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KAY GOLDEN

Building a “Young Ireland”

T. V. Golden and Nebraska’s “Irish Capital,” 1880–1926

The son of Irish immigrants, T. V. Golden helped build and boost the city of O’Neill, Nebraska. General John O’Neill—an Irish immigrant himself—founded the city in the late nineteenth century and encouraged his countrymen and -women to flee the poverty and prejudice of northeastern urban areas and settle in Nebraska with the assistance of the 1862 Homestead Act. Today, O’Neill bills itself as the “Irish capital of Nebraska” in a nod to General O’Neill and the Irish Americans—like T. V. Golden—who populated and motored this small town in northern Nebraska.¹ This exploration of Golden’s life reveals the ways in which one community developed an Irish space in the American Midwest and reflects the region’s signal transformation—from a nonwhite to a white place—over the past two centuries.

From 1840 to 1890, a seismic political and cultural shift took place in Nebraska as Euro Americans displaced the Native groups that had inhabited the land for centuries. The interaction and subsequent clashes between Euro and Native Americans began with the flow of emigrant wagon trains on the Mormon and Oregon trails and intensified as traffic through the region saw a significant increase during the gold rushes in California, Colorado, South Dakota, and Nevada. These “[g]rowing numbers meant increasing contact” and conflict “between the Native American and the Euro-American cultures.” The United States government responded by building military forts and negotiating treaties that increasingly placed Native tribes under the control of federal agencies. According to historian Charles Barron McIntosh, “After the southern portion of the Sioux hunting area was purchased in mid-1875, the cattle culture took over the land previ-

ously occupied by the culture of the hunt.” In 1877, furthermore, “a decisive step in this cultural change occurred when the Sioux were removed from their hunting ground in the Sand Hills” and moved to Dakota Territory, to the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations. But the “invading cattle culture” was relatively short-lived. When the US government began surveying the land and passed the Homestead Act of 1862, “The legal right to claim and use a parcel of land was the tenet of the culture change process” by which “Euro-Americans replaced Native Americans on the Great Plains.”²

Among these Nebraska homesteaders were thousands of Irish immigrants and their descendants who themselves felt dispossessed and disinherited. Theirs was a long history of physical and psychological suffering. Penal laws across the Atlantic dating from 1695 had “barred Catholics from the army and navy, the law, commerce, and from every civic activity.” Catholics could not “vote, hold any office under the Crown, or purchase land.” Moreover, Catholics lacked viable education options, since they “could not attend schools, nor keep schools, nor send their children to be educated abroad.” Their religious freedom was severely curtailed, and “priest-hunting was treated as a sport.” In 1835, three quarters of Irish laborers had no regular employment. Most Irish rented land from their English landlords and farmed tiny acreages. They were evicted at will and routinely subjected to brutality. Housing conditions were abysmal: “pigs slept with their owners, manure heaps choked doors, sometimes even stood inside; the evicted and unemployed put roofs over ditches, burrowed into banks, existed in bog holes.” It was not uncommon to see “three, six, or even ten families . . . settled on land which could provide food only for one family.”³ When their potato crops failed repeatedly during the 1830s and 1840s, poverty and famine became widespread. “It was a common sight,” one author notes, “to see a small band of frightened children pushing a wheelbarrow in which two dead parents lay. Mass burials became a necessity, and bodies were dumped in open pits on top of other bodies that waited there, scattered with lime.”⁴

Millions of Irish flooded into America seeking employment, autonomy, and a cultural identity they had been denied for centuries. Most had neither the money nor the strength to travel further than the eastern seaboard. In cities like Boston and New York they were reviled as filthy, lazy, disorderly, and animalistic. Their Catholicism earned them contempt from American Protestants, who—“believ[ing] that republicanism and Catholicism simply could not coexist”—refused to hire or associate with them.⁵ Irish im-

migrants often found housing in “windowless hollows carved out of the earth, completely without ventilation, drainage, or any form of plumbing. Families doubled and tripled up to occupy these holes, and it was not surprising to find as many as forty people living in a single tiny cavity.” Amidst these conditions, the “sick grew sicker and the starving died,” and Irish Americans saw themselves “categorized as the dregs and filth of human society.”⁶ But some went west, where they were tolerated only inasmuch as their labor was useful to build the canals and railroads needed to open up the nation’s interior.

What follows is the story of an Irish immigrant’s son who sought, amid formidable anti-Catholic bias in Protestant America, to forge an Irish settlement in the Midwest. This essay asks—but does not answer—salient questions about ethnicity in the American Midwest. While the Irish flavor of O’Neill, Nebraska, has deep roots, it also invites consideration of the uses of race and ethnicity in heritage tourism. O’Neill’s “Irish legacy”—as promoted by the current city government—no doubt exists, as this article will demonstrate, but its celebration obscures the legacies of Nebraska’s Native groups—the Ponca, Omaha, Lakota, and Pawnee among them—which the US government removed from the Nebraska landscape to make way for homesteaders. At least part of O’Neill’s mythos centers on the notion of the Irish—subjugated in their homeland and, as General O’Neill argued, mistreated in the overcrowded cities of the Northeast—settling in the heartland. Yet these dispossessed Irish also participated, however passively, in the dispossession—physical, cultural, and otherwise—of Nebraska’s Native population. It is telling, for example, that the “History Timeline” presented on the City of O’Neill website begins in 1875.

This article, then, does not directly implicate General O’Neill, T. V. Golden, or the other Irish American settlers who made (or remade) Holt County and O’Neill, Nebraska. Indeed, it examines quotidian yet critical dimensions of Golden’s life as he worked to create an Irish settlement in the American Midwest. But the story that unfolds on the following pages also encourages readers to think about the ways in which we deploy identity and history in regional and transregional contexts. Moreover, the article suggests that we can at once admire the courage with which “pioneers” ventured into what is today known as the Midwest—and call into question the assumptions that motivated and sanctified those endeavors. This kind of reflection enables us to be more critical and discerning about the ways in which we produce and consume historical knowledge, as well as the ways

in which we often use that knowledge to inoculate our hometown heroes, our states, and our regions from condemnation.

