

## Grade 5 - Informational

### The Biggest Barn in the World

The biggest barn in the world once stood near Kearney, Nebraska. Built in 1900, it was between 300 and 500 feet long, 100 feet wide, and 56 feet high. Why would anyone need a barn that big? Why was it built near Kearney? The reasons began with the dreams and plans of Henry David Watson.

#### Watson's Dreams

In 1888, Watson left Massachusetts and traveled west to Nebraska. He settled near Kearney. Watson was a dreamer, and his dreams were big. He acquired land and established a ranch that consisted of about 8,000 acres. It stretched from Kearney to Odessa and from the Platte River to the hills north of what is now Highway 30.

There was a drought in the Midwest in the 1890s. Many crops failed because of lack of water. Watson discovered that he could still grow alfalfa during the drought. He planted 15 acres of alfalfa in 1893. In time, he expanded it to 3,000 acres. In 1896, he raised 3,000 tons of alfalfa, but he couldn't sell any of it. Area farmers thought it was worthless. Some claimed it made their livestock sick and refused to use it.

#### The Need for a Big Barn

It would have seemed reasonable for Watson to scale back his unsuccessful alfalfa operation. He could have concentrated on one of the many other crops grown on his ranch. But he didn't. He continued planting alfalfa in large quantities. To demonstrate its value to the world, he built a large dairy operation on his ranch. He fed his herd nothing but alfalfa, and he built a big barn.

To understand the dimensions of the barn, imagine it on a football field. It would stretch from end zone to end zone, or longer, and cover two-thirds of the width of the playing field. It would be about as high as a five story building. The first floor of the barn had stalls for 400 dairy cows plus room for calves and horses.

The barn was built into the side of a hill so that teams of horses could pull loads of hay directly into the second floor. The barn could store 900 tons of hay. A silo attached to the barn held 1,000 tons of food for animals. Next to the barn was a creamery where milk products were processed for sale.

In time, Nebraska farmers started using alfalfa to feed their livestock. The Watson Ranch soon became famous. Tourists came to see the "biggest barn in the world." Farmers came to learn about alfalfa. Hundreds of people picked cherries from Watson's large cherry orchards. The Union Pacific Railroad, the creamery's major customer, served Watson's products in all the dining cars on its trains. It appeared that the Watson Ranch was a huge success. But it wasn't.

## **The End of a Dream**

Although Watson's ranch was a nationally known showplace, it never made much money. Watson didn't understand that bigger didn't mean better. Alfalfa had a profound effect on Nebraska farming that continues to this day. Watson is the one who introduced this crop to the region, but he devoted so many acres to alfalfa that it was impossible to manage. He didn't have enough equipment or workers to properly harvest the whole crop. He lost much of his crop each year.

In 1903, the Watson creamery burned down. Watson never rebuilt it. Without a creamery there could be no dairy. One of the greatest dairy operations ever attempted came to an end. Historians estimate that investors in the Watson Ranch lost up to 80 percent of their investment.

## **The Importance of Watson Ranch**

Watson was not financially successful, but his ranch influenced agricultural development. People from all over the United States as well as from foreign countries came to Kearney to see his operation.

In 1917, the Woods Brothers of Lincoln, Nebraska, purchased a large part of Watson's ranch. The property became known as the 1733 Ranch. It was 1,733 miles from Boston, Massachusetts, and 1,733 miles from San Francisco, California. The huge barn remained a landmark that continued to attract visitors for several years. It was torn down in 1935. Today, a historical marker stands on the site and reminds visitors of the dreams and accomplishments of Henry David Watson.

### **Watson's Barn**

