

Buffalo Tales



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THE KAUFMANN & WERNERT STORE

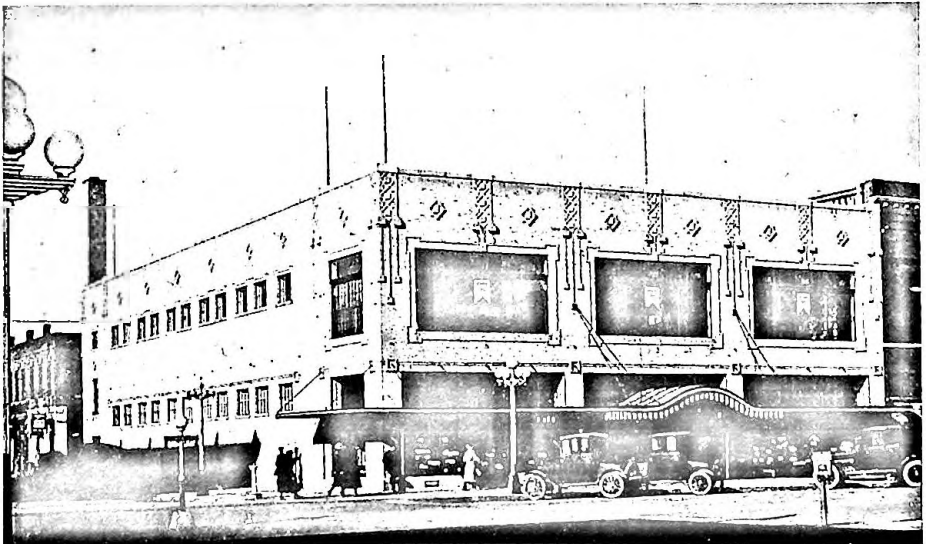
by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

"... a department store you wouldn't believe ... Kaufmann-Wernerts. On three floors, there is more merchandise than you normally find in a store ten times the size ... chances are they have what you're looking for, from cosmetics to washboards ... it is a shoppers' paradise. If you can't find what you need, you're just not trying very hard." This is how a visitor in late 1982 described Kearney's longtime Kaufmann & Wernert Store.

The story of the Kaufmann & Wernert Store in Kearney begins with the story of three men, David Kaufmann, Lawrence L. Wernert and Walter J. O'Connor. David Kaufmann was born in Germany in 1875. At age 28 he emigrated to New York City where he was employed in a wholesale house. The following year S. N. Wolbach was on a buying trip for his store in Grand Island. He offered him a job in the Wolbach department store, Kaufmann accepted, came to Grand Island and worked at Wolbach's for over two years.

Also employed at the store were Lawrence L. Wernert, a native of Evansville, Indiana, and Walter J. O'Connor, who had emigrated from England, and had also been employed in New York City before coming to Wolbach's as a buyer of silks and other dress goods.

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Kaufmann & Wernert Department Store, 2200-04 Central Avenue, 1922.

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
 - Supporting Membership \$25.00
- Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

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Trails & Rails Museum	706 West 11th Street	(308) 234-3041
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WITH THE SOCIETY

Don't forget that the Christmas Tree Walk will be December 2 through December 10, 1:00-5:00 p.m. each day, at Trails & Rails Museum. If you know of a club or group that would like to put up a tree, let us know as there are a few spots left.

A number of our members attended the annual meeting of the State Historical Society held September 23 in Kearney, the first time it had been held outside Lincoln. Many new and innovative ideas were picked up and shared with our Board at its last meeting, and we hope to make use of some of this knowledge as time goes on.

The State Society now has two people who will assist local societies. I had an opportunity to visit with Dr. Hanson and have a few ideas that the Board will pursue.

Fall Fun Day on September 17 was a beautiful day. The horseshoe tournament was a success; we had demonstrations and collections, a blacksmith, cannons from Fort Kearny, and music by Jim Cudaback all afternoon. Buggy rides by Keith Hilton were very popular with adults as well as children. He has donated his horse and buggy, as well as his time, at this event for two years. Thanks a lot, Keith.

Many first-time visitors helped to make a good crowd. Again, a big thanks to all the volunteers who spent the afternoon with the displays and in the buildings.

