

Hidden treasure for incorporation day anniversary

Many of us have basements or attics or closets full of old stuff. Most often these things are only meaningful to the owner, and would be considered junk to anybody else. But occasionally a gem is revealed.

Such was the case when my sister, Nancy Rosi, came across a roll of old dog-eared pages with marginally readable handwriting on them. She had discovered the 1880s version of a photocopier machine. Called “Bushnell's Perfect Letter Copying Book”, it was manufactured in 1885 to allow the purchaser to copy any letter written in ink.

This marvelous example of 19th century technology was interesting in and of itself. However the most exciting part about this book are the over 100 letters in it, all written by our great-grandfather James Harvey Crawford from 1889 to 1892. The members of the Crawford family were the first permanent residents of Steamboat Springs, moving here in 1876. The letters were his business letters concerning the Steamboat Springs Company.

Crawford partnered with Boulder bankers to form the Steamboat Springs Company in 1883, with James as vice-president and manager. The company bought 800 acres of land on both sides of the Yampa River, surveyed the townsite and started marketing the lots to new settlers. This private company, beholden only to a limited number of shareholders, ran the town for 17 years.

Crawford's newly found letters give us a closer look at the inner workings of the company, as it maintained the streets, built the bridges over Soda Creek and Butcherknife Creek, built an office, built and ran the Bath House, and promoted Steamboat Springs across the state.

However there were limitations to a private company operating a town. For example, they had no police capabilities (the county sheriff had jurisdiction) and they could not tax property owners (many of us might think this a big plus for the residents).

The final limitation occurred in 1900 when a business man from Denver wanted to build an electric power plant in Steamboat but could only sign a contract with a municipal body. This stumbling block led directly to the Steamboat Springs Company requesting a vote of the populace to see if they wanted to incorporate as a town.

That vote occurred July 17, 1900, with a strong majority voting for incorporation.

To celebrate this official beginning for the City of Steamboat Springs, The Tread of Pioneers Museum will host a special Brown Bag Lecture at the United Methodist Church at noon Friday, titled “The Anniversary of the Incorporation of Steamboat Springs: 1900 – 2015”

Former City Manager Paul Hughes, former City Council member Arianthé Stettner and I will co-present the panel-style discussion. James H. Crawford's original copy book described above will be on display for the event. A scanned and transcribed version of the copy book can be viewed at crawfordpioneersofsteamboatsprings.com under the Crawford Family tab.

James L. Crawford is the great-grandson of Steamboat Springs' town founder, James Harvey Crawford.



This photo shows James H. Crawford in front of the Office of the Steamboat Springs Company, built in 1889. This building was used as the first “City Hall” when the town incorporated in 1900.