Madison County Genealogical Society
P.O. Box 1031, Norfolk, NE 68702-1031
mcgs@telebeep.com
www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nemcgs/
www.nesgs.org/~mcgs

My Search for the Mayors of Norfolk
By Betty Bohac

To be successful at genealogical research you must possess determination, patience, and dedication. Those were the virtues used by Municipal Clerk, Betty Bohac in her quest for pictures of the 31 mayors and two acting mayors of the City of Norfolk.

The project of getting the pictures with the exception of two, took over 3 ½ years. It was not just her endeavor for photographs, but it was about the sons, daughters, grandchildren, great grandchildren, nieces, nephews and friends who were responsive to her requests for photographs. Betty also had the support of the City Officials.

An original clipping from Ruth Sorenson of the 1907 Norfolk Daily News picturing the nine living mayors at that time was definitely the deciding factor to undertake the project. It was not, however, as easy as it appeared. Many hours were spent at the library looking at microfilm for pictures. What a revelation---there are not too many pictures in those early newspapers. The library did have several original pictures; however, City Directories, Milestones [High school yearbooks], atlases, and cemetery records also came under careful scrutiny. In the final analysis it was much like doing family research, following one lead after another. People were contacted by phone, letter and word of mouth in all parts of Nebraska, Florida, Colorado, Minnesota, New Jersey, Iowa, Kansas, Virginia, Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania just to name a few. Betty's research included a personal visit to Decorah, Iowa, in her attempts to get a picture of James Simpson, Mayor from 1898 to 1899. He along with Paul Nordwig, Mayor 1927-1929 and 1931-32, (Nordwig died in office) are the only two pictures that were not found. The search will go on for those pictures.

The first Mayor, Herman Gerecke, was elected as mayor in 1866. The term of office at that time was one year. From 1886-1892, Herman Gerecke and John Koenigstein were the winners [for] the election to the Mayorship. Finally in 1892, Samuel Hayes broke the rivalry between the two. There always appeared to be many candidates for office and much competition at the party Caucuses as well as at the elections. Although the dates and statistical data was readily available in the records in the City Clerk's office, it was necessary to get an overview of City government in order to understand when elections were held and the conduct of governmental activities.

There were two acting mayors, August Steffan who filled the office of Paul Nordwig, and Dane Brewster who filled the unexpired term of James Scheer. The search for Henry Matrau, mayor from 1893 to 1895, also revealed a book Sixty-Three Letters Home.

These were letters written to Matrau's family during his service in the Civil War. The only picture available of John Clements was taken from a snapshot from a lady in Gordon, Nebraska. He was wearing a hat in the snapshot. The picture was used as it was the only one found.

Some of the pictures were developed from the newspaper microfilm. This was done by a special process by the Nebraska Historical Society. These pictures are not of the quality printed from original photos.

It was a long and arduous project but very rewarding in many ways. I found that the gentlemen who served as mayors came from all walks of life. Seven had served in the Civil War, one on the Confederate side. They were honest men who served with dignity and were responsible for the orderly growth of the City of Norfolk. Until you do this type of research, it is difficult to envision the process of establishing, for instance, a water and sewer system, gravel and then paved streets, the first street lights, naming the streets, the first door to door mail delivery, wooden to cement sidewalks and muddy Norfolk Avenue after a rain. The hardships endured along the way and the perseverance of those people who formed our City deserve our respect forever.

Genealogists have an excellent opportunity and challenge to preserve not only the history of their family but to record the events of the times, the places and the people for generations to come.