Broad Are Nebraska's Rolling Plains: The Early Writings of George Bird Grinnell

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“Broad Are Nebraska’s Rolling Plains”
The Early Writings of George Bird Grinnell

By Richard Vaughan

Early in July of 1870, twenty-year-old George Bird Grinnell crossed the Missouri River on a sternwheel steamer, stepped ashore, and left his first footprints in the young state of Nebraska. It was to be an experience that marked him for life. Although a lifelong resident of New York City, few years passed between 1870 and 1930 when Grinnell did not find time to spend a month or two west of the Missouri River.

A man of many interests and vocations, Grinnell is probably best known today as the author of several classic ethnographic studies of the Plains Indians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, his name will forever be associated with the establishment of Glacier National Park, and he will be remembered as one of the founding fathers of the American conservation movement, and as an influential advocate for the protection and welfare of American Indians.

As author or editor of more than thirty books (and a contributor to a dozen more), of more than one hundred signed articles, and of thousands of unsigned editorials and shorter pieces in *Forest and Stream*, the weekly sporting publication he owned and edited, Grinnell’s travels and experiences are well documented in the pages of Western American history. Readers of *Nebraska History* may be most familiar with Grinnell’s work from his first and last books, * Pawnee Hero Stories and Folk-Tales* (1889) and *Two Great Scouts and Their Pawnee Battalion* (1928).

Grinnell’s earliest Western experiences and writings were the result of his first trip to Nebraska, experiences that many readers know of through Grinnell’s 1923 article “An Old-Time Bone Hunt,” or through the description found in his *Memoirs*. Less well known are several other accounts of his 1870 trip, accounts that were never published. These documents, along with a poem that young Grinnell penned about the plains of Nebraska, help demonstrate just how pivotal the 1870 trip was in directing him on course for a life dedicated to preserving the culture, history, and environment of the American West.

A few months before his 1870 Missouri River traverse, while completing his undergraduate studies at Yale College, Grinnell heard a rumor that Professor Othniel Charles Marsh would be leading a summer expedition to the West to collect fossils. Although not one of Marsh’s students, Grinnell quickly determined that he wanted to be part of the expedition. Writing in 1915, he recalled:

> This rumor greatly interested me, for I had been brought up, so to speak, on the writings of Captain Mayne Reid, which dealt with travel on the plains and among the mountains, between 1840 and 1850. His stories had appealed to my imagination, and I had always been eager to visit the scenes he described, but had supposed that they were far beyond my reach. When, however, I heard of this proposed expedition, and learned too that the party would perhaps be made up from recent graduates of the college, I determined that I must try to be one of these. After several days consideration, I at last summoned up courage to call on Professor Marsh, and tell him what I desired. He discouraged me at our first interview, but said that he would inquire about me and at a second meeting seemed more favorably disposed. A little later he accepted me as a volunteer.

While it may have taken Marsh a few days to decide if the young Grinnell was really cut out for a Western trip, the decision proved to be a wise one.
Grinnell called the student scientists of the Marsh expedition an “innocent party of pilgrims’ starting out to face dangers of which they were wholly ignorant.” Standing, left to right: John Nicholson, Grinnell, James Wadsworth, Marsh, Charles Betts, Harry Ziegler, Henry Sargent. Seated: John W. Griswold, Alexander Ewing, Eli Whitney, Charles Reeve, James Russell. Images of Yale Individuals, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library

Yale professor Othniel Charles Marsh, leader of the 1870 expedition, was a pioneering paleontologist who later engaged in a highly publicized competition, sometimes called “the Great Bone War,” with rival paleontologist Edward Cope of the University of Pennsylvania. Images of Yale Individuals, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library

Grinnell and Marsh developed a strong relationship, remaining friends and colleagues until Marsh’s death in 1899. Not only was Marsh later able to offer Grinnell an assistantship at Yale’s Peabody Museum, but had Grinnell not served under Marsh’s tutelage, the opportunity to become a member of the scientific parties of Custer’s Black Hills Expedition (1874) and the army’s Yellowstone Reconnaissance (1875) would never have arisen. For his part, Grinnell would go on to write several profiles of Marsh and would be a public supporter of “The Professor,” when the long running feud with rival paleontologist Edward Cope exploded onto the pages of East Coast newspapers in the winter of 1889-90. The 1870 trip was, in fact, the first of many fossil hunting trips Marsh led as part of his intense, and often public, competition with Cope to acquire the nation’s best and largest collection of fossils.

Marsh, the nephew of the American-born financier and philanthropist George Peabody, often used social and financial connections to advance his interests. Though the exact details of how the 1870 trip was financed are unclear, it seems likely that Marsh’s acquaintance with Union Pacific Railroad executives helped reduce, if not eliminate, transportation costs. It is clear that his friendships with many military leaders resulted in a letter from the commanding general of the army William Tecumseh Sherman, which “proved an open sesame to all army posts.”

The Marsh entourage left New York on June 30. In an undated manuscript (hereafter the “Party of Twelve” manuscript), Grinnell recorded the group’s brief stay in Omaha and their trip west to Fort McPherson:

We were a party of twelve college students just starting out on a scientific expedition. Leaving New York at the end of the college year and stopping for a few days in Chicago and again at Omaha, we had at last reached Fort McPherson on the North branch of the Platte River from which point our first expedition was to be made and where we were to gain our first experience of frontier life. We had waited in Omaha while the Professor our stout and gallant leader had gone on to the Fort to make arrangements about a guide and on receiving a telegram from him we started on the two o’clock train for McPherson Station. On reaching the station at one o’clock A.M. we were met by the Prof and two of the officers who drove us over to the Fort. Crossing the river on a rough corduroy bridge the road passed along bold bluffs intersected at short intervals by side gullies affording excellent lurking places for the Indians within easy range of the road. This fact with the reasoned remark of an officer such as: “That ranch was attacked last fall by Indians and all the stock driven off and the herdsmen scalped,” combined to lower our spirits and the calm moonlight and the melancholy cry of the killdeer plover (Charadrius melodus) lent an added sadness to the scene. A drive of eight miles brought us to the post where we were kindly rec’d.
Fort McPherson (earlier called Fort Cottonwood) on the Platte River east of present North Platte, Nebraska, was the Marsh expedition's jumping-off point into the relatively uncharted territory of the West. Troops from the fort served as escorts for the group.

