etc. Their son continues to live in Hamilton House.

5. The Bellevue Log Cabin is on the National Register and has an Official Historical Marker in front of it. The Cabin is the oldest building west of the Missouri Rive in the old Louisiana Territory. It is owned by the Sarpy County Historical Society and has just been leased to the City of Bellevue for 50 years. The City with its building and parks organization will maintain the Cabin. The City just provided \$18,000 for a new roof and chinking provided by an expert on working on historic buildings. The Historical Society provides the furnishings and helps with tours. More people should see this rare historic gem.

6. Fontenelle Forest is listed as a Historic District on the National Register. IT DOES NOT HAVE AN OFFICIAL NATIONAL REGISTER SIGN.

No Sarpy County location has more history than Fontenelle Forest. Its nature can be enjoyed over and over again. Some items of historical interest include the following:

A. The History Trail takes hikers to the site of the Lucien Fontenelle Trading Post Site. This was sold to the Federal Government for the area Indian Agency. An archeology dig has revealed much information about this site which is available in the Nebraska Historical Society 1998 book, *The Fontenelle & Cabanne Trading Posts*. The original famous painting of the Post by Karl Bodmer can be seen at The Joslyn, and the Sarpy Museum has a famous reprint. Steamboats stopped here including the famous Yellowstone. All of the famous people going west between 1823 and 1838 stopped here.

B. Markers on the History trail say that the graves of Logan Fontenelle, his father Lucien, his mother Meumbane, and a brother are near by.

C. Hikers on several trails can see depressions where the Nebraska Phase Indians had lodges (A. D. 900 to 1350). Dr. Gilder, who is buried in the historic Bellevue Cemetery, did some of the early archeology work. A most recent dig of these lodges was done by Dr. Eric Kaldahl with University of Nebraska at Lincoln students.

D. Lewis and Clark camped here for five days in 1804 and for one night in 1806. Their journals list their experiences here. Recent books on Missouri River Channel changes reveal that this White Catfish Camp is located near the marsh area.

E. Historic Forest Elementary School was located just off Camp Gifford Road before reaching the train tracks.

F. Child's saw and grist mills were located here as were early roads. Some Mormons spent some time in a hollow here.

G. The Forest is also a history of area plants and animals and has been designated as a National Nature Landmark and has been recognized as a National Environmental Education Landmark.

7. The Peter Sarpy Trading Post site is on the National Register AND DOES NOT HAVE AN OFFICIAL REGISTER MARKER. In 1832, Lucien Fontenelle built this Post after he sold his 1822 post 800 yards north to the federal government to be used as an Indian Agency. After his death in 1839, Peter Sarpy bought the second post and it became known as the Sarpy Trading Post. The City of Bellevue owns the site and has a temporary type sign in a nearby park giving directions to the site, but there is no trail. The City of Bellevue recently purchased the Kramer Power Plant area and has added it to Haworth Park. This park connects to the Peter Sarpy Site, so some day a trail might be put in to walk to that site. Also some day archeologists might have a dig here like the dig at the Fontenelle Trading post about a half mile to the north.

Some have a dream of rebuilding the Peter Sarpy Trading Post like the rebuilding of Fort Atkinson. This project would take a good sized area as trading posts consisted of several buildings that served different functions. Probably just the main buildings would be replicated. One was a fine two-story building with a balcony across the front so people could sit there and see the steamboats coming up the Missouri. The two Bellevue Posts are sometimes called forts and Peter Sarpy was sometimes called Col. Sarpy. The Bellevue Posts or Forts, however, did not have walls that surrounded the buildings included in the post. Replicating the Sarpy Post would be great history.

8. The Omaha and Southern Railway Station, also called the Burlington Depot, is located in Bellevue and is still on the National Register even though it has been moved. It is the oldest surviving depot in Nebraska. The Depot was moved away from land owned by the railroad to keep it from being destroyed. The Sarpy County Historical Society owns and furnishes the Depot which is on a fifty-year lease to the City of Bellevue which pays for its upkeep. Before it was moved, it had a National Marker which the City of Bellevue either misplaced or destroyed when told that moving the depot took it off the National Register. Even if it is off the National Register, the integrity of the building has been carefully maintained and it is in very good shape.

