

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED JAN 23 1980
FEB 28 1980
DATE ENTERED

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC

AND/OR COMMON

Spade Ranch

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Ellsworth

VICINITY OF

---NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Third

STATE

Nebraska

CODE

31

COUNTY

Sheridan

CODE

161

3 CLASSIFICATION

(also in Cherry County)

CATEGORY

OWNERSHIP

STATUS

PRESENT USE

DISTRICT

PUBLIC

OCCUPIED

AGRICULTURE

MUSEUM

BUILDING(S)

PRIVATE

UNOCCUPIED

COMMERCIAL

PARK

STRUCTURE

BOTH

WORK IN PROGRESS

EDUCATIONAL

PRIVATE RESIDENCE

SITE

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

ACCESSIBLE

ENTERTAINMENT

RELIGIOUS

OBJECT

IN PROCESS

YES: RESTRICTED

GOVERNMENT

SCIENTIFIC

BEING CONSIDERED

YES: UNRESTRICTED

INDUSTRIAL

TRANSPORTATION

NO

MILITARY

OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Lawrence Bixby

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Ellsworth

--- VICINITY OF

STATE

Nebraska

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

County Clerk's Office

STREET & NUMBER

Sheridan County Courthouse

CITY, TOWN

Rushville

STATE

Nebraska

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Historic Preservation in Nebraska

DATE

1971

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

Nebraska State Historical Society

CITY, TOWN

Lincoln

STATE

Nebraska

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Sandhills, the State's most distinctive topographical feature, occupy 18,000 square miles in western and central Nebraska, and consist of sloping hills twenty-five to one hundred feet higher than the valleys. Lakes and table lands are scattered throughout the hills which provide an excellent environment for cattle ranching.

The Spade Ranch is located in these Sandhills of northwestern Nebraska on a tract which overlaps Sheridan and Cherry counties. The six sections of land which are included in this nomination make up the "Home Valley" or headquarters area of the Spade Ranch. The present ranch still covers a vast area of land (40 sections); however, due to the very irregular boundaries and considerable intrusions, only the Home Valley which includes the ranch buildings, and representative meadow and grazing lands, is included in this nomination.

The Spade Ranch headquarters consists of several buildings and corrals. The principal ones are listed below and are mapped by number on the site map:

Site 1. Log cookhouse (photos #1, 2, 3). This 1879 one story log structure features half dove-tail joints and a hipped roof.

Site 2. Three bunkhouses (photos #6, 7, 8). These structures are built of frame covered with stucco and vary in size. All have gable roofs and were formerly claim shacks on the Spade.

Site 4. Garage, (photo #23, background). This 20th century frame building is rectangular with a hipped roof and three overhead doors.

Site 5. Chicken House, (photo #20 center). This small rectangular frame building has a shed roof.

Site 6. Granary. (photo #20). This one story structure has a gable roof with lap siding.

Site 8. Machine Shop (photo #11). This frame building, which houses tools, etc. for ranch equipment repair, has a gable roof and lap siding.

Site 9. Calving sheds (photos #14, 16, 17). These sheds are simple one story structures with gable roofs which provide shelter for cattle during calving season.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY
RECEIVED JAN 23 1980
DATE ENTERED

Location of Legal Description	5	2
CONTINUATION SHEET	ITEM NUMBER	PAGE

County Clerk's Office
Cherry County Courthouse
Valentine, Nebraska

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED JAN 23 1980

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET Description ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE 2

Site 10. Barn (photos #12, 14, 15). The 1889 horse barn is constructed of cottonwood lumber. Architectural features include a gabled roof and shed additions, four rows of stalls and two feed aisles.

Site 12. Breaking pen (photos #12, 13). This corral is made of pole fencing for the purpose of saddle-breaking horses.

Site 13. Scale (photo #15). This diagonally braced scale box is situated in the corral-sorting pen area. Cattle are sorted and weighted here before shipping to market.

Site 17. Richards-Bixby house (photos #4, 5, 23). This building is a remodelled sod house with later contemporary additions. The house was framed up inside the old sod walls and then the sod was removed leaving the wide eaves. This house presently serves as home for the Jim Bixby family.

Site 18. Guest House. This house set behind (north) of the Richards-Bixby house and has been used through the years by guests at the Spade. This building is constructed in the same manner as the bunkhouses.

Site 20. Comstock Homestead house (photos #9, 10). This building was Will Comstock's homestead house and is now used as a guest house. It is a multiple add-on structure, composed primarily of old claim shacks and is constructed of frame, faced with stucco.

The sorting pen, loading chute, roping chute and branding, dehorning and castrating pen (see site maps #11, 15, 15 & 16) are found in the corral areas. Their names explain their functions.

Windbreaks (see site map and photos # 19, 21 & 22) play an important role in the operation of the Spade as they did in the early years. These windbreaks have been planted continuously since the early twentieth century and form large open corral spaces. The orientation of the plantings corresponds with the terrain and the prevailing winter winds so that at any given time, the ranch has ready access to adequately protected space for cattle. The windbreaks also provide substantial areas of shade during the hot, dry, summer months.

