

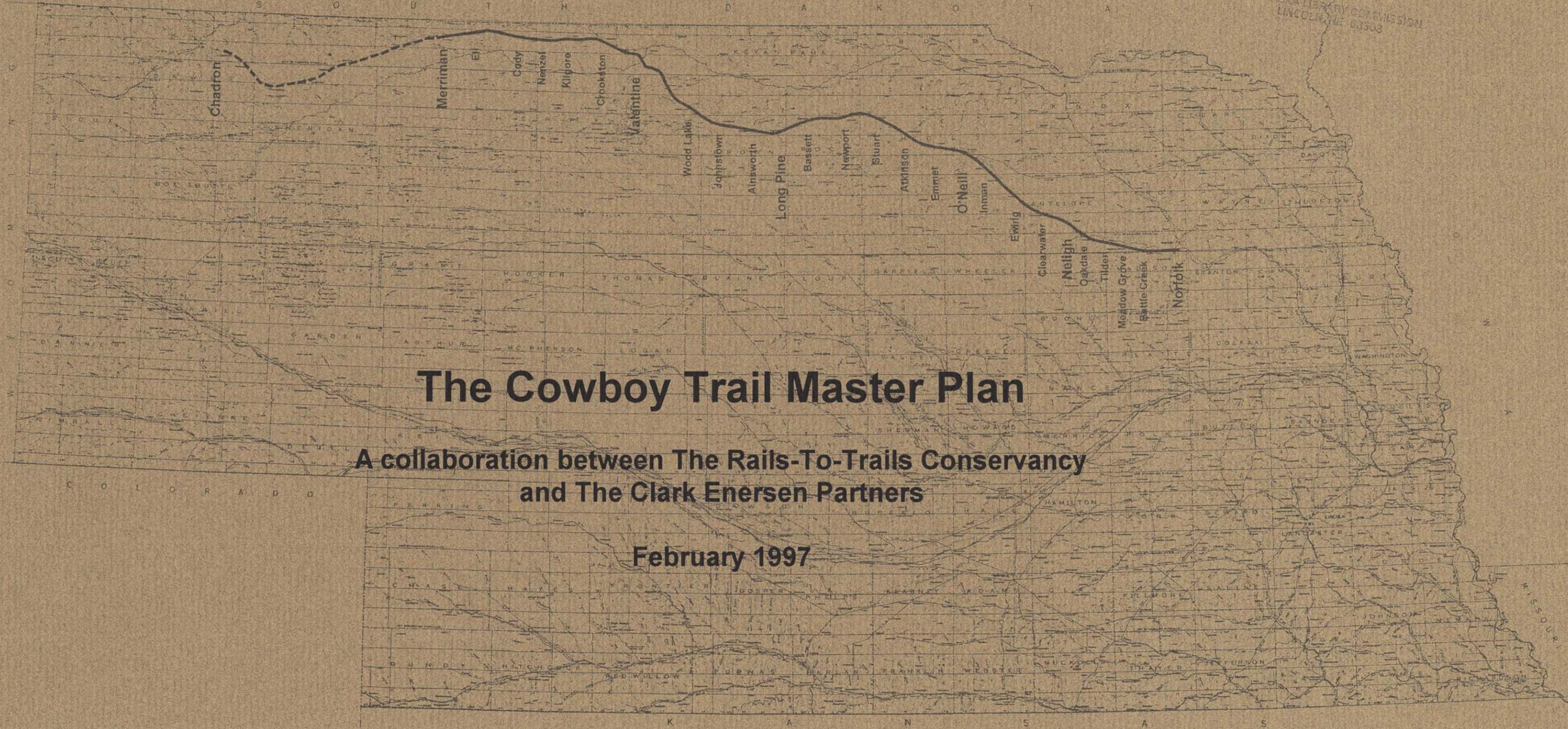
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The Cowboy Trail Master Plan

A collaboration between The Rails-To-Trails Conservancy
and The Clark Enersen Partners

February 1997

Nebraska's Cowboy Trail is the nation's longest rail-trail conversion. The 321-mile corridor stretches across the north central part of the state from Norfolk to Chadron. (See Map 1) It was purchased from Chicago and NorthWestern Transportation Company (C&NW) by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) for just more than \$6 million as one part of a three-way agreement with the State of Nebraska. The iron rail, the ties and excess ballast were lifted from the 247-mile section between Norfolk and Merriman and sold as salvage to recover the purchase price. The rails, ties and ballast on the 74-mile section from Merriman to Chadron remain in place to allow for the NEBKOTA Railway, a shortline carrier included under the three-way master agreement, to continue operating in the western part of the state while allowing a 30' rail with trail corridor.

