



## Bone Cabin



1910 photo of the Bone Cabin Complex

A short distance from the fossil rich University and Carnegie Hills sits a modest shack and a frame windmill that are an integral part of the windswept landscape of northwestern Nebraska. These structures are part of the Harold J. Cook Homestead. The homestead is also known as the “Bone Cabin” because of its use as a field office for paleontological work from about 1914 to 1923.

### History

The cabin was built prior to 1906 on the north side of the Niobrara River, and was located near the present visitor center. Here it was used by seasonal paleontologists. The cabin was probably moved to its present location in 1908 or 1909 by Harold Cook.

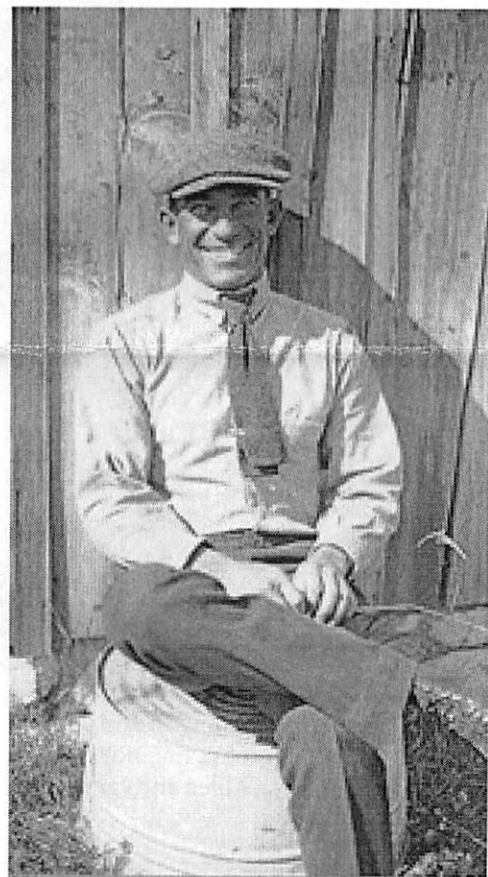
Harold’s father, James Cook, owned the neighboring Agate Springs Ranch and had initiated the investigations of the fossil beds in 1892 by inviting institutions to

conduct excavations there. When the issue of legal ownership of the fossil beds arose, Harold quit his geological studies to file a homestead claim on the surrounding land. This put an end to museum rivalries over the fossil beds and allowed unrestricted paleontological work to proceed. It also guaranteed that the fossil quarries’ future would be protected under the watchful eye of the Cooks, rather than being neglected or sold to “the highest bidder.”

### People

In 1910 Harold and his new bride, Eleanor Barbour Cook, set up residence in the rough one-room cabin. With the birth of their first child in 1911 and in consideration of his wife, he expanded the cabin by adding a bedroom, a small kitchen, and a coal box. The family moved out in 1914 when Cook proved up his homestead claim, returning to the comfort of his father’s ranch house.

The cabin then became home to a variety of people. Albert “Bill” Thomson, with the American Museum of Natural History, is closely associated with seasonal use of the Bone Cabin. He returned for several years and used it far more than anyone else. Three families and a number of seasonal workers also lived there off and on until 1951. All made modifications to the shack to increase comfort and livability. The Murphy family brought electricity to the cabin during their 1942 to 1949 stay. The Hoffman family enclosed the east porch and added a kitchen sometime between 1949 and 1951. While a gravity flow water line was installed with the east kitchen, plumbing was never installed.



