

The Ewing family moves to the plains —

The Journey to Kansas

The discovery of California gold in the late 1840s spawned an enormous movement of the U.S. population as thousands of people left the civilized eastern states and trekked across the vast central plains into the western mountains and Pacific coast from Canada to Mexico. Some went in search of precious metals — gold or silver — while others were in pursuit of a different lifestyle or a chance to start over. Still others were drawn by the availability of new land... virgin soil to yield better crops or produce.

Huge areas of former Indian land were designated as official territories of the United States. Kansas and Nebraska territories were established in 1854 and the Colorado,

Nevada and Dakota territories followed in 1861. By the start of the Civil War in 1861, settlers were becoming established — at least in sparse numbers — throughout much of the country west of the Missouri river.

Feeling the need to connect the eastern civilization with the western development, and in spite of the raging war in the southeast, the U.S. government gave huge public land rights and a tremendous amount of money to the fledgling Union Pacific Company as an incentive to build a rail line from the east across the new country and connect with California's Central Pacific which was building track eastward through the mountains. It took seven painful years, but the Trans-Continental Railroad was completed in 1869. Meanwhile, in 1862, congress enacted the Homestead Act, which would make public land available to settlers at little or no cost if they would cultivate it and live on it at least five years. After the Civil War, a Soldiers and Sailors Bill was added to the Homestead Act to favor veterans and their families.

While all of that was happening, our Ewing family had migrated from south-central Pennsylvania to northern Illinois in 1855. By the time the Transcontinental Railroad was completed, several events had occurred which undoubtedly influenced William Alexander Ewing's decision to move again. Many areas in the new territories and states were promoting their towns or developments through flyers and newspapers in major cities. Cherry Valley, Illinois, where William Alexander lived was only 80 miles west of Chicago. Both of his parents were gone — his mother died in 1864 and his father in 1866. A year later his brother, Jesse, died. And about the same time, one of his Illinois neighbors moved to Kansas.

According to Grant Ewing's newspaper column, written in the 1930s, it was the migrant neighbor's influence that finally made the difference. In 1869, William Alexander, along with three generations of the Sabin family (close friends in Illinois) and his younger brother, Cyrus Ewing, who was an army veteran, made the move to Kansas to once again be neighbors with the Lane family that had relocated earlier.

As detailed in Grant's column, W.H. Sabin's father and three of his sons, along with Cyrus Ewing, loaded wagons with their belongings and left Cherry Valley in October, 1869, expecting to make a quick trip of the nearly 700-mile journey since that fall had been so mild. But they ran into wet weather that turned the Missouri clay into a bog. It became very slow traveling, making only 6 or 8 miles some days, having to stop frequently to rest the teams. The travelers walked most of the way to lighten the load. On Christmas day they arrived at Sherman's sawmill on Bluff Creek in the rocky hills of northern Pottawatomie County, Kansas, about three miles northwest of the present-day town of Blaine. William Alexander Ewing and W.H. Sabin,

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along with the women and smaller children, came to Kansas later on the train, arriving at Wamego in early January, 1870. The families had shipped their household goods to be stored in Atchison, Kansas, until they were situated in their new homeland.

The neighbor who had come earlier had reserved land in Pottawatomie County very near the site where the town of Blaine would be established years later. But they soon decided it would be better to be close to a railroad, which took them further north into Marshall County. They found land that they liked in Wells Township, about a mile off the old Oregon Trail, three miles northeast of Irving.

While the men built houses on the Marshall County homesteads, their families shared a two-room cabin built for just such a purpose at Sherman's Pottawatomie County sawmill site. The women and children slept in the cabin while the men bunked down in the wagons outside. All were thankful for a relatively mild winter.

The Ewings' new story-and-half, 16' x 24' house was finished in April, 1870, and the family moved from Sherman's cabin to their prairie home. But it would be seven years later when the final homestead proof documents would be filed, on March 3, 1877.

In his 1930s newspaper column, Grant did not indicate whether the Ewings and Sabins had known Sherman before coming to Kansas. But he did write that Sherman's sawmill was brought from Wisconsin to Atchison by train, then hauled by wagon to Bluff Creek where Sherman and his brother-in-law, William Stone, had settled. Cherry Valley, Illinois, where the Ewings and Sabins had lived, is only about 15 miles from Wisconsin, so it is possible that they could have been acquainted prior to the move.

The plat map below (circa 1895) shows the homesteads of William Alexander Ewing and the Sabin family.