Although he incorrectly identified the fort's location, and today the killdeer is known as *Charadrius vociferus* (*Charadrius melodus* is the piping plover), Grinnell's observations of the topography, wildlife, and potential for contact with Native Americans are themes that would reappear in his writings for the next sixty years. In addition, whenever Grinnell wrote about the 1870 trip, he never failed to comment on the naiveté of the group of Easterners. In his 1923 article he described them as, "an entirely innocent party of 'pilgrims' starting out to face dangers of which they were wholly ignorant," and in his *Memoirs* noted that, "the members of the party were innocent of any knowledge of the western country, but its members pinned their faith to Prof. Marsh, who had done more or less traveling over eastern North America." 9

Innocent as they were in 1870, the group was an impressive example of the sons of America's ruling class, and many of them would grow up to continue that family tradition. Among the twelve students were John Reed Nicholson, the future state attorney general and chancellor of Delaware; Charles McCormick Reeve, a decorated U.S. Army brigadier general who rose to prominence in the Spanish-American War and then served as the first American provost marshal of Manila; Henry Bradford Sargent, a successful hardware manufacturer, bank director, and member of the Yale Corporation; James W. Wadsworth, a nine-term member of Congress from New York; and Eli Whitney, the grandson of the famous inventor, who became a prominent New Haven financier and president of the New Haven Water Company. Grinnell, Nicholson, Reeve, and Kentuckian Jim Russell, all from the class of 1870, would remain close friends until their deaths. Two other members of the expedition, Charles Wyllys Betts and Harry Degen Ziegler, served as the trip's unofficial historians and documented it for two leading eastern publications. 10

Fort McPherson, which had been established as Cantonment McKean in 1863, sat on the south side of the Platte River near the mouth of Cottonwood Canyon (south of present day Maxwell in Lincoln County). While it is often remembered as the base camp for several extravagant government-sanctioned buffalo hunts for wealthy businessmen and dignitaries (including Russia's Grand Duke Alexis), Fort McPherson was for many years the only major military post between Fort Kearny and Fort Laramie. As the tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad crept westward, muscling out the area's indigenous population, McPherson served not only as a military presence, but also as an important supply depot. In the summer of 1870, it was also the home base of Frank North and his famed Pawnee Scouts, who patrolled the U.P. tracks as they snaked across the Plains. 11

By the time the Marsh convoy rolled into camp, the fort was the headquarters of the Fifth U.S. Cavalry, under the command of Col. (Bvt. Maj. Gen.) William Hemsley Emory. The summer of 1870 was a relatively quiet one by military standards, with only an occasional confrontation with the Native population. While, no doubt, the Marsh group was
This Record of His People is Inscribed."
In a gesture fitting Grinnell’s sense of honor and family, he presented the very first copy to Frank and Lute’s mother, with the inscription, “To Mrs. Jane A. North, with love from Geo. Bird Grinnell, November 13, 1889. First copy from press.”

In meeting Frank North, Grinnell began a relationship with one of the “heroic men” who lived through the times and adventures about which he had only read. In the years to come, Grinnell would meet and write about other notable westerners “whose courage, skill, and endurance led to the discovery, exploration, and settlement of that vast territory which we now call the Empire of the West,” but he would hold none in higher esteem than Frank North.

Perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than in the obituary of North that Grinnell wrote for Forest and Stream:

The secret of Major North’s success in commanding the Pawnees, who loved him as much as they respected him, lay in the unvarying firmness, justice, patience and kindness with which he treated them. He never demanded anything unreasonable of them, but when he gave an order, even though obedience involved great peril or perhaps appeared to mean certain death, the command must be carried out. He was their commander, but at the same time their brother and friend. Above all, he was their leader. In going into battle he never said “Go,” but always “Come.” It is little wonder, then, that the devotion felt for him by all the Pawnee Nation, and especially by the men who had served under him in battle, was as steadfast as it was touching. . . . His was a singularly lovable nature. If the stronger manly points of his character inspired respect and admiration, not less did his gentleness and consideration for others win the devotion of others. He was modest, almost to diffidence, and it was with difficulty that he could be induced to speak of his own heroic achievements. And yet his face told the story of the power within the man. One who is accustomed to command men, and is so a judge of character, after seeing him for the first time, made the homely remark: “There is a man with grit in his face; one you could ‘tie to.’”

After a few days at the fort, outfitting, learning the intricacies of riding Indian...
ponies, and exploring the surrounding country, the expedition headed north on July 14. The "Party of Twelve" manuscript continues:

The escort of fifty men filed out of the post at about nine a.m. and we followed more leisurely about an hour afterwards. Reaching the station we loaded up our stores and proceeded. For about five miles our course passed through circular prairie the tall grass of which reached to our horses withers. Birds of different species sprang up from beneath our horses feet or followed us as we marched along. Among the latter the yellow headed blackbirds [were] conspicuous by their orange heads and necks and their shining black bodies. Doves of several kind whirred by us continually and were not considered worth a shot. The sun shone fiercely down upon us but our broad brimmed hats afforded us ample protection and we thought of nothing but the picturesque-ness of the scene.

