

Buffalo Tales

September/October 2016

The Merryman Performing Arts Center: 10 Years of the Arts in Kearney by Carol Lomicky



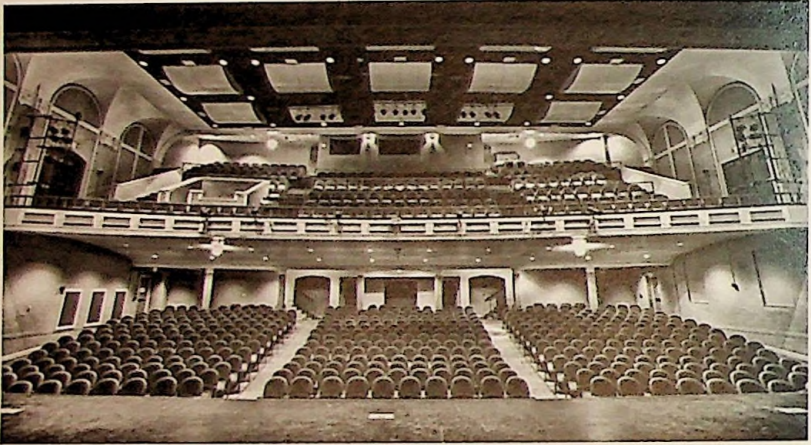
(Photo property of MPAC, used with permission)

The Merryman Performing Arts Center is celebrating its 10th anniversary during the 2016-2017 performance season.

MPAC, which became a reality on October 8, 2006, when the curtain rose for the grand opening show, simply wouldn't have happened without an enterprising group of Kearney people—a former University of Nebraska-Kearney professor of theater, a cadre of visionaries who early on propelled the initiative, and countless families and individuals who generously provided financial support. And for the past decade the Merryman has played host to cultural arts and entertainment that serve not only the city of Kearney but the entire region. In fact, some 50,000 people attend nearly 400 events a year including national touring artists and companies, Kearney Community Concert series offerings, Crane River Theater Company performances and various local and regional ensembles and entertainment. Add to that innumerable music, theater and arts programming for the Kearney Public Schools.

But the past decade would have been bereft of all of this had it not been for the foresight of Stan Kaye, a former UNK professor who discovered the distinctive possibilities of the then Central Elementary School auditorium. Here is what Mr. Kaye discerned: Although many school buildings from the early 20th Century era included a stage at one end of the gymnasium, the auditorium in the old school at 300 West 24th St. uniquely featured such architectural details as a formal audience area, balcony seating, a curtain, orchestra pit and proscenium arch. Kaye

recognized the potential as a performance venue this grand and classic space held, and, in 1999, he approached the Kearney Board of Education and Kearney Public School administrators to consider transforming the historic facility into a performing arts theater. Kaye and public school officials soon were joined by a group of community leaders, all of whom were motivated to integrate the performing arts into the educational curriculum, to support and strengthen local performing arts organizations, as well as to bring performing talent to Kearney and the region.



Auditorium- Merryman Performing Arts Center
(Photo property of MPAC, used with permission)

The history of the Merryman is inextricably linked to Central Elementary School and, before that, Kearney Junior High School. Built as the junior high school in 1925-1926 and dedicated on September 24, 1926, the Neo-Classical Revival structure is characterized by a formal symmetrical frontage, portico with monumental columns, decorated moldings, entablatures and cornices surmounted by a balustrade. The frieze is inscribed, "Kearney Junior High School." A broad flight of concrete stairs rises to the entrance.

The architectural style, popular in the United States between 1895 and 1935, reflects the curricular changes taking place in the country in the early 20th Century. The curriculum was expanding beyond the "three R's" to incorporate other subject areas together with "manual training" for boys (especially in woodworking) and "domestic science" for girls (sewing and cooking). Kearney Junior High School's design was state-of-the-art for its time and comprised the auditorium with a stage that doubled as the boys' gymnasium, a separate girls' gymnasium, lockers and restrooms, a kitchen where lunch was prepared and girls learned to cook, a lunchroom, a large library, specialized rooms for sewing, art, music, and science, and a principal's office. The building served junior high school students until the fall of 1967 when it became Central Elementary School. In 2000, the building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

By the time Mr. Kaye approached the local Board of Education in the late 1990s, the theater had been in disuse as a performance space for years. But events had been set in motion. A feasibility study was completed in February of 2001, and a 15-member steering committee was formed. The fund drive to finance the project began early in 2003 with Dr. L. R. Smith spearheading the capital campaign and the late Carol Cope and the late B.M. Stevenson serving as co-chairs. The Kearney Board of Education committed \$1.2 million and significant donations from the Theodore G. Baldwin Foundation, Baldwin Filters/CLARCOR, EATON Corporation, the late Emma Jane Wilder, the campaign co-chairs along with donations from the community moved the project along.



