Nebraska has the distinction of having the only unicameral legislature in the United States, and it is the only state in the nation in which every electric utility operating in the state is publicly owned. The Only State tells the fascinating story of how public power in Nebraska evolved from a network of small town municipal utilities early in the twentieth century into a statewide system of electric entities, served by a series of nuclear and coal-fired electric power stations, as well as hydroelectric dams, wind turbines, and gas generation facilities. Seeded out of the pioneers’ settlement in the rich bottomlands of the state’s major river systems, public power is a Nebraska tradition that continues to deliver low-cost and reliable electricity into millions of homes and businesses and contributes to the “good life” Nebraskans enjoy.

Co-authors Don Schaufelberger and Bill Beck are uniquely positioned to collaborate on The Only State. Schaufelberger, a retired president and CEO of Nebraska Public Power District, has been associated with public power in the state for more than sixty years. Beck has written dozens of electric and gas utility histories during a quarter-century career as one of America’s most accomplished corporate and institutional historians.
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Pioneers who crossed “the wide Missouri” in the mid-1800s thought little about who would control the generation and distribution of electric power in the area in the future. The “Overlanders” who followed the Platte River Valley west along the California, Mormon, or Oregon trails to the California goldfields, the Mormon Commonwealth in Utah, or the verdant farms of the Pacific Northwest were essentially ignorant of the benefits that electric power would bring to society in the twentieth century.

For much of the nineteenth century, the state’s history could be characterized as a place where settlers crossed to get to somewhere else. The United States acquired all of what would become the state of Nebraska when President Thomas Jefferson negotiated the Louisiana Purchase from Napoleon Bonaparte in 1803. In the early 1800s, the Lewis and Clark Expedition and the explorations of Lieutenant Zebulon Pike both passed briefly through eastern and southern Nebraska.

Settlement began between 1812 and 1825. Fur trader Manuel Lisa built Fort Lisa in 1812, and the U.S. Army built Fort Atkinson near present-day Council Bluffs in 1819 as a bulwark against threatened British raids from Canada. The next year, 1820, Major Stephen H. Long and a party of naturalists and soldiers followed the Platte River west across Nebraska to the Rocky Mountains. Long had a dismal opinion on the country he crossed to the mountains, describing the Great Plains as “the Great American Desert.”

After settlers began to found steamboat landings along the Missouri River in the 1820s and 1830s, the steamboat trade on the Upper Missouri began to grow. Bellevue, just south of present-day Omaha, became the state’s first permanent settlement in 1823. Within ten years, other small settlements had popped up along the river, and steamboats were venturing up river as far as present-day North Dakota and Montana in search of furs and trade with the Native Americans of the region.
John Fremont, known to a generation of Americans as “the Pathfinder,” explored the Platte River Valley further in the 1840s and gave the name “Nebraska” to the territory he traveled across. In 1848, the U.S. Army established Fort Kearney on the Platte River to protect settlers moving west across the Oregon Trail.

The Oregon Trail, the first of the overland traces across the tall-grass prairie between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, had been blazed in the 1830s. Fur traders Jedediah Smith, David Jackson, and William Sublette set out in 1830 by flatboat from St. Louis and then struck out west along the Platte River instead of heading north along the Missouri River as Lewis and Clark had done a quarter-century before. By the 1840s, thousands of travelers were jumping off at Independence, Missouri, and then following wagon ruts to the U.S. Army’s Fort Kearney on the Platte River in south-central Nebraska. From there, they followed the river west past Chimney Rock on their way to the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Northwest.

For much of the 1830s and 1840s, the political history of Nebraska had revolved around what Congress indelicately called “the Indian question.” The 1830 passage of the Indian Removal Act allowed the federal government to relocate Native Americans to lands west of the Mississippi River. The Trade and Intercourse Act of 1834 prohibited whites from trespassing on the newly-created Native American lands west of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. As a consequence, white settlers were barred from settling in what became Nebraska until the 1850s.

The social issue that dominated politics in the 1850s, however, was slavery, and Nebraska was at the eye of the storm for much of the decade. The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 set the stage for establishing Nebraska as a territory, but it embroiled the region into the political upheaval that preceded the Civil War. The act essentially repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which outlawed slavery north of the 36th Parallel. Although partisans in Nebraska argued the issue in newspaper broadsides and with fisticuffs in saloons, the territory’s neighbors in Kansas engaged in outright guerilla warfare over slavery during the late 1850s and early 1860s.