The corridor's 3,893 acres of land, two sets of buildings and 221 bridge structures were presented as a gift to the State of Nebraska from RTC. NGPC was the state agency assigned by statute 81-185.59 et seq (see Appendix) in 1993 to accept the gift of the C&NW right-of-way if offered and to railbank, develop and manage the corridor as a trail for recreational and alternative transportation uses. The state also retains the easement rights to develop and maintain a rail with trail alongside the 74-mile shortline operation.

The Cowboy Trail is adjacent to US Highways 275 and 20. The majority of the trail is in the heart of Nebraska's sparsely populated cowboy country and interacts with 26 communities, plus another five west of Merriman and five former railroad stops.

This corridor is to be valued and cherished for many reasons. It passes through beautiful Nebraska scenery — from the western hemisphere's largest stabilized sand dune formation to the prominent hay country to the scenic Elkhorn River Valley. It preserves natural habitat for wildlife and birds to feed, nest and recover. It continues the history of a transportation link as it provides a safe recreational outlet.

At the outset of planning, four constraints, or established factors, were identified.

“Railbanking”

The Cowboy Trail corridor is legally “railbanked.” Creation of an interim trail on a “railbanked” corridor requires that the corridor and all its structures be preserved as a viable element in the transportation infrastructure of the country. As such, the transferred ownership includes all bridges and trestles, a subgrade suitable for weights many times in excess of the trail user, trail slopes of less than 3 percent, and all existing surface and subsurface easements. Alternative forms of transportation could be allowed to use the corridor until such time as rail services would be restored.

Length

The Cowboy Trail Master Plan is for the 247-mile length from mile post 83.3, approximately .07 miles west of Norfolk to milepost 332, just east of Merriman. The additional 74-mile segment that could be made available for a trail with rail is outside the scope of the plan. The trail, as planned, crosses multiple jurisdictions — 26 towns or cities, six counties, three Natural Resources Districts, two State Recreation Planning Regions, and two Congressional districts — all with their own interests, missions, policies, goals, and structures.

Route

The route for the Cowboy Trail is limited to and predetermined by the railroad right-of-way (ROW). Where the basic ROW widens, especially in towns or cities, the extra width may be considered for trailheads and other trail user amenities. A side path for equestrians may be considered within the constraints of the ROW.

The Nebraska statewide trails plan, *A Network of Discovery (1991)*, relies heavily on the Cowboy Trail in creating the statewide trails network. This trail is also viewed as essential in creating a cross country rail-trail and could become an alternative route for the national American Discovery Trail.

Connections to other trails, existing and future, are inevitable and will impact on the Cowboy Trail.

Finances

When accepting the gift of the Cowboy corridor, the Nebraska State Legislature appropriated only modest funding for maintenance and operation for fiscal years 1996 and 1997. Future and additional funding would need to be sought beyond state tax revenues. Hence, trail features must be reasonable in the costs for construction, installation, and maintenance. Elements or structures for the trail, such as kiosks or trail heads, should be designed for simplicity, durability and adoptability by groups other than NGPC.

RTC's contracted salvage firm is to leave the corridor in a 'trail-ready' condition, suitable for a primitive trail experience. In addition, RTC contracted for the installation of sign posts and bollards at road crossings, over \$60,000 in trail surfacing and more than \$100,000 in bridge work. RTC also donated \$100,000 to NGPC for trail development work and established a separate \$50,000 matching program as an incentive to communities and groups along the trail to partner in the trail's development. An additional \$57,000 has been set aside by RTC for other trail-related projects.

Initial funding for the installation of decking and safety handrails on bridges, seven miles of surfacing and restoration work on the historic O'Neill Depot was paid for with funds from the Enhancements portion of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991, an 80/20 match program. The NGPC used the value of the donated corridor as the match.

ISTEA funding, combined with an additional \$40,000 from RTC, also covered the development of this Master Plan for the Cowboy Trail. It represents the collaborative work of The Clark Enersen Partners, an architectural, engineering and landscape architectural design firm from Lincoln, Nebraska, and Marg Peterson, trails consultant for Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, with input from citizens and communities along the trail, the staff at Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, and Rails-to-Trails Conservancy.

Goals were determined in two areas. From the very outset of work, the first set of goals focused on the question: *What should the Master Plan aim to provide?*

As a result of discussions between NGPC and RTC, it was agreed that the Master Plan would provide for four dimensions:

1. An overarching and long-term vision for the Cowboy Trail to ensure an efficient and coordinated plan of development;
2. An assurance of the rail corridor's preservation for possible future rail reactivation;
3. A safe recreational resource for local families and residents of all ages and physical abilities;
4. Opportunities to stimulate local economies by encouraging local, state, regional and national tourism.