Robert M. Merryman

(Photo property of MPAC, used with permission)

The man for whom the facility is named, Robert M. Merryman, a 1939 graduate of Kearney's Longfellow High School, being contacted by two of his classmates in 2004. Mr. Merryman, a California entrepreneur whose family owned Gaston's Music Store in Kearney, had been active in vocal music and theater while in school. He eventually donated \$2 million to the \$5.2 million project and would visit MPAC while it was under construction. He died in 2005 prior to its completion.

Two other MPAC areas also pay tribute to individuals whose generosity long will be remembered. The Scott D. Morris Family Theatre is named in honor of a \$500,000 gift from Kearney businessman Scott Morris, whose family—from grandparents, parents, siblings and children—attended school in the building. The Ron and Carol Cope Grand Lobby memorializes the late philanthropist Carol Cope, who contributed more than \$500,000. Additional gifts from the Kearney Board of Education, the Peter Kiewit Foundation and from community, alumni and staff members brought the project to fruition. Gail Lowenberg was hired as the first director in 2004. The orchestra shell and concert grand piano were acquired in 2007.

Throughout the 90 years that encompass the auditorium's intriguing history, countless children and adults undoubtedly have pondered the words on the engraving above the stage, "Knowledge Is Light. Wisdom Is Power." And for the past 10 years, as the Merryman continues to strive to be an engine of creativity for area youth and a place of entertainment, culture and the arts for the community and region, it is demonstrating that, true to its goal, "Art Is Affirmation."

2016 Calendar of Events

Prairie Blacksmith Association's Fall Conference-October 7-11
Dec. 3-4 and Dec. 10-11 from 1-5 pm: Open to the public: **29th Annual Christmas Tree Walk** -check out dozens of trees decorated by area not-for-profits that tie their mission into this year's theme, Christmas Cinema. ***All of November: Decorating (during regular business hours plus open late on Thursday, Nov. 3 for decorating)***
Saturday, December 3 from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 29th Annual Christmas Tree Walk***

Education notes (see website for additional details):

***Listen to Mardi Anderson on KGFW 1340 AM** at 9 am on the last Friday of each month for fabulous stories about Buffalo County!

*The **Archive Department** will be open on Mondays from 1:00-4 year-round or by appointment.

***Fabulous Fridays** are held on the 2nd Friday monthly at 2 pm. Check the website for locations.

September: Chickens on the Farm

November: Kearney Goes to War, 1941

October: Jelly Making of Long Ago with

December: Christmas Traditions

Choke Cherries, Grapes, etc.

Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

PO Box 523, 710 W. 11th St., Kearney, NE 68848

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We hope you enjoy these stories about Buffalo County. We would love to have a stock pile of Buffalo Tales ready so they can go out in a more timely manner. Please submit your memories and stories to us by e-mailing them to bchs.buffalotales@hotmail.com or sending them to the post office box: BCHS, PO Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848.

We appreciate your support!

Director's Report

-The first Senior College Class will begin this Wednesday. We have 11 students enrolled. The first session will be a tour of the grounds. Subsequent sessions: Mardi Anderson will talk about the boom business of the 1890's, Elaine will do the remaining—Hotels, Watering Holes, Cafes and Grocery Stores. Phyllis Kantaras will help.

-I sent out a press release about the Lending Library Wagon's ribbon cutting, scheduled for Thursday, Sept 8 at 4 pm. Approximately 25 KCLC students will be present. Light refreshments are planned.

-The groundbreaking was on Thursday, Oct. 6 at 9 am. Everything went very well and we had about 70 in attendance. NTV did two live spots and filmed both Lance and I and we were on at least three additional times. The Kearney Hub was present and also did another fabulous story. Overall we have heard a lot of positive feedback.

-The Prairie Blacksmith Association had their Fall Conference here and it was well attended. The participants loved our facility.

-The Ghost Hunt was held on Friday, Oct. 7. We had ten paid participants.

-Jan Rodehorst is allowing us to have a free spot on the Kearney RV Park ad and she just doubled the size to allow us to have a larger ad—all for free!

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(Contact Trails & Rails Museum for more information on becoming an Engineer)

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.us@hotmail.com

Katherine Wielechowski, Editor

2016 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

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Supporting Membership	\$75.00

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Trails & Rails Museum

**Buffalo County Historical Society
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