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## Chapter 2

# Ida Emily Higginson

## Birth to Marriage, 1866 to 1890

Ida Emily Higginson, Myrtie's mother, was almost six feet tall with dark hair. Ida had gray eyes—not blue, like her mother and siblings. The fifth child of Mary and Edward Higginson, Irish immigrants, Ida Emily was born in Lodi, Illinois, June 1, 1866, the year after the Civil War ended.

By 1869, the Higginson family had moved to Iowa, where Ida's youngest sister, Isabelle, was born in October.

Edward Higginson, Ida's father, had been seriously wounded in the Civil War. As a little girl Ida could stick her thumb into the hole in her father's wrist, a wound made by a minie ball. Edward's leg wound never healed correctly and he died eight years after the Civil War ended. Ida was seven.

Ida's brother John had white swelling in his leg. The odor of the running sore was so bad that at eleven years old, Ida's family taught her how to dress the abscess. She was the only one the smell didn't bother. Ida treated John's leg each morning for four years until John died when he was almost 26.

Ida, I (Louise) was told, went with her sister Carrie and her husband Charley Williams when they moved by covered wagon to Keya Paha County, Nebraska, in 1884. Carrie and Charley were expecting their first child, and

Mary, Ida, and Carrie's mother, had sent Ida along to help. At one point the bridge over the Niobrara River was out, and Carrie and Charles had to go back to Ainsworth.

*Aunt Carrie was just about to have her baby—seems like they always come in a blizzard. It was terrible. They put up the tent for the night for protection and baby Mae was born. The blizzard also blew the tent down and a woman from the railroad house came and brought Aunt Carrie to the house. The people there at the railroad station had a place where they lived and they brought Aunt Carrie and the baby in their house and they stayed there for a short time; and then the blizzard all cleared up and the snow evidently melted. It was the springtime and they went on and took up their land. And my mother stayed and helped with the work, washing on the board. Especially all the washing.—Myrtie Crabtree Briggs, daughter. (Also see the Williams Family story in Part III.)*

Ida bought a buggy to go back and forth in Nebraska and stayed with Carrie a couple years. Around the time of baby Mae's birth, the Superintendent asked Ida to take the exam to teach, as teachers were needed in Nebraska.

*My mother was one of the very first teachers out in Nebraska.*



Ida Emily Higginson.

*She taught around in different districts and some districts had only one month of school a year. And she'd go from one school to another—until one year she taught 11 months going from one school to the other because they didn't have teachers.*

*She taught in sod school houses. On Friday night, Mama took water and a broom to settle*

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## Sodhouses



General postcard in the family collection.

Some of the homes they made were called sod huts or sod shanties. They were actually made from the tough grass sod [buffalo grass] that grew there on the prairie the same as the sod schoolhouses.—Myrtie Crabtree Briggs, daughter

There was no wood or stone with which to build, so sod was peeled off the soil in rows and cut into blocks which were used like bricks. It took an acre of turf to build the average house.

Roofs were made of a lattice of willow poles, brush, long grass, a layer of clay from the nearest creek bank and a dressing of sod, grass side up. Heavy spring downpours would cause a roof to leak water like an overloaded sponge. Field mice were adept at tunneling through the walls and garter snakes generally followed along behind. Bedbugs and fleas were abundant.

—Cal Bivens, great grandson ❀

the floor for Monday. Men hewed logs in half and put the flat side up for desk and seats. There were readers and books in the school whenever they could get them.  
—Myrtie Crabtree Briggs, daughter

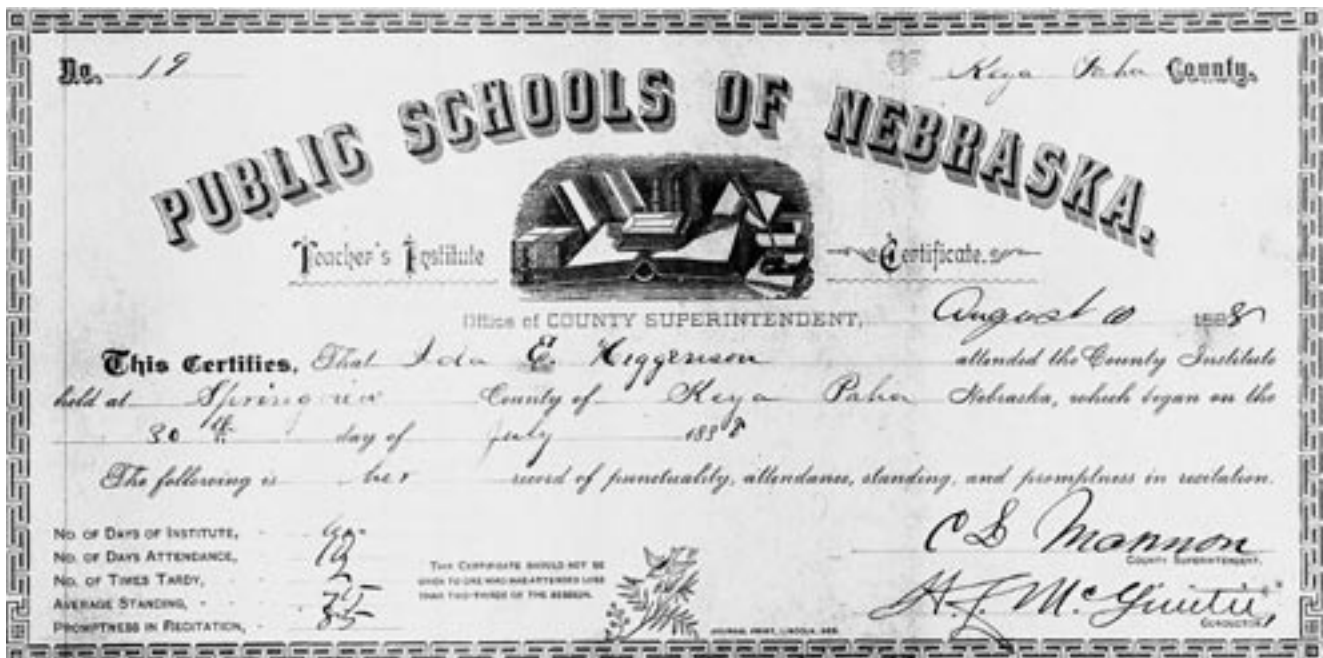
It seems Ida had to take an exam each time she renewed her certificate. One of the certificates said that she attended the County Teaching Institute in Springview.