Second, goals were established for the Design Concept. This followed the inventory and analysis, incorporated the constraints and reflected the goals for the Plan. The Design Concept is key in determining appropriate design elements and strategies for implementation. The concept is addressed and expanded upon in Section II, **The Plan**.

About the Plan's Organization

The introduction to the Master Plan contains a brief history of railroad activity and early population movement which is followed by the substance of the planning process and the plan design.

Section I, The Planning Process, covers the Public Participation and Inventory and Analysis Phases. The information ranges from factual data on the natural features such as soils, hydrology and climate to the location of views, vegetation, wildlife, rivers and highways.

Observations from the Trail include impressions and feelings of the young man who hiked the corridor during the inventory phase. Community inventories of services, facilities, connections and area resources were done to capture the social and cultural variety along the trail. An analysis was completed of potential trail users and their needs.

The Plan in Section II outlines the concepts and then the development of those concepts as the trail moves through countryside and communities. Design elements for tread and surface, signs and amenities, vegetation and viewing points are here, along with specific locations for placement.

Management & Costs in Section III include recommendations for maintenance and policy, a phased implementation approach, and suggested costs and funding ideas.

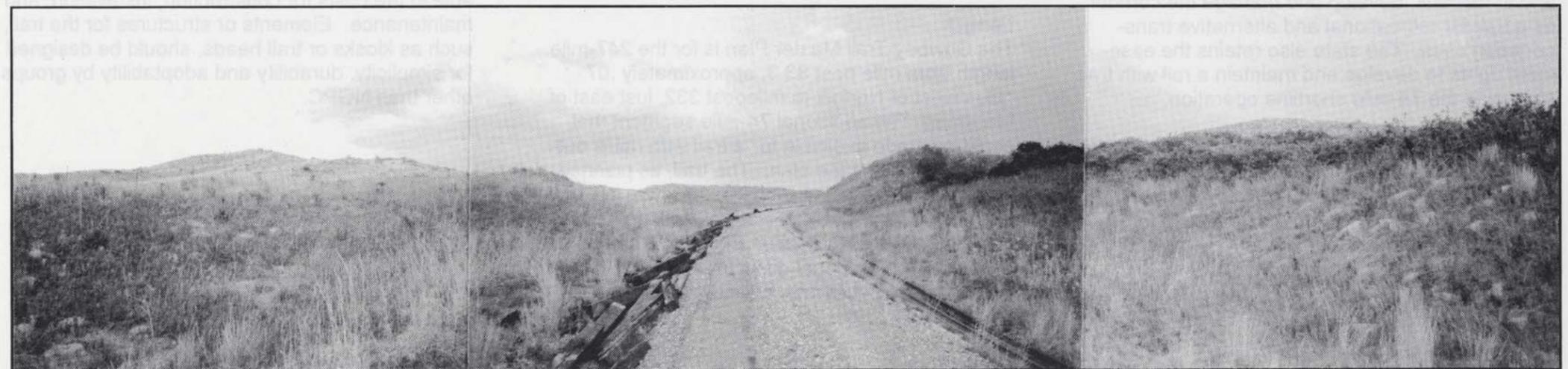
The Appendixes include the support materials related to the Cowboy Trail. Legislation on Nebraska Trails, the Cowboy Trail authorization and recreational liability are located in this section.

Using the Plan

The Cowboy Trail respects the mile markers, or posts, established by the railroad and they are used in the Master Plan as the keys to locating points along the trail corridor. The lower the number, the further east on the trail.

When the trail was inventoried, the hiker started at mile marker 332 in Merriman and headed east to mile marker 83.3 just outside of Norfolk. The plan is also assembled from west to east, large to small mile numbers.

The Cowboy Trail Master Plan should be viewed as a working document. As things change along the trail and as the volume of usage increases, the plan may need to change. Anticipate new opportunities and new ideas. Incorporate them into continued phases of development and enhancement.



Mile 256 - East of Valentine

Railroads and Pioneers Arrive

The character of the north central region of Nebraska is perhaps best described with words such as vast, open, sensitive, unique. And now the words challenge and opportunity must be added as the former 321-mile C&NW rail corridor, known as The Cowboy Line, is considered for trail development.

The more modern history of the area was shaped by the expansion of the New World and the newly forming United States. Railroads heavily influenced the early development of this region and of the State of Nebraska. The opportunity to preserve and continue that legacy exists with the development of a rail-trail on the railbed.