Harold J. Cook-1921

## Restoration

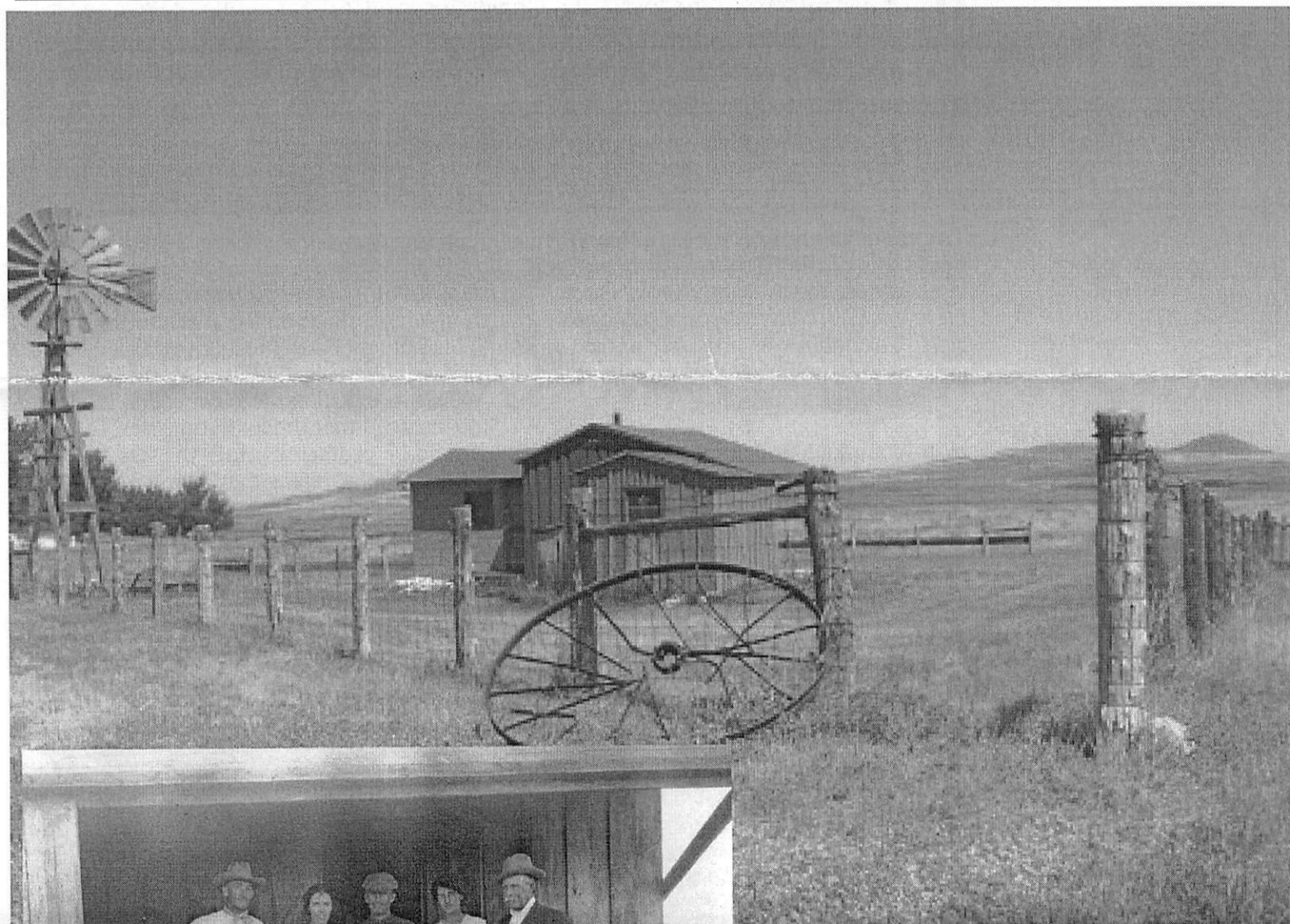
The cabin has been unoccupied since 1952 and suffered from neglect, severe weather, and structural flaws. This changed in 1996 when a team of preservation professionals stabilized the building and restored the exterior to the period of significance of 1909 to 1923. This is the period spanning the cabin's establishment as a homestead through its use as a field office for scientific study.

The 1996 restoration activity included:

- removal of the 1940's kitchen;
- restoration of the east concrete and stone porch, south coal box, and bedroom stoop;
- restoration of the historic paint scheme;
- replacement of the existing frame windmill.

The interior materials were removed in order to stabilize the building. They were not reinstalled due to poor condition and health concerns. Cook-era bedroom wall finishes discovered during selective demolition were retained in place. It was discovered that on one of the studs on the east wall north of the window, the days of a month had been checked off. This indicates that there was no wallboard then. Additional restoration of smaller scale exterior elements remains to be completed, such as a baby crib, and window and door screens.

Information collected as part of the 1996 restoration was critical in expanding the history of the Harold J. Cook Homestead Cabin. Since August 24, 1977, the Cabin Complex has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



Seated: Albert "Bill" Thomson and Mrs. Thomson Standing: John, Eleanor, and Harold Cook, Agnes Gildea and James Cook

The significance of the Bone Cabin is found in its association with men such as Bill Thomson and James and Harold Cook, who were committed to the excavation of the Agate fossil quarries. Thomson and the Cooks contributed to and extended our knowledge of North American paleontology.

To reach the Bone Cabin, exit the visitor center and follow the sidewalk up the Fossil Hills Trail; you will come to a mowed path that leads to the west or continue on up to Carnegie Hill and take the path down to the Bone Cabin. *A word of caution: Watch for rattlesnakes!*