9. The Kurz Omaha Village is on the National Register and DOES NOT HAVE A HISTORICAL MARKER. Kurz, a painter who kept a journal that has been printed, lived part of a year in that village near Bellevue. That is interesting because the National Register says the village is at an unlisted Papillion address. Not listing addresses of potential archeological sites has been and is a common practice to protect the sites.

However, this site is not and has never been a secret. The site is within the City limits of Bellevue. It is located at the Twin Creeks Shopping Center near the point where two branches of the Papillion Creek merge. Some objected when the Twin Creek Development started because they thought that an archeological survey should have been made to see what artifacts could have been saved.

Nothing was saved. HOWEVER, THE LOCATION IS STILL A HISTORICAL SITE ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER. PERHAPS WE COULD NOW HAVE A MARKER PLACED ON THIS SITE. The Omahas lived here when they signed the 1854 Treaty selling northeast Nebraska, including Sarpy County, to the United States except for land they kept for themselves in Thurston County and for one square mile of land, called the Mission Reserve, given by the Omahas to start the City of Bellevue.

10. Military Fort Crook on Offutt Air Force Base with its fine old buildings and Parade Ground are a Historic District. NO OFFICIAL NATIONAL REGISTER MARKER IS LOCATED HERE. The buildings are superbly cared for. Offutt's top officers and their families live in these old quarters on General's Row. Residents maintain a history of the buildings, and building repairs must comply with history.

The Officers' Wives Club has provided tours of the homes. But such tours are rare and have to be well planned for security reasons.

11. A blacksmith shop at Offutt Air Force Base was located just outside Old Military Fort Crook building area. This building is still used. It was put on the National Register at the same time as Military Fort Crook was put on the National Register. NO OFFICIAL MARKER RECOGNIZES THIS BLACKSMITH SHOP BUILDING>.

12. The Moses Merrill Mission Site with surviving foundation and chimney is located just southwest of Bellevue. This school for Native Americans is on the National Register and an Official National Register Marker is located on Highway 75 (also Fort Crook Road) giving history of and directions to the site. The site is owned by the Sarpy County Historical Society. Tours very seldom visit this location. Once in a while some Baptists interested in their history want to visit, but no efforts have been made to promote this site which is important for both religion and education. It is Nebraska's second school—the first was located at Fort Atkinson for military children. This school was started by missionaries and the federal government at Lucien Fontenelle's Trading Post for Native American children until a school was built for them at this location.

13. The McCarty-Lilly House located on Quail Creek Drive is a farm place that dates back to Sarpy County's earliest days. IT DOES NOT HAVE A HISTORICAL MARKER.

14. Linoma Beach by Gretna is a recent addition to the National Register. IT DOES NOT HAVE A HISTORICAL MARKER. The Lighthouse is an example of highway architecture. The site is important for recreation going back to the early 1900s. At one time, special trains ran from both Omaha and Lincoln taking people to the beach and the picnic areas at Linoma Beach. Linoma is short for Lincoln-Omaha Beach.

15. John Sautter Farmhouse is on the National Register. IT DOES NOT HAVE AN OFFICIAL HISTORICAL MARKER. It has been moved to a location with the Portal School near the Papillion Library. The home is a fine example of a farm home influenced by German immigrants.

16. The Springfield Community Hall is on the National Register of Historic Places. It does have a National Historic Marker. The Hall is still used today and is in good repair. It was the location of the national Smithsonian Barn Again Exhibit which the Historical Society held on the lower level. It was large enough to hold fine samples of early tractors and other farm artifacts added to the Smithsonian displays.

17. The Zeibel Farmstead on 63rd Street South of Papillion is on the National Register. IT DOES NOT HAVE A HISTORICAL MARKER. This farmstead has a native stone barn, stone house, and a stone out building. The home is still being lived in. The stone barn is not in good repair, but it is one of early Sarpy County farms that had a stone barn from local stone. It may be the last remaining one.

18. The Third Sarpy County Courthouse was placed on the National Register after the new courthouse was started at the corner of Highway 370 and 84th Street. This building on 3rd street in Papillion between Washington and Jefferson is being used by the City of Papillion..