In 1862 two legislative acts were passed and signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln. These two laws set in motion changes that would forever impact all aspects of American life. The first, the Pacific Railroad Act, created a system of transportation that stretched from coast to coast. The second, the Homestead Act, offered land to those who were willing and eager to expand into the newly created territories of Nebraska, Dakota and Wyoming.

The railroad provided access to the undeveloped lands at the same time it brought people who would lay claim and develop this unsettled mid-country. The spirit, energy and skills of the newly arriving pioneers were poured into capturing the potential of the plains. Together, these two partners changed the face and the future of Nebraska. Each built on the other's progress. Each depended on the other's success.

Land was the common element. Railroads needed it in long corridors, and the pioneers needed it in large plots. There seemed to be no shortage of this resource in the territories. Government land grant programs were established to make free land available to both homesteaders and railroad entrepreneurs.

This was an opportunity to build an economic empire for the railroad. For the pioneering families, it was an opportunity to own land, to start a new life on a new frontier. The railroad brought the people. The people provided the workforce essential for developing the land resources and building the population base required for Nebraska's statehood, which came in 1867.

Ground breaking for the first railroad in Nebraska was in 1863, but it was another two years before construction was actually underway. In 1864 the Sioux City & Pacific Railroad was incorporated. Five years later the Fremont, Elkhorn & Missouri Railroad, the "Elkhorn," was incorporated. By means of a variety of business arrangements, the "Elkhorn" railroad provided the link that connected the Sioux City & Pacific with the transcontinental Union Pacific Railroad across north central and north west Nebraska.

As the transcontinental line neared completion, the fever to build more railroads increased, only to be stopped short by the economic Panic of 1873.

With the discovery of gold in the Black Hills of South Dakota, railroad fever returned with a vengeance. Native American rights were trampled and treaties were disregarded in the pursuit of wealth.

Leases and mergers of railroad companies continued at nearly the same rate as the laying of rail and ties. Service extended from Wisner to Norfolk. To Oakdale in 1879. To Long Pine in 1881. To Fort Niobrara and Valentine in 1883. The arrival in Valentine was slowed by the need to build two major bridges, one across the wide, deep valley of the Niobrara River on the south side of Fort Niobrara and the other across the deep Pine Creek gorge at Long Pine.

After years of cooperative efforts between the independent rail companies, the Sioux City & Pacific/Elkhorn line was formally acquired by the Chicago & NorthWestern Railway in 1884.

The push west continued past Valentine, and by snow fall of 1885, Chadron was the proud new northwest terminal of the C&NW/Elkhorn Railroad. The Black Hills of South Dakota were within easy distance. The foothills and ranges of Wyoming were only a few miles west. The State of Nebraska was just shy of having a second complete cross-state railroad.

Between Norfolk and Chadron, there were 40 stops. Some of those were new towns established by the Pioneer Town Site Company, a subsidiary of C&NW. Others were simply machinery platforms, coal or lumber dealers, grain stops or livestock loading platforms. Every stop was a link to the outside world, bringing in people and goods while taking out the produce of Nebraska and the surrounding regions.

OFFICIAL TIME TABLES
Lincoln

THE NORTH-WESTERN LINE

COMPRISING THE

CHICAGO & NORTH-WESTERN RY.
CHICAGO, ST. PAUL,
MINNEAPOLIS & OMAHA RY.
FREMONT, ELKHORN
& MISSOURI VALLEY R.R.
SIOUX CITY & PACIFIC R.R.

7966 MILES
OF PERFECTLY EQUIPPED RAILWAY IN
ILLINOIS, IOWA, WISCONSIN,
MICHIGAN, MINNESOTA, NEBRASKA,
NORTH DAKOTA, SOUTH DAKOTA
AND WYOMING

Figure 1 - 1895 railroad time schedule. From the archives of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

**LONG PINE
AND
FREE HOMES
FOR THE
MILLION**

THIS IS THE PRESENT TERMINUS OF THE

Sioux City & Pacific R. R.

→: **LONG PINE** :←

Is in the center of a large unorganized district of country, especially adapted to agriculture, and which is **OPEN TO HOMESTEADING.**

It is high rolling prairie, well watered by streams which flow northward into the Niobrara River. Its soil is very rich and it is the **HEALTHIEST CLIMATE IN THE WORLD.**

SECURE A

**Low Rate Land Exploring Ticket
TO
NELIGH, NEB., AND RETURN,
AND GO AND SATISFY YOURSELF.**

For farther information write to or enquire of
P. E. ROBINSON, **J. R. BUCHANAN,**
Ass't Gen'l Pass. Agent, Gen'l Passenger Agent,
MISSOURI VALLEY, IOWA.