First in the column rode Major Frank North a scout justly celebrated throughout the west as the organizer and leader of the Pawnee scouts, by his side was Bill Cody better known as Buffalo Bill, the most celebrated frontiersman of modern times and the best buffalo hunter on the plains. Sixty nine buffalo has he killed in a single day and thirty six of them in a single run and from a single horse. He is the very picture of a bold and hardy prairie man. Six feet two inches in height yet so well proportioned that he looks only about the average stature when standing alone, with his long hair streaming over his shoulders and his mild blue eyes gleaming under a high forehead he is the type of physical beauty [He] is clad in buckskin through out and over his hunting shirt he wears another shirt of scarlet flannel highly ornamented. His mount is a little cream colored pony called Little Buckskin.17

Grinnell’s 1870 meeting with Cody was brief, as he only traveled with the Yale group for the first day. Although his real fame was a few years away, Cody was already gaining a reputation for his "plains showmanship," as well as for his abilities as a scout. Grinnell’s mention of Cody’s skills as a hunter is a reference to the fabled buffalo hunting contest between Cody and William "Billy" Comstock in the late 1860s. It is unclear just how much Grinnell knew about Cody in 1870. The July 14 entry in his trip diary includes an added note, at the top of the page (as if an afterthought, perhaps prompted upon learning who Cody was), which reads: "Bill Cody, alias Buffalo Bill, the most celebrated prairie man alive, accompanied us as far as Pawnee Springs."18

Later Grinnell and Cody often crossed paths; usually as Cody and his famed Wild West Show traveled the East. In fact, during Cody’s first visit to New York City in 1872, the two former Nebraska expedition mates were astonished when they met as Grinnell was leisurely "riding before breakfast in Central Park."19 Grinnell never placed Cody in the same league as the two scouts he knew best, Frank North and Charley Reynolds, usually noting his reputation more as showman than pathfinder. In an undated manuscript, probably written after Cody’s death, Grinnell recalled his skill as a marksman, perhaps exaggerating, as well as his theatrical career:

Shooting from the ground with a rifle, Cody was a very ordinary shot, and perhaps he never shot with a pistol at all; but he was the finest horseback rifle shot ever known, I think. His skill in killing buffalo, on the run, no doubt gave him his common name, Buffalo Bill. The Indians called him Long Hair. In the year 1870 he performed a most remarkable feat, when in riding after buffalo, he killed sixteen in sixteen shots. Yet, as already suggested, he was, when shooting at a mark or at game on foot, a very ordinary shot. . .

I have said that Cody was not a Scout in the old sense, yet no doubt he did some good. In his theatrical career and generally in the show business, he offered to a large public many things that actually existed, or had existed, and showed in the flesh, to people who knew nothing of such matters, something that resembled, or suggested, the old-time Scout. In the Wild West Show were depicted many current features of a stage of western development which proved to be very fleeting. It was certainly worth while that a public, remote from that life and ignorant of it, should have had an opportunity to witness its scenes. There was some slight exaggeration about it all, yet on the whole things were represented quite closely as they actually were at the time.

Cody was an agreeable fellow and pleasant to get along with; but it was necessary to make much allowance for the statements he made about himself — his tales of what he had seen and done. Nevertheless, because of his friendly manners and his apparent kindness, he was liked by most of those with whom he came in contact.20

Following Cody in the expedition train came two Pawnee scouts:

Tuckee-tre-lous and La Hoora-sac the former a celebrated warrior of the Pawnee Loups and the latter, on account of of his youth, as yet only known as a skillful trailer and successful hunter. They both wear cavalry uniforms and are very proud of them. Their scalp locks are neatly braided tied with red and yellow ribands and ornamented at the end with one or two small feathers. They are very proud of their equipments and turn around occa-
sionally to ejaculate to those who ride behind them "Heap o' good." Next comes the two officers Lieuts. R. and T. followed by our own party then fifty soldiers and after them six wagons each with its high white tilt shining in the sun sharply outlined against the dark green of the prairie and it's six mules straining as the driver cracks his black snake and urges them on with loud cries.

We march along slowly averaging about four miles an hour. All our party are charmed by the novelty of the scene. The professor turns out of the line now and then to examine a plant that is new to him or to look at the skeleton of a buffalo with which the plain is strewn. Others delight in the new forms of animal life which we see on every hand. Antelope on the distant bluffs, the new birds which we see continually, an occasional "Jackass Rabbit" loping slowly away and the sharp "skirr" of the terrible rattle snake all combine to interest and amuse us.

So we go on for about fifteen miles at length there is a stir at the head of the command. Horses are urged to a gallop and as we round the point of a low bluff we see a small pool of water and know that we have reached our first camping ground. As we come in sight of it about a hundred yards distant an antelope springs up from the edge of the water and gazes curiously at the strange creatures that move toward it. It turns to flee but on the instant a number of rifles crack and the gentle animal falls dying and pays the penalty of its curiosity.

The two lieutenants were Bernard Reilly, Jr. and Earl Dennison Thomas. Little is known of Reilly, but Thomas, a Civil War veteran and West Point graduate, would rise through the ranks and ultimately retire as a brigadier general. The expedition named the small pool of water Pawnee Springs (the headwaters of today's Pawnee Creek in northeastern Lincoln County) and it was here that the first day ended, as does the "Party of Twelve" manuscript.

In the years to come, Grinnell typically kept small, pocket-size trip diaries of his journeys, and used them to refresh his memory as he wrote accounts for Forest and Stream. The "Party of Twelve" manuscript was probably compiled in that manner. In fact, Grinnell's diary of the 1870 trip contains accounts of the events described in the manuscript.

Although brief, Grinnell's diary provides personal detail not present in his published and unpublished accounts, almost as if the entries were for a letter to his family. For example, he wrote that the group often spent their evenings singing and playing pitch and that each campsite (beginning on the eighth day) was named after one of the expedition members. The July 27 campsite, for example, was named "Camp Birdie Grinnell.

The diary also provides glimpses of Grinnell's subtle sense of humor, such as when he records his excitement on seeing what he thought was a new species of great blue heron, "but upon examination I found it was only one of the mosquitoes of the country." On a more serious side, the diary records the budding naturalist's sightings of dozens of birds and mammals; the man who eventually organized the first Audubon Society, helped Theodore Roosevelt create the Boone and Crockett Club, and later was called the "Grandfather of American Conservation" was recording everything he saw.