Gold rushes in Colorado in 1859 and Montana Territory in the 1860s created a strong demand for logistic services across Nebraska. River towns such as Bellevue, Omaha, and Nebraska City boasted warehouse districts where goods shipped into the territory by steamboat were reloaded into wagons pulled by teams of oxen for the arduous journey to the goldfields.
With his rifle, Bowie Knife, and hatchet, Daniel Freeman was ready for any eventuality on his homestead near Beatrice with homestead application, certificate, and proof. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)
Statehood and Settlement

By the time the Civil War broke out in 1861, the Nebraska Territory had begun attracting settlers who stayed rather than journey across the territory in search of brighter pastures elsewhere. The territory’s population grew from 2,732 in 1854 to 28,841 just six years later. Settlement followed the Platte and the territory’s other rivers, the Loup, Blue, Nemaha, Elkhorn, Republican, and their many tributaries.

Nebraska Territory was still a stopping-off place during the 1860s, but the character of the region was changing. The Pony Express riders were following the valley of the Platte west from civilization in Kansas City and Omaha, but farms increasingly were cropping up across the southern and eastern portions of the state. Most of the farms were small, fifty acres or less, and the farmers were increasingly immigrants who had fled the 1848 revolution in the German principalities, or Irish smallholders who had left the starvation of the potato famine in the 1850s.

The increase in population and farms led inevitably to the establishment of trading centers to serve the agricultural economy. Columbus and Fremont, both located northwest of Omaha, were formed in 1856. Beatrice, some forty miles south of Lincoln, dates its founding to the next year, 1857. On May 30, 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act created the Nebraska Territory with the territorial capital at Omaha. Nebraska became the thirty-seventh state in 1867, shortly after the Civil War. At that time, the capital was moved from Omaha to the village of Lancaster, later renamed Lincoln in honor of the recently assassinated president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln.

Two major events in the early 1860s advanced the agricultural frontier across Nebraska. Congress passed the Homestead Act of 1862, followed shortly after by the Pacific Railroad Act of 1862; the first transcontinental railroad crossed Nebraska late in the decade. The Homestead Act encouraged settlement of the Great Plains by making free land available to anyone who would claim the land and live on it for several years and improve the acreage. A few minutes after midnight on January 1, 1863, homesteader Daniel Freeman filed a claim on property a few miles northwest of Beatrice, reportedly the first person in the United States to file a homestead claim. During the next thirty years, millions of homesteaders in Nebraska and the Great Plains states would “prove up” government land.
The Pacific Railway Act of 1862 was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln to aid in the construction of a railroad and telegraph line from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean and secure for the government the ability to use the same for postal, military, and other purposes. The act granted ten square miles of public land on each side of the tracks, every other section, for every mile laid except where railroads ran through cities and crossed rivers. The thought behind the land grant was that the railroads could use the millions of acres of free land to offset the costs of building rail lines west to the Rocky Mountains and beyond. As a result, railroad expansion would provide new avenues of migration into the American interior.

The upshot was the completion of the Union Pacific Railroad across Nebraska to the Golden Spike ceremony at Promontory Point, Utah, in 1869. The Union Pacific, with its terminus at Omaha, crossed the state along the valley of the Platte River, giving Nebraska a transportation infrastructure that was the envy of neighboring states. The Chicago, Burlington and Quincy, and its predecessors, was another important pioneer railroad in Nebraska.

As a result of railroad development and Homestead Act settlement, Nebraska’s population boomed during the 1860s. Between 1860 and 1870, the number of Nebraskans quadrupled to more than 123,000 people. Congress recognized the past and potential growth of the territory when it authorized statehood for Nebraska in early 1867. The Nebraska Territorial Legislature convened in a special session on February 20, 1867, and signified its intent to abide by the congressional authorization. A little over one week later, on March 1, President Andrew Johnson signed the bill admitting Nebraska as the nation’s thirty-seventh state.
Dugouts, like this one on the South Loup River (top) and the Christmas Sister’s sod house on the Lieben (Lillian) Creek (bottom) in Custer County were popular with Nebraska’s early pioneers. They were sturdy, warm in winter, cool in summer, and easy to adapt for human habitation. (Courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society, RG 2608.PH:0-1653; RG2608.PH:10-53)
A Life of Unending Toil

Settlement of the new state of Nebraska continued apace through the 1870s and 1880s. Population nearly tripled between 1870 and 1880, topping out at just over 450,000 people in the federal census. Rail spurs into the unpopulated grasslands north of the Platte River and into the vast Sandhills region along the border with the Dakota Territory brought thousands of settlers into previously unpopulated sections of the state. New towns popped up on the windblown prairies, connected to the bigger cities and the main line railroads by steel rails that often weren’t in the best repair.