For nearly 110 years, the countryside heard the whistle and saw the steam, and later the smoke, of the locomotives. But over that same period, automobiles and trucks came to present stiff competition. Travelers preferred the privacy of the automobile. Freight, livestock and produce could be hauled by truck without waiting for scheduled arrivals. The railroad faced harsh economic realities — operating expenses continued to increase while revenues were diminishing.

Talks of discontinuing service along the route started as early as the mid-1950s. Nearly 40 years of efforts by a wide variety of groups and businesses tried to keep the line alive and viable, but finally, in 1991, C&NW filed notice with the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) of its intent to discontinue providing service on the line. (This regulatory body became known as the Surface Transportation Board in 1995.)

In authorizing the discontinuance, the ICC also urged that sufficient time be given to private shippers or the State of Nebraska to acquire the line in order to maintain the rail service and minimize the negative economic impacts on rural and small town Nebraska. As a fall back, should the efforts to acquire the corridor for continued rail use be unsuccessful, the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature passed LB739 allowing Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to accept the Cowboy Line as a gift, IF offered. The bill (subsequently codified as 81-815.59) was signed by Governor Ben Nelson in June 1993. (See Appendixes.)

When the 1991 ICC filing was recorded, Charles Montange, a leading attorney in the long-term preservation of rail corridors, and other individuals with an interest in trails began to closely monitor the abandonment process. As it became increasingly apparent that efforts to preserve the entire 321-mile corridor for continued rail use were unlikely to succeed, representatives of NEBKOTA Railway sought Governor Nelson's support in the creation of both on the C&NW corridor — a shortline rail operation and a trail.

The Governor agreed with the concept of preserving some rail operations as well as the entire corridor, if such could be done at no cost to the State, and he supported and encouraged discussions with NEBKOTA, C&NW and Montange on behalf of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC).

RTC, a national nonprofit membership organization, assists in preserving corridors once they are removed from active rail service and in converting those corridors into trails for use in recreation, as routes for alternative modes of transportation, and for possible future rail reactivation, known as railbanking.

C&NW's need was to remove the whole line as a package from their inventory. They saw a rail-trail as a way to meet that need. They also understood that by using the railbanking statute, the potential existed to reacquire the corridor should there be demands for future rail service. It was in full cooperation with one another, along with the support of the Governor's office, that a successful 3-way Master Agreement was negotiated in November 1994. The agreement provided for the preservation of the corridor under the federal railbanking statute, section 8(d) of the National Trails System Act, U.S.C. 1247 (d). Using this mechanism, C&NW was able to remove the corridor from its inventory, the linear integrity of the corridor was kept intact, and the conversion of the corridor into a public trail was made possible. Should rail service be required at some point in the future, the corridor will be available for a railroad to acquire in order to reactivate service.

Railbanked corridors require a willing agency or organization to serve as managing steward of the land and to agree to develop it into a public use trail. NGPC was named by RTC as "designee" to receive the corridor under conditions as laid out in LB739. NGPC commissioners, at their regular meeting on July 17, 1994, voted to accept financial responsibilities for the conversion of the corridor into interim use as a public trail. The transfer of ownership from RTC to NGPC was formalized at the December 5, 1994, meeting of the commission.

Figure 2 - From Official Time Tables of the NorthWestern Line, 1895

The 3-way Master Agreement is complex but straightforward. It specifies that:

1. RTC would purchase from C&NW the corridor known as the Cowboy Line from Norfolk (Mile Post 83.3) to Merriman (Mile Post 332) and obtain a trail easement on the line from Merriman to Chadron (Mile Post 404.5);
2. NEBKOTA Railway, Inc., the new shortline railroad created to work with the Governor's Policy Research Office, would continue to provide rail service between Merriman and Chadron;
3. The 247-mile corridor from Norfolk to Merriman was railbanked to be developed as the Cowboy Trail;

4. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission would receive as a donated gift from a not-for-profit entity (RTC) the Norfolk to Merriman segment and would serve as the steward and managing agency for the trail; and

5. NGPC would also obtain the easement rights to develop a rail-with-trail on the right-of-way from Merriman to Chadron.

History's mysteries and secrets of this land precede the homesteaders and the railroads, trails acts and legislative statutes by millions of years.

