Neodesha in 1873
From a Letter of William Hill, Pioneer Banker

I. INTRODUCTION

On March 28, 1873, William Hill of Baraboo, Wis., arrived in Neodesha with the intention of making a home there. The town was three years old, and after a mushroom growth of two years was at a standstill. Its frontier appearance greatly disappointed Hill and raised doubts about the advisability of bringing his wife and small children to such surroundings. However he saw possibilities of development, and in the letter to his wife here printed he seems to be making a conscientious effort to balance the good points with bad ones. Of this letter his son, Irving, wrote:

To me, my father seems to be describing carefully the setting into which he proposes to bring his young family, keeping in his mind that mother was well along in music, literature, and culture. He later supplied music and instruments for a family orchestra of seven and both did a first-class job of raising a family in Kansas.

II. THE LETTER

Neodesha, March 31, 1873

Dear Nellie,

We (Pierce and I) arrived here on Friday evening after a tedious drive across from the Mission, 32 miles, in the face of a wind that to use Pierce’s expression, would have taken the hair off my dogskin gloves had I not kept them under the buffalo robe,—he driving.

1. William Hill was born October 15, 1831, near Glasgow, Scotland, and at the age of twelve came with his parents to this country. After living for a time in Ashitabula county, Ohio, the family moved to Sauk county, Wisconsin, where William learned the printer’s trade. He did newspaper work in Wisconsin and other points until the outbreak of the Civil War when he joined the Union army, serving three years, first as a member and later as captain of Company B, Eighth Missouri Volunteer infantry. Returning to Baraboo, Wis., at the close of the war, he became publisher of the Baraboo Republic, and on January 7, 1865, he was married to Ellen Clark Maxwell, a teacher and an accomplished musician of Baraboo. When Captain Hill located in Neodesha in 1873 he gave up journalism and entered the Neodesha Savings Bank as cashier, a position he held for forty years. On the death of Dugald Stewart, president of the bank, on February 4, 1913, Hill succeeded him and continued as president until his death on August 6, 1918.—Neodesha Daily Sun, February 6, 1913, August 6-8, 1918.

2. The townsite of Neodesha on the Osage diminished reserve was surveyed in July, 1869, and late in December the frame of the first building was erected. Because of the liberal policy of the town company, lots being given freely to all who would build on them, two hundred houses were built the first year, and the population at the end of eighteen months had reached one thousand. In March, 1871, the town was incorporated as a city of the third class.—Andreas, A. T., and W. G. Cutler, History of the State of Kansas (Chicago, 1883), p. 904.

3. Irving Hill, of Lawrence, to Kirke Mechem, March 23, 1942, Kansas State Historical Society.

4. Probably J. V. Pierce, William Hill’s brother-in-law, who was president of the Neosho County Savings Bank at Osage Mission, and the Neodesha Savings Bank of which Hill became cashier.—Neodesha Daily Sun, August 7, 1918; Neodesha Citizen, November 22, 1872; Andreas-Cutler, op. cit., p. 832.

5. Osage Mission, now St. Paul, in the eastern part of Neosho county.
According to promise I give you my first impressions of Neodesha. I was disappointed in it, and still feel that disappointment, though feeling also that if I can provide here a pleasant home for you, and establish myself in a moderately successful business, all else will be of minor consequence. The natural situation of Neodesha is beautiful, but the buildings are poor and the town is dirty. The schoolhouse is a model of tasteful architecture, a really creditable and handsome building. The new City Hall in some respects surpasses the brick block in Baraboo comprising the bank; the corners are of cut stone, as are also the arched window caps, but the brick work is coarsely done, the brick inferior in quality and appearance, and the cornice is not in harmony with the proportions of the building, giving a squat look to its “sky line.” There is one other brick building, a store near the City Hall, and corresponding to it in its style of front. There are two other brick buildings in course of erection—a Methodist Church and a Gothic cottage; there is a very neat (but small) frame church (Congregational) and a few frame cottages that will compare with (say) Howard’s, and another number of houses as roomy, but less attractive. The balance of the town is largely made of one story buildings, some little more than shanties, all measurably destitute of the relief of trees or even grass, the houses here and there huddled very thickly together, the town having been laid off in 25 feet lots (frontage). The business portion of the town is concentrated on that portion of Fourth and Main streets extending for one block south (on Fourth) and west (on Main).