Forty-six members and guests traveled to DeSoto Wildlife Refuge & Visitor Center on Sunday, October 1. After some time at the Center, we returned to Fremont to ride the train to Hooper and back. After eating supper at "The Villager" a tired, happy group returned to Kearney.

A trip to the Colorado area is being investigated for the middle of June next year. More about this later.

The south part of the grounds at the Museum has been leveled and grass planted. Reseeding has been done in the area where the water line was extended.

Margaret Hohnholt, President

NEW BASIC MEMBER

Vince Robinson Wahrooga, NSW, Australia

These men, all young and single, lived at the same rooming house in Grand Island while working for the Wolbach store. After a couple of years, the three formed a partnership and started in business for themselves with the ambitious plan of creating a series of 5 and 10 Cent stores in central Nebraska.

The first store, established in July, 1906, was Kaufmann's 5 and 10 Cent Store in Grand Island. Kaufmann was the owner and manager and both Wernert and O'Connor worked in the store. After it was established, Kaufmann and Wernert in 1908 started the Kaufmann & Wernert 5 and 10 Cent Store in Kearney, with Wernert the resident owner and manager. In 1911, after the Kearney store was going well, a store was established in North Platte named the Kaufmann, Wernert & O'Connor 5 and 10 Cent Store, with O'Connor the resident owner and manager. In 1916 O'Connor bought out his partners, changed the name to W. J. O'Connor 5 and 10 Cent Store and became the sole owner and manager of a business that expanded into other O'Connor stores in North Platte and also in Cozad and Gothenburg.

Each of the three original stores was a successful and thriving business in its community for over fifty years. David Kaufmann, L. L. Wernert and W. J. O'Connor were not only successful entrepreneurs, but became influential leaders in their communities.

According to 95-year old William A. Reutlinger of Grand Island, who was associated with the store there for fifty years, there were at one time nine central Nebraska stores affiliated with Kaufmann's in Grand Island, including Kaufmann & Wernert's in Kearney. Reutlinger started work at Kaufmann's at age fourteen and became its manager at age seventeen. Fred Haack came from the Grand Island store with Wernert and within a few years was promoted to store manager, a position he held for forty years. Both Reutlinger and Haack as managers shared in the net profits of the business and were allowed to buy stock in their respective stores.

All store owners and managers went to market at least twice a year, purchasing in quantity, thereby giving them buying power to meet any kind of competition. Reutlinger recalls how they would buy huge supplies of candy in 30 lb. pails at 7¢ a pound and have it shipped to the Grand Island warehouse where it was divided among the various stores and sold for 10¢ a pound — a real bargain for the customer. The main floor of each 5 and 10 cent store featured the candy department front and center, the first counter to be seen as one entered the store, and the last to pass by as one left. Needless to say, candy was big business.

Also recalled by Reutlinger was the practice of buying new and unique items in quantity and having the order shipped out immediately. Competitors, especially chain stores, tested new products in a few of their own stores before buying. Consequently, the Kaufmann stores were first to offer new products and their customers liked that. Although each store in its early days was a 5 and 10 cent store, other departments were added over the years, but it was the 5 and dimes that were the most profitable. Of course, 5 and 10 cents became 5, 10 and 25 cents, and then "nothing over a dollar" as the buying power of the dollar decreased.

David Kaufmann had an outgoing personality, was friendly and sociable to everyone. He visited the store often. It is said that not only the store but the whole town knew when Mr. Kaufmann was coming to visit, and past employees admit they were on "pins and needles" on these occasions. In contrast, Lawrence Wernert was a quiet, modest man, always on the job, interested not only in his store, but in the promotion of downtown, in service to his church and to Good Samaritan Hospital. He was chairman in 1919 of the \$100,000 fund drive to build Good Samaritan Hospital, which was completed in 1924. Ron Cope, who was in the shoe store business in Kearney for nearly 50 years,

says of Mr. Wernert: "He was a gentleman, a marvelous business man, not just for the dollar standpoint, but for the fine person he was. In his quiet way he did a lot for Kearney and for Kearney's people in need. Most of his philanthropic deeds were never known."

One year after coming to Kearney, on February 18, 1909, Anna C. Rebhausen and Mr. Wernert were married in Platte County, Nebraska. Both lived the rest of their lives in Kearney. Mrs. Wernert to age 77; Mr. Wernert to age 94.

