

Dalton, Nebraska: Your Hometown Heritage

by Larry Martin © 2003, 2005

Dalton, Nebraska!?! Should I be interested in that tiny speck on a map out there in the southwestern panhandle of Nowhere, Nebraska?

As a descendant of Herman and Mary Martin, you should be interested, as it is a part of your heritage! Herman and Mary Martin moved to Dalton fairly early in their marriage. If they were your grandparents, one or both of your parents were born or grew up in the small town of Dalton. As a great grandchild of Herman and Mary, you might find it interesting to learn something of the town of Dalton, which has so much to do with your own family heritage.

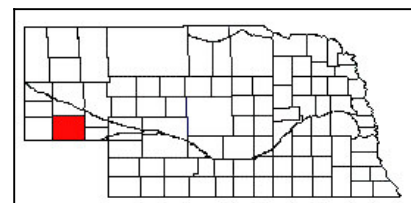


Dalton, Nebraska on the vast prairie of Cheyenne County, as it appears when approaching from the south on highway US 385. Photo 1996.

How did Dalton come to be? Why would anyone want to live there?

Who were the people that created and settled that community?

The southwestern panhandle of Nebraska, where Dalton is located, has a very interesting and colorful history. Its past was marked by fierce Indian battles, the boom of nearby gold discoveries, the development of a huge cattle industry, and the collapse of that way of life as it gave way to the influx of farmers. This area also saw the coming and going of thousands of prairie schooners with their wagon wheels rolling along the Mormon, the Overland, and the Oregon Trails as they crossed the grassy Nebraska plains. Many well-known landmarks for those traveling the trails are located in this part of Nebraska, such as Mud Springs, Court House and Jail Rocks, Chimney Rock, and Scotts Bluff.



Map of present day Nebraska with Cheyenne County (shaded), in which Dalton, Mud Springs, and Sidney are located.

Less than 150 years ago, the land in the vicinity of where Dalton is now located was inhabited almost entirely by buffalo and Indians (predominately the Pawnee, the Cheyenne, and the Lakota Sioux). A convenient watering spot, known as Mud Springs, became the focal point for the many trails that had developed over the centuries: first for the buffalo, then the Indians, the trappers and traders, the soldiers, the Pony Express, the stage lines, the pioneers heading to Utah, California, and Oregon, and finally the railroads. Mud Springs (now know as Simla) is located about three miles northwest of what became the community of Dalton.

The settlement and development of southwestern Nebraska was significantly affected by the construction of two railroad lines: one east-west and the other north-south. The Union Pacific railroad was built across the area from the east to the west, and the town of Sidney, twenty miles south of present day Dalton, was established and named by the railroad in 1867. The army soon established Fort Sidney, which offered protection to the local inhabitants and the railroad from the Indians. In 1876, gold was discovered to the north in the Black Hills of South Dakota, and there was a rush of miners and adventurers into the area. Sidney became an important supply point, and the Sidney-Black Hills Trail came into being as the route from Sidney to the Black Hills to the north. Sidney, for a few years, was a true rough and tumble frontier town frequented by many notorious characters, including Wild Bill Hickock, Calamity Jane, Sam Bass, and Doc Middleton.

Work on a north-south railroad was begun in 1898 and completed in 1900. It provided service from Denver, Colorado to Deadwood in the Black Hills. The construction of this railroad required the establishment of track laying work camps every few miles along the right of way. Along the track, a strip of land originally granted to the Union Pacific railroad by the United States government in 1867, then transferred to the NW&W/Burlington railroad for their north-south tracks in 1900, was the site of a railroad workstation camp. This camp, established by the railroad in early 1900, was named "Dalton." As was the custom, it was probably the name of a railroad official, although some believe it might have been named after Dalton, Massachusetts. In addition to the work camp, the railroad erected a depot, a section house, water tank, and stock pens. By the fall of 1900, there was daily freight and passenger train service running by the Dalton station between Denver and Deadwood.

Meanwhile, cattle raising had come to the area in 1869. The Platte rivers and many lesser streams weaving through the grassy plains supported large herds, and cattle ranching became the dominate agricultural activity. However, during the late 1800s, agricultural experimentation convinced many eastern Nebraska farmers that even the non-irrigated relatively arid land of the vast expanses of the high plains in southwestern Nebraska, could be successfully cultivated and could be profitable. Spurred by the availability of 160 acre homesteads, there began, in the 1880s, a period of migration of farmers to southwestern Nebraska. They built their sod houses on the land where trees were rarely seen, and began plowing the fields. Conflicts soon arose between the cattle ranchers and the farmers or "Grangers" as they were known. Court cases were decided in favor of the Grangers and this led to the break up of the great cattle ranches in the area. Winter wheat soon became the primary agricultural crop.

