

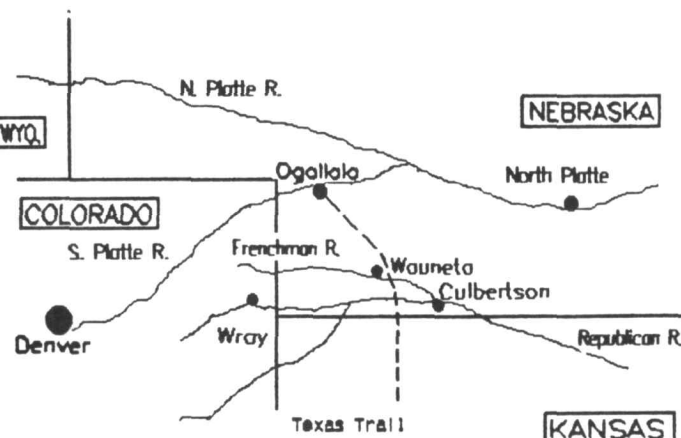
Pioneering in Southwest Nebraska

Gary W. Frasier and E. Belle Sims Frasier

The region between the Rocky Mountains and the Missouri-Mississippi rivers was one of the last places in the United States to be settled. There were few trees and little water. Rivers were widely spaced and shallow with wide flood plains. The upland areas between the rivers, frequently 20 to 50 miles wide, were monotonous flat surfaces broken with shallow depressions or "buffalo wallows." Blue grama and buffalo grasses dominated these upland divides and grew to the edge of the river banks. This treeless, shortgrass prairie region, now referred to as the High Plains, was believed to be unsuited for human habitation, fit only for the vast buffalo herds roaming the area. A few nomadic Indian tribes lived along some of the rivers where the low canyon banks provided protection from wind and snow during the winters.

Before the American Civil War, the area was considered a vast wasteland to be crossed while going "West." The Oregon Trail to California and Oregon and the Mormon Trail to Utah followed the Platte river across central Nebraska. The Santa Fe Trail headed southwest across Kansas into New Mexico.

Following the Civil War, great herds of Texas Longhorn cattle crossed this land going north, initially to the railhead stockyards at Ogallala, Nebraska, and later to cattle ranches in Montana. A few hardy families began to settle along the smaller rivers and creeks. Water was available in the rivers, most of the time, and the soil was generally suited to farming. Nowadays it is difficult to



comprehend why a person would come to a "desert" and try to make a living for a family. This is a story of one of those early settlers, the Samuel Sims family, who moved in 1883 from Kansas City, Missouri, to the Frenchman River area in Southwest Nebraska.

The Sims family history parallels much of the early expansion history of the United States, with roots going back to the days of the Revolutionary War. By the time of the War of 1812, the Sims family had progressed to the "Western Frontier—Ohio."

Samuel Sims was born in 1837. His father, a stern and stubborn man, was a blacksmith in the village of Gratiot, Ohio, between Zanesville and Columbus. He believed that to spare the rod was to spoil the child. However, he didn't believe in whipping girls, so, whenever any of Samuel's five sisters did anything wrong, it was Samuel that got whaled for it. The Gratiot schoolmaster shared

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Upland Divide Shortgrass Prairie, Southwest Nebraska.

these same views and when anything happened at school, he whaled the daylights out of the boys and told the girls they deserved the same and would get it if they were boys. Between the strict father and a cranky schoolmaster, Samuel spent a good share of the early part of his life receiving hot applications on the painful parts.

In 1847, Samuel contracted pneumonia after walking in water puddles going to school. A prolonged illness eventually destroyed his right lung. He was never able to perform strenuous manual labor. After finishing his education, he tried his hand at teaching in the South but was chased out of town for his belief in equal education for all, irrespective of race. By the early 1880's he was in the Kansas City, Missouri, area, working at various tasks.

