

**The following stories were compiled by Levern Hauptmann,
For Antelope Historical Society – 2005**

The complete Booklet called *The Miraculous Rescue Of Freddie Detwiler and other stories of Antelope County* can be found at the Main Antelope County Museum building. Levern Hauptmann's prologue and borrowed comments precede two of the stories from the booklet he compiled. (Read Introduction of Levern Hauptmann under Living History section called "Voices From The Past" to find out the names of Antelope County residents whose stories are included in this booklet.)

The Miraculous Rescue of Freddie Detwiler

After surviving the terrible winter storm of 1888, many Antelope County residents underwent a very trying two days in April before the joyful occasion of the bringing out alive of a little boy from a well shaft where he had been lodged for 47 hours nearly 80 ft. below the earth's surface.

The story that follows is from the front page of the Oakdale Sentinel. The front and back page of this paper was printed in Omaha. The story that is reprinted here is that which was written in Omaha; only fragments of the inside page story from Oakdale remain. The latter was in actuality a clearer and more concise report, lacking some of the overblown rhetorical flourishes of the quoted story.

Brave Men

Omaha Herald: There are to-day men as brave as those in olden time, who awaited with lance in rest, the charge of their mailed and gauntleted adversary. There are in these days of peace, men as quick to risk their lives for others, as when canons roar and the gleam of light in the cloud of battle of flashing sabers. One has not to turn to the history of a nation to find heroes, nor be content with the impossible creations who are bold in the pages of fiction. Every energy has its own heroes. There is in current life the courage beyond all fear, and the pathos and the tenderness beyond all praise.

The story which comes exclusively to the Herald, from Oakdale, yesterday morning, was as thrilling in its interest, as vivid in its incident as anything which belongs to the realm of fact. Its central figure was a little child, a toddler of three summers, who had fallen into a well seventy feet deep, and in the slender bore, too narrow to admit a large body, was held a helpless prisoner whose feeble cry came to the surface to mock those who would rescue. There was no need of hurry. But women wept and men were pale when they noted the desperate chances. To help seemed out of the question. Yet the effort must be made and there was no lack of volunteers. To save the child it was necessary to sink a shaft beside the bore. Men worked as they had never worked before. Hour after hour the tools were plied. Slow, wondrous slow seemed the progress. The child's moans grew fainter and fainter. In the haste there was no possibility of sinking a shaft. Deeper it went into the crumbling soil. Pebbles rolled down its sides. The tread of hurrying feet threatened it. The men at the bottom knew at any moment the shaft might cave and bury them and the babe that was their inspiration. They never paused. They spoke in whispers. They planned like engineers. They worked as being possessed of only the desire to bring back the little life which was going out in the darkness. At last they were down far enough. A narrow wall was between them and the child. They broke through, knowing that they might be finishing their own grave. The child was saved, and with the men who had saved it, drawn up into the blessed light. More than forty-six hours the struggle had lasted, but the reward was worth it all. Worth all the striving, worth all the hazard. It had placed a baby in the arms from which a cruel death had tried to snatch it. It had shown that men were loyal to their best interests, and that as noble chivalry may impel the spade as waves the sword. The scene will never be forgotten. By the weird rays of flickering torches, through weary hours, people watched the fight of unflinching men against what seemed to be fate, and they saw energy and love and the grandeur of unselfish manhood.

The second retelling of this story is from an article written by Fred Thornton entitled "The Rescue of Freddie Detwiler," which is found in Nebraska History, Vol. XVI, No. 2 (Apr.-June issue 1935), pgs. 112-114. The little girl that they tried the spiral worm on, Pearl Allen Petersen, was the grandmother of Richard Petersen who contributed some of the information for this story.

The Rescue of Freddie Detwiler

On Saturday, April 14th, 1888, just about the noon hour, the people of Neligh were thrown into a frenzy when a team came galloping into town from the East with two men who stated that a boy two and one half years old, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Detwiler living on the Pete Minkler farm four miles East of Neligh, had fallen into an old well and they wanted grappling irons and ropes and anyone who could help, to come as soon as possible to try to rescue the child.