The business portion thus described is very poorly built, many of the stores being of but one story, poorly finished, poorly painted, and looking old and dirty already, although but a few years built. The east side of the Square in Baraboo looks well and even the blacksmith's row from the new post office to Mills has a respectfully dirty look beside these buildings. You will scarcely have as favorable a prepossession of Neodesha after this account of it as from Mr. Scott's sketch and passages in my previous letters, but this is true. Nor is there much to boast of here, so far as I can judge, in the way of cultivated society, but there is a very genuine good will and hospitality towards newcomers.

6. The schoolhouse was a four-room brick structure built in 1872 at a cost of $15,000.—Andrews-Cutler, op. cit., p. 905.
7. Bonds were voted for the city hall on August 5, 1872, and the building was erected within five or six months. It was originally meant to house the county offices had Neodesha become the county seat.—Neodesha Daily Sun, October 5, 1930; Neodesha Citizen, August 23, November 22, 1872.
The site of the town is not as I supposed immediately at the
junction of the two rivers. It is a mile distant from the
junction (possibly more) a mile from Fall River, and half-a-mile from the
Verdigris. The valley broadens as it recedes, and presents an ex-
tended view. Near to the river banks is a wide belt of bottom lands,
and beyond this, on the swelling ground Neodesha is situated.
In the rear of the town the land again slopes slightly until the
intervale meets the up-sloping bases of a half-encircling rim of hills
in the back ground. Through these hills the Fall river valley affords
an easy outlet to the country beyond in that direction, though in
no place is there any formidable obstacle to communication with the
country back. On the brow of the northern segment of this rim of
bluffs, cut in two by the Fall River, is the grave of Little Bear,8
overlooking the two valleys. I attempted this (Sunday) morning
to induce Pierce to walk out with me to it; it was too windy to ride
comfortably; but he put it off until now he asserts we shall not
have time before dinner, (We are invited to dinner at Mrs. Suther-
land's,9 the lady concerning whom I wrote you), and I avail myself
of the interval to commence my letter to you.

I yesterday looked at the two houses which Howard thought I
might rent or buy, for they are still for sale. Either of them would
do well enough, but I wish to rent rather than buy, and I shall make
further inquiries before deciding—the more that the best of these
two houses will be rented only subject to sale. The other one can-
not be rented; the man for whom it was built has left the country,
and the property is to be sold to pay the liens on it. The liens
can be bought at 50 cents on the dollar, but the buyer will then
need to expend $350 in finishing the house, (the inside being un-
finished, the floors yet to be lay [sic], lathing and plastering to be
done, etc.) so that it would cost from $650 to $700 for the house
completed; and I am offered the other building for $800 ($200 less
than was asked for it when Howard was here) and am inclined to
think the last property the cheapest of the two. Still a third prop-
erty has been offered if I wish to buy for the same price ($800)
which I like best of all so far as the exterior is concerned, and which
if I have to buy I will buy; but I want to rent.—All property here

8. Little Bear, head chief of the Little Osages, died in the early part of 1867 or 1868,
and was buried on the summit of a high mound bearing his name about a mile north of
Neodesha. Two or three years later the grave was mysteriously robbed and the body re-
moved.—L. Wallace Duncan, History of Neosho and Wilson Counties (Fort Scott, 1902),
p. 842; Wilson County Citizen, Fredonia, September 23, 1941.