19. The Big Papillion Creek Bridge that was located on Giles road near 132nd Street was placed on the National Register. It has been moved to the Walnut Creek Recreation Area Walking Trail. Someone has provided a nice marker explaining its historical significance. The bridge was selected because of its design features.

20. In 2006, the William E. Gordon House on Bellevue Boulevard was placed on the National Register. No Marker identifies this home that had been recommended by the 2004 National Survey of Sarpy County for buildings and sites recommendations for the National Register. This home is a fine example of the Craftsman Style House that was popular between 1900 and the 1930s.

21. In 2007, the Patterson Site was placed on the National Register without publishing its location to protect it for future archeological investigations. The site has the potential to yield important information about Native Americans living in Sarpy County from AD 1000 to AD 1400 in both isolated and clustered lodges. Also nearby lithic materials may have been used by these inhabitants for “specialized, temporary or seasonal activities.”

SOME SARPY COUNTY TREASURES NOT ON THE REGISTER

Sarpy County has so many attractions that any attempt to list them will be incomplete. Some could be candidates for the National Register, and some are parks and attractions for both residents and visitors to enjoy, enjoy.

1. Sarpy County can boast of two new lakes at Chalco and Walnut Creek Recreation Areas. These add to water experiences available on the Missouri, the Platte, and the Elk Horn Rivers. The small lakes bordering the Platte River and Gilmore Lake provide more recreation facilities.

2. The Bellevue Cemetery continues to be a tourist attraction. The National Register does not recognize cemeteries unless there would be a very, very special reason because famous people are buried in many cemeteries. We could develop a walking tour of the Bellevue Cemetery. Omaha Chief Big Elk's grave and shrine are visited often with people leaving mementos at the grave site. His granddaughter is also buried here. Dr. Robert Gilbert who first studied and named the Nebraska Phase Indian Culture (AD 900-1350) is here. Journalist Henry Tibbles is here. He helped Standing Bear get that famous trial at Fort Omaha that declared that Native Americans were human beings protected by the Constitution. Tibbles worked with General Crook on this trial. He also married Suzette La Fleshe who was born in Bellevue and is one of forty-one persons in the Nebraska Hall of Fame in the State Capitol. She traveled the East and Europe speaking on behalf of Native Americans. Nebraska's first Chief Justice is buried here as is Sarpy County's first superintendent of schools and other leading pioneers. A walking self-guided tour could be developed.

3. The site of the Wake Robin Cabin could be a candidate for the National Register. Wake Robin Inc. owns the property, sponsors Boy Scout activities, and has a monument to Dr. Robert Gilder there. Dr. Gilder, the famous painter and archeologist, had a cabin here that was recently torn down because it had deteriorated beyond saving. A Boy Scout Concrete Coffin Mummy is located here. It was originally made and installed by Boy Scouts in Fontenelle Forest on Coffin Trail when Scouts used to have big gatherings in the Forest. The Scouts still have a pavilion at the cabin site where they can gather and cook meals. Bellevue's Wake Robin Elementary School and Omaha's Gilder School honor Dr. Gilder and have displays honoring him. Gilder School has some of his artifacts and a couple of Gilder's paintings. The Sarpy County Historical Society has a couple of his paintings as does the Fontenelle Nature Center. The Joslyn Art Museum also owns some Gilder paintings. Dr. Gilder's paintings have continued to increase in value since his death. The Historical Society also owns a sign Gilder painted with robins to welcome visitors to his Wake Robin Cabin. Wake Robin is a wild flower that blooms about the time that robins return to Sarpy County.

4. The Portal School was the last rural eight-grade school to close its doors in Sarpy County. The Papillion Historical Society worked to get the school moved to Papillion near the Sautter House and the Papillion Library. Either the Papillion Historical Society or the City of Papillion is caring for these historic buildings. Even though this building has been moved and is disqualified by rules to be on the National Historic Register, the integrity of the building has been maintained and perhaps an application should be made for recognition by exception to the rules.

5. The Stone School House and Community Building in LaPlatte is owned by a non-profit group of residents who preserve the building. Surveys by the Nation Register have written that this building is a good candidate for the National Register. Someone or some organization needs to accept the challenge to do the paperwork to recommend the building for the National Register.

