

**FRED E. ROPER,  
PIONEER  
Thayer County Nebraska**

**By Ernest E. Correll**

**Fred E. Roper, a pioneer of Hebron, Nebraska, was eighty years old on October 10, 1915. Sixty-one years ago Mr. Roper "crossed the plains," going from New York state to California.**

**Eleven years more than a half-century- and to look back upon the then barren stretch of the country in comparison with the present fertile region of prosperous homes and populous cities, takes a vivid stretch of imagination to realize the dreamlike transformation. At that time San Francisco was a village of about five hundred persons living in adobe huts surrounded by a mud wall for a fortified protection from the marauding Indians.**

**Fred E. Roper was born in Candor Hill, New York, October 10, 1835. When three years old he moved with his parents to Canton, Bradford County, Pennsylvania, and later moved with his brother to Baraboo, Wisconsin. Then he Shipped as a "hand" on a raft going down the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers to St. Louis, getting one dollar a day and board. He returned north on a steamer, stopping at Burlington, Iowa where his sister resided.**

**In 1854, when he was nineteen years of age, Mr. Roper "started west". His sister walked to the edge of the town with him as he led his one-horned cow., which was to furnish milk for coffee on the camp-out trip, which was to last three months, enroute to the Pacific coast.**

**There were three outfits - a horse train, mule train, and ox train. Mr. Roper traveled in an ox train of twenty-five teams. The travelers elected officers from among those who had made the trip before, and military discipline prevailed.**

**At nights the men took turns at guard duty in relays - from dark to midnight and from midnight to dawn, when the herder was called to turn the cattle out to browse. One man herded them until breakfast was ready, and another man herded them until time to yoke up. This overland train was never molested by the Indians, although one night some spying Cheyennes were made prisoners under guard over night until the oxen were yoked up and ready to start.**

**The prospectors crossed the Missouri river at Omaha, which at that time had no residences or business buildings. Enroute to Salt Lake City, the South Platte route was followed, averaging about twenty miles a day. Enough provisions were carried to last through the journey and as they had some provisions left when they reached Salt Lake City, they were sold to the half-starved Mormons at big prices.**

**Some perplexing difficulties were encountered on the journey. At one point in the mountains, beyond Salt Lake City, the trail was so narrow that the oxen were unhitched and led single file around the cliff, while the wagons were taken apart and lowered down the precipice with ropes.**

When crossing the desert, additional water had to be carried in extra kegs and canteens. When the tired cattle got near enough to the river to smell the fresh water, they pricked up their ears, stiffened their necks, and made a rush for the stream, so the men had to stand in front of them until the chains were loosened to prevent their crazily dashing into the water with their wagons.

Mr. Roper worked by the day for three months in the mines northeast of San Francisco. While placer mining, he one day picked up a gold nugget, from which his engagement ring was made by a jeweler in San Francisco, and worn by Mrs. Roper until her death, October 28, 1908. The ring was engraved with two hearts with the initials M.E.R., and is now in the possession of their son Maun, whose initials are the same.

Mr. Roper was one of a company of three men who worked a claim that had been once worked over, on a report that there was a crevasse that had not been bottomed. The first, workers did not have a "quicksilver," which is necessary to catch fine gold, but Mr. Roper's company had a jug shipped from San Francisco. Nothing less than a fifty-pound jug of quicksilver would be sold at fifty cents a pound. This was used in sluice-boxes as "quicksilver riffles", to catch the fine float gold, when it would instantly sink to the bottom of the quicksilver, while the dirt and stones would wash over; the coarse rock would be first tossed out with a sluice-fork (similar to a flat-tined pitchfork). In three years the men worked the mine out, making about fifteen hundred dollars apiece.

With his share carried in buckskin sacks belted around his waist under his clothes, Mr. Roper started in a sailing vessel up north along the coast on a trip, hunting for richer diggings. Then he went on a steamer to the Isthmus of Panama, which he crossed with a hired horse team, then by steamer to New York and by railroad to Philadelphia to get his gold minted.

After his marriage in 1861, Mr. Roper returned to the west and in '64 ran a hotel at Beatrice called "Pat's Cabin". When Nebraska voted on the question of admission to statehood, Mr. Roper's ballot was vote No. 3.

Desiring to get a home of his own Fred Roper came on west into what is now Thayer County, and about six miles northwest of the present site of Hebron on the Little Blue, he bought out the preemption rights of Bill and Walt Hackney, who had "squatted" there with the expectation of paying the government the customary \$1.25 per acre. In certain localities those claims afterwards doubled to \$2.50 per acre. Mr. Roper paid only the value of the log cabin and log stables., and came into possession of the eighty acres, which he homesteaded, and later bought adjoining land for \$1.25 per acre.

Occasionally he made trips to St. Joe and Nebraska City for supplies, which he freighted overland to Hackney ranch. At that time Mr. Roper knew every man on the trail from the Missouri river to Kearney. On these trips he used to stop with Bill McCandles, who was shot with three other victims by "Wild Bill" on Rock creek in Jefferson County.

The first house at Hackney ranch was burned by the Cheyenne Indians in their great raid of 1864, at which time Miss Laura Roper (daughter of Joe B. Roper) and Mrs. Eubanks were captured by the Indians near Fox Ford in Nuckolls County and kept in captivity until ransomed by Colonel Wyncoop of the U. S. Army for \$1,000.00. Si Alexander of Meridian (south-east of the present town of Alexandria) was with the government troops at the time of Miss Roper's release near Denver. Her parents, believing her dead, had meanwhile moved back to New York state. (Laura Roper is still alive, being now Mrs. Laura Vance, at Skiatook, Oklahoma.) At the time of the above mentioned raid, the Indians at Hackney ranch threw charred cottonwood logs of the house into the well, to prevent travelers from getting water. Fred Roper was then at Beatrice, having just a few days before sold Hackney ranch to an overland traveler. After the raid the new owner deserted the place in the fall of 1869, and in a few months Mr. Roper returned from Beatrice and again preempted the same place.

In 1876 Mr. and Mrs. Roper moved to Meridian and ran a tavern for about a year, then moved back to Hackney, where they resided until the fall of 1893, when they moved into Hebron to make their permanent home. Mr. Roper was postmaster at Hebron for four years under Cleveland's last administration.

**Title of Book: Nebraska Pioneer Reminiscences**

**Daughters of the American Revolution**