

= Solomon Butcher =

Solomon D. Butcher (January 24 , 1856 ? March 18 , 1927) was an itinerant photographer who spent most of his life in central Nebraska , in the Great Plains region of the United States . A settler under the Homestead Act , he began in 1886 to produce a photographic record of the history of white settlement in the region . Over 3 @, @ 000 of his negatives survive ; more than 1 @, @ 000 of these depict sod houses . Butcher wrote two books incorporating his photographs : Pioneer History of Custer County and Short Sketches of Early Days in Nebraska (1901) , and Sod Houses , or the Development of the Great American Plains (1904) .

Butcher was unable to achieve financial success as a farmer , as a photographer , or in a number of other schemes later in his life , and at the time of his death felt that he had been a failure . However , the number and scope of his photographs of Nebraska pioneer life have made them a valuable resource to students of that period of history , and they have become a staple of historical texts and popular works alike . His oeuvre has been described as " the most important chronicle of the saga of homesteading in America " .

= = Early life = =

Solomon D. Butcher was born on January 24 , 1856 , the oldest child of Thomas Jefferson Butcher and Esther (Ullom) Butcher , in Burton in Wetzel County , in what was then the state of Virginia but later became part of West Virginia . In 1860 , his family moved to LaSalle County , Illinois , where his father worked for the Illinois Central Railroad . The family remained there for nearly twenty years . Butcher finished high school in 1874 and was briefly apprenticed to a tintypist , who taught him the business of photography . In the winter term of 1875 ? 76 , he attended the Henry Military School in Henry , Illinois . He then worked as a travelling salesman for a firm in Clyde , Ohio until 1880 .

In 1880 , Thomas Jefferson Butcher announced that he was leaving his secure job with the railroad and moving west , to establish a homestead in Custer County , Nebraska . Although Solomon Butcher had a good job , he had grown tired of his work , and " had already thought seriously of seeking my fortune in the great west " . In March 1880 , a party consisting of Butcher , his father , his brother George , and his brother @-@ in @-@ law J. R. Wabel started westward in two covered wagons . After seven weeks , they arrived in northeastern Custer County , where they occupied homesteads near the north bank of the Middle Loup River , west @-@ northwest of present @-@ day Sargent .

The party began construction of a sod house , and Butcher quickly came to rue his decision to go west : " I soon came to the conclusion that any man that would leave the luxuries of a boarding house , where they had hash every day , and a salary of \$ 125 a month to lay Nebraska sod for 75 cents a day ... was a fool . " Upon the completion of the house , Butcher and his father returned to Illinois to bring his mother and his youngest brother to Nebraska . However , Butcher did not return with them : he stayed in Illinois for several months , returning to Nebraska with only three days left to construct a dwelling on his homestead ; failure to do so would mean forfeiting his claim . Butcher , his father , and two of his brothers built and occupied a dugout , saving the claim . Two weeks later , however , he once again went back east , moving to Milwaukee , Wisconsin and abandoning his homestead . " I would not have remained and kept batch for five years for the whole of Custer county , " he declared .

Butcher attended medical college in Minneapolis in the winter and spring of 1881 ? 2 . There , he met Lillie M. (Barber) Hamilton , a young widow working as a nurse at the hospital . The two were married in May 1882 .

Soon thereafter , Butcher once again decided that the West was the place for him . " I had just seen enough of the wild west to unfit me for living contentedly in the East " , he wrote . In October 1882 , the couple returned to Custer County , where they moved in with his father . During that winter , he worked as a schoolteacher .

= = Photographer on the Plains = =

Butcher was able to save some of his teacher 's salary , and to borrow enough more to open the first photography studio in Custer County . The studio was housed in a lath @-@ and @-@ adobe building , measuring 18 by 28 feet (5 @.@ 5 m × 8 @.@ 5 m) , with a dirt floor and with cotton sheeting in lieu of glass to cover the windows and the skylights . As a backdrop for the photos , he used an old cloth wagon cover . The cloth had been gnawed by rats and was full of holes , which Lillie patched . To keep the patches from showing up in photographs , Butcher attached two coil springs from an old bed to the ceiling , then hung the backdrop from them . Before taking a picture , he plucked the backdrop so that it oscillated on the springs ; the motion , combined with the long exposure time required , blurred the backdrop so that the patches would not be visible in the photograph .

Photography alone was not enough to pay the bills . Butcher opened a post office in his studio , which he named " Jefferson " after his father . This proved less than lucrative : his postal income came from stamp cancellations , and in the first three months amounted to 68 cents . He also did farm work for his father , at a wage of 50 to 75 cents per day .

In December 1884 , the town of Walworth was established near Butcher 's homestead . Butcher , his wife , and their two children moved there and built a sod house . In Walworth , Butcher found a business partner , A. W. Darling , who supplied the money to put up a frame building for a studio . However , Walworth did not last : it had been established at a time when rains had been unusually good , and the resumption of normal dry conditions led to the town 's demise . Butcher 's family had to leave their sod house after six weeks of residence . He and Darling were forced to sell their building , which was moved to the town of West Union ; there , they rented it for five years .