Life on the Nebraska prairies in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was a series of struggles against drought, insect infestation, temperature extremes, and economic hardship. Those on the farm probably had it the worst. Farming in the 1870s and 1880s was unending toil, from sunup to dark. Farmhouses and barns were lit by candles or coal-oil lamps. Meals were cooked on wood- or coal-fired stoves. Water for drinking and washing was drawn by hand from a pump, usually at the well in the yard. Because of the difficulty of filling gallon or five-gallon pails, bathing was reserved for Saturday night.

In the dairy farming areas of eastern Nebraska, cows had to be milked by hand twice a day. Hay and grass for feed were cut with scythes and pitched into the barn loft by hand. Plowing and harrowing were done with teams of oxen or horses. After heating water in large kettles or pails on wood- or coal-fired stoves, farmwives dipped the water into a smaller pail and carried it to the washtub. Using the hot water, they scrubbed clothes across a washboard and then ran them through a hand-wringer before hanging them on a line outside to dry.

Farmers in the eastern half of the state generally had wood available to build wood-frame farmhouses. That wasn’t the case in the prairie sections of Nebraska where the only readily available building material was the sod that held the prairie grass together. One homesteader described how his “father, mother, and neighbors from the nearby homestead cut sod from the virgin prairie and piled up two-foot sod squares to make the walls for the sod house and adjacent barn. They installed wooden window and door frames in the sod foundation, laid a wooden roof frame across the top of the walls and piled sod on top of that.”
Inside the sod dwelling, the pioneer family would plaster everything over with cow manure, which dried to the consistency of concrete and sealed the interior of the dwelling from the winter winds that howled across the Nebraska prairie. The typical sod house contained two rooms, a kitchen and a living area, often with a loft area for sleeping. The rooms were usually divided with a curtain or a blanket, and a pot-bellied stove provided heat for the living area. Often, on the treeless prairie, dried buffalo or cow manure, called chips, were used for fuel. A prosperous farm family might have a second stove in the kitchen, primarily for cooking. The homesteader and his family would stable horses and milk cows in an adjacent sod barn. Although primitive, the sod houses did have the reputation of being warm in winter and cool in summer.

**Small Town Life**

Residents of Nebraska’s small towns had little less of a comfortable existence than their rural neighbors before electric power began making its presence known in the 1880s. Residents of larger cities such as Omaha, Kansas City, and St. Louis were able to avail themselves of coal-gas streetlights during the 1870s, although the light was frequently feeble and plagued with smoke issues. Most gas distribution companies in North America and Europe manufactured and sold what was commonly called “town gas.” Derived from burning coal in the absence of oxygen, low-British Thermal Unit (BTU) manufactured, or town gas lit North American streets, including Nebraska’s two largest cities, Omaha and Lincoln, for much of the last half of the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, manufactured gas played an increasingly
Larger Nebraska towns in the late nineteenth century boasted cultural venues like this opera house on the main street of Chadron in 1888. (Courtesy of Dawes County Historical Society)

One of the earliest log houses built in Buffalo County in 1859 by William Story. (Courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society, RG2608.PH:0-706-A)
important role in gas utilities’ sales to residential and commercial cooking and heating markets.

Nebraska’s small-town dirt streets were as dark at night as the adjacent prairies. The kitchens in small-town homes had no refrigeration, and an outhouse out back was what passed for residential sanitary systems. There were no telephones in Nebraska in the 1870s, and air conditioning during the summer was provided by the arrival of infrequent cold fronts. Because of the absence and expense of lighting, residents went to bed at dusk and awoke at dawn.

Life was about to change, however. In 1879 in far-off New Jersey, inventor Thomas Alva Edison, after years of trial and error, finally perfected a workable incandescent light bulb. Within three years, he had developed a delivery system consisting of dynamos and conductors at the Pearl Street Station in Lower Manhattan. Edison’s customers were Wall Street trading offices and the residences of such powerful investment bankers as J. P. Morgan.

Other inventors, including Charles Brush in Cleveland and Elihu Thomson in Lynn, Massachusetts, were experimenting with similar systems to deliver arc lights and incandescent lights. Before the decade of the 1880s drew to a close, both Nebraska and America would begin a half-century process of electrification, an industrial evolution that would transform society.
Chimney Rock was one of the most recognized Nebraska landmarks on the trail west. (Courtesy of Michael Forsberg, Nebraska Department of Economic Development)