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BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P.O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848-0523.
 Phone: 308.234.3041
 Email: bchs.buffalotales@hotmail.com
 Broc Anderson, Editor

2018 Annual dues, payable January 1, are: Student—\$10, Individual—\$35, Family—\$40, Institutional Membership—\$50, Supporting Membership—\$75, Silver Engineer—\$125, Gold Engineer—\$250

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Buffalo County Historical Society
710 West 11th St. P.O. Box 523
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Buffalo Tales

May/June 2018

Buffalo County Historical Society

The disarming of the Kearney State College Police Force during the era of civil rights and Vietnam Part II

By: Cannon Marchand

Continued from the March/April... Scott's thoughts prompted a number of responses in support of the police and of Austin's actions. The editor of the *Hub*, Allen Goldsmith, spoke about how some criticism of police is necessary, but they put their lives on the line, and in doing so must have firearms. An *Antelope* editorial reported, "police today rarely receive thanks ... for their efforts to protect our lives, it is admirable that a KSC policeman was conscientious enough to perform his duty without regard for his own safety." Perhaps Austin's most loyal written supporter was a fellow KSC policeman and student Roger Faar. Faar, in an article in the *Antelope*, vehemently defended Austin's decisions as the only possible course of action, and defended the department's sense of value of human life. From these reports, a sense of the fervor and reaction of the small community of Kearney can be felt. The community had many that willingly jumped to support a lawman officer they saw as attacked by a lunatic. Much of the community had come to the conclusion that Sagehorn was a madman killer, and that Austin justly and heroically killed him and defended both KSC and the community as a whole. Scott's criticism of violence and questions about police training were dismissed by many.

Understandably, Sagehorn's date Gail McFall was another vocal supporter of Sagehorn. She questioned the shooting in a letter that was published in the *Antelope*. McFall, in her letter, could not understand Sagehorn's motives for the shooting, and argued that significant questions remain about why Sagehorn acted the way he did. Essentially, she said the event does not make sense upon conclusion of all the reported facts. Sagehorn appeared normal to her and to others that knew him before the shooting. They did not know why he acted as a madman on that night. She tried to question inconsistencies in the investigation, such as how Sagehorn could have had time to park his car so far away, and why there was a wiped tape deck with no fingerprints in his car's backseat? She reported that Sagehorn had a tape recorder in his car's dash when he left her that night and it required a key to be removed. Her letter finished with how she felt, "Randy's name had been blackened," and she implored anyone that knew anything else to speak out.

Court records of the shooting have now been lost or destroyed by the Buffalo County Court, and the newspapers offer only an outline of what happened. It will most likely forever remain unclear what Sagehorn's motives were for approaching Kollmorgen's car. Original statements from Gibbons, Kollmorgen, and interviews of McFall and a close friend of Sagehorn. The friend was named Gene Steinmeyer. Steinmeyer explained, in his statement, that Sagehorn loved guns and had recently been arrested near his home in Clatonia for repeatedly getting into car chases with police. On the last occasion police obtained his license plate number to identify him. Sagehorn also told Steinmeyer he hated police and would run from them in the future. Even with this background it is still troubling to not understand someone's motives after they apparently commit heinous acts, such as shooting a police officer. Running from the police as a teenager is a far step from trying to kill one.

The events of the shooting brought up other questions about KSC police and general security. For example, Scott brought up the attestable fact that many officers of the KSC Police Department were untrained. They did not attend an academy, unless they were previously members of another police department. Chief of Police Fred Barth had served with Kearney Police Department, and was one of the few KSC officers to be reported as receiving training at the time of the shooting. Many officers, like Austin, were just college students with a badge and a gun. There is no record of Austin possessing any

training. The lack of training of KSC officers is the biggest fact highlighted after the shooting which led to campus security becoming unarmed. Not the shooting itself.