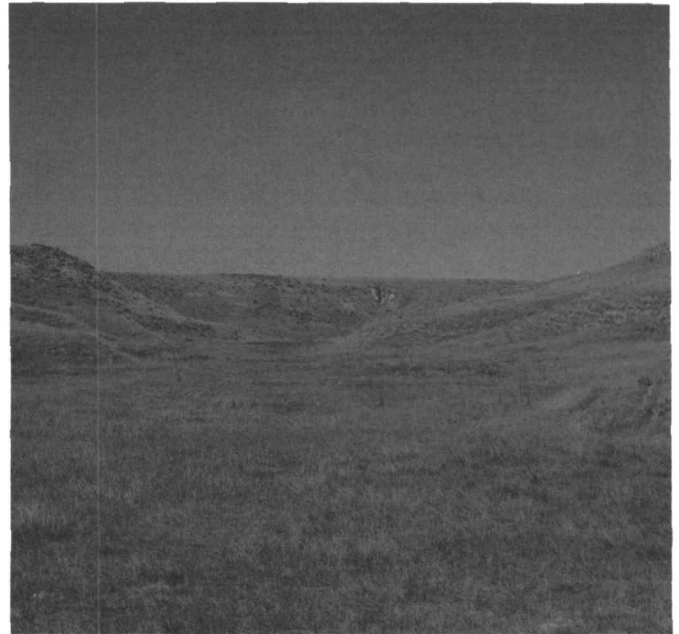
The glowing tales of opportunities to pioneer in southwest Nebraska had to be explored. Several of Samuel's sisters were living in the larger towns in Nebraska. In 1882 he traveled to the Frenchman River area in the southwest corner of Nebraska and found a suitable piece of land along the river. A squatter, one who had never filed for formal title of the land, living on the land was glad to find someone who would pay for the improvements, consisting of a one-room sodhouse and a small dugout stable. Samuel filed a homestead application with the Federal Land Office in North Platte, Nebraska, over 100 miles away.

In 1883 Samuel brought his wife, Alice, and two small sons, Artie and Guy, to the ranch. They were not fully settled when letters came pouring in from relatives who were coming to see their new home on the wild frontier. Their small house was not large enough to hold the visitors and it was necessary to find other accommodations. A short distance away was the old house of the Rowley Ranch near present day Wauneta, Nebraska. The owner, a nephew of Samuel, gave permission for the family to move into the larger house to receive the guests.

The history of the Rowley Ranch typifies some of the "wildness" that was in the area during this time. The Rowley ranch was started in the early 1870's by George Rowley. The ranch house, considered very elegant, consisted of seven rooms, a basement, a fireplace, and even a wood floor. On October 3, 1878, a rider on an exhausted horse rode up to the ranch and yelled, "Get the women and children out of here, the Indians are coming." They made a wild ride to Culbertson, Nebraska, 25 miles to the east, where they were safe. Chief Dull Knife was leading a band of Cheyenne Indians who had left the reservation in Oklahoma. They were heading to their traditional homeland of the Pine Ridge country in northern Nebraska.

George Rowley was not at home, having gone on a business trip to Greeley, Colorado. There he learned that the Indians were coming up the cattle trail from the south of his ranch. Being concerned for his family, he rode the 120 miles to Ogallala, Nebraska, and discovered that his family had reached safety and that the Indians had passed through the area. He never dreamed that some of the

Indians had stopped off, built some "sweat" houses, and were resting. He came upon this trailing group, was killed, and his body dumped into a gully. The leather was stripped from his new saddle and the saddle tree thrown away. Some of his men found the saddle tree a few days later but did not associate it with George, believing he was still in Greeley. No one realized he was missing until others from his group returned several weeks later. Mrs. Rowley never returned to the ranch to live. When the Simses moved into the house 5 years later with their visiting relatives, the hammer and nails used to remodel a room on the day of the Indian raid were still lying where



Valley bottom shortgrass, southwest Nebraska.

they were dropped. Rowley's skinned saddle tree lay in the yard.

In the fall of '83, Samuel went to McCook, Nebraska, for the winter's supply of food. One of the main food items was 10 bushels of potatoes. During an early cold spell in the beginning of the winter, all the potatoes froze and were ruined. This put the family on very short rations. A three-day trip each way to McCook in the dead of winter to replenish the supplies was risky because of the condition of Samuel's health. By February their food supply was gone. Samuel would have to risk the trip. On the planned day there was a howling blizzard, which meant the trip would be impossible for several weeks. They would soon be starving. In mid morning there was a knock on the door. Samuel nearly collapsed. He thought it was someone to stay with them until the storm was over and it would mean another mouth to feed. He opened the door and it was one of the Rowley cowpunchers who had married George Rowley's widow and was living 7 miles down the valley. His men had butchered a beef and he had brought a "taste of beef" to the new neighbors.