It broke his heart to leave his native Ireland forever, but Thomas Golden felt compelled to go. It was 1836; he and his countrymen living under British rule could not vote, own land, or openly practice their Catholicism. As tenant farmers, they lived in miserable conditions. Poverty and recurring famine were their lot. Golden hoped to marry one day; and if, God willing, he had children, they ought to have more liberty than he. And so it was he left County Roscommon and sailed for America, his heart heavy with “the burning sense of injustice, resentment, and the feeling of dispossession with which nine out of ten emigrants left their native land.”⁷

Crossing the Atlantic was harrowing. Immigrants crowded into creaking ships with “hundreds of people . . . from the driveling idiot of ninety to the babe just born, huddled without light, without air . . . breathing a fetid atmosphere, sick in body, dispirited in heart.”⁸ Golden journeyed into the wilderness that was the American Middle West in the 1830s and found work constructing a ninety-six mile canal between Chicago and LaSalle. In connecting the Great Lakes with the Mississippi River, the Illinois and Michigan Canal would forge the first continuous route through the nation’s interior, opening it to settlement and trade. The project was an enormous undertaking. Ten years Golden labored from sunup to sundown in “heat and cold, cutting through swamps, swales, and forests, amid swarms of mosquitos and stinging snow.”⁹ Nights, the howling of the wolves outside his shanty door came like a homesick keen for his long-lost Ireland. Determined to “give Catholicism a firm and lasting foundation” in America, he gave of his little free time and spare wages to help build the first Catholic church—the Log Church of the Holy Cross—in LaSalle.¹⁰ There, on September 10, 1848, he married Mary Clear, an immigrant from King’s County, Ireland. In September 1849 Golden was Utica’s delegate to the Democratic county convention in LaSalle.

When the canal—the most important manmade waterway in America—was completed in 1848 Golden, like many Irish immigrants, likely went to work for the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad, then extending its line from LaSalle to Illinois’ western border. In the fall of 1853, as the track neared Rock Island, workers crossed the Mississippi River into Davenport, Iowa, to survey and grade the connecting road. In Davenport, on December 22, 1853, Mary Golden gave birth to twins, namesakes Thomas Vincent

“T. V.” and Mary. A year later Thomas Golden died at age thirty-seven. He would not see his children—John, three, and the twins, thirteen months—grow up, but he had left them the greatest legacy a father could: the perquisites of American citizenship.

Golden’s widow and children went to live with her father in Utica, Illinois. A year later the toddler Mary climbed into a trunk and suffocated. Six months later, on July 4, 1856, Mary Golden wed James Fitzsimmons in LaSalle. Though this union resulted in the birth of three children, it was apparently not harmonious, and Fitzsimmons moved alone to Carbon Cliff, where he was found dead beside a railroad track, his head crushed, in the summer of 1872.¹¹

Growing up in LaSalle County, Illinois, it was perhaps natural that young T. V. Golden should mythologize the father whose name he carried. He could imagine him a young man departing his Irish homeland by ship, could hear the “creaking of keel timbers, the banging of the anchor chain, the smash and thud of seas against the hull.”¹² He could envision the Illinois prairie as his father had found it—“a new world of grass and sky, of space and freedom, of light and distance.”¹³ He could hear the grunts of the canal men as their sledgehammers cracked rock, could hear the gunpowder exploding, “the rattle of cranes, the shriek of dry pulley sheaves, the creak of the windlass, and cursing in English and Gaelic.”¹⁴ He could feel the same “ancient, almost wild passion for personal freedom that is the very marrow of the Irishman’s nature.”¹⁵ As the seashell is shaped by the sea and remembers at its core the roar of deep water, so Golden was shaped by his father’s odyssey. He vowed that somehow he would redeem his father’s sacrifices. He would succeed in America and bring honor to the Golden name. It was more than a wish, more than a dream. It was his filial obligation. At sixteen, T. V. Golden became a cooper’s apprentice in Utica. But he had higher aspirations. Knowing education was the key, but unable to afford college, he studied independently. In 1876, when he was twenty-two, he earned a teaching certificate and accepted a position in Mount Ayr, Iowa, where he quickly distinguished himself as a community leader. He joined the Iowa National Guard as first sergeant and began to study law with the firm of Askren and Spencer. For three years his reputation grew. Then, even as he was helping to plan the town’s Independence Day celebration, a shocking event left Golden feeling as though a firecracker had exploded in his hand.

On the afternoon of June 22, 1880, he stopped into the Golden Saloon,

operated by his brother John and half brothers Billy and Barney Fitzsimmons. When a party of belligerent men entered, the Fitzsimmonses refused to serve them. A fight erupted and T. V. Golden joined the fray. In the frenzied skirmish Billy and Barney Fitzsimmons drew revolvers. Billy chased one of the interlopers down the stairs and shot him three times in the back. The victim “staggered into Misses Buck and Merrill’s milliner shop and dropped dead.”¹⁶

Golden was arrested with his half brothers. That night a lynch mob gathered outside the jail and by morning numbered some five hundred persons. Sheriff Landes, fearing for his prisoners’ lives, accompanied them under heavy guard to Afton. One can scarcely imagine Golden’s anguish as the train, assailed by the surging mob, left the station. One minute he had been studying the law, and now he was on the wrong side of it. In an instant he had tarnished, rather than burnished, the Golden name. While the Fitzsimmonses received prison sentences, the assault case against Golden was dismissed the following spring. But the scandal dogged him like a cur, and he remained in Mt. Ayr only long enough to complete his law studies and marry the woman who had stuck by him through his trouble. That winter of 1881 Golden and wife Annie moved to Grant City, Missouri. There he taught school for one term before opening his first law practice, specializing in real estate and commercial law.

