

Librarian's Shelf by Marilyn Zehring

Nebraska Historian to Present at Library

Although the greatest peacetime emigration in the history of the world took place across the plains of Nebraska, an astounding number of the emigrants met their end suddenly, unexpectedly and sometimes violently in the Cornhusker State. In fact, says historian Jeff Barnes, by driving on Nebraska's Interstate 80 one could say they are driving through the state's largest and longest cemetery - the Platte River Valley.

"There are thousands of unmarked graves throughout the valley, covered by roads, highways, fields, and quite possibly people's homes," said Barnes. "An estimated 20,000 people died on the Oregon Trail, about one in every 17. It was even worse for the Mormons, as one in ten died on their trail. Today, driving Interstate 80 in Nebraska, you're passing an average of more than 20 unmarked graves in every mile."

How these emigrants died is the topic of "To Live and Die on the Plains," Barnes's presentation on Sunday, September 18 at 2:00 pm in the Art Gallery at the Columbus Public Library. The program is sponsored by the Friends of the Columbus Public Library and the Nebraska Humanities Council.

The 45-minute talk presents an astonishing tale of life and death on the Great Plains, in which you as an emigrant might leave your spouse and children behind in an unmarked grave, or even see friends digging your own grave. The Power-Point presentation includes seldom heard tales and many rarely seen historic images.

Barnes is the author of "Forts of the Northern Plains: Guide to Historic Military Posts of the Plains Indian Wars" which will be available for purchase and signing after the talk. This is a guide to 51 historic military posts of the Plains Indian Wars, primarily those involved in the wars with the Sioux (Dakota) Indians. The book gives a brief history of each of the posts, why they were built and what became of them, illustrated by historical images and present-day photographs. The guide covers the frontier forts from the late 1810s through the 1890s, reflecting the period of the first and last military conflicts with the Plains Indians. His second book, "The Great Plains Guide to Custer: His Forts, Fights and Other Sites" will be published in January, 2012.

A former newspaper reporter and editor, Barnes writes freelance and lives in Omaha. He is a fifth-generation Nebraskan, former chairman of the Nebraska Hall of Fame Commission and past marketing director of the Durham Museum. He traveled more than 13,000 miles in researching and photographing "Forts of the Northern Plains".