After the group left the Pawnee Springs campsite, they continued northward, spending seventeen days exploring the region between the Platte and Dismal rivers. In addition to their days of travel, their time was filled with successful
fossil hunting forays ("fossilizing" in Grinnell's diary) and not-so-successful antelope-hunting side trips. Although they saw signs of the Native residents of the region, the only Indians they encountered in Nebraska were the two Pawnee Scouts who accompanied them.

Upon their return to Fort McPherson, Marsh and his brood boarded a westbound train for Fort D. A. Russell in Wyoming Territory, where their next adventures began. After that, it was on to Fort Bridger and a trip south into the Uinta Mountains before heading to Salt Lake City and finally San Francisco. The expedition began breaking up as winter approached, and Grinnell returned home in November.26

Like many of his contemporaries who ventured westward, Grinnell's first trip West was an extremely influential event in his young life. In five short months he saw the landscapes he had read about as a child, met the men he credited with "taming" the West, and encountered the Native peoples who would dominate the rest of his life. Unlike many of those of many contemporaries, however, Grinnell's 1870 trip was much more than a coming-of-age journey into the wilds of North America. He returned time and time again over the next sixty years. His views and opinions of the people and environment of the West evolved as his influence as a writer and advocate grew, but his memories of the 1870 trip always expressed fondness for the people he met and awe for the country he encountered.

Upon his return East, Grinnell spent the next three years in New York City learning the ropes of the family brokerage house. Despite business commitments, he found time for two quick trips to Nebraska in the years following the Yellowstone expedition. In 1872 he and Jim Russell joined Lute North for a two-week excursion hunting buffalo with the Pawnee along the Republican River, and in 1873 Grinnell and Lute hunted elk in the Loup Rivers region.

Within a few years, Grinnell's father, George Blake Grinnell, retired and renamed the business, "George Bird Grinnell & Co." Honoring his father's wishes, Grinnell did his best to step into George Sr.'s shoes; still, one can only wonder if his relatives really believed he would succeed, especially with his penchant to spend his free hours in the city's markets and menageries collecting specimens for Professor Marsh.

Grinnell's tenure in the world of high finance was quickly punctuated by a national financial crisis, the Panic of 1873. As it turned out, the panic propelled Grinnell to take up his pen and begin writing. Grinnell explained this motivation in an undated manuscript:

During the business panic of 1873 I was working in an office in Wall Street and was greatly concerned over the situation. All business there had practically stopped and people generally could neither pay nor collect their debts. I worried over this for days, and one evening, in order to get my thoughts from the matter, I began to set down a little story-the events of a hunting experience in the west. When I finished this, I began another similar story and recalling these memories, I gradually became so interested as almost to forget my troubles.

I knew slightly Charles Hallock, who had just established the Forest and Stream newspaper, and showed him the stories and later he printed them and asked me to write others for him. I continued to write. Later, after the immediate occasion of this first writing had passed, I still set down other accounts of western adventure, and as the time went by the work grew easier. This was the beginning of my making copy for the printer.27

In all, there were five "little stories" published in Forest and Stream between October 1873 and February 1874.28 All were published under the pseudonym "Ornis," Greek for bird. Grinnell's writings appeared in Forest and Stream for the next fifty years, but usually under the pseudonym "Yo;" Ornis made only one appearance after 1874.29

A seventh Ornis article, never published, also describes the early days of the 1870 trip. More polished than the "Party of Twelve," the account consists of a draft and a final version incorporating the edited remarks of the draft. The draft version is titled "Western Sketches;" the final signed manuscript is titled "Camp Life West of the Missouri: Among the Sand Hills of Nebraska." Almost 2,500 words long ("Party of Twelve" is 1,200), "Camp Life" is clearly written with an audience in mind. "Camp Life" takes the expedition past Pawnee Springs, giving readers a glimpse of the second day's march that ended just before reaching the South Loup River near today's Stapleton in Logan County.30

Best described as a travelogue, the essay attempts to transport the reader from the comfort of his armchair to the beautiful and mysterious world west of the Missouri. "Camp Life" is one of Grinnell's early attempts at what one critic has termed, his "successful use of narrative to create a sense of presence... storytelling which conveys the intensity of closely observed personal experience."31 In fact, Grinnell becomes so intent on describing the days of yesterday that he does not inform the reader about the 1870 trip until midway through the article, and then without reference to names or dates. More than 130 years later, "Camp Life" remains a wonderful example of a young author experimenting with a new writing style, while at the same time providing us with another glimpse of the 1870 expedition's first few days (see page 47).

It seems probable that both the "Party of Twelve" manuscript and the "Camp Life" manuscript were two of the "other accounts of western adventure" that Grinnell composed as a result of his meeting with Hallock.32 Ornis offers a hint about when "Camp Life" was written in the first paragraph, when he notes that a surveying party had recently reported the discovering of a "vast forest of pines" at the headwaters of the Niobrara River. It is not clear who the surveyors were, and thus the date cannot be pinpointed, but it may simply be a broad reference to one of the many mid-1870s expeditions (including Marsh's 1873 trip) that passed through the area that today is the tri-state region of Nebraska, Wyoming, and South Dakota.

Why the "Party of Twelve" and
Grinnell (left) and Luther North, shown here at Crow Agency, Montana, in 1926, became fast friends and remained so for more than sixty years. Grinnell's last book, *Two Great Scouts and Their Pawnee Battalion* (1928), a biography of the North brothers and their lives in the West, was based on Luther's recollections. Courtesy The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

"Camp Life" manuscripts were never published also remains unanswered. Since both deal with the same trip, it is possible that one was written as a replacement for the other. And, since "Camp Life" is signed, it seems likely that it was the final version. Perhaps the article's reflectiveness and lack of action kept it from appearing in print; it really cannot be considered a true "hunting" story. Regardless of the reason, the manuscripts found their way into a personal archive that ultimately grew to mammoth proportions.

The Panic of 1873 not only stimulated Grinnell to start writing, but it also seemed to be the catalyst for his decision to leave the family business. When calm returned to the brokerage (largely due to George Sr.'s return), Grinnell declared that there was nothing more to hold him in New York as "I had always had a settled dislike for the business." In March 1874 the brokerage was dissolved and its namesake headed north to New Haven, where he served as one of Marsh's assistants, often unpaid, until 1880.

