

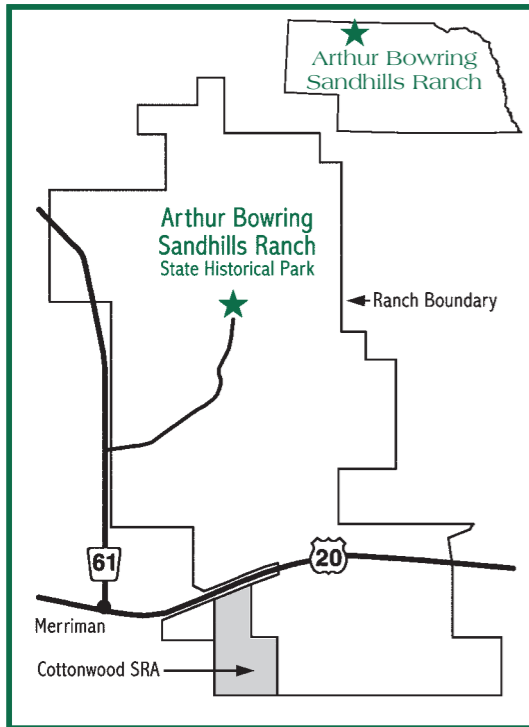
# Arthur Bowring Sandhills Ranch State Historical Park

P.O.Box 38

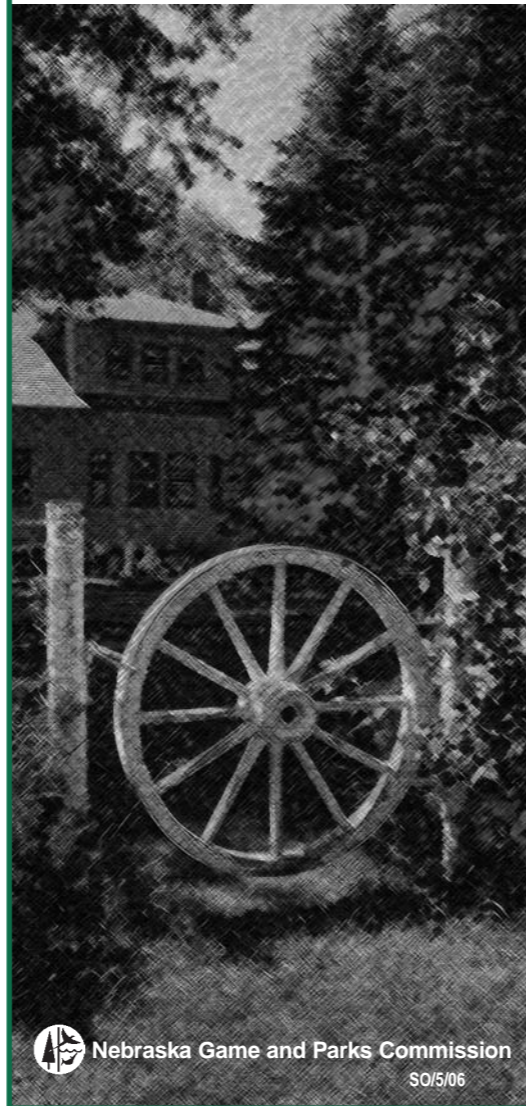
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# Arthur Bowring Sandhills Ranch State Historical Park



 **Nebraska Game and Parks Commission**  
SO/5/06



## The Ranching Legacy

Located 1½ miles north and 2 miles east of Merriman, Arthur Bowring Sandhills Ranch State Historical Park preserves a working cattle ranch established at the turn of the century along with the legacy of pioneer rancher Arthur Bowring and his wife, Eve.

The Sandhills region of Nebraska is geographically unique in the New World. Its dunes cover some 20,000 square miles. The climate is semi-arid, but there is normally enough rain to stabilize the hills with grass.

The story of the region and the role Arthur and Eve Bowring would play really begins with the building of the Union Pacific Railroad west through Nebraska in 1867. Cattle from Texas arrived for shipment to eastern markets and to start herds to stock the empty grass lands on either side of the rails across the plains.

Before this, ranching in Nebraska was confined to road ranches along the Oregon Trail, where traders raised a few horses, oxen and cattle to replace stock of the westering pioneers. With the arrival of the railroads cattle ranching as we now know it, began to take shape.

For the first 10 years, the budding industry was confined to the Platte and Niobrara river valleys – for fear of entering the Sandhills, long believed to be inhospitable to man and beast. The first moves into the Sandhills were made out of necessity. After a devastating range fire in 1874, North Platte rancher John Bratt moved some of his cattle into the edges of the “hills,” northwest of town.

About the same time, Nebraska most illustrious citizen, buffalo Bill Cody began his ranching operations on the Dismal River, 65 miles into the Sandhills. Partners with Buffalo Bill

were the famous North Brothers, former heads of the Pawnee Scouts of Indian Wars fame. By 1879, the edges of the hills were grazed, but the interior was still considered unsuitable. That winter, a severe blizzard drove thousands of cattle south from the E.S. Newman ranch east of Gordon, just a few miles from the present-day Bowring Ranch.

When weather permitted, Newman sent his cowboys into the hills hoping to find a few surviving strays. What they found were not only his cattle, safe and sound, but thousands of head from other ranches grazing fat and healthy on the lush meadowlands of the interior. This startling discovery created a boom in cattle operations, and since the Sandhills were public range, it meant free grass for all. Unfortunately, this soon led to an overstocking of the area. When two back-to-back severe winters struck in the 1880's, millions of cattle died on the Great Plains, driving many large ranches to ruin.