But something called him to O’Neill, Nebraska. The fledgling colony had been founded in 1874 by Irish nationalist John O’Neill to “carve a home and haven” for the “exiled sons and daughters of Ireland.”¹⁷

While comprised of no more than four hundred people, the Fremont, Elkhorn, and Missouri Railroad had recently extended its line into the village, and the depot teemed with homesteaders. Some fifty schooners a day, their great white bonnets arching against the sky, rolled into the city. Golden sensed that here, in this nascent Irish colony on the plain, lay his destiny, and in the summer of 1883 he, his wife Annie and their baby Parnell moved to O’Neill.

Though by the time of Golden’s arrival, the Sioux, Pawnees, Poncas and Otoes—who had lived and hunted in the Sand Hills for thousands of years—had been removed from their lands onto the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations in South Dakota and Indian Territory, many residents of Holt County remained frightened of a potential uprising: “Every wind brought the fear of the Sioux riding down upon us.”¹⁸ The more likely threat, however, came from “pony boys,” the men herding cattle across the



Fig. 1. When T. V. Golden sat for this portrait at about age seventy (circa 1925), he had weathered the vicissitudes of frontier life over four decades to ensure the success of the Irish settlement in Nebraska. His leadership played a pivotal role in transforming the region from a dusty outpost to a vital agricultural center. He belonged to more than thirty cultural, civic, business and religious organizations, and was founder and president of most. Photo from the Golden family collection.

plains. Historian Alfred Andreas wrote, “It is not infrequent that parties of them visit the settlements, drink freely of whisky, and terrorize the people *ad libitum* by firing their revolvers off in the air, through windows and the sides of houses to the great annoyance and no small risk of the occupants thereof.”¹⁹ Indeed, the first sheriff of Holt County was killed by a cowboy in an O’Neill saloon. The fear of horse and stock thieves was so great that it was hard to get a jury of twelve men willing to convict.

Golden launched a newspaper, the *O'Neill Tribune*, and a few months later, after being admitted to the Nebraska bar, he opened a law office. He was deluged with business at once. The homesteaders pouring in needed his acumen, for "land tenure in the West, instead of being the apparently simple process which it seemed from the reading of railroad folders, was actually a succession of lawsuits . . . and the courts of Nebraska . . . were jammed with claims and counter claims."²⁰

Golden spent long days traversing Holt County's 2,418 square miles locating land for settlers, encountering squatters who refused to budge behind the point of shotguns. Studying the records at the US Land Office at Niobrara, he uncovered widespread fraud. Eastern speculators had procured large holdings with no intention of living on and improving the land as the Homestead Act of 1862 mandated; and cattlemen had used hirelings to claim vast acreages for ranching operations. The absconding of land intended for his countrymen who came in earnest to found farms angered Golden, who likely lodged the high number of protests filed with state and federal land agencies from Holt County during this period.²¹ Complicating matters was the fact that Congress modified the provisions of the Homestead Act of 1862 some fifteen times. And each claim he entered required Golden to file a "maze of paperwork."²² Within a year, working tirelessly as a lawyer and land agent, Golden became one of the "leading business and professional men" in Nebraska with a listing of forty thousand acres of deeded lands and twenty thousand acres of school lands.²³ To facilitate orderly and lawful settlement, he invested \$400 in a set of Tyler's abstract books and began mapping every acre of land in Holt County.

Golden's numerous trips east to recruit settlers helped engender a "boom time on the prairie."²⁴ It seemed everything was going his way. "Progress was in the air," one historian wrote. "The good crops, the railroads, the growing population all suggested great things."²⁵ It seemed the sky was the limit. And then it fell. The morning of January 12, 1888, a dark cloud encroached from the northwest like the heavy lid of a cast iron kettle, clamping down over Holt County "like some diabolical thing. Its very suddenness was terrifying . . . in the realm of the supernatural."²⁶ All day and night a blizzard raged across the region. Temperatures plummeted to thirty below zero. Scores of people and half the livestock in Holt County perished. Eastern newspapers published a flurry of sensational stories about the storm that had devastated a large area of the Middle West. The flow of settlers froze up, for a "region that could slay a thousand innocent Ameri-

can citizens in the course of an afternoon did not look like a fit place for human habitation.”²⁷ That spring more settlers left Holt County than came in. They were done “[eking] out a precarious existence under the most primitive conditions,” done with the “sod houses, snakes, dust, dirt, treeless expanses, few neighbors, cold, blizzards, heat, prairie fires, cyclones, Indians and fear, grim fear.”²⁸

Concerned, Golden helped organize a company in Omaha for promoting the region to settlers and called a meeting in O’Neill “for the purpose of devising ways and means to advertise this city and county to the outside world.”²⁹ As a Holt County supervisor, he purchased a grader for improving roads and carried his newly completed county map—“a model of neatness and complete perfection”—on his many recruiting missions.³⁰ But more setbacks followed. In 1890 eight O’Neill businesses, including the roller mills that processed farmers’ grain, burned to ashes. The summer crops withered under the lowest level of rainfall since 1864. In February 1891 the newly built Catholic school, St. Mary’s Academy—“the pride of the town and the very heart, as it were, of the Catholic society”—was destroyed by fire.³¹ There was no money to rebuild; seven years the charred ruins would stand, a phantasmagoria of blackened tiers housing God’s wild creatures.

