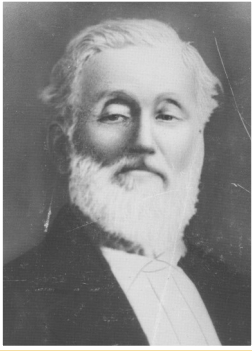


August, 2008



# EWING FAMILY NEWS

**Descendants of William Alexander Ewing**

*Getting established ....*

## ***Life on the prairie had its hazards***

On February 12, 1870, William Alexander Ewing went to the land office in Junction City, Kansas, where he paid a two-dollar fee and filed his declaratory statement for homestead rights on 80 acres in Wells Township, Marshall County. He and his brother, Cyrus, worked at building the house in Marshall County and in April, 1870, Rebecca and the children were moved from Pottawatomie County to their new home in Wells Township.

For some reason, maybe a paperwork error or missed deadline of some kind, William Alexander Ewing filed a statement in Marysville on January 24, 1871, relinquishing his interest in the homestead certificate that he had filed a year earlier. He then immediately entered a new homestead application on the same 80 acres, establishing a new homestead date. His application was sent to the land office in Concordia, where it was receipted on February 4, 1871.

The final homestead proof document was filed on March 3, 1877, witnessed by N.W. Sabin and Ira E. Sabin, and stating that William A. Ewing had built a house on the land "of frame 16 x 24 feet, 1½ stories high, shingle roof, board floors, having two doors and five windows outside, being comfortable to live in." It also stated that he had plowed and cultivated about 45 acres of the land and had "a good well of water, prairie stable, lumber corn crib 10 x 16 feet, lumber granary, 90 rods of hedge fence, corral fenced, about 350 fruit trees and about one acre of forest trees." Receipt of this document was acknowledged at the Concordia land office on October 9, 1877, and was approved on January 5, 1878. A patent was issued for the land on June 1, 1878, finally making it officially William Alexander's land, eight arduous years after his arrival there.

### **Pioneer Life**

Life was not easy on the prairie. Very little machinery existed in the 1870s and everything was done by hand labor or with the advantage of horse, mule or oxen power. Even then, some of the farm implements were fashioned out of log timbers and hardware pieces that were scrounged from any source available.

In 1870, when the Ewings settled in southern Marshall County, most of the towns were still pretty new... Barrett was platted in 1856, Irving was founded in 1859, Frankfort and Waterville were only three years old, Blue Rapids barely a year old and Bigelow would not be in existence until eleven years after our ancestors established their homesteads. Rail service had been established through Frankfort, Barrett, Irving and Blue Rapids up to Waterville, so some commerce was already in place, although most of the family's needs were either grown, hunted or gathered from the wild. Deer, rabbits, prairie chickens and other small game were plentiful but the buffalo had been pushed further west by 1870. Wild plums, grapes and strawberries provided fruit before orchards had been planted or had become productive. Various prairie plants were cut in the early spring to be used as "greens," a valuable source of nutrition before gardens began to bear produce.

The Indian tribes that had once roamed freely in Marshall County had been moved onto reservations years before the Ewings moved to Kansas. Small bands of Indians would travel an old trail that led between the Otoe reservation north of Marysville past the Ewing homestead and into southeastern Pottawatomie County

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near Wamego where the Kaw and Pottawatomie tribes lived. On their journey, the travelers would frequently stop at the Ewing home and some became good friends with William and Rebecca.

The prairie could be a beautiful place if the weather was right. Rains would produce abundant crops from the fertile soil. But the rains weren't always there. A few years before the Ewings arrived, severe drought had forced many early settlers to leave Kansas, in the face of starvation.

Harsh weather was always a potential threat on the plains. It could be blazing hot and dry as a bone, or bitter cold with snow higher than your head... and windy. Always the wind... the blessing of a gentle breeze or the curse of a relentless torrent. It was just such a wind that brought devastation to Marshall County just three years after the Ewings arrived.

## **The Great Fire**

On November 17, 1873, a fire started on the Otoe reservation near Oketo, about seven miles north of Marysville. A strong northwest wind drove the blaze through central Marshall County, at times stretching eight to ten miles wide and racing at the speed of a galloping horse... right through Wells Township where the Ewings and the Sabins lived... inflicting heavy losses to both families and their neighbors. William Alexander was able to save their house by plowing a fire-break wide enough to protect it, but other buildings were lost to the fire.

Rebecca herded the children out into the center of a small field of green winter wheat, using blankets to shield them from the flames. The intense heat drove deer, rabbits, coyotes and other wildlife onto the same green field, all too frightened by the fire to be concerned about each other or the humans that shared the space. While fighting the blaze, William Alexander was reportedly singed badly enough to damage his eyelids. His photos show that he didn't, or couldn't, open his eyes very wide.

The wind-driven fire continued to rampage its way southward, burning a large swath all the way to the Kaw River at the south edge of Pottawatomie County.