There were three stories from Ida’s teaching days which Myrtie enjoyed telling her children, and they enjoyed hearing:

“The apple tree,” read one child, “burst into a ‘hug bucket’.” The words were *huge bouquet*.

“The girl was walking along and turned aside and fastened her garter,” was the sentence in the book. But Ida’s pupil was too embarrassed to read that. “She turned aside to do a very necessary thing,” he read out loud.

Another time one of the



**Ida’s Keya Paha County teaching certificates:**

September 19, 1885, district 1 for 6 months. May 21, 1887, district 65 for 6 months. March 18, 1888, one year/any district. July–August 1888, Teacher’s Institute certificate: attended 10-day session (the one shown here). August 4, 1890, any district for 1 year. Exam scores signed by the County Superintendent of schools. Copies of certificates are courtesy of Cal Bivens.

poorer boys was reading and asked, “What is b-o-n-e-s?”

Miss Higginson answered, “Why, you know. You have more of them than anything.”

“Is...it...beans?” (Spoken in a western drawl.)

And from Cal’s family: Emily taught school at one time, in a sod school house. Two boys got into a scrap there one day and Emily waded into the melee and “knocked their heads together.”

During the time Ida taught school there was much tension between the settlers and the Indians, because of the Ghost Dance, which spread across the west in the mid to late 1880s. It excited the settlers greatly and Wounded Knee was part of the fallout.

When one major incident happened in South Dakota, Mary Higginson sent for her daughter Ida, “Cause she thought that they’d get her as she was teaching and she had a long way to walk home.” Seven miles is a long way to walk home, but Ida was not close to the situation in South Dakota, Grandma told me.—*Louise Smith, great granddaughter*

Emily once offered her brother, Jim, \$20 for a spotted pony. He whistled and shuffled about for a while appearing to do a great deal of thinking about the offer. Finally he accepted.

By 1885, John Crabtree and his family were in Key Paha County, Nebraska, and John and Ida had gotten to know each other (possibly reacquainted).

On December 25th, 1890, Ida Emily and John Crabtree were married. Emily still had the pony when she got married. John had a horse, too, and they hitched the pair together.

—*Cal Bivens, great grandson* ❀

## Nebraska News 1888–1890

### The Blizzard of ’88

In January of 1888, a blizzard devastated the plains. Due to its suddenness and severity, the storm caused numerous deaths. There are stories of people frozen to death in the blinding snowstorm, lost between their house and barn. The family folklore contains a memory of this event and relates a fairly well-known story of a school teacher who saved her pupils by linking them together with a length of rope and guiding them along a fence-line to safety.

### The Big Indian Scare

Another event remembered is the “Big Indian Scare” of 1890. There was great fear of the Indians, whose land was just across the Keya Paha River.

This was related to the rise of the “Ghost Dance” in the 1880s. The episode was triggered by the death of famed Sioux medicine man Sitting Bull in 1890. He was killed during an altercation with Indian police at the Standing Rock Agency in South Dakota. Hundreds of Hunkpapa Sioux fled the agency to seek refuge in one of the Ghost Dance camps or with the last of the great chiefs, Red Cloud, at the Pine Ridge Agency. Some of the Hunkpapas were joined by Big Foot’s Minneconjous heading for Pine Ridge, South Dakota.

Terrified settlers in northern Nebraska began to brace themselves in anticipation of another Indian war. Some barricaded their homesteads with hay bales and anything they could use.

### Massacre of Wounded Knee

The Big Scare ended December 29, 1890. On the morning of the 29th, soldiers prepared to search the band for weapons. A rifle was fired, setting off intense shooting that left more than 250 Indians, most of them unarmed, dead.

This event happened four days after John and Ida Higginson Crabtree were married.

—*Cal Bivens* ❀



Norden and Springview are in Keya Paha County. Ainsworth and Long Pine are in Brown County. Pine Ridge, South Dakota, where Wounded Knee took place, is about 173 miles to the west of Springview, Nebraska, just above the Nebraska border.