Later, Samuel bought 50 head of yearling heifers and turned them loose on the open range like the other cattlemen did. He never saw 25 of them again. The Sims place was only 1 1/2 miles from where the Texas Cattle Trail crossed the Frenchman River heading north. During the summers of 1883–84, an average of one trail herd a day and sometimes two crossed the river. The Sims heifers probably got caught up in one of the herds.



Author standing in remnant of 120-year-old Texas cattle trail north-east of Wauneta, Nebraska, 1990.

In 1884, the oldest Sims boy, Artie, spent most of the summer working on the roundup as a horse wrangler for the ET brand cattle outfit west of Wauneta. This roundup was the start of the cattle removal from the "open range" for the eventual opening of the country to homesteaders. The roundup started in eastern Colorado and moved down the Republican River. They passed the home place only once in the late summer. What an experience for a 13-year old boy, away from home for the first time. He kept his horse hobbled at night and at the first sight of daylight was off to bring in the horse remuda for the other cowboys to select their mounts for the day.

During one period the roundup spent 3 days near Wray, Colorado, waiting to join another group. Time hung heavy for Artie Sims. He climbed a railroad water tower next to the tracks and spotted a henhouse at a residence not far away with a bunch of "far ranging" chickens. The potential for a change in menu from the common fare of beef was too much for the cowpunchers. On the last day of their stay near Wray, a young lad from the residence wandered into the cowcamp. One of the cowboys mentioned, "I see you have some chickens. Guess we should have been eating some of them." The young man said, "You don't want to eat any of them! They have cholera." When the opportunity came for a peek at the henhouse,

the cowboys found the floor covered with dead chickens and their heads turned green. Perhaps the ones they had grabbed and eaten were not sick!

When Artie came home from the roundup in the fall of 1884, the Simses decided to go to Kansas City so the boys could get some taste of schooling. When they returned to Nebraska in the spring of 1885, the valley road was strung with prairie schooners of the homesteaders. Some of the Old West was gone forever in that area.

One day in 1884 Samuel had walked around looking east and west. His son asked him what he saw: "I see a railroad coming up the valley, and it will pass about here." In the spring of 1887, a corps of railroad engineers came up the valley surveying for the new tracks, followed by great gangs of men, teams with plows, slip scrapers, all the last word in modern dirt-moving equipment. Before summer's end, the grade was built. The center of the railroad track is about 90 feet from the place where Samuel was standing three years earlier.

Early in the summer of 1887, a 14-year old boy turned up at the Simses' place and asked for food. He was starving and wolfed his food like a famished dog. It was several days before he could safely eat all he wanted. They guessed from the start that he was a run-away, but never let on. Little by little they learned the kid's name was John Casey and his home was Oxford, Nebraska. When he was strong enough, Samuel got him a job on the railroad work crew as a water boy and notified his family that John was all right. There came a time when he became homesick, and Samuel told him his folks were anxious for him to come home and that everything would be forgiven. John was one tickled kid.

When Artie was 16 it was decided that he would go back to Kansas City and stay with an aunt for some additional schooling. In the early part of the winter he became sick with typhoid fever and nearly died. His mother rushed to Kansas City to be with him. In Nebraska, Samuel and his youngest son, Guy, nearly died from freezing. Prior to Christmas the winter had been the worst ever seen, and after Christmas it was twice as bad. The two stables drifted full of snow to the roof, smothering livestock inside. Within a few days Samuel and Guy were out of bread with no idea how to make more. They did have some potatoes and some hens. Each morning they made a fire in the stove and ate eggs and pancakes, then let the fire go out. The fire in the fireplace was kept going. In the early afternoon, they'd put some potatoes on the coals for the evening meal. On January 12, 1888, a blizzard hit the area, forever known as one of Nebraska's worst. It had been a gorgeous warm morning, and the snow came out of the northwest with a sudden, blinding fury. It cost the lives of hundreds of people in the high plains. Late in February 1888 the weather finally cleared.

In Kansas City, Artie's health improved somewhat and his mother returned to Nebraska, leaving him to finish school. He immediately got homesick and decided to return home on the train. A strike on the Burlington Rail-

road left him stranded in Oxford, Nebraska. While he was trying to catch a ride on a freight caboose, a young man sitting on the other side was watching him and presently came over. "Son," he said, "you are too sick to ride this thing. How far are you going?" When informed that he was trying to get to Wauneta, the man asked if he knew the Simses. When Artie told him that was his name, he said, "Then it was your people that took my kid brother in and took good care of him when he was starving last summer." It was John Casey's brother. He took Artie under his care until the trains were running and he was able to go home.

