



Buffalo Tales



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WHEN WATERTOWN WAS A TOWN

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

(Note: Much of the information on Watertown was taken from research papers of Alvin R. Jones, of Amherst, his daughter Lana Lee Gosch, and Connie Hazzard, a former reporter for the *Kearney Daily Hub*.)

Watertown was one of the railroad stations established in 1890 when the Kearney & Black Hills Railroad built a branch line up the Wood River valley northwest from Kearney. It was a town that did not survive, but for three decades it was the center of a thriving community even though it never had more than four houses and two stores and its population never exceeded fifteen or twenty.

J. S. Veal had built a country store in the early 1880's where Watertown was later established. There was a pioneer cemetery about two miles north, and a sod schoolhouse had been built one mile south when School District No. 101 had organized in 1886.

The railroad brought the first train and freight service into the area. All of the town locations and their stockyards were determined by the Kearney Black Hills Railroad Company. Watertown was four and one-half miles southeast of Miller, and it was seven and three-tenths miles on to Amherst, the next town to the southeast.

Steam locomotives needed water and this is how Watertown got its name. An elaborate water reservoir and windmill, with 5½-inch cylinder, was built to the southwest on high ground. An underground 4-inch pipe system carried water to the



Watertown Depot and Elevator.

—Photo by Nora Oertwig

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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 \$ 7.50
- Institutional Membership \$10.00
- Supporting Membership \$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

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WITH THE SOCIETY

TRAILS and RAILS MUSEUM is open for the summer season. You will have more opportunities to visit the museum this year. Open hours have been expanded to 9 to 12 noon and 1 to 5 p.m., Monday through Saturday, and 1 to 5 on Sundays. These hours will continue through October 27.

The Loup River Freighters Hotel looks more "homey" and "lived in" since a large collection of accessory items donated by Hal and Marian Johnson has been added. The Johnsons had already donated a major portion of the furniture in the hotel. Other donors and their donations include dining room table, chairs, buffet, and carving set from Earle and Ruth Webb; parlor organ, quilting frame and quilts, treadle sewing machine and rugs from the Triplett family; settee from Pamela Long; washing machine from Fay and Beverly Schroer; double bed, dresser and commode in the small bedroom from Mary Eckhout; cherry secretary/desk in the dining room from H. D. Kendall; shelf clock from Alice Howell. There is much work to be done in the hotel such as building shelves and arranging the items we have, but you will be pleased at the progress made since last fall.

MUSEUM VOLUNTEER TRAINING will be offered on May 5 and May 12 at 2 p.m. and again at 7 p.m. Each session will last about 1½ hours and will include a tour of the museum buildings, a history of the growth of Trails and Rails, and written information for you to read at your leisure. Each session will be the same and you are welcome to attend as many as you wish. With the expanded hours, two people are needed during open hours. Mardi Anderson will continue to be there on week days, and Susan McFerrin will work on weekends. We are asking volunteers to consider some system in their scheduling, if possible. Individuals or couples may sign up for specific days, for example, the second and fourth Wednesday mornings of each month. And perhaps members of a community would like to take responsibility for a specific day each week, for example, in the past, Gibbon-Shelton members signed up for Saturdays, and Elm Creek for Tuesdays.

WE NEED YOU! Please join the museum volunteer staff.

NEW MEMBERS

Warren and Rosella LammersKearney

SUPPORTING MEMBERS

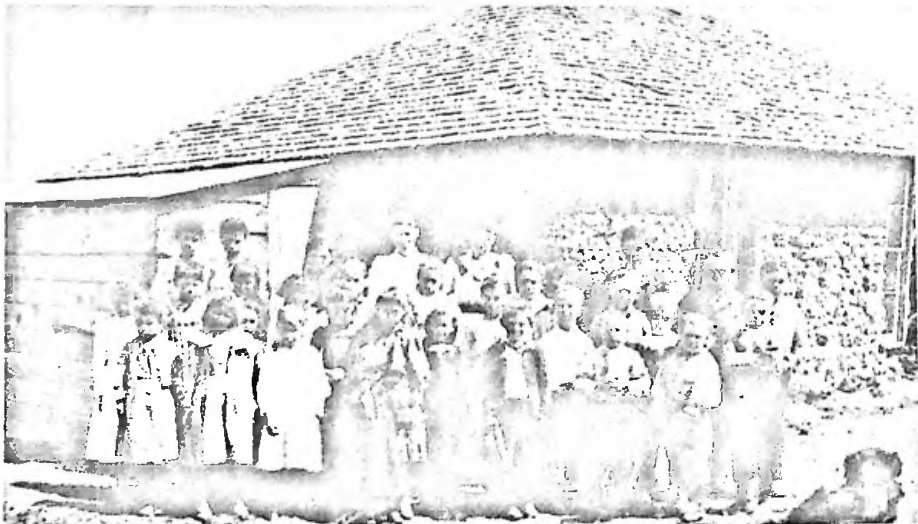
Frederick E. Hammer . . .APO New York Norma AhrendtsKearney

steel standpipe which was located along the railroad tracks. A swinging arm was extended over the locomotive to fill its reservoir with water. When the Schukar family came to Watertown in 1896, Carl Schukar managed the water system for the railroad until it was discontinued. The well was eventually sealed shut.