Personal adversity compounded Golden’s discouragement. His mother’s house was robbed. In a single year he lost two sons to childhood diseases. Under a “sombre [sic] cloud of almost unbearable sorrow,” he turned to drink.³² He thought of leaving Nebraska. But his determination to make a success of it would not let him quit. He sought treatment for his “dipsomania” at the newly opened Keeley Institute in Beatrice. Its eponymous founder claimed daily injections of bichloride of gold could destroy a man’s thirst for liquor. He returned to O’Neill invigorated. He helped organize the O’Neill Fire Department and became its chief. Elected to the State Board of Control, he prepared a bill for the Nebraska legislature for a tax to “aid in the support of fire departments.”³³ In 1893 he was elected second vice president of the Nebraska State Firemen’s Association. As a fundraiser for the rebuilding of St. Mary’s Academy, he organized the O’Neill Dramatic Company and directed its first play. He bought stock in the Keeley Institute, opened a branch in O’Neill and became its director. He told its first class of “graduates”: “I have belonged to various societies, civic and military, fraternal and religious, and will now say that I feel prouder of belonging to this society than any other. . . . It represents . . . 50,000 men and women redeemed from lives of drunkenness,

debauchery and disgrace, and regenerated to lives of usefulness, honor and respectability.”³⁴

But if the imbibers were drying out, so was the region’s farmland. As the 1890s progressed it became clear that the moisture deficiency of 1890 had been no anomaly, but a harbinger of things to come and a serious obstacle to lasting settlement. For farmers it was “a time of strain, of endless anxiety, as year after year conditions worsened and brought them nearer to bankruptcy.”³⁵ Holt County’s fiscal woes were exacerbated when treasurer Barrett Scott embezzled nearly \$90,000. The crime was confirmed on February 12, 1892, when Golden and his fellow county supervisors, suspicious that something was amiss, stepped into the vault to count the monies and receipts. A two year effort to prosecute Scott ensued. Scott fled to Mexico and was captured and returned to Holt County, only to be seized and hung by vigilantes. In 1895 Golden and lawyers M. F. and J. J. Harrington won an acquittal for Scott’s alleged killers.³⁶

Golden, who had enticed homesteaders to the region on the promise of arable land, felt responsible for solving the drought problem. In the summer of 1892 he persuaded county officials to pay self-proclaimed rainmaker Frank Melbourne \$3,000 if he could produce a half inch of rain over at least half the county in four days’ time. Golden headquartered Melbourne in the courthouse cupola. When four days passed without measurable precipitation, Melbourne declared it his first failure of the year. On the fifth day, when it rained an inch and a quarter, Melbourne tried to collect, but Golden sent him packing without a cent. The *Stuart Ledger* reported dryly, “Tom Golden will never, no never, monkey any more with rain makers. No one can imagine the hot water he was in pending Melbourne’s stay away up in the tower among the bells, bells, bells. Had rain come in time to make Holt county indebted to the rain man \$3,000 Golden would not have gotten out of the county alive.”³⁷

All levity evaporated as the drought worsened and farmers faced financial ruin. Adopting a more scientific approach, Golden began researching irrigation. He attended conventions, studied reports and corresponded with experts nationwide. He learned that an “inexhaustible” water supply—the Ogallala Aquifer—lay mere feet beneath them, accessible via windmills and pumps.³⁸ Golden became an outspoken irrigation proponent at a time when it was “considered libelous to even suggest in print that parts of the state might require irrigation for successful husbandry.”³⁹

Many feared the admission would dry up the flow of immigration into the region. But Golden wrote:

While I am convinced that the letter below will receive criticism from many, I feel that no apology will be demanded by the thinking portion of the community. . . . I feel that the matter of irrigation in this and surrounding counties must be met sooner or later, and why not now? If we are honest to the intending settler, who comes to view our land with intent to purchase, we must tell him that it is not a success so far as the growing of corn and wheat is concerned . . . and we are standing in our own light if we neglect to utilize the elements placed by nature in our hands to be used. Irrigation has accomplished wonders for the world before and can in our case. . . . Hopes and prayers have not availed and we have the stern reality that something must, or at least ought to, be done.⁴⁰

Believing irrigation could render the land “a veritable garden,” Golden asked, “Can we and will we bring the water from where it now is, in abundance, to the places where it is needed, or must we rest under the imputations of future generations that we lacked the intelligence or, having the knowledge, wanted the energy requisite to success?”⁴¹ Golden became an “enthusiastic leader” in the irrigation movement, helping found the Holt County Irrigation Society, the Nebraska State Irrigation Association and the North Nebraska Irrigation Society. In 1894 Nebraska governor Crounse appointed him a delegate to the Nebraska State Irrigation Convention.⁴² Golden further proposed diverting waters from the Niobrara and Snake rivers into a canal that would irrigate some half million acres over six counties and “furnish power for the numerous factories which it was envisioned would spring up along the route.”⁴³ To this end he helped organize and invested in the Niobrara Irrigation and Power Company, later known as the Golden Irrigation District in recognition of its “prime mover.”⁴⁴ He became a “prominent and active factor in promoting the irrigation project in northern Nebraska,” writing numerous editorials and speaking to county boards, business leaders and farmers’ alliances across the region, “pushing forward that great enterprise.”⁴⁵ When the struggling farmers balked at the cost of surveys, tests, wells, pumps and canal construction, Golden argued that their investment would not only create jobs and raise land values, it would “be an untold blessing to millions yet unborn.”⁴⁶

In Omaha he sought capital from investors who, having loaned mon-



Fig. 2. Horses and automobiles commingled in this O'Neill, Nebraska, street scene circa 1915. While Golden worried that cars carrying shoppers to larger cities might “sound the death knell” for small towns, he owned one of the first autos in Holt County. He was “not overly enthusiastic” with its performance, writing the Rambler Company in 1907: “One man alone does not or cannot have sufficient strength to crank the machine. It requires two men or a team. It seems to me it would be as well to drive the team and leave the machine in the barn.” At right is the Golden Hotel; at left the First National Bank building. Photo courtesy of the Holt County Historical Society.

ey to homesteaders, had a financial stake in their success. Meanwhile the drought persisted. In 1894 “farmers put in their crops, and never took them out. . . . Day after day, week after week, month after month the people scanned the great, high sky of the plains, for sight of rain. Sometimes huge clouds rose from the horizon; but no rain came.”⁴⁷ It seemed “the rain god had closed the windows of heaven.”⁴⁸ All hopes were incinerated when, during a hot July sandstorm, “corn blades shriveled in the blast like grass in an oven. Nebraska farmers stood helpless while their harvest was swept away by the relentless breath of the devastating simoom.”⁴⁹ Horses and livestock were slaughtered for want of feed. Merchants went out of business as “financial conditions grew worse and the entire state was almost in the grip of actual famine.”⁵⁰ Every day brought more sheriff’s auctions and foreclosures. Homesteaders left “like a defeated army,” their Conestogas rolling away in “long processions of failure.”⁵¹