Grinnell's reunion with Marsh was quickly rewarded, as the professor asked him to go on an upcoming government expedition to the Black Hills. Grinnell recruited Lute North as his assistant. A year later Grinnell traveled to the recently established Yellowstone National Park, again as a government scientist. After 1875 Grinnell's Nebraska trips revolved around hunting trips with the North brothers, visits to the Dismal River ranch they co-owned with Cody, and in later years, short stops in Columbus to visit Lute or pick him up and head west.

Grinnell's association with *Forest and Stream* lasted more than forty-five years. In 1876, while still in New Haven, he became the paper's natural history editor. Four years later, after he and his father had purchased "over one-third of the capital stock," he moved back to New York to become president and editor-in-chief. Grinnell sold the paper in 1911, but continued to write for it until 1921, the year his name stopped appearing on the masthead as a member of the advisory board. Grinnell became a prolific writer who seemed never at a loss for a topic. In addition to his work for *Forest and Stream* he published on topics ranging literally from A (anthropology) to Z (zoology), and his writing helped shape America's impressions of the turn-of-the-century West.

Although he spent less and less time in Nebraska, Grinnell's relationships and memories bound him to the state for the rest of his life. References to Nebraska friends and places often crop up in his writings. Ironically, by the time he began to publish his ethnographic studies, the Pawnee had been relocated to the Indian Territory. Still, the die had been cast; Grinnell's love affair with the American West began to blossom and, as pointed out by Nebraska's own Mari Sandoz, "[f]or more than sixty-five years George Bird Grinnell's energies, concern..."
A prolific writer, Grinnell was the author or editor of more than thirty books, contributed to a dozen more, and produced hundreds of articles for *Forest and Stream*, a weekly sporting magazine. An influential cultural and environmental preservationist, his writing helped shape America's impressions of the turn-of-the-century West.

and scholarship were all centered upon the native life of the Great Plains and the bordering mountains." Echoing those sentiments, upon his death, a Nebraska State Historical Society resolution noted that Grinnell "left imperishable evidence of his love for the Nebraska region and the people who dwell therein."36

Grinnell returned to Nebraska metaphorically in his last book, *Two Great Scouts*. For years, Grinnell had encouraged Lute North to write the story of his life, and finally, in the 1920s, Lute began recording his recollections and sending them to Grinnell to edit. Grinnell would work on them for a few weeks and then return them to Lute with a few questions and suggestions. In 1925 and 1926 Grinnell sent the completed manuscript to several of his publishers. Correspondence among Grinnell, North, and the publishers indicates that at least two publishers (Scribner's and Arthur H. Clark) turned the manuscript down, primarily because it was not detailed enough. In a letter dated December 12, 1926, Grinnell suggested to North that while he would prefer Lute be the author, Grinnell would be willing to step in if Lute approved, implying that it would be easier to publish the work if Grinnell were listed as author. Lute apparently approved, and Grinnell began work on the manuscript that became *Two Great Scouts*.37

Unfortunately, Grinnell’s skills as a biographer never matched his other writing skills and *Two Great Scouts* has been criticized for leaning too heavily on Lute’s questionable memory. That, combined with his close relationship with Lute and his near hero worship of Frank, did not allow him to view the North Brothers through the objective and critical eyes their lives deserved.38

One final Nebraska manuscript—a short poem that begins, “Broad are Nebraska’s Rolling Plains”—has remained confined to the acid-free folders of an archive for more than one hundred years. Classically educated, Grinnell was no doubt more familiar with poetry than are today’s youth. Many periodicals of the day, including *Forest and Stream*, featured a poem or two in each issue. Still, no other piece of poetry has ever been credited to Grinnell. Like the other Nebraska manuscripts, there is no sure way to date the poem’s composition, but it seems safe to say that the poem, found in a small collection of his earliest
Early Writings of George Bird Grinnell

papers, was written shortly after his return from one of his first Nebraska trips. Handwritten, with a draft on the verso, the poem is hardly a literary ode for the ages. Still, it highlights the wonder and romance that Grinnell found in those first trips:

Broad are Nebraska's rolling plains
Fertilize meadowed bottoms lie
Mighty the rivers that roll along
Fed by the snows of mountains high

Land of the watchful antelope
Land where the mighty bison roam
Where the great Elk and the timid Deer and the turkey make their homes

Beats near the buckskin hunting shirt
Many a brave and noble heart
In many a deed of chivalry
The stalwart hunters take their part

Where crafty Sioux in war paint grim
Menace the lives of those they love
With whoop and yell a murderous horde
Dashing down from the bluffs above

Grinnell often noted that he had missed the true "Far West," and Nebraska in the early 1870s was as close as he ever got to the days he read about as a boy in New York. Rather than dwelling on what might have been, however, the realization that he had missed those early days seemed to inspire him to try to preserve what remained and record what had passed. Grinnell's days among "Nebraska's rolling plains," were key to that inspiration and ultimately helped him become one of the West's most influential cultural and environmental preservationists.40

Notes

1 There is no comprehensive biography of Grinnell, but more than fifty profiles have been published. Since the early 1970s, John F. Reiger has led the way in documenting Grinnell's life and work. Most important is his edited collection of Grinnell letters and memoirs, The Passing of the Great West: Selected Papers of George Bird Grinnell (New York: Winchester Press, 1972). Another book-length study is Edward Day Harris, "Preserving a Vision of the American West: The Life of George Bird Grinnell" (Ph. D. diss., Yale University, 1995). Among the dozens of shorter profiles, the best include Sherry L. Smith, "George Bird Grinnell, and the 'Vanishing' Plains Indians," Montana, The


5 Schuchert, O. C. Marsh, 102.

6 Untitled manuscript, R37:661–62, Grinnell papers.


10 Other members of the expedition, all graduates of or current students at Yale or Yale's Sheffield Scientific School, included Charles Ballard, Alexander H. Ewing, and John W. Griswold. For the Betts and Zeigler articles, see C. W. Betts, "The Yale College Expedition of 1870," Harper's New Monthly Magazine 43 (October 1871): 663–71; "Results of the Yale College Expedition to the Far West," New York Herald, Dec. 24, 1870.