## Changing Times

The days of free grass on an open range were soon over. Hardscrabble farmers were using the 160 acres of the Homestead Act, and later the 640 acres of the Kincaid Act, to establish farms on some of the nation's last free land. Attempts to farm these tracts led to failure for many. One of the families that came to the Sandhills in these tumultuous years was that of Henry C. Bowring, formerly of England, Canada, and Iowa. A railroader, who laid track across Iowa and South Dakota, Henry Bowring and his large family homesteaded near Gordon in 1885. Henry and Jane Bowring's seventh son, Arthur, filed a homestead claim a few days past his 21st birthday on land that he was to enlarge, improve and occupy for the next 50 years.

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Arthur began ranching in 1894 with a 160 acre claim near Merriman. He soon added a 480-acre Kincaid tract, purchased odd lots from the U.S. Government as well as from other would-be ranchers and farmers, who choose to quit and sell out. Members of his family had also filed Kincaid claims and subsequently sold them to Arthur. He began ranching with the venerable Shorthorn breed of cows. Eventually, he switched to a successful western breed, the Hereford, popularly known as the "whiteface." Arthur married Anna Mabel Holbrook in 1908. Miss Holbrook came to Merriman in 1905 to teach in local grade school. By all accounts she was a vivacious and much liked member of the community. Originally from Hooper, Nebraska, she was the daughter of William Holbrook, who served for decades as a justice of the peace and state legislator.

Never in the best of health, Anna suffered complications during pregnancy and one August day in 1909, during an electrical storm and while Arthur was miles away with a haying crew she became ill. Despite the aid of her parents, neighbors, and friends, both she and her infant son died during childbirth. They were both buried near her former home in Hooper, and Arthur lived alone for nearly 20 years afterward.



### A New Bride

In 1928, along came Eve Kelly Forester. Born in 1892 in Missouri, she had married Theodore Forester and bore him four sons: Harold, Frank, Jo Don and one son died shortly after birth. In 1924, the young mother with sons in tow came to Nebraska to live with her mother in Lincoln. Soon after, she took a job as a traveling saleswoman for the Norfolk Steam Bakery, a very unusual occupation for a woman in those days. Her territory was large, extending as far as Merriman, where she met her future husband when automobile problems brought him to her aid. They married in 1928.

Both of these energetic people strongly believed in serving their community and country. In Arthur's case, that included serving as a road overseer, justice of the peace, county commissioner, election judge, school board member, deputy of the Nebraska Game and Fish Commission, secretary of the Merriman Telephone Company and state legislator.

Eve, too, was dedicated to the idea of public service, and some of her offices included: County Republican finance and



*Eve's collection of Spode china in the "Camilla" pattern made in England in the late 1800's. Two Royal Ironstone soup tureens are also shown.*

precinct chairman, county chairman, member of the National Institute of Health, member of the U.S. Board of Parole, and perhaps the highlight of her career, U.S. Senator – the first woman from Nebraska to enter Congress. She was appointed in 1954 by Governor Robert Crosby to fill the rest of Senator Griswold's term when he died. She served seven months.

Following her service in the Senate, Eve returned to her beloved home in the Sandhills of Nebraska and to many demands of ranching. But, soon it was back to Washington, where she had been appointed by President Eisenhower to serve two years of an unexpired term on the federal Board of Parole, a full-time job which required travel all over the country to attend hearings. She was subsequently named for another six-year term. During the few weeks she spent at home each year, she put in long hours particularly at calving time. For many years, she had collected glassware and silver, which continued during her extensive travels around the country on parole hearings. She acquired hundreds of items.

Eve Bowring died on January 8, 1985, one day before her 93rd birthday. She outlived her three sons, including Don, who was electrocuted in 1965 while attempting to move some haying equipment under a power line.

All her life, she was devoted to her husband and was uncomfortable leaving the ranch to her family, since they were not descendants of Arthur. Also, since none of them was involved in ranching, it meant that the ranch that had prospered for nearly 100 years would be fragmented and sold off; her collections of china, silver and glass would be scattered, and her husband's name would be lost, since he was childless.



*Replica sod house recalls days of yesteryear and offers look at old-time crafts.*



*The Visitor Center was funded through the Game and Parks Foundation by grants from the Burlington- Northern Foundation. Inc., the Omaha World-Herald and Harold W. Andersen.*

All these things she was determine to prevent. To preserve the 7,202-acre Barr 99 Ranch for future generations as a working ranch, one established at the very beginning of Nebraska ranching history, she turned to the Nebraska Game and Parks foundation and its chairman, Harold W. Andersen.

Chairman and chief executive officer of the Omaha World-Herald, Andy and Eve had known one another since he was a young reporter. She respected his work as a newsman and with the Foundation. He worked with her in her goal of preserving the ranch as a State Historical Park.

### A Cherished Gift

Her only stipulations were that the foundation pay the yearly taxes to the county, that part of her Hereford bloodline be kept and worked, so that the ranch would be a living history museum, and that her home and its collections be retained intact so visitors, even hundreds of years hence, could see a working ranch.

In accord with her wishes, Arthur Bowring Sandhills Ranch State Historical Park documents the development of the cattle industry in Nebraska over the last century. The ranch house is virtually as it was at the time of Eve's death in 1985. The corrals, barns, bunkhouses, and other buildings are preserved as work places. The ranch house, outbuildings and 7,400 square-foot Eve Bowring Visitor Center contain displays devoted to the extraordinary lives and careers of Arthur and Eve Bowring, the history and geology of the Sandhills and the Nebraska cattle ranching business.