In this desperate climate, Golden aggressively pursued outside capital. He brought in New York financier James M. Kerr, conducted him across the region, described the irrigation projects he envisioned, and then called a mass meeting at the O’Neill courthouse. Some six hundred to eight hundred people crowded the building “to suffocation.”⁵² Kerr told the assembly that were he to invest, they would need to contribute, too. But they could not afford the ditch that would enrich them; and the “grand design” was relinquished.⁵³ Golden would not live to see the day, some sixty years later, when the Ainsworth Irrigation Project and planned O’Neill Irrigation Unit would “follow closely those plotted by the engineers of the Golden District.”⁵⁴ He settled for the construction of a smaller—and less costly—canal along the Elkhorn River, completed in November 1894.

Though a wet year doused for a time the irrigation debate, Golden knew it would have to be addressed eventually. Theirs, he realized now, was a semiarid climate. Dry spells would return. Understanding that “Nebraska had certain limitations as an agricultural state and that farmers as well as any other group needed to apply their best brains to the problems before them,” Golden encouraged farmers to diversify into livestock and poultry operations; try new crops and methods; and modernize equipment.⁵⁵ In 1898, after consulting with experts at the state university in Lincoln, Golden consented to manage an institute that taught northern Nebraska farmers the newest advances in animal husbandry, veterinary medicine, soil conservation and farm equipment. He planted fifty acres of flax “just to start something new in the country,” and in 1904 brought a cutting of

alfalfa to the *Frontier*, whose editor reported, “Mr. Golden says he has tried for five years to demonstrate that alfalfa can be grown here and now has the evidence.”⁵⁶ Before long it was widely understood that alfalfa filled “an important need in the cropping system of the state, enabling farmers to readjust their crop system to maintain soil fertility and engage in livestock production on a larger scale than ever before. No other plant . . . changed the agriculture of the state in so short a time.”⁵⁷ By 1920 Nebraska produced more alfalfa than any other state in America.⁵⁸

Golden visited the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis in 1904 and marveled at the new, motorized machinery—water pumps, manure spreaders, hayloaders, plows, and such—that could revolutionize Nebraska agriculture if only farmers would transcend their “conservatism gone mad.”⁵⁹ To them he said: “The progress of the world in all lines, and particularly in agriculture, has advanced more in the past fifty years than it did prior to that time since the flood. Of course it will continue to progress and one has reason to expect improvements in the next generation beyond our dreams. Shall we hitch ourselves to the wagon of progress and assist in pulling the load, or shall we block the wheels by inertia, fault finding and denunciation?”⁶⁰

Recognizing that the viability of both the region and O’Neill itself hinged on the success of its farmers, Golden espoused their political interests. A prominent figure at nearly every county and state Democratic convention from 1883 to 1927 and a four time candidate for elected office, he denounced the eastern banks, industrialists and monopolists he felt exploited farmers’ labor.⁶¹ In 1895, in the midst of the populist revolt, Golden was a speaker with William Jennings Bryan at the Long Pine Chautauqua. He stumped statewide for Bryan during his three presidential runs and organized the Holt County Bryan Volunteers.

On behalf of farmers, Golden routinely challenged the railroads which, “claiming to serve the settlers, really lured them into Nebraska, then throttled them.”⁶² Farmers were taxed to subsidize railroads that raised their shipping rates at will, controlled policy through powerful lobbyists and owned some forty percent of Nebraska’s choicest farmland. Furthermore, “conditions of warehousing grain were scandalous for the farmer, profitable to the railroads.”⁶³ At the Holt County Democratic convention of 1892 Golden helped frame this resolution: “That we are in favor of state control of transportation charges on the railway system within the limits of Nebraska, to the end that shippers shall not be subject to the avaricious de-

mands of railroad corporations. We are opposed to the bringing into any state of a lawless band of Pinkertons to suppress the mechanics and laboring men of our country in their efforts to secure a fair proportion of the products of their labor.”⁶⁴ In 1908, after one of Golden’s many appearances before the State Board of Equalization, the *Kearney Daily Hub* reported: “Attorney Golden of O’Neill . . . was armed with many figures to show that the real estate of Holt County was being over-valued. He said that at least seventy percent of the land had been assessed too high. . . . He said tax sharks employed by railroads were responsible for these figures being presented to the state board.”⁶⁵

If farmers prospered, Golden envisioned O’Neill becoming “one of the great cities of the northwest.”⁶⁶ As city supervisor, Commercial Club leader and mayor he “undoubtedly had more to do with the building up of the business district than any other individual.”⁶⁷ He organized the Holt County Telephone Company in 1901 and served as its manager; owned the T. V. Golden and Co. abstract firm and the Golden Furniture and Hardware Company; and in 1908, to compensate for the dearth of lumber in the region, began a cement manufacturing operation, believing it “the building material of the future.”⁶⁸ He poured sidewalks around the city and designed and erected several cement block buildings. In 1914 he started a brick manufacturing company.