6. The Fish Hatchery in the Gretna Area has also been recommended for the National Register. Perhaps the State of Nebraska could assign someone to work on getting this facility on the National Register. Nebraska maintains historic fish hatchery displays here that could be improved. The hatchery started as a private venture in 1872 and was taken over by the state in 1880.

7. Shramm State Park is located near the Hatchery and has the Aksarben Aquarium of Nebraska and Missouri River fish. They have nice displays, some with history, and hold nature and nature art shows.

THIS IS AN ABSOLUTELY BEAUTIFUL AREA. MANY IN SARPY COUNTY ARE STILL UNAWARE OF THIS LOVELY SPOT WHERE ONE CAN GET A TEMENDOUS VIEW OF THE PLATTE RIVER VALLEY AND ENJOY SARPY COUNTY NATURE.

8. Part of Bellevue City Hall has history displays. A stop there will remind people of Bellevue events. They have a favorite photo of cattle grazing on the Bellevue City Hall lawn, formerly the Sarpy County Court House, when Bellevue was a sleepy little town.

9. Bellevue East students designed and sponsored the first huge brick mural of Omaha Chief Big Elk on horseback leading the Bellevue/Offutt Community with its diverse population into the future. A fine display honors Bellevue's Native American History and has the bell from the steamboat General Grant which sank south of Bellevue in the mouth of Papillion Creek. Bellevue West now has a complete reproduction of East's mural and a Native American Display. Either school could be a tourist stop.

10 All of the Bellevue Public Schools have history displays that are worth visiting. Betz has a fun, big display of student art that includes everything from hoola hoops and McDonalds Arches to Lewis and Clark, Trading Posts, the Bellevue Bridge, and Offutt Air Force Base. Lewis and Clark Middle School Displays feature the two Omaha scouts who were on the expedition. Fort Crook tells the story of Standing Bear being declared a human being in that famous court case under Crook's jurisdiction. Crook and Bellevue's Tribbles were initiated into the Omaha tribe's secret society.

11. The Martin Bomber Plant at Offutt Air Force Base is also a candidate for the National Register. When Military Fort Crook and its Blacksmith Shop were put on the National Register, it was stated that the Martin Bomber Plant should be added as soon as its 50 birthday was reached. Buildings must be 50 years old to qualify. This WW II building is now called Building D and has housed ever so many Air Force Units. A wonderful photo exists of President Franklin Roosevelt in a convertible automobile being driven through the Martin Bomber Plant as planes were being built for World War II. The Base Historians' Office printed a history of this building. The Sarpy County Museum and Offutt share photos and information.

12. Elk Hill and the first Bellevue College have been listed in surveys as candidates for the National Register. The original dormitories still have their architectural integrity, but the designs are nothing special. They were made into apartments and are still used for that purpose. The buildings also housed students when a federal Depression Era trade school was built just south of the buildings. The trade school was later moved and became business buildings in Olde Towne Bellevue.

When Omaha Chief Big Elk died, he was buried on top of this hill which was then called Elk Hill. His grave was dug up to build the large main building of the first Bellevue College, and Big Elk was reburied with a fine service in front of this building. When that large building was torn down for apartment buildings, Big Elk was buried the third time with 1,000 participants in the historic Bellevue Cemetery.

13 The Holy Name Shrine on Flug Road with its beautiful view of the Platte River Valley is not old enough to be a candidate for the National Register. People love to stop here at this Sarpy County Treasure.

14. Buildings in the old business districts of Papillion and Gretna could be candidates for the Historical Register. The National Register Surveys have listed some of them. The two concerned communities should explore the possibility of preparing and submitting the applications for these buildings. **SOME BUSINESS INCOME TAX BREAKS EXIST FOR BUSINESSES LOCATED IN BUILDINGS ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER.** Property owners must be the applicants for placing property on the National Register.

15. One National Register Survey suggested that the location of the interurban train track bed should be considered for the National Register. This train ran from Fort Crook up to Bellevue Boulevard, on to Avery (now in Bellevue), and into South Omaha. The Bellevue Depot was located just east of the first Bellevue College. An examination of early photos shows that the lines of the depot have not changed. The depot was turned into a single family residence and now appears to be rented in two different parts. The owner is unknown.

