



Buffalo Tales



Volume 12, No. 10 Buffalo County Historical Society November-December, 1989

GOING HOME TO KAUFMANN'S

by Susan Sizer Bogue

Susan Sizer Bogue is a graduate of Kearney High School and the University of Nebraska Law School. She is a lawyer/risk management consultant in the Denver, Colorado area. Even though she has lived elsewhere for most of her adult life, she still considers Kearney home in a sense. Her mother, Margaret Sizer, continues to reside in Kearney. The following article was written in August 1988, after the Kaufmann & Wernert store closed on July 25, 1988.

No matter how long I've lived elsewhere — 25 years more or less — Kearney will always be "home" to me. I come here to get some perspective on my life, to shop at Kaufmann's, to breathe a little clean air (I live in Denver), to visit family and friends, to get a Goodrich's ice cream cone, to stroll the Mall, to eat at Cattleman's, and to show my children the rock garden. Now one of the pieces of a perfect Kearney visit is missing.

I knew something was wrong on my last visit when a whole row of parking places was available right in front of Kaufmann's. The store was dark. A sign advised the public that there will be an auction of the building and its fixtures on August 18th. A few curtain rods, a checkered ear-flap hat, a rack of buttons, a lone garden rake, a rack of earrings priced from \$1.80 to \$4.00 and some used Christmas lights were the visible remnants of the bountiful merchandise that was Kaufmann's in its heyday under the ownership of Sid and Jake Hellman.

I can't say that I was surprised at its demise. My concern for Kaufmann's began the first time I visited the store after it came under new management. The store had been brightened, lightened, inventoried, organized, computerized and utterly stripped of its friendly, "general store" atmosphere. It didn't seem at all like the Kaufmann's I had always known.

I can recall many visits to the "old" Kaufmann's. Merchandise spilled down the rampway. Every cubic inch of space was filled with a variety of everything. On one visit cases of mouthwash lined both sides of the entryway, with just enough space for a box, provided by the Kearney Lions Club, for donating your used eyeglasses. Even with the cases of mouthwash, there was plenty of room to stop and chat with my grade school principal, a former neighbor, or a classmate. It was obvious that Kearneyites enjoyed the socializing that was part of shopping at Kaufmann's. On snowy days, there would be a distinct smell of wet wool in the entryway.

Kaufmann's was not one of those stores where you had to search for obscure basement stairs. The descending stairway cut through the center of the long front entryway. Above the stairs a sign advised that the basement contained a True Value Hardware Store. That and more. Toys and games were piled high beyond the reach of

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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. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- Basic Membership \$10.00
 - Institutional Membership \$15.00
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Trails & Rails Museum	706 West 11th Street	(308) 234-3041
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WITH THE SOCIETY

So many people have done so many things at the Museum and for the Society that it is impossible to thank each and every one individually, so let me take this opportunity to say Thank You to all. Since we depend so heavily on volunteers, your response is deeply appreciated.

As you prepare for Christmas, think of your Society in your annual donations and gifts. All donations to Buffalo County Historical Society are tax deductible.

1990 dues are payable January 1. Consider upgrading to Support Memberships. Thanks goes to all who have become Supporting Members or Life Members. This additional support is most welcome. Now is a good time to honor someone with a Life Membership.

Don't forget the **2nd Annual Christmas Tree Walk** to be held at The Museum on **December 2nd through December 10th**, from 1:00 to 5:00 p.m. each day.

Many of you will be called to help with this walk and/or food for the bake sale. If for some reason you are not called and wish to volunteer to help or donate food, feel free to call or just show up and say what can I do? Extra help is always appreciated.

Since this is the November/December issue, I wish all of you a Happy Thanksgiving and a Blessed Christmas.

Hope to see you at the Museum at the Christmas Walk.

—Margaret Hohnholt, President



Fountain Luncheonette

even adult hands. Bicycles and tricycles hung from the ceiling while wagons, doll strollers, and play lawn mowers protruded into the aisles, tempting children to rearrange the merchandise from time to time. The downstairs toy store seemed to be as well stocked throughout the year as it was during the Christmas shopping season. Oftentimes my mission at Kaufmann's was to buy party favors. There might be three varieties of pick-up sticks, two types of jacks, four kinds of marbles, and balloons of every shape, size and color. I would fill one of the wicker shopping baskets with the merriment of a child's birthday party.