But as much as O’Neill had grown since its days as a “canvas covered camp of the immigrant,” it lacked a modern hotel.⁶⁹ In 1912 Golden built one. As the “ornament” of the city rose on the northeast corner of Fourth and Douglas streets—“Golden’s Corner”—the *Frontier* reported, “Tom Golden is about the busiest man in town just now, giving his personal and undivided attention to getting the hotel building started. Tom can handle any kind of a tool from a shovel to a surveyor’s instrument with the agility of an expert.”⁷⁰

At the Golden Hotel’s grand opening on May 10, 1913, Golden was presented with a gold pocket watch and feted as “the man who had the courage, the brains, and the money to build the best hotel building in Nebraska.”⁷¹ Frank Brown, state hotel inspector, was “astonished . . . to see such a magnificent structure.”⁷² The *Norfolk News*, reporting that Golden had built the hotel out of “civic pride,” said the building would stand “as a creditable monument to his memory in the years to come.”⁷³ A *Columbus Telegram* reporter mused, “I was impressed with the marvelous transformation of that section of Nebraska in the span of less than forty years. . . . Now I

see some remnants of the pioneers, and great hosts of their children, occupying a garden spot which they have made to bloom and blossom. . . . Wonderful transformation! Wonderful the people who accomplished it, and among them all perhaps there is no name more worthy than that of T. V. Golden.”⁷⁴

But Golden’s business success meant nothing without his faith. In 1903 he was a founding member of only the second Knights of Columbus council in Nebraska, and he helped build the Knights of Columbus Hall and Opera House in 1907. An active member and supporter of St. Patrick’s Church, he could not help but be moved when, as the cornerstone was laid for a new brick building in 1909, the visiting Bishop of Cheyenne intertwined the American flag with “the sunburst of Erin, with its glories and sorrows commingled, with its cross and round towers and the hybrosal tides weeping copious tears on her sea-beaten shores, where for the last two hundred years the exile of Erin departed heart-broken and dejected to find a new home and country.”⁷⁵ In 1912 he befriended Father Flanagan—who would found Boys Town in Omaha in 1917—when the young priest came to O’Neill on his first pastoral assignment. Like Golden’s father, Flanagan had emigrated from County Roscommon, Ireland.

Titanic though his efforts were in so many arenas, Golden also devoted time to promoting education. He organized a literary society, served on the school board, spearheaded the drive to establish a library in the public school, and organized the first parent-teacher association in Holt County. He regularly visited the schools, conferring diplomas, judging debates, and mentoring teachers and students. He urged farmers to send their children to school rather than confine them to farm labor, and he organized a union whereby students received musical entertainment and instruction at nominal cost. Golden worked with state college officials to ensure that O’Neill’s curriculum prepared students for higher education. In 1907 he helped establish the O’Neill Junior Normal—the second largest teacher training institute in Nebraska—and lobbied in 1909 to have a permanent state normal located in O’Neill.⁷⁶ Golden’s philosophy of education is best summarized in his own words to students in 1891: “In the times now passed . . . he was the surest winner who possessed the most hardened muscle, the swiftest limb, the greatest physique. But in this age of the world it requires more. He is the best adapted to fight the battles of life who arrives at manhood possessed of a broad and liberal mind, a thorough education and an honest and determined purpose.”⁷⁷



Fig. 3. The Golden Hotel, shown here circa 1915, symbolized O'Neill's progress. The *Independent* mused that John O'Neill, who in 1874 had lain "his shaggy head on a sagebrush pillow," might, had he lived to see the hotel, have slept in a luxurious apartment for \$1.50. Constructed of brick, steel and cement to render it fireproof, the "pride of the city" featured Tennessee marble staircases; tile floors; electric lights; indoor plumbing; forty-six guest rooms with private telephones and hot and cold running water; a vacuum cleaning system to keep bedding "properly cleaned and aired"; one hundred seat dining room; soda fountain serving Coca-Cola concoctions; Western Union Telegraph Station; barber shop; and news and cigar store carrying such popular publications as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. The US Land Office, located at left in the hotel's annex, would close in 1919, signaling the end of an era. Photo courtesy of the Holt County Historical Society.

Deemed "one of the best speakers and writers in the west," Golden addressed political conventions, farmers' alliances, legislative hearings and business meetings throughout the region.⁷⁸ He spoke in Chautauqua tents, courtrooms, assembly halls, and schoolhouses. After a holiday oration the *Independent* said, "Our eloquent townsman, Hon. T. V. Golden, is always an interesting speaker and seems to be equally familiar with any subject he is called upon to discuss; but his address at the opera house on Memorial Day seemed to excel in good thought, beautiful language and impressive delivery. Every man, woman and child who listened to Mr. Golden's address on that occasion were imbued with new and broader ideas of the beauty, the solemnity and the high ideals of patriotism to which this day is dedicated."⁷⁹ In 1913 Golden's biography appeared in Watkins's *History of Nebraska*. It read, in part: "His faith in Nebraska soil has never been shaken . . .

and through his efforts and advice much tame grass has been planted to supplement the native prairie grasses. Mr. Golden takes an active interest in public questions and educational matters.”⁸⁰ Bolstered by his influence, the region became “the greatest hay growing section in the world” by 1917.⁸¹ To support this industry he and three partners incorporated the Elkhorn Valley Hay Growers Association to facilitate the raising, storage and shipping of hay and other farm products; buy and sell livestock; and build hay barns, warehouses and grain elevators.

Golden led efforts to increase food production and conservation during World War I. He helped farmers expand their operations and served as a delegate to Nebraska’s food congress in Omaha. When prices for farm goods—and the nation’s estimation of farmers—rose, Golden hoped the Middle West had come into its own at last. But after the war, “Nebraska agriculture went into a tailspin.”⁸² Prices for farm goods went on “perhaps the most terrible toboggan slide in all American agricultural history.”⁸³ And though land values plummeted, taxes remained levied on high wartime valuations. Meanwhile the cost of living skyrocketed. Soon “the West was on the pavement, thrown out of the ninth story window of wartime prosperity by the Washington wonder-workers.”⁸⁴ Poverty hardened over the region like a killing frost. Population growth halted.