= = Pioneer History = =

In the spring of 1886 , Butcher conceived the idea of writing an illustrated history of Custer County . This , he thought , would be the key to fame and riches . " At last , Eureka ! Eureka ! I had found it . I was so elated that I lost all desire for rest and had to take morphine to make me sleep . " To embark upon this project , he needed financing . Unlike Butcher , his father had succeeded as a farmer , running a gristmill and a freighting business as well ; it was to him that Butcher turned for assistance . Thomas Jefferson Butcher was initially skeptical ; but after his son had arranged to photograph 75 homesteads , he agreed to provide a team and wagon for the project .

In June 1886 , Butcher took the first photograph for the book . He met a certain amount of skepticism ? " Some called me a fool , others a crank ... " He began his work only thirteen years after the establishment of the first homestead in the county , when it could hardly be said to have a history . He persevered : from 1886 to 1892 , he took over 1 @,@ 500 photographs and recorded over 1 @,@ 500 narratives .

Hard times struck Custer County in the early 1890s . Crops failed in 1890 ; good crops in the following two years were offset by low prices . The harvest was small in 1893 , and the spring and summer of 1894 were almost entirely devoid of rain . The county also partook of the nationwide depression that began with the Panic of 1893 . Butcher was an early victim of this agricultural and economic collapse : in 1892 , he lost his farm , and was forced to suspend his history project .

The Populist Party and its predecessor , the Farmers ' Alliance , were strong in Custer County in the 1890s , carrying elections for a decade beginning in 1889 . Butcher attached himself to the movement and , in 1896 , was elected Justice of the Peace and Clerk of the Election for West Union . Rising farm prices and a generally improving economy allowed him to secure a home and to get himself nearly out of debt , and in 1899 he was about to resume work on the history .

In 1899 , however , Butcher 's house burned down , destroying its entire contents , including the pioneer narratives and the photographic prints . Fortunately for the history project , the glass negatives were stored in a granary , and escaped the fire . The house had carried no insurance , however , and Butcher was once again left penniless .

Butcher persevered , again setting himself to the task of compiling pioneer narratives . He secured the assistance of George B. Mair , the editor of the Callaway Chronicle , in editing these accounts

and in preparing the manuscript . To cover the cost of engraving , typesetting , and publishing , he recruited Ephraim Swain Finch , an early settler of Custer County and now a wealthy rancher . Finch , whom Butcher knew through his Populist activities , agreed to underwrite these expenses ; moreover , he placed an advertisement in the Custer County Chief , assuring readers that orders for Butcher 's forthcoming book would be filled .

Orders for the book began flowing in . The first edition of 1000 copies sold out before its delivery date , in the summer of 1901 ; a second printing , of either 500 or 1000 copies , was issued before Christmas of that year . The book , titled Pioneer History of Custer County and Short Sketches of Early Days in Nebraska , included 200 engravings in its more than 400 pages .

= = Later career = =

Encouraged by the success of Pioneer History , Butcher began planning similar photographic histories of Buffalo and Dawson counties , which border Custer County on the south . He moved to Kearney , the county seat of Buffalo County , in 1902 ; there , he opened a photography studio together with his son Lynn . He roamed more widely still , through Colorado , Utah , and Wyoming ; carrying his equipment in a wagon , he made negatives on the site , then shipped these to Kearney , where Lynn and several women employees made the prints and mailed them back to the customers . Butcher pere et fils also ran a postcard business , making over 2 million cards for the local trade . In 1904 , he published a second book , Sod Houses ; or , The Development of the Great American Plains , at the urging of a lawyer who hoped to use Butcher 's photographs and accounts to sell land in Nebraska . In 1909 , he visited Yellowstone National Park and produced a set of 100 stereographic postcards .

Butcher abandoned the history of Buffalo and Dawson counties after spending more than a thousand dollars on the project . Discontented with his profession as photographer , which had failed to make him a fortune or even to put him on a sound financial footing , he turned his efforts elsewhere . In 1911 , he turned the Kearney studio over to his son and began work as an agent for the Standard Land Company . He gave stereopticon lectures throughout Buffalo and Dawson counties promoting the company 's irrigated lands in south Texas , and made plans to move there himself .

Before he could move , however , he had to dispose of his thousands of 6 @. @ 5 @-@ by @-@ 8 @. @ 5 @-@ inch (170 mm x 220 mm) glass @-@ plate negatives . He also had to get himself out of debt once again . In an attempt to accomplish both of these at once , he offered his collection of negatives to the Nebraska State Historical Society . To Addison Sheldon , head of the Society 's Legislative Reference Bureau , he wrote , " Now is the time to buy me cheap , when I need the money so badly . " In November 1911 , he and Sheldon signed a contract for the sale of the negatives for \$ 1000 . Butcher was to receive \$ 100 down ; the rest would be paid after the Nebraska legislature passed a bill appropriating funds for the purchase .