11 For a history of Fort McPherson, see Louis A. Holmes, Fort McPherson, Nebraska, Fort Cottonwood N.T., Guardian of the Tracks and Trails (Lincoln, Nebr.: Johnsen Publishing Co., 1963). There are many profiles of the Pawnee Scouts, including those written by Grinnell. Perhaps the most accessible and succinct is Donald F. Danker, "The North Brothers and the Pawnee Scouts," in The Nebraska Indian Wars Reader, 1865–1877, ed. R. Eli Pail (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

12 Special Order 91, July 12, 1870, Fort McPherson, Nebraska, Special Orders, v. 22, Record Group 393, Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, National Archives and Records Administration.

13 Untitled manuscript, R37:662, Grinnell papers. The surgeon mentioned was probably Assistant Surgeon A. D. Wilson. See Holmes, Fort McPherson, Nebraska, 59.

40 Grinnell, Pawnee Hero Stories, dedication page; Bayard Paine, Pioneers, Indians and Buffalo
Indian-Fighters, Hunters and Fur-Traders

shooting thirty-six buffalo during one run, while

Western Writers Series 123 (Boise: Boise State

writer, see Robley Evans, George Bird Grinnell,

University, 1996). Grinnell's quote on westerners

is from his Beyond the Old Frontier: Adventures of

Indian-Fighters, Hunters and Fur-Traders (New

York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 325.

"Frank North," Forest and Stream 24 (Mar. 19,

1885): 141. Much of the wording in the obituary

would later appear in Grinnell's other profiles of

North. See Grinnell, Passee Hero Stories, 323–35,

and Two Great Scouts, 20.

17 Untitled manuscript, R37: 662-64, Grinnell papers.

18 Joy S. Kasson, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West: Celebrity,

Memory, and Popular History (New York: Hill and

Wang, 2000). The Cody-Comstock contest is
discussed in most Cody profiles. Grinnell's account
is similar to most, although he credits Cody with
shooting thirty-six buffalo during one run, while
more other accounts mention thirty-eight. Addi-
tionally, Grinnell refers to Cody’s horse as “Little
Buckskin,” while other profiles call him “Buckskin
Joe.” The quote is from Grinnell's Diary, July 14–
30, 1870, MS 5, George Bird Grinnell Manuscript
Collection, Braun Research Library, Southwest
Museum (hereafter cited as Grinnell manuscript
collection).


21 Untitled manuscript, R37: 664–66, Grinnell papers.

22 Reilly apparently remained in the army until
1878, while Th omas's decorated career did not end
until his retirement in 1911. For details on
Reilly see Francis B. Heitman, Historical Register
and Dictionary of the United States Army (Washington,
D.C.: GPO, 1903) 1:822. For Thomas, see George
W. Cullum, Biographical Register of the Officers
and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy

23 Diary, July 17, 18, 27, 1870, Grinnell manuscript
collection. “Birdie” was Grinnell’s nickname
among his expedition mates, and one that Jim
Russell would use in his letters to Grinnell for the
next fifty years.

24 Ibid., July 15, 1870.

25 For Grinnell’s role in the establishment of the
Audubon Society, see Mitchell, “A Man Called
Bird.” For Grinnell’s role in establishing the Boone
and Crockett Club, see John F. Reiger, “Boone and
Crockett Club” in American Sportsmen and the
Origins of Conservation, 3rd. ed. (Corvallis: Or-
regon State University Press, 2001), 146–74. For
Grinnell’s role in the American conservation
movement, see Michael Fроме, “George Bird
Grinnell: Grandfather of American Conservation,”

26 For a complete and thorough description of the
expedition’s route in the Nebraska Sandhills,
see C. Barron McIntosh, “The Route of a Sand Hills
Bone Hunt: The Yale College Expedition of 1870,
Nebraska History 69 (Summer 1988): 84–94.
Besides describing some of the events of the trip,
McIntosh meticulously maps the route, hypoth-
esizing that the group never reached the Middle
Loup River, as all the members thought, but rather
ascended the Dismal River.

27 Untitled manuscript, R46: 880–81, Grinnell papers.

28 The live articles by Orn is, all from Forest
and Stream, vols. 1 and 2, are “Elk Hunting in
Nebraska” (Oct. 2, 1873): 116; “A Day with the
Sage Grouse” (Nov. 6, 1873): 196; “The Green
River Country” (Nov. 13, 1873): 212; “Buffalo Hunt
with the Panness” (Dec. 25, 1873): 305–6; and
“Albinos” (Feb. 19, 1874): 22.

29 George Bird Grinnell [Ornis, pseud.], “With
Goats and Sheep in British Columbia,” Forest and
Stream 72 (Apr. 10, 1909): 574–75; (Apr. 17,
1909): 613–14; (Apr. 24, 1909): 653–54; (May 1,

30 Western Sketches, R46: 609–28, Grinnell papers;
George Bird Grinnell [Ornis, pseud.]. Camp
Life West of the Missouri: Among the Sand Hills
of Nebraska, R44: 731–42, ibid.

31 Evans, George Bird Grinnell, 11.

32 Grinnell’s relationship with Hallock was often
strained. In 1877 Hallock published
The Sportsman’s
Quarterly
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE AMERICAN WEST
Princeton University Press, 1990), 599. For a
wonderful example of a Grinnell reference to
Nebraska, when writing about other parts of the
West, see the concluding paragraphs of his “Rocky Mountain Wanderings,” Forest and

33 Mari Sandoz, “Introduction” in George Bird
Grinnell, The Cheyenne Indians: Their History and
Ways of Life (New York: Cooper Square Publishers,
1962), v, “Dr. George Bird Grinnell,” Nebraska History

34 Grinnell to North, Dec. 12, 1926, R29: 574–75,
Grinnell papers. Luther’s original manuscript was
finally published, with Grinnell’s introduction, as
Man of the Plains: The Recollections of Luther
North, Donald F. Danker, ed. (Lincoln: University of

35 James B. Hedges, review of Two Great Scouts
and Their Pawnee Battalion in American Historical
Review 31 (July 1926): 890–91; Leo E. Oliva,
review of Two Great Scouts in American Indian
Quarterly 1 (Winter 1974–75): 293–94; The New
Encyclopedia of the American West, s.v., “Grinnell,
George Bird.”