Soon after the railroad came through, a grain elevator with a capacity of 10,000 bushels was built. A. L. Fitch appears to have been the first operator. Oldtimers have told about his white horse circling the horse-powered steel elevator, lifting the grain into the bins. In 1948 the elevator was closed, and was later blown down by a wind-storm, after being blocked up to be moved to Elm Creek.

The stockyards which the railroad built were used for cattle and hogs which had been driven to Watertown to be shipped to Omaha and Kansas City. In Bassett's *History of Buffalo County*, Vol. I, it is stated that "In 1914, 25 cars of hay, grain and livestock were shipped from Watertown."

The Union Pacific took over this branch line in 1898. The 65-mile segment from Kearney to Callaway had been completed. While the line never did realize its first ambitions to build to the Black Hills, a 37-mile extension to Stapleton was completed in 1912. Although some grading extended westward, no rails were ever laid beyond Stapleton. The first McKean motor car of the Union Pacific inaugurated motorized passenger service on this line in 1905. The motor car made daily stops on the Kearney branch line and was widely used by people traveling to and from Kearney and other stations on the line, and often used by students going to and from high school in another town. The sound of its special horn was missed by residents along the railroad



Watertown Sod School, 1895, Mate Veal, teacher.

Pupils: Blanche 18, Della 16, Ernest 11, and Sadie 11, Hanks; Mable 11, Edith 10, Crapa; Orrin Veal, 8; Rachel Shoop, 17; Etta 19, Edward 14, Elma 12, and Lucinda 10, Hannemann; Edwin 19, Elsie 17, Walter 13, Ena 11, and Ruby 4, Thiede; Albert 17, Walter 15, Flora 14, Laura May 11, and Fred S. 8, Thomas; Jessie M. 20, Clarence 17, and Blanche E. 12, King; Bert A. Fitch 17; Lizzie 17, Joseph 13, Esther 11, Mary 9, and John 7, Cherry; Cora Howerton 7; Nelson 18, Vernil 13, Hitchcock, and Fred Nash 14.

Taken by Harry Carson, an early roving photographer, with a Plate Kodak.

—Photo: Courtesy of Alvin R. Jones

when, a half century later, the final run of the passenger motor car was made in 1955.

The Watertown postoffice was established on October 17, 1890 and was located in the new depot. Thomas J. Quail was appointed the first postmaster. Five weeks later, on November 22, 1890, John S. Veal became the postmaster and served until May 3, 1894. Some of the other Watertown postmasters were Alva L. Fitch, Abram R. Jacoby, Ernest G. Burrington, and Lester V. Stubbs. The postoffice was discontinued on September 30, 1920 when Watertown mail was sent to Amherst to be distributed. The Watertown depot was moved to Riverdale and served that village for several years.

A new frame school was built in 1896 replacing the sod school. In 1905 a bell tower was attached to the new schoolhouse, and in 1913 a horse barn was built on the school grounds. In 1914 the 9th and 10th grades were added in an extra room, and Watertown District 101 became a two-room, two-teacher school until declining enrollment ended the two extra grades in 1928. This school was officially closed in 1970.

Watertown had no churches. The Methodists held worship services in the sod school when fourteen members organized for services in 1891. Immanuel Lutheran Church, which was built in 1884 and was located two miles east of the town, was sometimes referred to as the Watertown Lutheran Church, but only because of its being on the rural mail route out of Watertown.

There was a great deal of development in the area during the early years of the village. William Osborn had a blacksmith shop, and Carl Schukar, in addition to his duties for the railroad, operated a cream testing station. He also kept daily weather records for many years before World War I, and in wintertime started the fire in the school house for the teachers. Charles Major operated the Watertown elevator for



This 2-story sod house, built in 1884 by Frank Major, was located two miles south of Watertown. It had wood floors and was plastered with native gypsum. In the picture are (l. to r.) Mrs. Major and her husband Frank, Mate Veal Jeffery, Cecil De La Barre Haase, Kate and Jessie Major, Charlie De La Barre and Fred Cheney.