The little boy had been playing in the yard, but when his Mother went to call him she found his cap and hearing faint cries, found he had fallen into an old abandoned well. The frantic Mother gave the alarm. Word was sent to Neligh and Oakdale and although there were no telephones at this time, the news spread very rapidly and at one o'clock over one hundred men were on the ground all anxious to help in some way to rescue the boy, but all efforts with grappling hooks and ropes had proved futile and at five o'clock in the afternoon it was decided that the only way to rescue him was to dig a shaft near the old well and when down on a level with the child, to tunnel through to the old well.

The old well was a twelve-inch bored well and when down seventy-eight feet was reduced to Eight inches and when the well failed to reach water the twelve-inch tubing was pulled out. It was known the child could not enter the small tubing.

The men who started the shaft were not experienced well diggers and the shaft was started much larger than necessary but the work was kept up during the night. Early Sunday morning, William Stinson and James Stratton who were experienced well diggers from Oakdale, were given charge of the work and they at once reduced the size of the shaft to thirty inches square. About this time, C. C. Crawford, Dick Wolf, G. Worthington, L. Keezer, Wm. Kaley and Fred McDougal, all experienced well diggers, arrived from Neligh. These men were put in relays and each man dug for thirty minutes to his utmost strength. Other men were kept busy hauling up the dirt and moving it away from the shaft. It was soon noted that Curbing must be used.

A load of plank was brought and J. Lytle and the writer (Fred Thornton of Neligh, Nebraska) cut the curbing making locked corners and no nails needed to fasten it. Each plank was put in by the diggers and in this way all was safe.

The moaning of the little boy was terrible and a spiral worm was made of small iron bar, spring shaped, and was tested on a little girl of the boy's age. It seemed to be a success but was a failure in the well as there was no way to wind it around the body from the end of a rope. After this trial the moaning ceased and it was thought he had been further injured. An iron pipe was lowered down close to the boy and a small bellows used to pump fresh air to the bottom of the well.

Provisions were sent out from the stores and prepared at the Allen home and brought to the men who were working. Many of the neighborhood women worked all night preparing meals and hot coffee.

About midnight on Sunday the shaft was down seventy-two feet—but the diggers were into dry sand. Messrs. Stinson and Stratton then took full charge of the work and declined any help from the others as they realized the real peril of the loose sand. A different kind of curbing had to be used consisting of planks sharpened like a wide chisel and driven into the sand ahead of the diggers. Mr. Stinson started a small tunnel to the well. The well had not been bored straight and it was necessary to lower a bell down into the well and by the sound he soon located the well. The sand had to be pulled back by handfuls to prevent running into the well and covering up the boy. The tunneling in the loose sand

was very SLOW. When the men reached the boy, he was almost covered with dirt and sand and they first discovered his little feet straight up and thought he must have fallen head first. They soon found his head pressed tightly between his knees. He was in a sitting position.

After getting the dirt away from the boy and the tunnel made secure, he called for W. A. Elwood, County Sheriff, to come down and lift the boy out. Mr. Elwood was near the shaft and had said to Mr. C. J. Best, editor, of the NELIGH LEADER, that he would NOT go to the bottom of that shaft for ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS. When the call came, he never spoke or hesitated for an instant, and after considerable effort lifted the boy out through the tunnel and handed him to Mr. Stinson, who was quickly hauled to the surface. He asked that no Noise or Demonstration be made. The other two men were hauled up. The boy made a slight crying sound, giving evidence he was still alive. Mr. Stinson, who seemed cool and collected, collapsed on the ground. He was soon revived and taken to his home in Oakdale where several days care was needed. Drs Cox and Wait of Neligh and Dr. E. W. Minton of Oakdale were on the ground and at once took charge of the boy and a careful examination showed a few bruises but no broken bones. After a short time, he was given some nourishment and was breathing quite regularly.

Word was sent to the parents who had been taken to the Allen home soon after the accident happened and that mother's joy knew no bounds when she saw her little boy alive and sure to recover. No person on the work would accept a Penny for his work, which shows the spirit of those Good Old Pioneers.

Fred Detwiler, the little boy who survived forty-six hours—seventy-eight feet below the surface is now a man of Fifty Years and lives in the State of Washington. Very few of those who worked so faithfully in the rescue remain today. Mr. Elwood who forgot his price to go in the tunnel is living in Bakersfield, California. The little girl whom they fitted the spiral worm, hoping it would fit on the little boy, was a neighbor child at that time and is now Mrs. Pearl Peterson of Neligh. But forty-seven years have taken a large portion of those workers to their long rest.

