



**Stone fence posts, North Central Kansas (Courtesy of Kansas Industrial Development Commission)**

## Facts and Fiction

Fences? Good heavens! What's there to say about fences? They are just something that people tear their clothes on when they try to crawl through, something for the birds to sit on, something to keep livestock in one field and out of another, something that every farm has. But what else could possibly be said about fences?

Well, surprisingly enough, fences are fascinating. For instance, probably everyone has heard the proverbial comparisons that a certain person is "as ugly as a mud fence," and that someone else is "as skinny as a fence rail" (which is sometimes heard "as skinny as a rail"). These comparisons are common in oral tradition all over the United States, and are certainly used in Kansas. But how many people ever stopped to think about just how ugly a real mud fence is? —Or even if there is such a thing?

As a matter of fact, there used to be a few mud fences right here in the state of Kansas. One can imagine the impracticality of such a fence (to say nothing of its ugliness!), but sometimes in the early days a temporary mud fence was better than no fence at all. At least three types were used: a fence built by stacking straw-and-mud bricks; a sod type, laid up much as the sod house walls were laid up; and the type which was formed by simply piling up dirt and packing it. The characteristic in common with the last two types was the deep ditch on the outer side. This ditch, about three feet deep, served as part of the fence and also yielded up the earth used in building the other part on top of the ground. These fences were built in order to keep livestock out of a certain area—and especially to keep

range cattle from trespassing. Certainly a deep ditch backed by a bulwark three or four feet high would be rather discouraging to all but the most foolish animals.

Naturally when people were able to get stone or wire, or had time to grow hedges, mud fences were not even considered—but in the early days, so they say, sometimes those old ugly mud fences came in mighty handy.

Whether the saying “as skinny as a rail” actually came from the idea of fence rails or railroad rails is conjectural. At any rate, the saying has been reported in Kansas both “as a rail” and “as a fence rail,” and whichever way you look at it, the person is pretty doggone thin.

Occasionally, fences show up in other material passed around by word of mouth. For example, this riddle was heard in Lyon County: What time is it when an elephant sits on a Kansas fence? —Time to get another fence.

Then there is the joke about the teacher who asked a little boy to use the word “detail” in a sentence. The boy said, “De duck’s head went under de fence before de tail.”

Another joke, reported from Western Kansas, uses a similar play on words. (Incidentally, the play on words or ideas is a pretty common form of humor in oral tradition.)

Two neighboring farmers out west had feuded for years. The community was well aware that the two men were far from friendly, but it was kind of a surprise when one of the men got shot and had to be taken to the hospital. The other man, of course, was taken to court, you know.

Well, the judge asked this one man, “Did you shoot him in self-defense?”

And the fellow said, “No, Judge, I didn’t. I shot him in de back just as he went *over de fence*.”

But seriously, feuding and fences seem to go together pretty well. Nearly every community has had its “spite fence” at some time or another. A spite fence is really two fences running along side by side, maybe six or twelve inches apart. Farmer Jones puts up his fence just inside his property line and won’t let Farmer Brown “use” it. So Farmer Brown erects a fence on *his* side of the line. Thus, each man “spites” the other, and from this double fencing project comes the term “spite fence.”

Some of the feuds may strike the outsider as pretty amusing, but the people involved are usually dead serious. From an area in the southern part of Kansas come a couple of fence-feud stories that are supposed to be true. It seems that one fellow set out trees all along the fence in the daytime. At night his unfriendly neighbor went along and pulled them out! Another story involves the fence itself. One day Farmer A put in a mile of fence; that night Farmer B went along and tore it all out. It is said that he even went so far as to destroy the posts and to fill in the post holes!

An account of one man's solution to a fencing problem in Osage County was told a few years ago by his granddaughter, who at the time of the telling was in her sixties. This really happened, just as she told it:

"When grandad started to farm [around 1870], he bought an eighty acre farm that on one side was bordered by the farm of a rich cattleman who raised expensive heifer cattle. Despite his great wealth he neglected to keep his fences fixed.