The violence of the campus shooting and of the Vietnam War era as a whole also played a role in the unarming of campus security. Scott cited Sagehorn's death and the violence of Vietnam era America in an article in the *Antelope* where he was interviewed for his reasons for leaving the Catholic priesthood a month and a half after the shooting. What Father Scott touched on with his writings on the shooting was the general feeling of hopelessness in regard to the violence happening across the country, especially on college campuses. Through Scott, the public gained a greater understanding of dissenting views on authority and distrust of facts as they were reported that many had at the time of the shooting. These would be noted by college administrators.

The administrative assistant to the college president during the shooting, and dean of students beginning in September 1970, was Robert Nye. He would have most likely been aware of and read all of Scott's writings, newspapers about the November shooting, and reports about civil unrest on college campuses in America. Also, with Nye being in a leadership position on campus, it is likely he had access to even more complete accounts of the shooting and information about the campus security department. For instance, he likely read a 1972 report, ordered by the University Board of Regents, that recommended benefits of unarming police at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. His knowledge and position led him to be the campus official to propose unarming KSC police.

The first mention of unarming police is in a 1973 *Antelope* article published just short of three years after the shooting in 1969. The article does much to explain the condition of the campus police at the time and the feelings of both Nye and KSC president Dr. Brendan McDonald. In the article, Nye is indicated as the immediate supervisor of the police department, but McDonald does say, "Should a major violation occur, I would be liable to take care of it personally." Next in the article, newly appointed chief of campus police Harlan Hendrickson explained that his police did have the same authority as city police, but they did not have the same training. They did not attend any police academy and were only required to be a high school graduate and pass an exam. The article conversely reports that some security officers stated they never took an exam before being hired. The final part of the article reports on a new trial policy implemented that year from Nye: to have unarmed dormitory guards. At the time, the name of the department was not police, but campus security. The department was often referred to as police, but the name would not be changed from security until 1995. In response, some members of campus security said they would not be police officers if they could not carry guns.

The trial created by Nye was apparently seen as a success to campus leaders. As on June 27, 1974, patrol officers were barred from carrying firearms. The campus was placed under the jurisdiction of the Kearney City Police Department to enforce laws. Campus security were relegated to a support and report role for the security of the campus. Nye explained how the decision had been made in light of the fact KSC officers did not have training to use weapons, whereas city and county law enforcement did have training. Campus security was upset about the decision and used the events of the shooting of Sagehorn to argue why they should be allowed to carry guns. Students of KSC responded in following reports in the *Antelope* newspaper with their thoughts. The feelings of students were mixed: they wanted campus security that had firearms, but they were also uneasy about having campus security provided from the city police. They also felt like their \$3 parking fees should be going towards a well-trained police force, not the current untrained KSC security department.

The issue of armed police would be made relevant again in 1976 after an unarmed campus security officer named Val Jean Niles was assaulted by a masked assailant at a state-run tuberculosis hospital near campus, which is now owned by UNK. The assailant left the officer bruised and escaped the scene. Again, students were active in voicing their opinions in the campus newspaper. Many felt they needed armed campus security, but that it must come with more training. The incident also prompted Nye to defend his actions saying, "There is no point in carrying guns in this type of community. It is made up of good, industrious students and there are no problems. I feel we can do our job in KSC without firearms." Nye also acknowledged the shooting of Sagehorn, but claimed it

had no effect on campus policy to unarm police. Another article in the *Antelope* identified that police did have access to a single firearm in their office. The firearm was a rather unique choice for security as it was a M3 .45 caliber Grease Gun. This was a mass-produced submachine gun from World War II. The officers did not have any training with it and no policy existed to explain when to use the firearm. It was also reported that the firearm was in poor condition. It is not reported when the department disposed of the weapon, but even with it they were still effectively unarmed.