While discussing this story with Clayton Reutzel and Betty Reutzel Peterson, they told of the rediscovery of the shafts dug to rescue Freddie. This happened in about 1934 when a mule, pulling a dirt scraper to dig a trench to place silage in, fell into the long, abandoned well area. Clayton's and Betty's childhood home is located 4 miles east and ½ south of Neligh, which has since been owned for many years by the Hatfield family.

A fragment found from the *Oakdale Sentinel* reported that when the child was brought out alive, the over 1000 persons who had gathered gave no cheer or shouts, with everyone instead going to their knees to offer a prayer of thanksgiving. It also states that there were still more than 400 people in attendance 4 hours after the miraculous rescue.

When David Hauptmann was editing this story, he searched the internet and came up with a Fred Detwiler who lived in South Carolina. Levern Hauptmann telephoned and the Mrs. Detwiler who answered at first did not think her husband had any ancestors who had lived in Nebraska, and who had fallen into a well. Her husband, a retired Navy Commander, when told of the well shaft tale, said, "That was my father." He knew this only because when he had asked his father why his younger brother was named Elwood, his father replied, "That was the guy that pulled me out of the well." Sheriff W. A. Elwood had indeed extracted the little boy, who "was going great guns at age 86 when he was unfortunately hit by a car and died of complications."

Black Man in a White Man's World

By Levern Hauptmann

This story of Frank Barnett, Antelope County's only black resident for many years of the first half of the 20th century, will begin with the featured story of his life, composed by Mable Guild, that was published in her column in the Neligh News upon the occasion of his death.

Life Story of Frank Barnett

Frank Barnett lived in Antelope County 50 years.

He was a native of Sarpy County where he was born February 29, 1879. Springfield was his home town. He lived with the Elmer Seelemeir family and was a jockey for a number of years at the old Sarpy Fair Grounds races. He loved horses and liked to care for them. He rode for D. Smith, racing financier.

After Frank was old enough to work, he hired out to the Ben Calvert and Clarence Bendle families a number of years at Elkhorn, Nebraska. He attended the old Platford church at Springfield, attending all the socials. He had many friends among the young and old.

He came to Antelope County in 1907 with Harry Brennan.

His first job after reaching Antelope County was with a hay baling crew for Henry Wilson south of Neligh.

He worked several years for Ernest Becker, northeast of Brunswick, a former friend from Sarpy County.

He also was a farm hand for Frank Bitney, James and Bill Dempster, Phil Reutzel, George Guild, Albert Doht, John Forbes and James White.

He took a certain pride in picking and hauling in three large loads of corn daily through husking season, going to the cornfield before the sun was up. He often would pick 100 bushel a day. He received a pleasure from it, that rose far above the discomforts of cracked knuckles and sprained wrists.

Frank always loved children and was never happier than when he was playing Santa Claus to a number of them. He planned surprises for his aged friends also. He always appreciated and remembered a good joke and had a happy disposition. He held to the doctrine that everything in the present state of existence is for the best.

Stringed musical instruments have intrigued him all his life. If there was anything that he enjoyed more than playing the guitar it was picking the strings of his Denten mandolin. He played the guitar both general and Hawaiian style. One of his favorite humorous songs he sang to the accompaniment of the guitar was "And the Green Grass Grew All Around."

With the coming of radio in 1922, Frank bought a small Westinghouse, one-tube set from the Neligh Mill. He would wear headsets until the wee hours of the morning and from that time on Frank's conversation was built around what he heard on the radio. He has 14 radios sets at his place.

One of Frank's favorite horses was Joker, a high stepping steed he drove in about 1901.

His first car was a Brush. Then a Maxwell, Buick and Reo. One of his Chevrolets was stolen from his home in 1928. The thieves tied Frank and drove off with his car, which was found near Foster. Frank managed to cut his hands loose. That was the “tightest” spot he was ever in.

Frank rented farms a number of years and in 1946 bought a 40-acre farm in Custer Township, which is still his home.