## **More Havoc**

The following year, 1874, brought another dry spell. A great drought persisted most of the spring and summer, with hot, dry winds blowing from the southwest that parched the area. When the winds finally changed to the north, they blew in great clouds of grasshoppers that created a haze on the horizon. The grasshoppers literally devoured every green thing except peach leaves. They even chewed on board fences and the handles of hoes and rakes. Sides of buildings were covered with the pests. In places they were so thick on railroad tracks that the trains couldn't run until the rails were sanded. Finally a scourge broke out among the grasshoppers and they perished, leaving people grateful that the insects were gone, but very discouraged about the damage they had done.

The winds brought more havoc on other occasions. The morning hours of Friday, May 30, 1879, found pleasant clear skies in southern Marshall County. But the afternoon saw clouds gathering and dropping temperatures that brought thunder and lightning to the area. Between five and six o'clock that evening, the storm broke with terrific fury. High winds damaged the gypsum mill, the flour mill and the woolen mill in Blue Rapids. Meanwhile, the town of Irving, about three miles southwest of the Ewing homestead, was severely battered by the storm, not just once, but twice. Shortly after the first huge funnel had ripped through the town, a smaller destructive tornado followed. The combined effect of the storms destroyed thirty-four homes and businesses, blew wagon bridges into the Blue River, and left at least thirteen people dead, many more injured and pelted the area with hail described as "weighing several ounces and measuring six to eight inches in circumference"... that would be tennis ball to baseball sized.

The tornado (called a cyclone in those days), reached a width of ½ to ¾ of a mile and moved up the west fork of the Black Vermillion River near the Ewing farm and destroyed the home of their neighbor, Milo Weeks, leaving him injured. It then proceeded up the Vermillion valley toward Barrett and Frankfort, destroying many homes and killing five more people before moving into northeastern Marshall County where it finally lifted near Axtell. Rain continued through the night, swelling creeks and rivers and making rescue efforts more difficult. A train-load of nurses and physicians were brought out from Atchison to aid in the treatment of casualties.



The destruction and suffering caused by the storm was reported in newspapers all over the country. Accounts of the incident led to Kansas being dubbed with the nick-name of "the cyclone state."

## Establishing Roots

Through all the difficulty and adversity, the Ewing family managed to survive... and grow. William and Rebecca had five children when they came to Kansas. Shortly after their arrival in Marshall County, another girl, Caroline (Carrie) was born, followed by the birth of Sarah (Sadie) three years later in 1873, Ira in 1875 and John in 1878.

Large families were almost a necessity for survival on the frontier. Even though neighbors would band together to share labor on large tasks, having lots of children meant having a built-in work-force to handle the chores and assist with labor-intensive farming. But having a large family didn't insure success. Harsh living conditions and diseases often took a heavy toll among the children. Medical help was not always available and, even when it was, primitive knowledge often could not cope with the causes or provide treatment for common ailments. The Ewing family was no exception to the normal.

## Tragedy Strikes the Family

William and Rebecca had already lost three children to disease while living in Illinois. Ten years after moving to Kansas, tragedy struck again. The May 14, 1880, issue of *The Irving Citizen* carried the following item:

*"Mertle Ewing, a daughter 14 years of age, of Wm. Ewing who lives near Irving, died of typhoid fever last Saturday. Mr. Ewing's wife is not expected to live. It is thought she has the consumption."*

The following issue of the newspaper on May 21, 1880, carried this short note:

*"We were sorry to learn of the death of the wife of Mr. Ewing this week, who lives near here."*

So, within a week, one of the Ewing girls died from the effects of disease as did her mother, Rebecca, on May 18, 1880. The Otoe Indian chief and three of his family members attended Rebecca's funeral.

A few years later, in 1886, Carrie, another daughter of William and Rebecca would succumb to illness at age 16. Then, in 1891, the oldest daughter, Lizzie, would die after a short illness. All were buried in Antioch cemetery, just west of the town of Bigelow, a few miles southeast of the Ewing homestead.

## Life Continues

William Alexander Ewing truly exemplified the pioneer spirit. Though he was not large in stature, he was physically strong with a powerful grip and an iron will. Even in the face of calamity and personal tragedy, he kept moving forward, working the land and making a life for his family.

In January of 1885 William Alexander bought from George Storch (an agent for the railroad), for \$360, an additional 40 acres that adjoined the north end of his 80-acre





William Alexander and his sons farmed their 120 acres through good years and not-so-good years, as did their neighbors in Wells Township. William's younger brother, Cyrus, farmed the 160 acres that joined him on the east, growing the usual grain crops as well as a little tobacco. And their good friends, the Sabin family, a mile or so further east, established themselves as a premier grower of broomcorn and even founded a broom factory, manufacturing brooms for sale throughout the area.

As William Alexander's children reached adulthood, they each left home and established their own lives. The boys all remained close to the homestead, while the girls moved out of the area. When the last child, John, married in 1901, William was 74 years old and his health was beginning to decline, although he continued to farm.

In the fall of 1909, Ira Ewing moved his family into the homestead house to live with William and Ann. A few months later, on January 3, 1910, William Alexander Ewing died and was buried in Antioch cemetery beside his wife and their three daughters who had preceded him in death.

**The Ewing homestead                      The 40 acres bought in 1885**