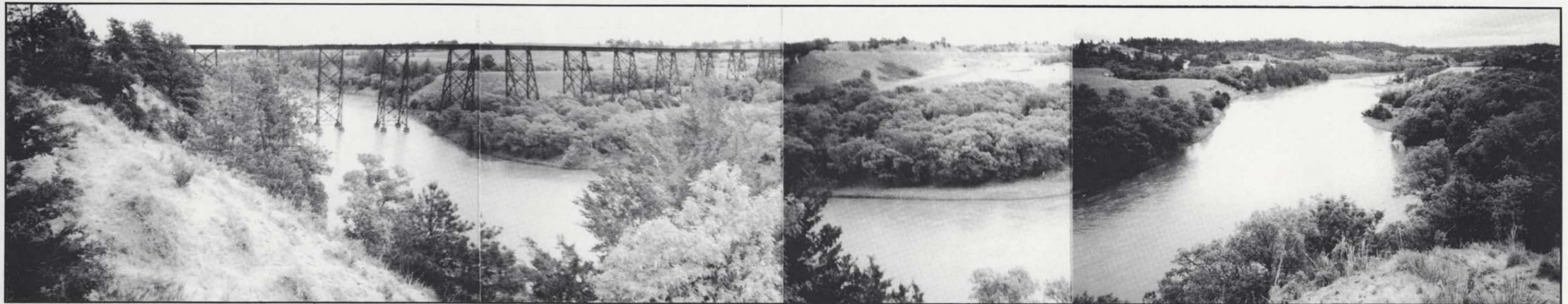
Before the railroad a great sea filled with giant creatures covered the area. Dinosaurs, mosasaurs, plesiosaurs, rabbits, rhinos, camels, bison, and approximately 150 other species lived on this land long before any known human species.

Along the Cowboy Trail corridor today, paleontologists are discovering some of the world's most astounding fossils in beds steeped with the ancient past. Historians, archeologists, and sociologists are searching for stories from previous populations and cultures. Geologists, biologists, and naturalists are studying the changes caused by time and nature.

Between the prehistoric period and the time of the pioneer, Native Americans moved freely across the old dried sea bed, caring for the earth and its creatures. This land they called home, they also called "Nebraska, the land of flat waters."

The richness of their legacy, culture and tradition is an essential component to the preservation of this stretch of land. The documentation of these histories, in many cases, is yet to be uncovered and told. Native Americans living in the surrounding areas hold one of many keys to the development of the Cowboy Trail.

Even as this land corridor takes on another use as a trail, a rich legacy is assured. Today's trail users will be able to venture onto the vast Great Plains of northwestern and north central Nebraska, explore millions of years of nature's evolution, encounter cultural heritages unlike their own and learn of the 110 years of railroad history in Nebraska.



Mile 267 - Niobrara Bridge East of Valentine

The Cowboy Trail Master Plan

Prepared for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration.

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The contents of this plan reflect the views of the authors who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the data presented herein and are subject to changes in laws, standards and needs. The contents do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the Nebraska Department of Roads or the Federal Highway Administration.

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Continued from Page i

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Berggren and Woll Architects

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Marg Peterson

To the vast numbers of unnamed people who have been diligently working behind the scenes for the Cowboy Trail, to those who have inadvertently been omitted from this list, and to those whose names have been misspelled, our apologies. A special thank you to the media outlets — newspapers, magazines, radio and television — that carried Cowboy Trail news and feature stories, interviews, letters of support and opposition. There can never be a completely accurate count of all those who have offered suggestions, challenged assumptions, welcomed trail workers and users, picked up a gum wrapper, or participated in this trail project. All of you are acknowledged with heartfelt thanks.



THE CLARK ENERSEN PARTNERS

Mr. Rex Amack
Director
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
2200 North 33rd Street
Lincoln, NE 68503

August, 1996

Dear Mr. Amack,

The Cowboy Trail represents a great occasion to expand recreation in Nebraska. The Clark Enersen Partners is proud to have been associated with this significant effort.

We are pleased to submit the Master Plan for the development of The Cowboy Trail. This plan should serve as the guide for future development of the trail corridor.

Our thanks to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission staff and others associated with the project for their assistance in preparing this plan.

Sincerely,

Eileen E. Bergt, ASLA
Landscape Architect
Project Manager/Designer
The Clark Enersen Partners, Inc.

Dennis D. Scheer, ASLA
Landscape Architect
Principal in Charge
The Clark Enersen Partners, Inc.



August, 1996

Mr. Rex Amack
Director
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
2200 N. 33rd St.
Lincoln, NE 68503

Dear Mr. Amack,

It is with great pleasure that I submit to you the final draft of The Cowboy Trail Master Plan. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, along with The Clark Enerson Partners has taken great effort to prepare a plan which will serve the Commission and other state and local agencies for years to come in your coordinated and continuing efforts to develop the Cowboy Trail into a world-class rail-trail.