36 Untitled manuscript, AHC#9657, George Bird
Grinnell Papers, American Heritage Center,
University of Wyoming.

37 For examples of Grinnell’s descriptions of the
“Far West” that preceded his arrival in 1870, see
Grinnell [Yo, pseud.] “The Old West,” Forest and
Stream 50 (June 25, 1898): 509–9; Grinnell, Beyond
the Old Frontier; and Grinnell, When Buffalo Ran
George Bird Grinnell published six stories in Forest and Stream magazine under the pen name Omis, five between October 1873 and February 1874, and one in 1909. "Camp Life West of the Missouri," also signed Omis, and published here for the first time, describes the early days of a fossil-hunting expedition with O. C. Marsh in 1870. Omis, Greek for bird, is no doubt a play on Grinnell's middle name "Birdie" given to him by other "pilgrims" on the Marsh expedition.

Although since the completion of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Rail Roads, what was formerly termed the "Far West" has ceased to be the terra incognita that it was prior to 1868 [sic], nevertheless, there are still vast wildernesses of prairie and mountain territory that have never been visited by the white man. Exploring parties and detachments of government troops have traversed many unknown regions, and have laid bare many of the wonders of that marvelous country that lies between the Missouri River and the Pacific Ocean, and still new phenomena are being brought to light and fresh beauties are being discovered almost every day. During the past summer the existence of vast forests of pines is reported upon the head waters of the Niobrara by a party of surveyors who have penetrated into that unknown land, a land hitherto untrodden save by the foot of savage animals, or the still more savage red man. The strange beauties of the Yellowstone region, almost unknown until quite recently, are too familiar to every reader to need more than a bare mention.

The mind struggles in vain to form an adequate conception of the vast extent of country through which we pass. We attempt to estimate it in miles, but this measure is too small and fails us just when we most need it. While travelling on the cars indeed, the distances do not seem so great. Occupied as the traveller naturally is with book, cards or conversation, time and distance alike fly swiftly by, and the journey's end is reached almost before he is aware of it. Then too, the fresh scenes and novel objects that attract and interest him at each turn in not to be disturbed till breakfast time next morning. Thus five hundred or a thousand miles may be passed away, and what was formerly a journey of months is now measured by days. Towns have sprung up and are flourishing along the lines of the Rail Road and the old emigrant trail is deserted. The progress of the traveller who rides along the road, formerly so well worn, is impeded by the tall weeds that grow in the wagon tracks, and when from time to time he passes one of the adobe ranches that still stand along the path, he finds the soil washed from the roof and the sides guttered by the rain; while the timbers that formerly served to support the former lie scattered on the ground and furnish him with firewood. The old emigrant trail has relapsed into its pristine solitude.

The farmers are astir, and after a hasty meal, they start away to repeat the labors of yesterday. And thus for months the journey is continued with scarcely an incident to vary its monotony. The passage through the Indian country, and at long intervals, a buffalo hunt, alone relieve the tediousness of the march.

Such was travel on the plains in the olden time. It has passed away, and what was formerly a journey of months is now measured by days. Towns have sprung up and are flourishing along the lines of the Rail Road and the old emigrant trail is deserted. The progress of the traveller who rides along the road, formerly so well worn, is impeded by the tall weeds that grow in the wagon tracks, and when from time to time he passes one of the adobe ranches that still stand along the path, he finds the soil washed from the roof and the sides guttered by the rain; while the timbers that formerly served to support the former lie scattered on the ground and furnish him with firewood. The old emigrant trail has relapsed into its pristine solitude.

I desire to give you a brief sketch of every day life of a party travellers who leaving the Rail Road with its civilization and all the accompanying luxuries, have started northward over the sand hills of Nebraska. Well are they called sand hills. Brown, bare and desolate, they stretch away to the north for hundreds of miles, clothed only with a sparse covering of grass that grows in stunted tufts, each separated from its neighbor by a foot of more of coarse yellow sand.

Suppose us there to have started. Our own party numbers the heavy wagons with their shining white tilts, dragged painfully along over the dusty trail by the slow oxen as the patient mules. See the herd of footsore animals that follows in the rear of the train. Listen to the shouts and cries of the drivers, the barking of dogs and the shrill creaking of the wheels. Note carefully the thousand details of the march, for it is a picture that you will never behold again.

And, at last, when the camping ground has been reached, when the wagons have been corralled and the guard placed, men and beasts reposing from their labors prepare themselves for renewed exertions on the morrow. The animals, turned out to feed, luxuriate in the rich grass. Numerous fires cast a ruddy glow over the scene and the women, who with the children have been riding throughout the day in the wagons, prepare the evening meal. The little ones rejoiced at being released from their daily imprisonment play merrily though the camp; with the happy carelessness of childhood they take no thought for the morrow. The men lounge about the fires, or busy themselves in cleaning their arms or in repairing the accidents to harness or saddle. One or two indefatigables start off down the creek or back into the bluffs and return with two or three brace of grouse, or perhaps a fat doe or an antelope. The hard labors of the day gives relish to the meal and erelong the clean stars looking down from on high, shine upon the camp wrapped in sleep.