Against this bleak backdrop, Golden suffered loss. Annie, his wife of thirty-four years and mother of his nine children, died of cancer in 1915. And his son and namesake Tom and his wife—who was expecting their first child—succumbed to influenza during the epidemic of 1918. Heartbroken, Golden, sixty-five, began feeling his age. But having devoted his heart, mind, and soul to the development of this region, he would not concede defeat. He formed a taxpayers’ league to protest profligate spending and editorialized:

By reason of the war the various departments at Washington lost their balance and to perform their duties an army of employees were required, and they are still on the pay roll, though, as I understand, the war is over. . . . In the state government we can see the same disrespect for economy. With apparent disregard of consequences the state officials multiply the number of persons on the pay roll and increase the salaries of all and our state is overridden with booze hounds, fish and game hounds, building and fire inspectors, road agents, school and bridge inspectors. All meandering through the state, guests of the

best hotels and all the time under full pay at the public expense. . . . Well may we ask, 'When and where will this end?' . . . Three important qualities are necessary for success in government as well as in person: Industry, honesty and economy and the latter is not the least.⁸⁵

At an Interstate Commerce Commission hearing in Kansas City in 1918 he protested the railroad's proposed near-doubling of shipping rates on hay. In 1922 he helped found and was general director of the Blue Pole Road Boosters, which established an interstate highway from Fremont to Chadron. The completed road allowed farmers to transport their own goods to market, decreasing their dependence on the railroads. Golden was a principal speaker at the August 1926 State Board of Equalization meeting in Lincoln, arguing that Holt County's tax levy be lowered. When it was cut by half, the *Independent* exulted, "The people had stood all they were going to and demanded retrenchment at their hands—and got it."⁸⁶ In 1926 Golden persuaded the Armour Company of Chicago to open a plant in O'Neill, describing his "own success in poultry and dairying in Holt County and of the future that could be developed along this line."⁸⁷ In providing some seventy-five jobs and a local market for farmers' products, the plant proved "a boon . . . to north Nebraska."⁸⁸ Working "very diligently" with the state university's agricultural college, Golden brought a "Cow and Hen Special Exhibit Train" to O'Neill.⁸⁹ Some five thousand farmers saw demonstrations regarding modern methods and equipment in the poultry and dairy industries. His longtime goal of harnessing hydropower was realized when he induced a local electric light company to build the state's largest hydroelectric power plant on the Niobrara River twelve miles north of O'Neill. The *Sioux City Journal* gushed, "Blazing headlines could not exaggerate its importance for northern Nebraska . . . and for the whole state in general."⁹⁰

In 1919 Golden's lifelong crusade for Irish independence from Britain seemed close at hand when he met Eamon de Valera, Ireland's first elected president, at John O'Neill's burial site in Omaha. De Valera was touring America seeking support for his guerilla army. Inspired, Golden formed a branch of the American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic and attended its national convention in Chicago. He gave impassioned speeches across the region, enrolling members and soliciting subscriptions. When news reached O'Neill the night of December 6, 1921, that the Anglo-Irish Treaty granting Ireland dominion status had been signed

in London, Golden joined the joyful throng that streamed into the streets, exulted around a bonfire at Golden's Corner, then stamped, cheered, and orated at the Knights of Columbus hall until the wee hours of the morning. No one wanted the celebration to end. It had been centuries coming.

As much as he had accomplished during his tenure in Nebraska, myriad challenges awaited. Gazing out across his beloved Golden Valley Hay Ranch, Golden wondered: Would the next generation take up the baton? It seemed to him they'd grown complacent. How could he convey to them the hunger, the vision, the sheer force of will that had settled the region? How could he explain what it had meant to him, to his father, to John O'Neill, and to an exiled Irish people? Using his post as president of the Commercial Club, Golden exhorted young members to dispense with "banqueting and ethereal oratory" and put their "shoulders to the wheel" for progress. He helped them frame goals to render O'Neill "the future commercial center of northeast Nebraska."⁹¹ He urged them to make the farmers' interests their own. And lest they forget the "courage and perseverance" of the pioneers, Golden involved them in planning a semi-centennial celebration as a "deserving tribute" and "memorial to their struggle."⁹² Finally, just months before his death on January 22, 1928, Golden, "always a man of keen foresight and faith in the community," asked them to be patient, not expecting to "turn the world over in a day."⁹³

It had taken him forty-five years, after all, to help "build up a young Ireland on the virgin prairies of Nebraska and there rear a monument more lasting than granite or marble to the Irish race in America."⁹⁴ Few men had worked harder, longer, in so many arenas to effect the permanent settlement of the region. But to acknowledge and celebrate these accomplishments is not to absolve these settlers—and by extension the region. To do so would be to present an incomplete story. Still, we might still say—without reverting to tired Turnerian tropes—that Golden helped transform the landscape and historical trajectory of Holt County and O'Neill, Nebraska. A cursory glance at the city's website—with its overwhelmingly green color scheme and shamrock icons—or a trip to the town—which boasts the "world's largest shamrock" painted at the city's main intersection of Douglas and Fourth Streets—reveals Golden's lasting imprint.⁹⁵

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Kay Golden is a freelance writer who lives in Kearney, Nebraska. T. V. Golden was her great grandfather. She wrote this narrative as a tribute to him.

NOTES

1. City of O'Neill website, www.cityofoneill.com, accessed June 22, 2014.
2. Quotes from Charles Barron McIntosh, *The Nebraska Sand Hills: The Human Landscape* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 61, 95, 100, 90.
3. Quotes from Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland, 1845–1849*, reprint ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 27, 20, 32.
4. Stephen Birmingham, *Real Lace: America's Irish Rich* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).
5. David M. Emmons, *Beyond the American Pale: The Irish in the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 51.
6. Birmingham, *Real Lace*, 42.
7. Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 268.
8. Kenneth Neill, *An Illustrated History of the Irish People* (New York: Mayflower Books, 1979), 117.
9. Walter Havighurst, *The Heartland: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 168.
10. Pamphlet, *A Brief Guide to St. Patrick's Church, St. Patrick's Parish, LaSalle, Ill.*
11. *Rock Island Argus*, Aug. 19, 1872.
12. Havighurst, 166.
13. *Ibid.*, 139.
14. *Ibid.*, 168.
15. Sean O'Faolin, quoted in Birmingham, *Real Lace*, 26.
16. *The Chariton Leader*, June 26, 1880.
17. William Fallon, quoted in the *Holt County Independent*, Sept. 15, 1916.
18. Arthur F. Mullen, *Western Democrat* (New York: Wilfred Funk, Inc., 1940), 15.
19. Alfred Andreas, *The History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1882), 982.
20. *Ibid.*, 105.
21. See Russell C. Lang, *Original Land Transfers of Nebraska* (Louisville, Ky.: Gateway Press, 2001), 288.
22. *Ibid.*, 65.
23. Lang, 199–200.
24. Addison E. Sheldon, "The Deficiency Judgment," *Nebraska History* 13, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1932): 291.
25. James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 203.
26. Ora A. Clement, "Why Preserve the Story of the Blizzard?" in *In All Its Fury: A History of the Blizzard of January 12, 1888* (Lincoln, Neb.: Union College Press, 1947), 72.
27. David Laskin, *The Children's Blizzard* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 243.
28. Olson, 204; Mina Clark Buhn, "Early Days Along the Niobrara," *Nebraska History* 14, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1933): 249.
29. *Frontier*, Jan. 23, 1890.
30. *O'Neill Tribune*, Feb. 16, 1888.