"As was the custom [See reference to this law on page 24] of those days, each farmer was to fix one half of the fence that was next to his neighbor. Grandfather, being young and ambitious, fixed his half of the fence. The rich neighbor failed to do the same.

"Over the years the rich farmer's cattle kept getting out, and they would eat or trample grandad's crops. Still the rancher failed to heed to grandfather's plea to please fix his half of the fence. Grandfather, not wanting to admit defeat, noticed that every year at a certain time his neighbor would buy a large head of heifers and put them in the pasture next to his farm. That was all grandfather needed.

"The next year the cattleman put his heifers in the pasture as usual. As soon as he did, grandfather bought the oldest, ugliest, and poorest bull he could find, and put him in his own pasture. Needless to say, as time went on and Mother Nature took her course, the rich man's heifers and grandfather's old bull mingled together through the poor fence.

"When the following spring came, and the rich neighbor's cattle started to have calves, you never in your life saw such an ugly, mixed-up bunch of calves in your life! The fence was fixed immediately, and stayed fixed."

The *Kansas Historical Quarterly* of 1939 makes note of another problem in Kansas fencing which originally appeared in a story printed by the *Rocky Mountain News* (Auraria and Denver) in the March 7, 1860 issue. According to the *News*,

A letter was received at the metal warehouse of Thos. S. Dickerson, No. 45 Wabash avenue, also largely in the trade in fence wire, to the following effect:

"Dear Sir:— Send me your terms for fence wire. I am thinking of fencing in Kansas. Yours, &c."

The book-keeper into whose hands the letter fell, started at the proposed territorial movement, fell into a brown study, and made a series of calculations, and relying upon the resources of the house in the line indicated, replied as follows:

"Dear Sir:—Have consulted the best authorities, and made an approximate calculation of the amount of wire it will take to 'fence in' Kansas. We find that we have *just enough* if you order at once.

Yours, &c."

All this talk about fences, of course, is leading up to the main article of this issue, "Fencing the Prairies." Its author, W. M. Richards, is one of

the nicest fellows you could hope to meet—a tall, vital man with a twinkle in his eye, a wonderful sense of humor, and a wealth of knowledge about things that matter.

W. M. Richards is a real Kansas man. He was born in Elk County, near Howard, over sixty years ago. He went to school in a little one-room country school, and after graduating from the eighth grade, he soon took the County Teachers Examination. (In the early years of this century and before, it was quite usual for people to go no further than the eighth grade—even teachers. If a person could pass the county examination, he could obtain a teachers certificate.) His first teaching job was in the very school in which he had been a pupil a short time before. After a year, he moved over to the Fairview school, another one-teacher school. For two years, he rode to and from work on horseback, eleven miles a day.

Later, he moved to Severy as principal-superintendent-teacher. After serving in the navy during World War I and getting a bachelors degree at Emporia State Normal, he went on to jobs as Superintendent of Schools at Severy (1919-'21), Herington (1922-'28), Dodge City (1928-'35), and Emporia (1935-'56). After three years as Associate Professor of Education at College of Emporia, he became Special Lecturer in Education at K.S.T.C.

Mr. Richards, one of our best Kansas historians, first became interested in the history of the state when he was about fifteen. He happened to find an old metal bridle bit out in a field one day, and it stirred up his curiosity. Perhaps the bit had belonged to an early Indian or a Civil War soldier or some long-gone outlaw or . . .? That started him on a hobby of study, observation, research which has made him an expert on Kansas. He has written seven books so far, six of which he co-authored with Bliss Isely. Probably the best known of these are *Four Centuries in Kansas* (1937), which was used in the Kansas schools for many years, and *We, the People*, which is currently being used as a text by various states over the country. All of these books are in print except for the seventh one; it should be out by the fall of 1960.

Mr. Richards, with his knowledge, his experiences, his accomplishments, is an interesting subject himself. But let's let him do the talking for a while about one of his favorite topics—"Fencing the Prairies."