As the farmers migrated from the east into western Nebraska, new towns developed and existing small communities began to grow. Advertisements were placed in the larger newspapers of eastern Nebraska and Iowa to encourage "immigrants" to move to the growing communities in

the west. One advertisement described the fertile and cheap land, opportunities for agricultural pursuits, but also appealed to potential investors and businessmen, promising that Cheyenne County (in which Sidney and Dalton are located), "...offered advantages to both the man of large means as well as small means..," and that "...considerable sums of money are yet to be made."

During the first decade of 1900, the migration of farmers, tradesmen and businessmen, and their families from the east to the small towns and communities of rural southwestern Nebraska had a significant impact upon the development of western Nebraska in general, and the growth of Dalton and our family history and heritage in particular.

Dalton seemed to be well situated to attract and benefit from the migrating farmers and those who would engage in supporting businesses or trades. It was a small railroad station on the north-south line, and easily accessible by the major east-west line which ran through Sidney just 20 miles to the south on what became highway US 385. By 1908, advertisements in the Sidney newspaper touted the virtues and livability of Dalton: "There never was another town in the state which made as rapid a growth as this town." There were grain elevators, hotels, livery barns, churches, and several stores. "Land is level, having a rich black soil five feet deep with clay subsoil underneath. There never was a better chance for men to get close to a good town and have better soil than this, with the price of land from \$16 to \$22.50 per acre."

The railroad work camp of Dalton had begun to expand into a small community as early as 1901-1902 to support the nearby farmers and influx of businessmen. A one-room school house was built just west of the tiny town. In 1902, a request was submitted to establish a post office for "Dalton." By 1903, the first general store was established in town, which soon included the post office. The store sold groceries, clothing, cloth, hardware, lumber, and coal. Lumber was in short supply in the area, but by 1903 the first wooden house was built in Dalton. Water was another scarce commodity. In 1908, the only well was privately owned, and the owner hauled and sold water to the local residents for 25 cents per small tank. Eventually, three windmills provided water for the residents of Dalton. One was located in the middle of Main street and the other two were in the back yards of residents.

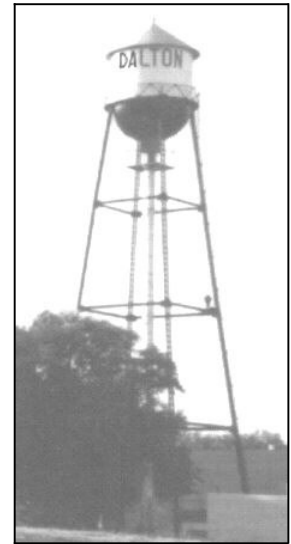
Dalton, about 1909, from the west on Main street, looking east showing one of three windmills which provided the early water supply.

The building at the far end of Main street is the original Dalton school built in 1909. In 1925, it was moved to the south side of the street and became the Pioneer Memorial hospital.



The town's present day water tower was built in 1914 with a 30,000 gallon capacity tank. A new 280 foot well was dug by hand to provide the water to fill it. What a day of celebration it must have been for the townspeople when that imposing silver structure with "DALTON" painted on the tank was completed and became a more reliable means of water distribution.

As the one room school became inadequate to accommodate the growing number of children, a two-story brick school was built in town in 1909. The school served the first through the twelfth grades. The first church in Dalton was the Presbyterian, built in 1908. Soon, there was a Catholic and a Lutheran church in town. Dalton's first newspaper began publication in 1909. By 1913, a fire department was organized with a cart pulled by the volunteer firemen. A small company with a 100 horse power generator provided electric power to many Dalton residents by 1917.



The Dalton water tower, built in 1914, as it appears today, 2004.



Comparative pictures of Dalton, looking from the west down Main Street. The top photo shows Dalton in 1921, the lower photo is how Dalton looked in 2004 during our reunion.

Businesses in Dalton came and went over the years like in many other small towns. But even in the difficult times of the early 1930s (when many of our parents became adults), Dalton offered many services to its residents and the surrounding agricultural community that it served.

Within the town limits, there lived approximately 375 residents. There were four churches; two grocery stores; a general merchandise store; two cafés; two taverns (one with a pool hall), and a drug store. There were three grain elevators; three farm implement dealerships, as well as a Chevrolet automobile dealership; a hardware store; a creamery and ice cream store; three gas stations; a barbershop; a bank; a newspaper office; a train depot; a telephone exchange which also sold small appliances; a fire house with a small pick-up fire engine; a town library and village clerk's office; a single jail cell; a school with grades one through 12; a hospital, a doctor's office and a resident doctor. The dentist had an office, but was in town only once a month. And, of course, there was the blacksmith shop.

From the tiny railroad work camp established around 1901, Dalton had grown rapidly. By 1909, there were about 200 people living in the community known as Dalton. On July 21, 1909, a delegation of five Dalton citizens were selected to present a petition to the Cheyenne County commissioners in Sidney, requesting that Dalton be formally incorporated into a village. The request was approved and the five men were appointed as village trustees. One of those "founding fathers" and original trustees of the Village of Dalton was **Herman A. Martin**.