Preparation of The Cowboy Trail Master Plan has been a true work of discovery and excitement for all of the team members contributing to this project. The plan identifies tremendous natural and built resources which can be featured, highlighted, enhanced, and restored, making the trail a central feature in each of the communities through which it passes. When fully developed, the Cowboy Trail should contribute significantly to the local economies of the communities on or near the trail by becoming an important tourism destination. In addition, the trail has already begun to serve as an important non-motorized transportation and recreation corridor for local residents, providing a safe off-road place for children, equestrians and others to bicycle, walk or ride.

This Master Plan describes an overall vision for the development of one of our Nation's most significant rail-trails. Though the plan recommends many unifying design and trail development concepts, we recommend that the plan be read as a guide and used in a manner which encourages local creativity within the broader context of the overall vision identified in the plan. By using the plan in this way, local features of the trail and characteristics of the communities can be highlighted all along the corridor, yet trail users will find an underlying consistency which should enhance their experience and reinforce the significance of this tremendous trail -- whether they are using one-mile of the trail or enjoying the entire 247 mile long portion of the trail included in this plan.

Development of the Cowboy Trail Master Plan would not have been possible without the assistance and guidance of many people. I particularly want to acknowledge the contributions of Project Director Marg Peterson. Working under contract with the Conservancy, Marg brought to this project vision, enthusiasm, commitment, and the benefit of her many years of experience on rail-trail issues. I also want to specifically acknowledge the excellent work of The Clark Enersen Partners, particularly Eileen Bergt and Todd Brown. All of us here at the Conservancy are also deeply grateful for the guidance provided by current and former NGPC staff members Pat Foote and Charles Duncan. Finally, we wish to thank all the Members of the Commission for selecting Rails-to-Trails Conservancy to complete this plan and for their continued support for development of The Cowboy Trail. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy is pleased that this phase of the planning process is now complete and all of us here at the Conservancy stand ready to assist the NGPC with its on-going development of The Cowboy Trail.

Sincerely,

Hal Hiemstra
Vice President

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Introduction	1	Section II The Plan	
History	3		
Section I The Planning Process			
The Phases of Planning	7	Design Concept	41
Public Participation Phase	8	Concept Development	42
Inventory & Analysis Phases	9	Trail Corridor Through Countryside	43
Natural Features		Trail Within Community	50
Soils	10	Design Opportunities	
Hydrology	11	On Wide Rights-of-Way	56
Climate	12	Adjacent to Trail Corridor	60
Visual Character: views, topography, vegetation, wildlife		Liability	61
Observations from the Trail	15	Elements of Design	
Town/City Character: sights, images, flavor, impressions		Symbols & Definitions	62
Observations from the Trail	19	Miles 332 to 276	63
Landmarks: buildings, bridges, skylines	21	Miles 276 to 221	65
Secluded Areas	22	Valentine Loop	68
Social, Cultural, Economic, Political		Scenic Excursion	70
Communities	25	Miles 221 to 169	71
Land Use	29	Wildlife Excursion	74
Population	30	Miles 169 to 124	75
Connections & Attractions		Elkhorn River Excursion	78
Trails	31	Miles 124 to 83.3	79
Historic	33	Agricultural Excursion	82
Recreational Opportunities	34		
Activity Analysis	35		