9. Before her marriage Mrs. Sutherland was Miss E. A. Raymond, "an accomplished
lady", and a native of Conneaut, Ashtabula county, Ohio. On December 30, 1871, she was
married at Atchison to J. Y. Sutherland, a young lawyer who had recently located at
Neodesha.—Andreas-Cutler, op. cit., p. 906.
is sold far below cost. For instance one property was sold just before my arrival here, a two-story house with an L. The house cost $1,400, not being fully finished inside, though outside presenting a good appearance,—well built. With this house went an old barn, etc., and twelve 25 feet lots, and the whole sold for $1,000. Any property that is for sale can be bought at about half what it cost the owner. From this you will very readily infer that the town has come to a stand still, and such is the fact. But its advantages are such that it cannot go back any, and I think that as in the case of Baraboo there will be a gradual advance in the character of the buildings and people, even though the population may remain at a standstill. There is a country around here to maintain a large trade, and a large trade is done. Neodesha has to-day as many stores as Baraboo, and all appear to have a fair trade. There is also a little start in manufacturing—of Studebaker wagons and black walnut furniture, etc., and the floursing mill here is one of the best in Southern Kansas—a large and well finished building, costing $22,000. Brick is made within the corporate limits, and magnificent building stone quarried, and aside from the water spoken of in my last letter there is a cheap and easily improved waterpower obtainable on Fall River a mile east of the village. There are three steam sawmills.

Evening.—Well we have visited Mrs. Sutherland’s, had an excellent dinner, and quite a chat after it. To my surprise I found her to be quite a young lady—younger perhaps than yourself—the talk of her being an invalid, having given up singing, &c., having led me to conclude that she had passed the flush of youth. The house, two rooms, is one of the cosiest I venture to say in Neodesha, the front room, (actually papered,) hung with pictures, a few choice books in their little library, and quite a number of objects of interest. But its crowning recommendation to me was the family bed in one corner of the room! Kitchen and dining room in one—a little too small for comfort, so that Mrs. Sutherland refused to sit at the small round table for fear of crowding us. But everything was very nice; the meal was well prepared, the knives were silver-plated, the coffee excellent, salt cellars and little butter plates extra, and the butter itself was from Illinois! To judge from a large photograph of her father’s house, Mrs. Sutherland was brought up

10. The Neodesha Citizen of November 18, 1870, listed a floursing mill, three sawmills and two wagon shops in the town.

11. "Futhey & Keys’ floursing mill was completed the spring of 1871."—Duncan, op. cit., p. 907.
in a home of luxury and comfort, and can scarcely speak of it without regret. She will I think gladly welcome your coming, as an acquisition to society here! Mr. Sutherland is a young lawyer, scarcely far enough ahead in practice yet to justify him in any other than an economical expenditure, but is making his way in the world.

After dinner, the wind having gone down, we (Pierce and I) got a carriage, and drove up to Little Bear's Grave. As we ascended the hill, Pierce requested me to keep my eyes on the floor cloth on the bottom of the carriage until having reached the right point of observation, he should bid me look around. You know how I have stood up for Baraboo scenery in every letter. Well, the view from Little Bear's Grave surpasses that from the bluff at Dorward's Gorge, or that from the Ebenezer Hill, or that from the bluff looking down on Sauk Prairie, or any view that there is in Sauk County. It surpasses anything I ever saw! The belts of forest skirting Fall and Verdigris Rivers, Chetopa and Dry and Little Washington Creeks and other streams, the lines of hills, the valleys, pockets, prairies, Neodesha and Thayer, the one at hand, the other visible at a distance of sixteen miles, all give such diversity to the scenery as makes the whole vast extent on every side seem such as I might imagine the planner of Fairmount Park desiring to reproduce were you to give him a circuit of sixty miles. The monument itself is but a square built pile of thin layers of limestone, as roughly laid up (without mortar) as a stone fence. The scene at his burial could be worked up into an interesting magazine sketch. I can only hit it off to-night hurriedly. Delegations of Indians congregated from different tribes to do honor to his funeral ceremonies. The "howlers" were out in force. These fellows, next to the medicine men in the standing accorded to them by the tribes, hold themselves in readiness to "howl" on the occasion of the death of any member of the tribe—for a consideration! For a small pony they will "howl" for twenty-four hours; for a steer four days! On the death of Little Bear their services were volunteered, and the hills and woods rang with their melancholy, piercing wailings for days during which no food passed their lips. The braves congregated in all the pomp of

12. J. V. Sutherland came to Neodesha from McHenry county, Illinois, June 1, 1870. In addition to his law practice he sold real estate in Neodesha.—Andreas-Cutler, op. cit., p. 906; Neodesha Citizen, November 18, 1870.

