

Robert Hazlett

1847-1936



Robert Harmon Hazlett was born July 6, 1847 on his father's farm in Christian County, Illinois. His parents were William Phe Hazlett and Zerelda Haggard Hazlett, who were among the original pioneer settlers in Illinois. A successful lawyer and state attorney in Illinois, he later came to El Dorado to develop land investments made there.

Hazlett and his wife, Isabella Bradford Hazlett, had lived at 141 N. Emporia, in a house built in 1890. In 1911, they built an elegant home at 115 S. Washington, using local limestone from the first Butler County courthouse. Interior woodwork was of native walnut from their ranch, "Hazford Place."

The name of this working ranch may have been a combination of Hazlett and Bradford, or of Hazlett and Hereford. Both stories were circulated; the Hazlett's never gave a definitive answer as to which it was. They spent summers living at this ranch two miles north of town.

Robert and Isabelle were married January 7, 1884. Having no children of their own, they raised Robert Hazlett Bradford, the motherless son of her cousin. His father had been one of Hazlett's closest friends. Though raised as their own, the child was never formally adopted. He called the Hazletts "Aunt and Uncle" and he was known as their nephew.

A lawyer, banker, and later a petroleum producer and refiner, Hazlett at one time owned over 10,000 acres of Butler County land. He became owner and developer of the world's greatest Hereford herd of cattle.

Modest, progressive, philanthropic and successful, he was known throughout the Central West as “The Ideal Citizen.” He prospered through the sheer force of hard work, uncompromising integrity and prudent living.

Colleagues in the field of cattle breeding called Hazlett a “premier breeder” and “one of the five master breeders of beef cattle” of all time. He held a vision of contributing something of lasting usefulness to humanity, hoping to build up a breed of cattle that should serve the food-producing industries of the world. The name Hazlett became a sufficient guarantee of any animal’s breeding and quality.

Hazlett held memberships in the Saddle and Sirloin Club of Chicago, the Kansas City Club in Kansas City, MO, El Dorado’s Kiwanis Club, the El Dorado Chamber of Commerce, and was a charter member of the El Dorado Country Club. He also served as director of the American Royal Livestock Show in Kansas City and the International Livestock Show in Chicago.

He was president of both the El Dorado National Bank and Mutual Farm Insurance Company of El Dorado, and served as vice-president of the El Dorado Refining Company. He was a member of the executive committee for the American Hereford Cattle Breeder’s Association, as well as serving at different times as its director and president. Having served in the offices of director and president of the American Royal Livestock Show, he did much to draw attention to Kansas cattle.

Rolla A. Clymer wrote of Hazlett’s herd, “It [the herd] is not generally listed as one of the town’s assets, yet it has done far more to advertise the town in years past than the achievement of any other single individual.”

Robert Hazlett died on December 29, 1936. On the day of his funeral, held privately in his home, many local businesses closed out of respect. Fellow influential businessmen from all over the nation came to pay their respects.

Six months after Hazlett’s death, a dispersal sale of his livestock attracted buyers from all over the world. Thus was his herd broken up, and Butler County’s greatest attraction of the day became only a memory.

CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

Having moved to this area to develop land holdings he had purchased while living in Illinois, Robert Hazlett made Butler County his home for the rest of his life. Even during his three years in Leadville, Colorado, he and his wife continued to call El Dorado home. News of the Hazlett’s Colorado venture often appeared in the El Dorado Times during these years.

With early financial successes as a lawyer, banker and mine owner, he obtained his greatest wealth by reason of later oil developments. But his greatest accomplishment came as a Hereford cattle breeder. His herd of 600 perfectly balanced Hereford cattle, representing

nearly half a lifetime of careful, studious, scientific effort on Hazlett's part, focused world- wide attention on the county.

COMING TO THE AREA

Sixteen months before leaving Illinois, Hazlett purchased land in Butler County. At this time he was in his second term as elected state attorney. He was told by many that he had an excellent chance at achieving high office in politics. But he did not care to be a politician.

He and his wife discussed their options; they decided that if they came to Kansas, a Republican state, there would be no inducement to enter politics.

Hazlett also had a boyhood dream of obtaining a lot of cheap land and building it up so that it might some day be valuable. So they chose to move here.

Hazlett had an unalterable faith in Kansas since coming to the state in 1885, and remained steadfast to those convictions.

Butler County may have been chosen for land investment because others he knew from Illinois had located here. Among them were John Foutch of the National Bank of El Dorado, J. H. Fullinwider, a farmer and land promoter, D. M. Bronson, attorney and real estate agent, and J. M. Robison, farmer and rancher.