Long before the first blush of dawn appears in the east, the travellers are astir, and after a hasty meal, they start away to repeat the labors of yesterday. And thus for months the journey is continued with scarcely an incident to vary its monotony. The passage through the Indian country, and at long intervals, a buffalo hunt, alone relieve the tediousness of the march.
The Marsh expedition's destination was the Middle Loup River, and a map drawn by the army escort places them on that stream. However, a recalculation by C. Barron McIntosh using accurate mileage data, physiographic associations and other evidence, shows their actual route to have been along the Dismal River. See C. Barron McIntosh, "The Route of a Sand Hills Bone Hunt: The Yale College Expedition of 1870," Nebraska History 69:2 (Spring 1988). Courtesy C. Barron McIntosh.

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A dozen and the cavalry and with teamsters make the total of our outfit about seventy five men. Two by two we advance in a long line over the undulating swells of the prairie, and behind us follow six government wagons, their huge white tilts sharply outlined against the brown hills. Each is drawn by six stout mules that tug and strain before their heavy loads, urged on continually by the impatient cries of the teamsters. These each mounted on the near wheeler guide the leaders by a single rein. The wagons advance slowly, at a rate of not more than two miles an hour and we are therefore soon far
ahead of them and concealed from them by the rolling bluffs over which our journey lies.

As we ride along birds of varied plumage spring up before us and fly away, the antelope gazes curiously at us from the distant bluffs; occasionally a jack rabbit starts almost from beneath the feet of the foremost horses, and with his long ears flopping at each jump skurries off while from time to time we hear the angry "skirr" of the dreadful rattlesnake. The novelty of the scene delights us and we converse gaily as we ride along. As the sun passes the zenith, however, his rays becoming more potent moderate our spirits and now whenever we halt for a while to allow the wagons to come up, each rider dismounting throws himself upon the ground and takes advantage of the shadow cast by his horse to shelter himself from the burning rays.

The sun is low in the west when as we round the point of a low bluff, we see in a little hollow, a few hundred yards ahead, a pool of clear water. Its banks are clothed with a thick growth of high grass which promises excellent food for our animals and we immediately resolve to take advantage of so favorable a spot for the camp. As we approach the water an antelope stirs from the high grass near it's edge, and after gazing at us for a moment turns to flee, but a dozen rifles crack and the beautiful creature sinks bleeding to the earth.

In a few minutes the horses are unsaddled and we lead them down to drink. Several of the troopers, however, pass their lariats around the noses of their animals and spring on their backs to ride them down to the water. As they start some sudden movement causes one of the riders to clasp his legs tightly about his horse and the latter feels the spurs which the cavalry-man has forgotten to take off. The improvised bridle gives him no control over the spirited animal which with many a bound and plunge, dashes off toward the bluffs. The shouts of his comrades notify the careless fellow of the cause of his trouble, and when he loosens the grasp of his legs in order to stop the spurring, a final plunge send him high into the air and he falls sprawling upon the plain amid the screams of laughter of the whole company. The affrighted steed gallops off over the bluff but is pursued and soon brought back. The fall is the least serious part of the matter to the unlucky soldier. Besides the severe rebuke from the Lieutenant in command, he will have to bear the jeers of his fellows for many a long day.

The tents are now pitched, the fires kindled, and before long we are summoned to our evening meal. The tender steaks of the antelope are keenly enjoyed and it is pronounced the most delicious of game. Enlivened by song and story the evening passes away and at length we spread our blankets, and pondering on the wonders of the great west, one by one we fall asleep.

The stars were still shining with that brilliant radiance peculiar to the western heavens, when the clear notes of a bugle sounding the stable call rang out upon the still air. At this signal the quiet that had previously reigned is dispelled and sounds of bustling activity commence to be heard—all hands hasten from their tents to the wagons to get corn for their horses and then make a hurried toilet. The cooks have already built the fires and move about them preparing breakfast. The red light gives color to surrounding objects and a genial warmth is imparted to the chill air of early morning. As we partake of the meal the eastern sky begins to pale, and just before sunrise at the sound of "boots and saddles" we catch up our horses and are soon on our way.

Fresh and invigorated is the breeze of the morning and glorious beyond description the sunrise that we view. The mists that hang over the lower lands as they are warmed by the rising sun, roll up the bluffs to their summits, and after lingering there for a while are finally dispersed and vanish. The grass wet with dew sparkles in the sun and the cheerful notes of birds are heard on every side. The horses, too, seem to feel the beauty of the scene and move along with an active springy gait very different from their lagging steps toward evening. We proceed for some hours and now the difficulties of the route increase. At times the bluffs are so steep as to appear almost impassable, and it is only by doubling up the teams that we are enabled to surmount them. Finally we reach a little valley surrounded by high and steep hills which it seems useless to attempt to pass. A halt is ordered and we collect beneath the shade of the wagons to discuss the possibilities of penetrating farther into this desert. The idea of giving up the expedition and returning is suggested, but it is treated with the contempt it deserves, and presently scouts are sent out to see if a path cannot be found by which we may continue our march. After an absence of an hour they return and report that if we can pass three or four bad places near at hand we shall strike a divide which promises a fair wagon road. We renew our exertions and after several hours of the severest labors reach a more level country.

This we traversed until the approach of night warns us to seek a camping ground. A little pool of stagnant water is found and by it we pitch our tents. Our reservoir is not a large one, only about two feet in diameter and an inch and a half deep, it is thoroughly warmed by the heat of the sun and is teeming with animal and vegetable life, but it contains water and we are very thankful for it. Men are set to work to enlarge it, and a guard is placed to keep the thirsty animals away from it's edge. Then follows the tedious work of watering the latter. We have a few buckets and these are slowly filled by dipping up the precious liquids half a capful at a time as it trickles drop by drop from the sand. They are then passed up to the waiting herd, emptied and sent back. This is kept up until long after dark and when it is over, thoroughly wearied by the day's work, we seek our couches and are soon profoundly sleeping.

George Bird Grinnell [Ornis, pseud.], "Camp Life West of the Missouri: Among the Sand Hills of Nebraska," George Bird Grinnell Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. Transcribed from the microfilm (Scholarly Resources, 1999), Reel 44, frames 73-42. Grinnell's usage, spelling, and punctuation have been retained.