Unfortunately for Butcher , a feud was raging between Sheldon and Clarence S. Paine , secretary of the Historical Society . Sheldon was an ardent Populist ; Paine , a follower of conservative Democrat J. Sterling Morton . Sheldon believed that Paine had used underhanded tactics to displace his predecessor as secretary ; Paine believed that Sheldon was scheming to bring the Society under control of the University of Nebraska regents . At the legislature 's next biennial session , in 1913 , Sheldon had an appropriations bill introduced to pay for the Butcher purchase . The bill passed the House unanimously , but ran into stiff opposition in the Senate , probably at Paine 's instigation . In the end , Butcher was forced to accept a compromise payment of only \$ 600 .

Butcher 's Texas land deals came to nothing . In 1915 , he moved to Broken Bow , back in Custer County . In December of that year , Lillie Butcher , who had suffered ill health for many years , died . For a short time in early 1916 , Butcher worked for Sheldon , annotating his collection of negatives and adding narratives that had not been included in Pioneer History . In 1917 , he married Mrs. Laura M. (Brachear) Nation .

Butcher briefly worked as a travelling salesman for a grain and flour mill . However , he abandoned

this for less practical schemes . He invented what he described as an " electromagnetic oil detector " , applying the principles of dowsing to the discovery of oil . In 1921 , he planned a photographic expedition to Central America to produce material for a series of travelogue lectures , and tried to interest Sheldon in it ; Sheldon was skeptical , and the expedition was never launched . In about 1924 , he began marketing a patent medicine , consisting chiefly of alcohol , dubbed " Butcher 's Wonder of the Age " .

In 1926 , the Butchers moved to Greeley , Colorado ; Butcher died there on March 18 , 1927 .

= = Works = =

Butcher 's work received little notice outside of Nebraska during his lifetime . Although there was a market for photos depicting the romance of the Wild West , the public preferred mountains and canyons to open prairie . Later in his life , popular taste inclined toward the modern and the sophisticated ; images of rustics gathered around sod houses were out of fashion . His photographs had little to recommend them from an artistic standpoint . Biographer John Carter describes him as unconcerned with aesthetics , and with no more than adequate technical abilities . " Unquestionably he was not a prairie Stieglitz . "

Recognition of Butcher 's work came only later , when the history of the settlement of the Plains began to be written . His photographs became staples of textbooks and popular works dealing with the homestead era . According to Carter , " They are the images that we conjure up when we think of plains settlement . "

Butcher has been compared to painter George Catlin , who painted Native Americans in the 1830s , and to Nebraska writer and photographer Wright Morris , who depicted rural Nebraska in the 1930s and 1940s . Like them , Butcher recognized that an era in Plains history was passing , and tried to document it visually before it was gone . Even during his short career , the face of Nebraska changed ; the sod houses of his earlier photographs are increasingly supplanted by frame buildings in his later ones .

Butcher did not confine himself to recording events that took place when he was present . He was not above re -enacting historical events for a photo : for example , the 1878 lynching of two Custer County homesteaders at the behest of rancher Print Olive , or the cutting of another rancher 's fences by homesteaders . The latter photograph has been uncritically accepted by many historians as documentation of the actual event , although a closer examination reveals that the wire cutters are made out of wood . Butcher also did not hesitate to retouch photos . He photographed a hill in Cherry County that had been important to early settlers because of its cedar trees ; since the trees had been cut long before he got there with his camera , he scratched trees on the bare hill on his negative . To illustrate Ephraim Swain Finch 's account of how he had battled an 1876 infestation of grasshoppers , he posed Finch in his cornfield , then incised scores of dots and specks into the negative to depict the flying insects . When he sought to illustrate a large flock of ducks , but realized that the birds were flying too fast for his camera to record , he photographed the scene without the waterfowl and then scratched dozens of ducks into the negative .

Butcher retouched for his own purposes as well . On one occasion , he damaged a spot on a negative , producing a hole in a photograph of a sod house . Rather than undertaking a round trip of sixty miles (100 km) to re -shoot the scene , he concealed the damage by inking a crudely drawn turkey on the negative . Upon seeing the finished product , the homesteader expressed wonderment , declaring that he owned no white turkeys ; but he was persuaded to put aside his doubts , since the camera was incapable of lying .

Butcher 's determination to record a vanishing era led him to photograph every detail of life in the homestead era . According to the editor of a 1965 edition of *Pioneer History* , " There was nothing too inconsequential for him to direct his camera upon . " The Butcher collection at the Nebraska State Historical Society consists of nearly 3 , 500 negatives ; nearly 1 , 500 were taken in Custer County , and more than 1 , 000 show sod houses .

The number and scope of Butcher 's photographs has made them a valuable resource to the historian of the period . Nebraska folklorist Roger Welsch conducted a detailed analysis of Butcher

's sod @-@ house photos , including furnishings , farm equipment , animals , etc . , for his 1968 Sod Walls , which initiated present @-@ day investigations of sod @-@ house construction and living . Studies based on the photographs continue : in the 21st century , digital image processing enabled researchers to see details inside doors and windows , which appeared as nothing more than dark oblongs in the original prints .

Although Butcher never achieved financial success or artistic recognition , and died believing himself a failure , his work has endured . According to one writer , " No other photographer captured settlement in the Great Plains with such insight into the experience of homesteading . "