In 1950 his house burned to the ground. Frank escaped grabbing his mandolin, which is still his companion. He lost everything, and his many friends raised money and erected him a new house, furnishing him in what he needed to carry on with.]

Frank was called a “Star” patient at the Elgin Plantation Home where he was cared for since having a stroke. He had a lot of company.

I lived all my early years in very close proximity to Frank. The house I was born in was the one lived in for many years by Frank some years later when he rented that quarter of land. My father purchased this land in the late 40’s and we always refer to it as Frank’s place. Mable Guild’s home where she lived with her widowed mother, Phoebe Guild, was 2 miles north. Throughout my youth, there were always stories of romantic inclinations between Frank and Mable. I have no idea whether there was anything to this gossip, but I do know that there was a Nebraska state law that prohibited any individual with 1/8th Negro, Chinese, or Japanese blood from marrying a white person.

Information on Frank’s coming to Antelope County and his first years here comes from Betty (Branen) Lundquist, the granddaughter of Harry Branen.

Harry Branen kept a diary back years ago, and Betty read in his diary that on several Sundays during the years of 1906 and 1907, Frank Barnett visited the Branens and brought along his gramophone.

According to Harry Branen’s diary, Frank came to Neligh with the Harry Branen family, as they came on the Immigrant Train. Harry and Frank rode in the train cars with Harry’s livestock, machinery, wagons, and the buggy. They left Sarpy County on Saturday, January 18, 1908 and arrived in Neligh at 3:30 PM on Sunday, January 19, 1908. They slept in the box car that night and then moved to Harry’s Farm northwest of Neligh, NE.

Richard Peterson of Columbus, NE has written some of his remembrances of Frank as follows:

“While renting Farms, Frank lived close to my Parents several times as the one time was when they both lived about 6 miles north and 3 miles east of Neligh, in what was known as the neighborhood of George Speedie and the Laase Family.

There was a very small house on the farm that Frank rented, and I remember that he had a 32 Volt Windcharger beside the house and he had a 32 Volt Delco Power Plant inside the house. In the living room (which was very, very small) he had all these Heavy Glass Batteries that were charged by the windcharger; if the wind blew, and if the wind did not blow, Frank had to charge these glass batteries with the Delco Engine Driven Generator. This was 32 Volt DC (direct current) and not AC Current as we have today, in our modern homes.

Dilver and Rena Hauptmann had raised Children there where Frank later lived, but Frank being alone living there, still did not have much space. Frank was more Modern than my parents because in the 1940’s Frank had this Windcharger and his Delco Light Plant for “electric lights”. The old house had an open “Porch” as I remember it which was probably 4 feet square—enough for 2 people to stand there.”

Although generally well liked by his friends and neighbors, the pervading racism of the years of Frank's existence must have placed an enormous burden upon him throughout his life. He was commonly referred to as Nigger Frank even by his friends and there were farms where he was not allowed to eat at the table with other members of the threshing crew, instead being fed outside. Another well-known story is of a local farm wife who on a Saturday night in Neligh announced to all- "Don't look at me—don't look at me—I have my winter hat on." Her husband and Frank had been horsing around one evening of the preceding week, and Frank had placed her summer straw on his head, thereby making it unwearable for all time for this lady. A more favorable look at the times is presented by the story of two rather rowdy bachelor neighbors who journeyed along with Frank trying to catch some catfish along the Elkhorn River. They tried their luck until they got fairly close to Norfolk, where they spotted a liquor joint. They went in and ordered three draws—the bar keeper brought only 2 and said "we don't serve n-----s in here." The brothers both generously spit in their beers and walked out without paying.

My last memory of Frank is one night in the 1950s while home from college, reading late one night when Frank knocked on the door. Frank, after spending all of Saturday evening in the "lower" beer joint, needed help to pull his ancient coupe from the ditch, where he had run off the road.

I was somewhat involved with the budding civil rights movement of the time, such as writing to the Neligh paper to get them to stop reprinting the "Coon" and "Darkie" canned jokes that they apparently received from a southern supplier. I was surprised that Frank knew of this and offered me praise that I still treasure as he said "You grewed out good."

Frank passed away in 1959 at the Elgin Plantation Home. Frank's headstone in the Laurel Hill Cemetery in Neligh reads:

"Frank Barnett 1879-1959, Erected by Friends"