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The cattle industry in Nebraska dates to 1870 when the Union Pacific railroad in the State became interested in shipping Texas longhorn cattle and built facilities to rival those in the long time cattle town of Abilene, Kansas. Prior to 1870, a few Texas cattle had been shipped as far north as Nebraska by the government to provide beef for Nebraska's Indian reservations. The first shipping point in Nebraska was located in the east-central community of Schuyler. By 1871 however, the shipping location was moved west to Kearney because of laws restricting large herds of cattle from being driven too close to settled areas. With the influx of settlers coming into Nebraska, Kearney soon became too populated to deal with the massive cattle herds and the cattle transport operation was then moved to Ogallala in western Nebraska in 1873. This new "cowtown" became the shipping terminal and according to most accounts, it not only lived up to the tradition of the "wild and wooly west", but helped make it.

Trail drives continued moving through Nebraska until the mid 1880's when strict herd laws and quarantine laws were passed and enforced at the insistence of the northern cattlemen.

A few pioneer cattlemen had begun raising stock in Nebraska in the 1860's. During these early years however, Nebraska's "interior" Sandhills were avoided as ranchers thought this area would be too dry. In 1879, though, one cattleman decided to take a short cut through the heart of the Sandhills enroute back to his ranch from a roundup. After traveling several miles through this supposedly dry country, he came upon a lake surrounded by several hundred head of healthy cattle. These cattle were "strays" and their descendants who had long since been given up for dead. Instead they had wintered in the hills and were in better condition than some of the cattle on his ranch. Several ranchers had similar experiences during this same time which proved to the Nebraska cattlemen that they had been overlooking some of the best rangeland in the State.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED JAN 23 1980

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET Significance ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 2

Bartlett Richards, a Massachusetts native, was born in 1862. He came west for his health in 1879 and gained employment working as a ranch hand in Wyoming. He became interested in ranching as a business and by 1883 he had advanced to managerial positions in large cattle companies in Wyoming and Nebraska. Richards' brother DeForest moved west in 1885 and with Bartlett, founded the First National Bank of Chadron, Nebraska. They also bought interest in a bank in Harrison, Nebraska, and established banks in other northwestern Nebraska towns. Bartlett Richards soon began dealing in ranch land, buying and selling to suit his interests as manager of the Lakota Cattle Company.

About 1887, Richards became interested in the Sandhills to the south and east of Chadron, Nebraska, after the success of the Newman brothers who had started ranching 50 miles east of Chadron on the Niobrara River in 1877. Rancher Bennett Irwin, who started the Spade Ranch near Bean Soup Lake southeast of the Newman, sold it on August 10, 1888, to Richards. Soon after this purchase he moved a log house from the Newman Ranch down to the Spade for use as the cook house. Today it serves this same purpose. Richards took a partner, John J. Cairnes, who was vice president of the Anglo-American Cattle Company, the largest in southwestern South Dakota. Richards and his brother Jarvis, Cairnes and his wife all filed homestead claims in the hay meadows near the Spade to give them control of the upland range surrounding the ranch.

Few ranchmen owned much of their rangeland; however most owned their own hay meadows which were considered to be the hub of a good cattle raising operation. With the Sandhills becoming more populated, the ranchers needed protection against cattle rustling. Richards was instrumental in finding a solution to this problem as one of the founders of the Nebraska Stock Growers Association.

By the mid 1890's, after the influx of homesteaders had taken the better lands of western Nebraska, the Spade, located in the remote and rough heart of the Sandhills, was one of only four large ranching outfits still operating. The Richards and Cairnes partnership had grown to the point where incorporation was necessary. The Articles of Incorporation listed their assets at \$475,000. Bartlett Richards served as president of this new company, Richards and Cairnes, Inc. Richards' wife and brothers owned shares in the company also. Cairnes sold his interest in the company in early 1899 and later that year Richards and his two brothers, Montana rancher Will Comstock and E. C. Harris of Chadron formed the Nebraska Land and Feeding Company of which Bartlett Richards served as president and Will Comstock as vice president. This new company created

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY	
RECEIVED	JAN 23 1980
DATE ENTERED	FEB 28 1981

CONTINUATION SHEET Significance ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 3

a very large cattle operation of which the Spade Ranch was headquarters or the "home ranch." The company had about 500,000 acres of land enclosed by 292 miles of fence. Fifty-six windmills and four flowing wells provided adequate water. As a protection against prairie fires, the Spade had two fire guard crews plowing furrows. Telephone lines connected the Spade with the towns of Ellsworth and Chadron, Gordon, Rushville and eventually Alliance. The number of cattle on the Spade usually ranged between 25,000 to 40,000 head.

Since the Sandhills range was nearly always good when other sections of the country were experiencing drought, many cattle from stricken areas could be bought cheap and shipped to the Spade to fatten. By 1900, this vast Spade cattle operation consisted of three ranches, the Spade (or home ranch), the C Bar and the Overton. Comstock lived at the home ranch, while Richards had a house 25 miles south in Ellsworth, one of their shipping points on the Burlington Railroad.