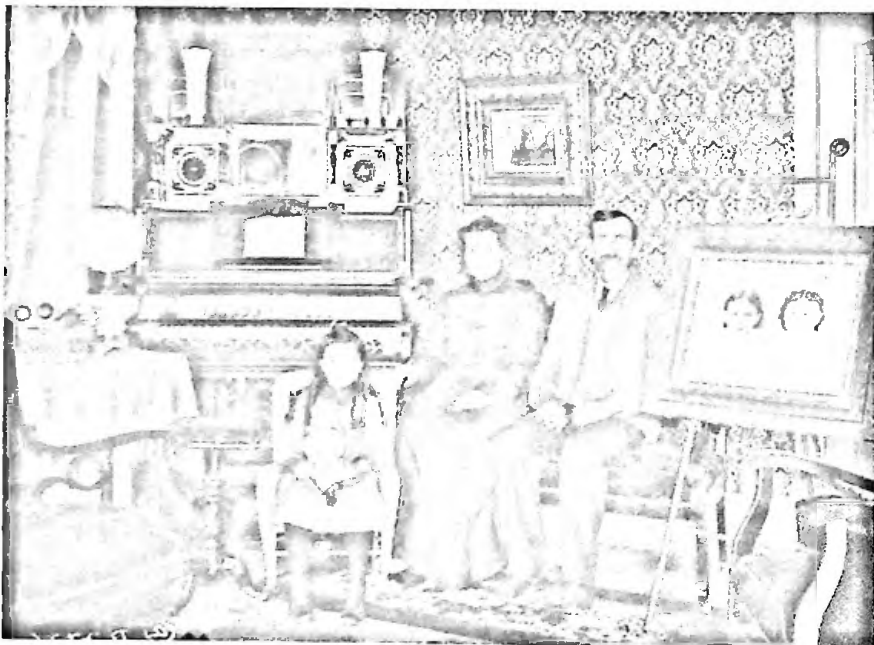
—Photo: Courtesy of Claude Curd

many years. He lived two miles south of the village in a two-story sod house which his father, Frank Major, built around 1884. For three decades the stores, sometimes one and sometimes two, sold just about everything from school supplies, groceries, furniture, and *Quick-Meal* stoves to buggies and a few pieces of horse-drawn farm machinery. Store owners were J. S. Veal, A. L. Fitch, Jess Hanks, Henry and Abbie Elliott, Dave and Fred Whitesel, Nora Stubbs and her son Lester, J. F. Mackey, E. G. Burrington, A. R. Jacoby, Mrs. Laurie Trumbull, and William and Lydia Dersche. The last store burned in 1920 when the Dersches were owners. That same year the home of Alva L. Fitch, who had lived in Watertown from its early beginnings, was struck by lightning and burned to the ground.

In the 1880's Henry Zarrs built a brick house one mile southeast of Watertown and made the bricks on the place. He was a bricklayer and worked on the Midway Hotel when it was being constructed in Kearney. In 1889 Alva Fitch and Mr. Zarrs built a brickyard. Carl Voss was hired to do some of the work. It was in operation for ten years. Bricks stamped with a "W" have since been found in the surrounding area.

A flour mill was built along the Wood River southeast of Watertown in the 1890's. In the early days the Wood River carried a great deal more water and there was enough flow to use a wooden water wheel. A dam was built across the river and a mill pond formed behind it. The mill closed around 1915 but part of the limestone foundation and pieces of iron can be seen at the site a mile southeast of Norman Abel's farm and about five miles from Watertown.

There was also a limestone quarry a mile east and half mile south of Watertown in the Alfred Trampe pasture.



Mr. and Mrs. R. A. Acheson and their daughter in their home, Watertown, 1903.

—Photo by Solomon D. Butcher
Nebraska State Historical Society Collection.

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During the early years F. B. Crapo, a farmer who lived in the hills north of Watertown, owned and operated a sorghum press. Farmers who grew amber cane could haul it to the press for processing into blackstrap molasses or sorghum for the family kitchen.

Social life in Watertown included literary debates at the school, with teams traveling to other schools as well. Box socials were held quite often, and dances were held in the store building when it was empty. Outdoor shows were held at the depot and people sat on a few planks, brought their own chairs, or sat on the ground.

Watertown was one that didn't make it. After the store and the Fitch house burned in 1920 the town began to decline, and by 1930 practically everything was gone in the way of establishments. After the closing of the elevator in 1948 there was no longer a market there. Although once a regular stop on the Kearney & Black Hills Railroad, by 1967 the population had dwindled to three, and now (1987) the townsite is a farmstead and the once-busy railroad branch line which created Watertown has discontinued all service beyond Riverdale.

SOURCES

Alvin R. Jones research; *Kearney Daily Hub*, August 6, 1971; National Archives microfilm, *Postoffices in Buffalo County*; Ehemberger and Gschwind, *Smoke Across the Prairie*, 1964; S. C. Bassett, *History of Buffalo County*, Vol. I; Personal interviews with Viola Mueller and Gladys Anderson, April, 1987.

WAGONS WEST CELEBRATION will feature the "Roaring Twenties". It will begin the evening of May 30 with an old-time country school program and ice cream social at the District #1 schoolhouse, followed by informal singing around the campfire at the Sandy Creek Muzzle Loader encampment on the museum grounds.

On Sunday, May 31 there will be displays of antique autos by the Fort Kearny Antique Auto Club, fire trucks from the 1920's, living history demonstrations, amusement park concession games for children, and vaudeville performances throughout the afternoon.

The food concession stand will feature barbeque buffalo burgers and delicious BCHS homemade pies. Volunteer pie bakers should contact the museum. There will also be a raffle.

In the meantime, if you are planning to travel anywhere between now and the end of May, stop by the museum and pick up some brochures to take along and leave at gas stations and motels with your friends along the way.