16. St. Mary's Catholic Church in Bellevue has been recommended by a survey for the National Register. The survey team was very impressed with the stained glass windows that honors those in the Air Force.

17. St. Columbans, Nebraska, is another candidate for the National Register. This is the town within the town. An Irish priest named Galvin, for Galvin Road, started an order of priests who served as missionaries in Asia. St. Columbans has its own United States Post Office and today is completely surrounded by Bellevue. It is a lovely spot. People visit for a walk through a wooded area to a shrine, a beautiful site. Since the Columban Fathers stopped their annual festival and substituted a golf tournament as a fund raiser, fewer and fewer people know about this unusual beauty spot. In addition to being the International St. Columbans Headquarters where their international publication is prepared, the site is also a religious retreat center. The Historical Society often makes this a stop on Bellevue History Tours and is a favorite stop.

18 National Survey teams have recommended that the Bellevue Bridge be submitted for the National Register. It is the only bridge and the largest monument dedicated to Civil War veterans, the GAR. The dream was to have highway 370 cross Sarpy County, cross the Bellevue Bridge, and avoid Omaha traffic and ,in case of war, be an evacuation route for Offutt. The dream was a fairly good one. But then the Eisenhower Interstate Program passed congress and Interstate 80 went through Omaha.

19. The old Papillion Public Works Department Building has been recommended by the National Survey as a candidate for the National Register.

20 The Anderson Grove Presbyterian Church has been recommended for consideration for the National Register. This small county church with its cemetery across the street is now surrounded by Offutt Air Force Base's Capehart Housing and Bellevue.

21. The Melia Hill Interstate Rest Area has been recommended as a candidate for inclusion in the National Register. This location is listed as Gretna. Melia was a town located here. It had a depot, main street, post office, stores, etc. Some of the historical displays in the Sarpy County Museum are from Melia.

22. Sarpy County Caves are located on the early maps. They are located on private land and seldom seen. Some say the caves have been badly damaged by graffiti. Some say Native American pictographs are there. The caves are not far from where the ski area was located east of Melia Hill Rest Area.

23. Interested persons should check the "Sarpy County Nebraska Historic Building Survey" for homes, farmsteads, bridges, commercial buildings, etc. that have been surveyed. Readers can come up with other candidates. Owners must apply and sign the application forms. Interested persons can help the owners apply.

Some buildings that impress the survey teams are not exceptional buildings. The survey team was impressed with the early Bellevue small Federal Housing Authority Homes that were built in Bellevue to house workers for the Martin Bombe Plant in World War II. This was a time when home building was only permitted in areas serving the war needs. The LaVista "House of 9s" homes that were built after World War II have historic interest. "Buy a house for \$9,999 with \$99 down." This attracted those qualified for GI Bill Housing Loans. A former service station on Fort Crook Road impressed the latest Survey Team due to its advertising design.

24. Sarpy County has many parks and recreational activities that are also treasures. Bellevue's Washington Park's small adobe building was Bellevue's first fire station, a library, and a justice of peace court before it housed a variety of city offices. The park has many history monuments. Thompson Park and Union Square was the approximate site of the 1854 Fourth of July Celebration in the just created Nebraska Territory. Haworth Park has the Lewis and Clark Children's Wall and the Missouri River Walking Trail. Papillion has city parks and Walnut Creek. La Vista and Papillion share the Wherspan Lake and Chalco Recreation Area. And the county has many golf courses and swimming pools. These are our treasures which we can share with others.

25. Sarpy County Residents are the best treasures we have. Some day we could use some people to form an official organization to work with the National Register people. These people have to be recognized by a political subdivision such as the County. They have to be approved. They are not paid. They study and recommend and help property owners apply for the National Register. Some historic communities have active organizations under the direction of a political subdivision. Prescott, Arizona, has over 700 places on the National Register. Charleston, South Carolina, has building after building with the National Register designation.

Maybe some day, Sarpy County could draw up the legal papers to create a committee that would work with this project. The Nebraska State Historical Society provides the contacts who would advise those who might be interested.