In the fall of 1901, as cattlemen were looking to Congress for a land-lease law, Theodore Roosevelt became President of the United States. Cattlemen, knowing his familiarity with the plains, felt he would understand the grazing dilemma of the ranchers, who could not assemble enough land legally under the 160-acre homestead law to operate successfully. Their fences on the public domain pointed up the problem. Instead, the President instructed his Secretary of the Interior to order the fences removed, much to the dismay of the ranchers. The passage of the Kinkaid Act in 1904, which allowed homesteaders to file on 640 acres in 37 counties in western Nebraska, was designed to solve the homesteader-rancher conflict and wipe the sandhills clear of illegal fences.

Richards and Comstock did not dismantle their fences immediately and in 1905 pleaded guilty to fencing (a misdemeanor) 212,000 acres of government land. Each man was fined \$300 and sentenced to 6 hours in the custody of a U.S. Marshal, who, however, was by-passed and they "served" their time in the custody of their lawyer. The event was highly publicized and exaggerated in the press. Reportedly, Roosevelt was dismayed and felt the penalty should have been more strict. The Spade owners again came to trial in 1906 on the charge of conspiring to defraud in the entry of public land (a felony). Witnesses told how old soldiers and others had been transported to the Sandhills to file on lands obviously unfit for cultivation with the intention of defrauding the government. Small wooden

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY	
RECEIVED	JAN 23 1980
DATE ENTERED	FEB 28 1980

CONTINUATION SHEET Significance ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 4

dwellings were often pulled from homestead to homestead on skids to give the appearance that entrymen were fulfilling residency requirements. The Spade owners allegedly leased the land from the "homesteaders," some of whom had never settled on the land.

Richards and Comstock, who did not testify, were convicted of the charge and sentenced in Federal District Court to one year in prison and a \$1,500 fine. The ranchers appealed to the Circuit Court of Appeals where they lost a 2 to 1 decision, in which Judge John F. Philips bitterly dissented, declaring they were not guilty. They were committed to the Adams County jail in Hastings, Nebraska, in 1910. Bartlett Richards, chronically ill with an intestinal ailment, died following emergency surgery in September, 1911, with a few weeks remaining on his sentence.

Richards and Comstock were not the only ranchers brought to trial during what has been casually dubbed "Roosevelt's Round Up." The government also moved against ranchmen in Wyoming, Colorado and South Dakota. This series of trials made the headlines even in Great Britain. Many ranchers were indicted; however it seemed that only "example cases" were prosecuted.

After Will Comstock was released from jail, he spent time trying to get the Spade Ranch affairs in order. This was a difficult task, since the time-consuming legal battles and subsequent imprisonment of the owners had left the ranch without direct supervision for several years. The Spade empire slowly disintegrated despite Comstock's efforts. He died in 1916, leaving most of the Spade lands heavily mortgaged. Mrs. Richards continued to try to hold on to the ranch until 1923 when all of the mortgages were foreclosed. The banks which had foreclosed on the Spade hired the ranch's present owner, Lawrence Bixby to put up hay in 1924. He had come to the ranch in 1903 at the age of eight when his parents were hired by Richards and Comstock. His mother was the ranch cook and his father was a school teacher. It is local folklore that Lawrence at the age of twelve announced that he would someday own the Spade Ranch. After the collapse of Richards' and Comstock's empire, Bixby began to persuade the local bankers to take a chance on him. He tells how he once bought a piece of land with \$5 down and a \$1,300 note. Slowly, during the 1920's, 30's, and 40's, Bixby acquired the old rangeland, which was lying dormant, until he owned 40 sections of the original Spade Ranch including the ranch headquarters in the "Home Valley." Bixby and his family have made the legendary Spade once again a profitable ranch.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED JAN 23 1980

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET Significance

ITEM NUMBER 8

PAGE 5

The Spade Ranch is significant to the agricultural history and settlement of the Great Plains region of the United States. The Nebraska Sandhills, like parts of Wyoming, Colorado and South Dakota had been considered too desolate for habitation. Richards and Comstock were among the few who proved that this sandy terrain if handled properly, made good grazing land. Because of the ranch's notoriety resulting from the fencing and land-conspiracy trials and because of Richard's untimely death while still in jail, the vast Spade "empire" has become a legend in the history of cattle ranching in the Great Plains.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED JAN 23 1980

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET Bibliography

ITEM NUMBER 9

PAGE 2

Bixby, Lawrence, informant, Ellsworth, Nebraska, 1975 and 1978.

Dick, Everett, Conquering the Great American Desert, Nebraska State
Historical Society publications, Volume 27, Lincoln, 1975.

Olson, James C., History of Nebraska, Lincoln, University of Nebraska
Press, 1966.

Richards, Bartlett Jr., and Van Ackeren, Ruth Morse Bartlett Richards,
Pioneer Cowman, unpublished manuscript, 1970's.

Yost, Nellie Snyder, The Call of the Range, Sage Books, Denver, 1966.