I always meandered through housewares and hardware. Part of the fun of shopping these departments was the chance of finding a copper mold or perhaps an Allen wrench with a price tag circa 1955. A couple of friendly clerks were always sure to ask me if I needed any help. I would be tempted to tell them that I was just on a sentimental journey through the store. But instead, I would say, "No thank you."

Clerks were not in short supply anywhere in this store. At the back of the basement, a clerk might be unpacking merchandise near the elevator. "Would you like a ride up?" she would ask as I approached. "Yes, second floor, please." A door with a window closed behind us. The woman stretched a metal lattice gate across the door and latched it. The elevator ascended jerkily to the second floor. "Watch your step, please," the woman would warn. The elevator never quite aligned with the floor. I would have to step up 2 and 1/2 inches or down an inch. No doubt it is as difficult to stop an elevator at the right moment as it is to serve yourself precisely ten dollars worth of gas.

The upstairs was almost as cluttered as the basement. Signs flying above women's clothing might tell me that irregular sweaters were 50% of half price. Or a manufacturer

would be having a close-out sale on ski vests, which were then \$5.00 less than the sale price. On one visit sweatshirts in bizarre colors were selling for \$2.00 each. It was a bargain I couldn't resist. I bought one the color of faded split pea soup. It's even more faded now.

A few aisles over, nice quality children's sleepwear might be half price. The selection was amazing. Some children's shops didn't have as much stock in their entire store as was packed into three or four aisles at Kaufmann's. No trip to the second floor of Kaufmann's was complete (for women, that is) without a trip to the Ladies Lounge. It dazzled you as you entered; sunshine streamed in through two giant windows. There was a plastic covered lounge sofa pulled up to the East-facing window. It provided a bird's eye view of Central Avenue. Weary women shoppers could truly lounge there. A woman might sit knitting an afghan, occasionally looking down on the stop-and-go car and people traffic at one of Kearney's busiest intersections. An elderly woman could look out the South window above 22nd Street, watching for her ride. A young woman could change her baby's diapers on one of the lounge chairs. There used to be an alterations lady stationed in the corner with her sewing machine. After resting briefly and watching shoppers along Central Avenue, I would decide to head downstairs.

Descending Kaufmann's wide stairs was like making a grand entrance to a ballroom. Sometimes I would pause briefly on the mezzanine floor. It wasn't that I ever needed anything on the mezzanine. It was just that I liked the riotous look of the mezzanine. Thousands of artificial flowers — silk, plastic, and paper — were stuffed into baskets and plastic planters. Craft items as diverse as styrofoam shapes, pipe stem cleaners, and embroidery hoops filled other counters.

Finishing the descent, I would land on the main floor, the true heart of Kaufmann's. Faint smells barely noticeable on the other floors became stronger on this floor. The store was redolent of malted milk balls, no-nonsense bar soap, griddle grease from the snack bar and something musty like potting soil.

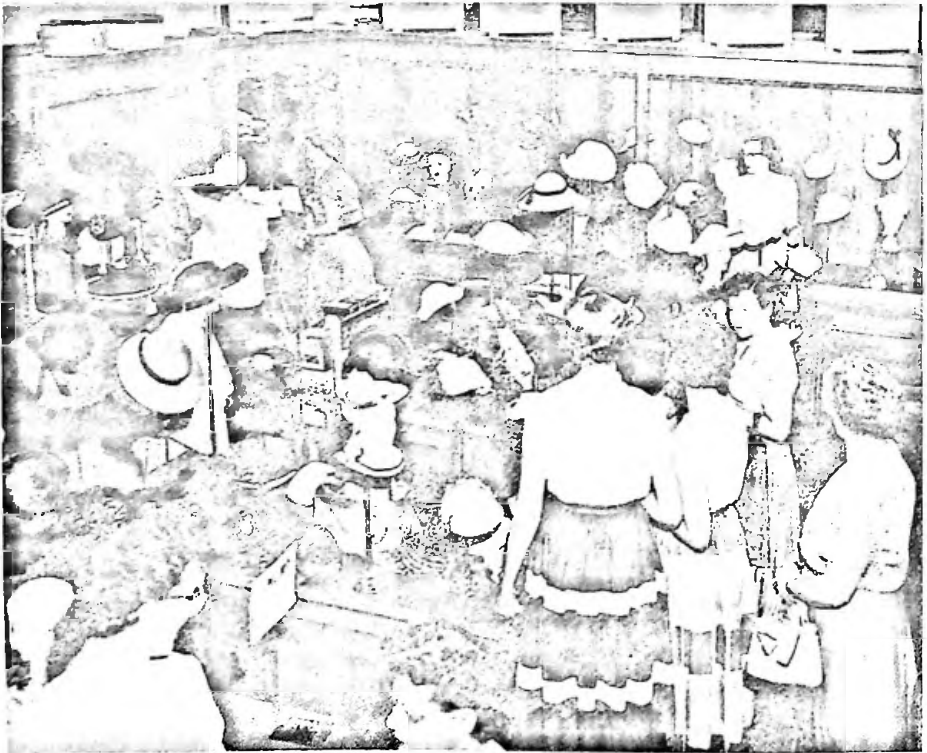
From tropical fish to tube socks to office supplies. You could get anything you wanted at Kaufmann's. Sadly, the candy counter which once presided over the front section of the store was gone in later years. I can remember as a child waiting expectantly as the young woman behind the candy counter wielded power with her scoop as she shook cinnamon bears or maybe chocolate stars from the scoop onto the scale. She would peer intently at the numbers on the scale and perhaps shake out one more bear or star. Then she tipped the bottom of the scale (conveniently shaped like a scoop) so that the candy at last filled a small brown sack. That will be 5 cents, please.