31. Nellie Synder Yost, *Before Today* (O'Neill, Neb.: Miles Publishing Co., 1976), 146.
32. O'Neill Tribune, Apr. 5, 1888.
33. *Frontier*, Jan. 28, 1892.
34. T. V. Golden, quoted in the *Frontier*, Mar. 17, 1892.
35. Mary Louise Jeffery, "Young Radicals of the Nineties," *Nebraska History* 38, no. 1 (Mar. 1957): 26.
36. *Frontier*, July 4, 1895.
37. The Stuart Ledger quoted in the O'Neill Sun, Aug. 25, 1892.
38. Letter, T. V. Golden, O'Neill Sun, Nov. 23, 1893.
39. Sam S. Kepfield, "El Dorado on the Platte: The Development of Agricultural Irrigation and Water Law in Nebraska, 1860–1895," *Nebraska History* 75, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 233.
40. Letter, T. V. Golden, O'Neill Sun, Nov. 23, 1893.
41. *Ibid.*
42. A. Bower Sageser, "Attempted Economic Adjustments in Holt County During the 1890's," *Nebraska History* 40, no. 2 (June 1959): 112.
43. Everett Dick, *Conquering the Great American Desert* (Lincoln: Nebraska Historical Society, 1975), 389.
44. Yost, 103.
45. *Frontier*, May 10, 1894.
46. O'Neill Sun, Nov. 23, 1893.
47. Mullen, 70.
48. Romaine Saunders, quoted in Burns E. McCulloh, *A Piece of Emerald* (O'Neill, Neb.: Miles Publishing Co., 1974), 48.
49. Dick, 345.
50. Olson, 233.
51. Dick, 347; Mullen, 33.
52. O'Neill Sun, Aug. 9, 1894.
53. Sageser, 114.
54. McCulloh, 62.
55. Olson, 253.
56. *Frontier*, Sept. 9, 1909; *Frontier*, Aug. 4, 1904.
57. Olson, 252.
58. *Holt County Independent*, Feb. 20, 1920.
59. Letter, T. V. Golden, *Holt County Independent*, Apr. 14, 1905.
60. *Ibid.*
61. Golden ran for Holt County attorney in 1892; judge of the Fifteenth District in 1895; representative of the Fiftieth District in 1910; and mayor of O'Neill in 1914. He lost all but the last election.
62. Mullen, 62.
63. *Ibid.*, 63.
64. *Frontier*, Sept. 1, 1892.
65. *Kearney Daily Hub*, Aug. 5, 1908.
66. *Frontier*, May 31, 1906.

67. From Golden's obituary in the *Frontier*, Jan. 26, 1928.
68. *Frontier*, Apr. 2, 1908.
69. *Ibid.*, July 16, 1897.
70. *Ibid.*, Aug. 8, 1912; *ibid.*, June 6, 1912.
71. The Golden Hotel was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1989, noted in part for its "contribution to the continued economic and commercial development of the town." See Golden Hotel, state/federal agency certification, Oct. 13, 1989, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, nebraskahistory.org/histpres/nebraska/holt/HT13-003_Golden_Hotel.pdf, accessed Mar. 27, 2014; *Frontier*, May 16, 1913.
72. *Frontier*, June 19, 1913.
73. *Norfolk News*, quoted in the *Frontier*, May 15, 1913.
74. *Columbus Telegram*, quoted in the *Holt County Independent*, May 30, 1913.
75. *Frontier*, Aug. 5, 1909.
76. Chadron was selected for the Normal, which opened in 1911.
77. T. V. Golden, quoted in the *Frontier*, Dec. 24, 1891.
78. *Holt County Independent*, May 5, 1922.
79. *Ibid.*, June 5, 1903.
80. Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, vol. 3 (Lincoln, Neb.: Western Publishing and Engraving Co., 1913), 749–51.
81. *Holt County Independent*, July 6, 1917.
82. Olson, 271.
83. Stuart Chase, quoted in Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday* (New York: Harper and Row, 1931), 161.
84. Mullen, 227.
85. T. V. Golden, quoted in the *Holt County Independent*, May 26, 1922.
86. *Ibid.*, Aug. 6, 1926.
87. *Ibid.*, Mar. 26, 1926.
88. *Frontier*, Jan. 20, 1927.
89. *Ibid.*, Apr. 22, 1926.
90. *Sioux City Journal*, quoted in the *Frontier*, Sept. 8, 1927.
91. *Frontier*, Mar. 15, 1917.
92. *Ibid.*, Sept. 6, 1923.
93. *Frontier*, Mar. 15, 1917; *Holt County Independent*, Apr. 22, 1927.
94. Letter, John O'Neill to Bishop O'Connor, Sister Mary Evangela Henthorne, BVM, Irish Catholic Colonization Association of the U.S. (1932), 137.
95. For more on contemporary efforts to observe O'Neill's "Irish legacy," see the O'Neill Area Chamber of Commerce website, www.oneillchamber.org, accessed June 22, 2014; and the City of O'Neill website, www.cityofoneill.com, accessed June 22, 2014.