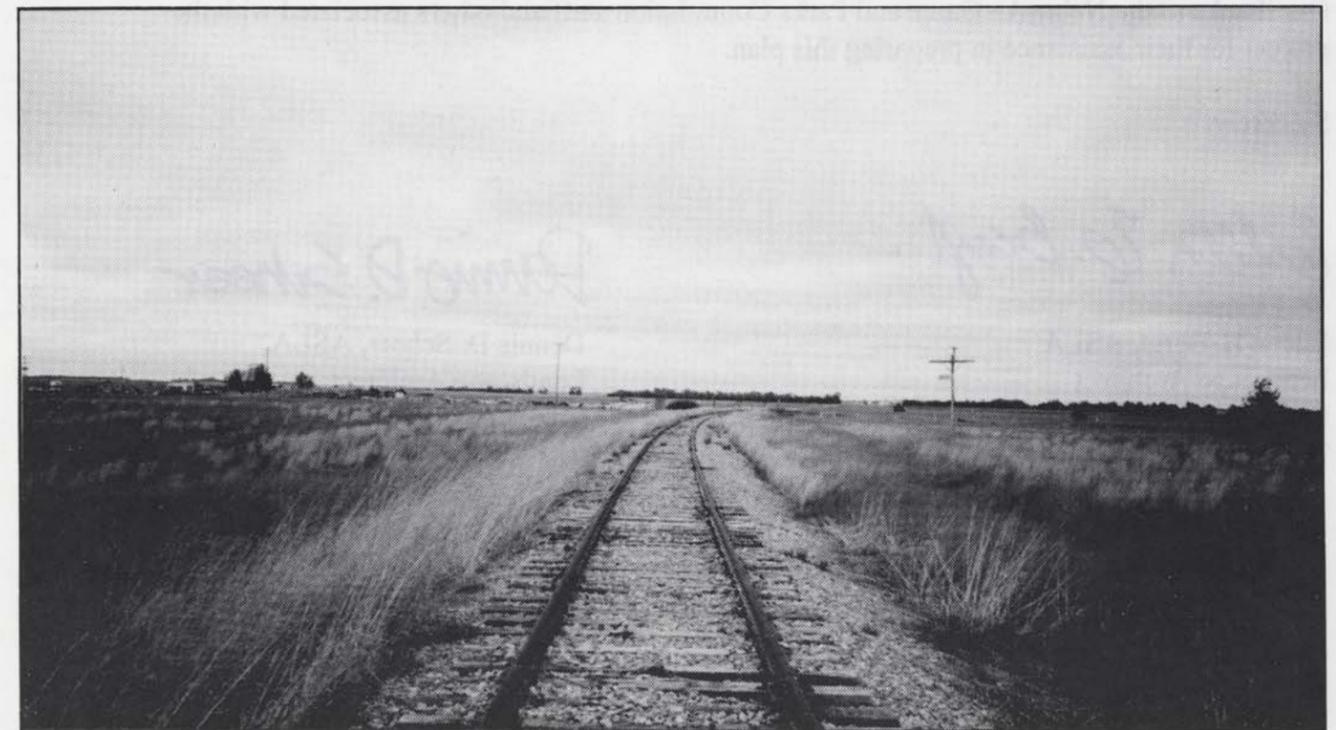
Section III Management & Costs

Maintenance Recommendations	85
Policy Recommendations	86
Phased Development/Priorities	87
Cost Estimates	89
Partnerships and Funding	90

Appendixes

Legislation	
Recreational Trails Act, Article 15	93
Article 81-815.59, Cowboy Trail	94

Recreation Liability Act, Article 10	95
Railbanking	96
Other Rail-Trails	97
Inventories	
Demographics	98
Facilities	99
Activities & Trails	100
History	101
Nature	102
Amenities	
Restrooms	103
Benches/Picnic Tables	106
References	107



Mile 212 - East of Long Pine

Tables

1. County Population	30
2. Federal Areas	32
3. Community Trails	32
4. Nebraska State Areas	32
5. Historic Attractions	33
6. Off-Trail Recreational Opportunities	34

Figures

1. 1895 Railroad Time Schedule	3
2. FromTime Table of NorthWestern Line, 1895	4
3. Soils	10
4. Rivers	11
5. Mean Annual Precipitation	13
6. Average Depth of Snow Cover	13
7. Days...Maximum Temperature 32°	14
8. Days...with 80°F Temperatures	14
9. Prevailing Winds and Velocities	14
10. Visual Character	15
11. Secluded Areas	24
12. Communities	25
13. Trail Intersection Signage	44
14. Point of Interest	45
15. Obstruction Free Zone	45
16. Horse/Bicycle Rack	46
17. Sun Dial	47
18. Wetlands Deck Plan	47
19. Deck Details	47
20. Interpretive Structure	48
21. Interpretive Structure	49
22. Interpretive Structure	49
23. Interpretive Structure	49
24. Example of Trail Intersecting Community	50
25. Example of Trail at Edge of Community	51
26. Kiosk Details	52
27. Kiosk Elevations	53
28. Basic Amenities Signage	54
29. Valentine ROW	56
30. Long Pine ROW	57
31. O'Neill ROW	58
32. Wide Rights-of-Way	59
33. Point of Interest at Niobrara River Bridge	68

Maps

1. Nebraska: Cowboy Trail	i
2. Activity Analysis	35
3. Miles 332 to 276 Merriman to Crookston	63
4. Miles 276 to 221 Crookston to Ainsworth	65
5. Miles 269 to 265 Valentine Loop	67
6. Miles 224 to 221 Scenic Excursion	69
7. Miles 221 to 169 Ainsworth to Atkinson	71
8. Miles 204 to 194 Wildlife Excursion	73
9. Miles 169 to 124 Atkinson to Clearwater	75
10. Miles 124 to 111 Elkhorn River Excursion	77
11. Miles 124 to 83.3 Clearwater to trail end, Norfolk	79
12. Miles 100 to 83.3 Agricultural Excursion	81