

As someone who is Nebraska born and raised, and is a graduate of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, I'm well aware of how many different things and sayings that are almost synonymous with Nebraska. Husker Football. Corn. Agriculture. Go Big Red. And let's not forget "Dear Old Nebraska U". But who would have thought that Nebraska wasn't always the Cornhusker state? Before Nebraska was the Cornhusker State, it was the Tree Planter State. It was dubbed the Tree Planter State in 1895, twenty three years after J. Sterling Morton of Nebraska City founded Arbor Day. Nebraska actually didn't become the Cornhusker State until 1945. Nebraska actually has its beginnings in fruit production and orchards, rather than corn.

When settlers first came west to Nebraska as a result of the Homestead Act of 1862, they were able to claim up to 160 acres of land from the government as incentive for moving out west into new American territory. Settlers were required to make "improvements" to the land. They could either live on the land for five years, build a dwelling, and cultivate the land, making the land theirs after paying a small registration fee, or pay \$1.25 per acre. Many settlers chose to plant trees on their land to provide windbreaks, shaded areas, and fruit trees to provide themselves and their families with fresh fruit, as well as being able to trade fruit for other necessities. Many fruit trees responded well to the deep loamy soil of eastern Nebraska, resulting in many thriving orchards.

In the 1930s, Nebraska, like most of the Midwest, experienced a severe drought known as the Dust Bowl. While this had a negative effect on the orchards, the final straw for many farmers was the Armistice Day blizzard of November 11th, 1940. Fall of 1940 was mild, and come November, the ground hadn't froze yet. Because of the warm temperatures on November 10th, instead of snowing, it rained. Because the trees were drought stressed they absorbed as much of the moisture as they possibly could. Normally, this would be a good thing because it would allow the normal plant processes to proceed as they should, since without water, photosynthesis cannot happen. The morning of November 11th was around 50 degrees. That night, the temperatures plummeted, and the high for November 12th was 17 degrees. The orchards, with their newly well-hydrated trees, did not handle the extreme temperature change well. As most of us know, water will expand when it turns into ice. Water that is already inside of a plant is no different, unfortunately. The fruit trees that had just taken up as much water as they possibly could've also expanded as much as they could. Unfortunately, the tree cells couldn't handle the stress and pressure from the expanding water molecules. In most trees that experience frost crack, that's just it, they crack. These fruit trees didn't just crack though, they shattered. There were bark pieces and branches everywhere, and there was no recovering the vast majority of these trees. Because orchards take years to establish, most farmers couldn't afford to replace the trees and take the loss of income until the fruit trees were established again. This was when Nebraska switched to row cropping with plants like corn, soybeans, and sorghum. Because row crops have a faster turnaround, the farmers were able to continue to make profit on their farms.

Next time that you yell "Go Big Red!" and cheer for the Cornhuskers, remember that we used to be the Tree Planter State. And maybe think about planting a tree for J. Sterling Morton. For more information, contact Miranda Earnest at the Buffalo County Extension Office, 308-236-1235 or mearnest2@unl.edu.