13. Chetopa, Dry and Washington creeks are eastern tributaries of the Verdigris river in Wilson county. Chetopa creek joins the Verdigris just north of Neodesha, and Dry and Little Washington creeks unite before flowing into it a short distance below its junction with Fall river.

14. Thayer, a town in the southwestern part of Neosho county.
their most impressive paint and costume. The place of his burial was one of their favorite resorts, and Neodesha, like Baraboo, boasts of having been of the haunts of the tribes, from which they were last and loathest to depart.

From Little Bear's Grave we drove across Fall River, fording it twice. It is nearly as clear and rapid and beautiful a stream as I had anticipated. The Verdigris is less so. We passed the Cramer place, and a number of magnificent farms, all of them on the bank of the river having the advantage of prairie, bottom land and timber. After driving through the bottoms and along the river, and after the view from the mound, the statement that there are 13,000 acres of timber within a radius of five miles from Neodesha seems within the range of credibility at least. We passed a number of peach orchards and little vineyards, and I imagine that there is no scarcity of either grapes or peaches in season. Drove of cattle were sheltered in the bottoms, but will soon be grazing upon a "thousand hills" or less. Sheep already are nibbling the short shoots of the young grass.

I spoke of the absence of grass from the dooryards in the village. The native grasses are quickly tramped out, and when the ground is not re-seeded with tame grass it becomes as bare as a trodden piece of plowed land. But with the yards seeded, and the grass kept well cut, a sward will form as rich and velvety as in the north, and all trees and shrubs and vines grow luxuriantly. I saw yesterday some lemon trees turning green out of doors, and one of the prettiest young shade trees I have seen is a mulberry, transplanted from the river bottom. Yesterday at Mrs. Sutherland's there were a few wildflowers on the table and the handsomest verbena I have seen. Her hyacinths had already bloomed, and were set out for young bulbs.

Monday Morning.—To-day the Bank is to be moved into the new City Hall. There is no mail until evening, and I could add much to my letter, but in the bustle of removal I shall have little opportunity for writing. There was almost as much confusion in the office yesterday and last evening, and hence the horrid and hurried

15. In contrast, A. R. Greene reports the burial of Little Bear thus: "He died in his wigwam, a mile southwest of town, on Fall river, and was hauled in an old lumber wagon to the mound, where the grave of a former chief was emptied out and he was emptied in. "Less than a score of people attended, no women, not even his wife, being among the number. Dissolute habits led to his death.


16. The Cramer family came to Kansas from Ohio in 1869 and settled on a farm just south of Neodesha on the south side of Fall river.—Neodesha Daily Sun, October 13, 1936, and in "Wilson County Clippings," v. ii, p. 49.
scratching off of this letter. In the new Hall, the Bank will have as fine an office as could be wished for. Everything seems to move steadily forward in the line of the programme indicated by Howard, and next week I shall enter the Bank to commence work, and on the first of May assume my position as Cashier. I am making the acquaintance of our business men under circumstances that seem to me to be as favorable as could be desired, and have already a fair idea of the routine of the business. The re-organization of the bank is also being adjusted in a way altogether satisfactory.\footnote{17}

As soon as the Directors have an understanding of the change in the management of the Bank, I shall notify you, so that you may then commence preparations for removing. I looked in, by the way, yesterday at the furniture store, and while I found very nice black walnut furniture, and some of it very cheap, I found no bureau like ours that could be bought for less than $32, and I am half inclined to think it might be well to bring that. But let Ed take the card table. However, it will be time enough for me to advise you on these matters when the time comes, and I am now fairly crowded from the desk, so must close.

I have not received a letter now due me, which doubtless awaits my return to the Mission. But I pray that you and the children are well, and with much love I remain

Your Affectionate Husband

Wm. Hill.

\footnote{17. The Neodesha Savings Bank was organized in 1872 and reorganized and chartered on April 1, 1873. On August 17, 1903, it became the First National Bank of Neodesha.—Andreas-Cutler, op. cit., p. 905; Neodesha Register, August 14, 1903.}