The Hazletts made the move to El Dorado in January of 1885, where he opened a law office at 322 W. Central. But his primary interest became buying and selling land, in which he was gained financial success.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Practicing law in Springfield, Illinois from 1874 to 1885, Hazlett was twice elected State Attorney of Sangamon County, even though he was a democrat in a staunchly Republican area. He successfully prosecuted the conspirators who attempted to steal the body of Abraham Lincoln from a Springfield cemetery.

Having invested in Kansas land, he moved to Butler County, where he engaged extensively in the real estate business during the boom time of the 1880s, while still practicing law. In 1887, he formed an association with C. L. Harris under the firm Hazlett and Harris.

In 1889, Hazlett moved to Leadville, Colorado, to oversee his mining interests. Prospectors would make discoveries but investment capital was required to develop the mines. This was a difficult time for Colorado mining and Hazlett came close to bankruptcy. But he persevered, resorting to working the mine himself. Three years later, he sold the mine, just before the collapse of silver prices in 1893.

Returning to El Dorado, he invested this acquired fortune in additional land holdings and in banking, purchasing a large interest in the Merchants State Bank. He expanded this bank to eventually become Farmers & Merchants National Bank. In 1909, he disposed of his holdings in this bank and became president of El Dorado National Bank, purchasing a majority of its stock.

In March of 1897, Hazlett was a leader in organizing the Farmers Mutual Insurance Company of El Dorado, and served as its president for many years. Warren Hall Coutts, Jr. later recalled that Hazlett started this company because he then owned 35 farms (rented out to tenant farmers) and was tired of paying insurance premiums on all of them. He ranked first in the county and was among the leaders in the state in owning farm lands. His Butler County holdings at one time reached over 10,000 acres, operated under his personal supervision.

In 1898, he made his first purchase of pedigreed Hereford cattle, from a desire to have a small breeding establishment to, in his spare time, enjoy owning and improving. He succeeded far beyond his expectations. Over the next 30 years, he developed this beginning herd of 16 head into the finest herd worldwide, while building fame as one of the greatest stock breeders of modern times. One acquaintance noted his soft spot for his animals: he often petted and talked to his animals, walking from town nearly every day to see them.

Unusual among wealthy cattlemen, Hazlett was not simply a rich man who hired competent help. He himself was the guiding force in the development of his herd. He knew their names, characteristics, what they ate, and where they slept.

In breeding as well as in all his affairs, Hazlett had a keen mind and learned quickly from study and observation. His success was largely due to his trait of becoming a student of every enterprise he entered. He also strictly adhered to the principle that “any animal that is not good enough to be used by himself, is not good enough to be sold to someone else for breeding purposes.”

Herefords were recognized as a breed best suited to the difficult conditions of the prairies, with a reputation for making more beef off grass than any other breed. Breeders raised purebred cattle, not for the market, but for sale to ranchers seeking to improve their own stock.

Hazlett concentrated on line breeding, a theory tried and discarded by others as too risky and too expensive. He discovered that close blood concentration can be followed up much longer than was formerly deemed possible, provided that none but the soundest animals are mated.

To achieve success, he culled his herd mercilessly. He followed the same reasoning of English breeder William Torr, who stated “it takes thirty years to make a herd and bring it to one’s notion of perfection.” So distinctive was the type of Hereford produced, that the strain became known in cattleman circles as the Hazlett Hereford.

Later, his breeding methods became standard teaching in the field. At an award presentation, Dr. W. C. McCampbell of Kansas State College’s department of animal husbandry said of Hazlett, “The Hazlett Herefords comprise the greatest herd of Herefords the world has ever

known. Because of this, Mr. Hazlett does not belong to El Dorado or Kansas or the United States; he belongs to the world.”

Owning land found in 1916 to be rich in petroleum, Hazlett plunged into that rough and tumble business, becoming one of the area’s big producers of the Mid-Continent oil field. He helped in the organizing of the Inland Oil and Midland Refining Company, later to become Skelly Oil Company. Along with Robert H. Bradford, he was owner of the El Dorado Refining Company (El Reco), one of the largest area employers of the day.

Hazlett made money in many other fields, but not on his cattle. The high quality associated with the name Hereford today is, in part at least, his gift to the world.

AWARDS, RECOGNITION

Hazlett’s Hereford cattle captured scores of blue and purple ribbons in world competition, along with numerous grand championships, with perhaps a record never equaled in the livestock industry.

Because of his high standing in the industry, a specially executed portrait of him was commissioned to hang upon the walls of the Saddle and Sirloin Club of the Chicago Stockyards, the inner sanctum where the elite of the cattle world met to dine and talk business. This rarely attained distinction was “in recognition of accomplishing something genuinely worthwhile of the highest achievement.”

On July 6, 1927, Hazlett’s 80th birthday, he was awarded the title “America’s Premier Hereford Breeder” by the Breed Association. Hazlett also received an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws from the Kansas State College in Manhattan, Kansas.

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