During the winter of 1989–90 the country was swept by an epidemic of "grippe," now called the flu. Samuel and Guy had it several times and each time it was harder for Samuel to get over it. The family remembered how he was outside on the evening of March 6, 1890, watching a sunset. He came in and went to bed early. They found him dead the next morning with a distinct smile on his face. His whole life had been a brave struggle against a heart-breaking health handicap in a hard land. At last he found rest and relief from pain. He was buried on a grassy slope in their pasture.

Artie was 19 and Guy was 11 when Samuel died. They continued to live on the place, farming and cattle raising. In the fall of 1890, the Sioux Indians on the Rosebud and Pine Ridge reservations became increasingly dissatisfied and started having war dances. In January 1891 the Indians took the war path and headed south. The medicine men had promised them that when they did the "ghost"

dances, all the fallen warriors would return and help drive the white man out. Artie went into Wanqueta, four miles away, to hear the latest news. He quickly returned with a report that there were 500 Indians south of the Platte. They turned out the livestock and stood guard all night. It was a false alarm. The Indians had started but were turned back. Many of the Indians were later killed at the "Battle of Wounded Knee."

On April 1, 1893, a terrific prairie fire swept across southwest Nebraska. A man-made fire had gotten out of control early in the morning near the Colorado state line and headed east, pushed by a strong northwest wind. By 1 pm it had moved over 80 miles east. The wind suddenly changed 90 degrees, blowing from the north. The fire was now moving south on an 80-mile fire front. Artie and Guy started backfires around their place, which allowed the fire to pass without damaging the homestead. The wind finally died down at sunset with the fire front near the Kansas-Nebraska line 20 miles to the south.

Samuel Sims had lived only 7 years on the homestead. His pioneering spirit was carried on by his family. His widow Alice lived on the original homestead until her death at the age of 97. Artie and Guy Sims fought in the Spanish-American War in the Philippines in 1898–1899. Artie Sims lived on the Frenchman River homestead until his death in 1936. Guy Sims died in Wauneta, Nebraska, in 1975 at the age of 96 plus. Artie Sims is the father of Belle Frasier and the grandfather of Gary Frasier. It took a hardy group of people to survive those early times. How many people would do it today?

Tohono O'odham Range History

Dan Robinett

The Tohono O'odham (formerly Papago) Nation lies in south central Arizona along the international boundary with Mexico. It contains approximately 2,845,000 acres of rangeland. The plant, animal, soil, and water resources of this diverse land have been utilized successfully by the native people for several hundred years without major impacts until recent times.

Two broad climatic areas occur on the Tohono O'odham Nation. Each is characterized by distinctive vegetation. The largest area is the Sonoran Desert. This area covers over 90 percent of the land. It is broken into two subdivisions for the purpose of range classification.

The Lower Sonoran Desert is the hottest and driest country. It occupies about 40 percent of the land area and occurs on the west side of the Nation. Rainfall averages 7 to 10 inches per year. Elevations range from 1,300 to 2,000 feet. Upland sites are characterized by shrubby vegeta-

tion. Grassy areas in this region are found in small bottoms and the large flood plains.

The Upper Sonoran Desert covers over 50 percent of the O'odham Nation at elevations from 2,000 to 2,900 feet. The average rainfall is 10 to 13 inches. Upland sites are characterized by paloverde, ironwood, mesquite, and saguaro forests with an understory of bursage, burro-weed, and snakeweed. These sites have the potential to grow grass instead of these half-shrubs. The bottom sites and the hill (mountain) sites in this region also have the potential for grasses and other forage species in their plant communities.

The other broad climatic area is the Desert Grassland. This area occurs on less than 10 percent of the land area and includes the Baboquivari Mountain Range, a flank of land around it, and the top of the Comobabi Ranges. It is broken into two subdivisions for range classification.

The first subdivision is the Desert Grassland. It occurs at elevations from 2,900 to 5,000 feet and has an average rainfall of 13 to 16 inches. Upland sites were once unbroken, grassy plains which now have covers of mes-

Editor's Note:

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