Even though I went to Kaufmann's on other pretexts, most of the time my true destination was the lunch counter. Getting there might have been a problem for the uninitiated. It was way at the back of the store. Racks of paperback books almost completely blocked it from view. A photo booth completed the camouflage. I would wend my way among the books and find a round, puffy stool to sit on. The layout of the snack bar was ordinary enough. Orange and red juice dispensers bubbled and gurgled in the background. Glass pastry cases lined the eating counters. The pieces of pie in the pastry cases were not ordinary, however. They were homemade and delicious. The menu featured a very reasonably priced plate lunch special, the "famous Hobo" and the Nebraska Bragburger. I knew the pies were homemade because I had seen the "pie lady", Mrs. Pat Hilty, making pies one morning.

On one particular visit to the snack bar, the lunch hour rush was over; the business people had gone back to work. A few shoppers were eating a late lunch or having an early coffee break. I could turn my stool around and browse the paperback racks without getting up. There were classics sprinkled among the westerns, romances, bestsellers,

near bestsellers, cookbooks, child-rearing books, and other how-to books. I remember buying Truman Capote's book, *Music for Chameleons*. As I ate my apple pie, I read through the KGFWgram, a pink half sheet of weather, news and sports. I was pleased to read that Paul Wice of my high school graduating class was the news director. My attention was drawn to two pre-school children cavorting in the do-it-yourself photo booth. I could see a flash of lights beneath the curtain as the children ducked up and down amid lots of giggling. I had a feeling that the "4 poses for 75 cents" would be a bit blurry. The two children showed their mother the finished photo strip. They laughed uproariously. The mother seemed vaguely familiar. She approached me. It was a friend from high school—Chris Poffenberger Sherrerd. We caught up on 20 years of news as best we could. As she was leaving, she intimated that she had to make a special trip to Kaufmann's at least once a month so her kids could spend their saved-up allowances in the "toy basement" or bobbing up and down in the photo booth. "Kaufmann's is a tradition with you, too," I said knowingly. She added that some friends of hers from California always made Kaufmann's their first priority on a trip to Kearney.

A lot of people will miss Kaufmann's. It was downtown Kearney's "general store" with a long tradition of friendliness, homemade pies, bountiful merchandise, chaos, bargains, and an old photo booth. But where there's an auction, there's the hope for a new owner and a new store. I was reminded of this when my 8-year old daughter suggested, "Why don't we buy Kaufmann's and open a pet store!" While I don't think I will buy it for a pet store, I do hope that a new owner will capitalize on the prime location and bring some life back to Kaufmann's.



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156 pages, 78 photographs, 30 stories, indexed.
Paperback. \$6.50 plus 75¢ postage if mailed.

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The above books also available at <i>Gerbers Books & Gifts</i> in downtown Kearney Centre, and at <i>read all about it</i> at Hilltop Mall.

- Trail Dust to Star Dust**, Gibbon centennial, 1871-1971,
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- Life and Times of Doc Nielsen** \$ 4.95
- Steam Locomotives of Nebraska** \$ 3.50
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- Notepaper with sketches by Barb Avery and by Carol Kimball \$ 4.00
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