Events were occurring outside of KSC as well that contributed to the debate to unarm KSC police. These were the feelings Scott touched on that erupted after National Guard soldiers killed protesting students in 1970 at Kent State University. America during the time of Vietnam War was deeply divided. Activism, disputes, and demonstrations led to high tensions across the country. Anti-war feelings combined with tensions of the Civil Rights Movement to expose violent divisions in American society. Kent State became the high-water mark of campus violence. Over 700 college campuses were forced to cancel classes after Kent State. Many young college students developed a distrust of their government leaders and facts as they were reported. In Nebraska, the most famous response to distrust of the time was a student protest following Kent State where students at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln protested at a draft office and then stormed and seized the Military and Naval Science building, which housed the campus Reserve Officer Training Corps programs. The students were eventually peacefully dispersed, but they did later make demands to unarm UNL police. UNL police at the time was around the fifth largest police department in the state, and unlike KSC police officers, UNL police attended the state police academy to receive certification.

The decisions of Dean Nye and President McDonald about KSC security were not made with the facts isolated to the Kearney Campus. They were college leaders making decisions trying to avoid the violence on other campuses. A week following Kent State a large protest of more than a 100 students congregated at KSC. The student newspaper described it as being an emotional and disorganized event. The *Kearney Hub* and campus newspapers were also reporting on the draft lottery alongside information about the Sagehorn shooting. KSC administrators did not want to bear any responsibility for an armed police department on their campus being involved in a shooting, which must have seemed possible after the Sagehorn shooting and other examples of violence on campuses. They also would have been well aware that their police department did not have training nor were as large as UNL's police. The decision to unarm KSC police absolved them of potential future responsibility of actions of any armed KSC officer and, in their minds, actually made the campus safer in a turbulent time.

While it would be easy to say that one event caused the current campus police at UNK to be unarmed, no such definitive incident exists. The shooting of Randall Sagehorn has often been cited as a leading cause, but it alone did not unarm the campus police. The 1969 shooting brought increased scrutiny to the department that would leave them unarmed, but perhaps even if the shooting did not occur, KSC security may have been barred from carrying firearms anyways. The increased media attention highlighted the fact that most of the college security officers had no training and were merely students at KSC. Campus administrators at the time were also making decisions in the flurry of Vietnam-era protests and unrests. The tragedy at Kent State, the violence at other college campuses, and the possibility for personal responsibility of anything happening at KSC made it a good choice for them to unarm campus security. With the inadequate level of training of the police unarming them was a reasonable and justifiable decision. In 1981, however, campus police began attending the same police academy as other Nebraska law enforcement officers and became certified as a police department. This certification and professionalization continues to the present day. As of 2016, the department changed their name to simply UNK Police and has had officers with full police powers backed up with standardized training. They are far different from the department of 1969, and the climate of tension stemming from Vietnam has lessened. Officers today face new threats such as mass shootings and increased scrutiny from always being recorded. The question of why they are not armed is still, and possibly more, relevant today.

***For sources for this essay—please contact the editor at bchs.bufftalotales@hotmail.com**

Coming Events and

Education notes (see website for additional details):

Staff and volunteers have been hard at work preparing for all of the June activities including:

Buffalo County Stampede 1/2 Marathon, 10K, and 5K on Sunday, June 10 Please see getmeregistered.com to sign up as a participant or as a volunteer! We need many volunteers to stand at corners or hand out water while cheering on the runners. Your time is valued and appreciated! You can also e-mail bchs.halfmarathon@hotmail.com and ask Todd questions! Thank you for considering helping BCHS with this major fundraiser!



"150 Nails" Contest-see any staff member for more details on this fun contest!

BCHS Wedding Contest-see any staff member for more details on this fun contest!

Saturday, June 16 from 10-1 pm: **33rd annual Wagons West Celebration.** Join in this FREE family-friendly event to see historic demonstrations, hear live music,

and enjoy the authentic Buffalo County buildings.



Live Music – Treasure Hunt and Prizes -

Pioneer Games and Crafts – Blacksmithing – Quilting Display – Handkerchief Doll Making – Visit Historic Buildings – Archive Research Help – "150 Nails" Contest – Concessions available

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**PO Box 523, 710 W. 11th St., Kearney, NE 68848
(308) 234-3041 www.bchs.us
bchs.us@hotmail.com**