2010 Central Avenue was the location of the first Kaufmann & Wernert store. It was a small store. Three fulltime clerks handled the customers during the week, with high school girls' help on Saturday. Sewing thread and needles, lace, safety pins, candy, gum and crackerjack, lamp chimneys, children's mittens and stockings — all the small, but important, things everyone needed.

In July, 1912, the store moved to 2105-07 Central Avenue, a building with twice the street frontage and two stories high. Two weeks after the opening of the larger 5 and 10 cent store, Kaufmann & Wernert opened a ladies' clothing store on the second floor named the Kearney Ladies Outfitting Co. Later a beauty shop was added. The additional floor space enabled the store to handle a greater variety of merchandise.

When F. G. Keens completed the two-story business building at 2206-08 Central Avenue in 1916, Kaufmann and Wernert rented the first floor, moved in their Ladies Outfitting Store, and opened a new store named the Kaufmann & Wernert Department Store. Besides ladies' ready-to-wear this store added other departments, such as piece goods, hosiery, cosmetics, men's socks, ties and handkerchiefs, and some children's clothing. The 5 and 10 cent store continued business at 2105-07 Central until 1922.



Interior of senior department store, 1922-1933.

In 1922 a fine, modern two-story building of light-colored brick was completed on the corner of 22nd Street and Central Avenue, next door south of the department store. It also was built by F. G. Keens and became the fourth and final location of Kaufmann & Wemert stores in Kearney. The architecture of the new building was characteristic of post-World War I with flat roof, uniform wall surface and modest ornamentation. The interior of the store was most impressive. \$80,000 was spent on fixtures alone, all of the finest material and latest design, making it a real "uptown" store. This would be the Kaufmann & Wemert senior department store, and everyone who remembers it tells what a grand store it was. The best quality of ladies' and children's ready-to-wear was offered, along with hats, lovely yard goods, fine jewelry and accessories, china and glassware, domestics, and a complete baby department, to name a few. There was a cafeteria on the second floor in the southwest corner. On the mezzanine floor the business offices were to the north; Mr. Wemert's office, the alterations department, and the employees' cloakroom were to the south. A large public restroom was located in the southeast corner of the second floor.

With the opening of the new department store, the 5 and 10 Cent Store was moved into the first floor of the store next door at 2206-08 Central. A wide opening was made on the first floor connecting the two stores. The second floor was added to the store — the 5 and 10 on the first floor, and a "budget" department store upstairs. In addition to the merchandise already carried, additional counters were added for groceries, tapestries, sheet music and records, needlecraft, and some items of hardware. There was also a public restroom on the second floor of this store.

These two stores, side by side, located in the hub of downtown Kearney, made Kaufmann & Wemert's one of the most important retail names in the state of Nebraska.

In 1933 when the economic depression and the dust bowl era hit the area, both stores were consolidated into the new corner store. Vera Bauers Hanneman worked for Kaufmann & Wemert from 1929 to 1939 and was there when the two stores were combined. She was first in the grocery department on the second floor of the older store, and later in charge of the needlework counter of that store and in the new store after the merger.

Needlecraft was popular then, as now, and the store carried a full supply of embroidery floss, crochet threads, and yarns, in every shade of every color, also needlework patterns, quilt pieces, and the tools and equipment women needed for their needlework. When the department was moved to the new store, Mrs. Hanneman said that Mr. Wemert was very particular in choosing its location, placing it under the skylight on the second floor so the customer could match colors, threads, and dye lots under natural light. One drawback to this location in the "dirty thirties", she said, was the dust that sifted in from the skylight and down over the merchandise.

The store operation continued in the corner location from 1933 to 1953, when, on June 1, L. L. Wemert sold the Kaufmann & Wemert store to Sid and Jake Hellman, brothers who had been employed by Hested's stores for many years.

Sid Hellman had been with Hested's for twenty-five years, was manager in Hastings for seven years, district manager for five years, and in the main office at Fairbury for two years. Jake Hellman had been with Hested's for twenty-three years, was manager in Grand Island for fifteen years. In assuming operation of the store they stated that the store would continue under the name of Kaufmann & Wemert, and that no major changes in personnel was contemplated. Indeed, the Hellmans continued operation of the store with few changes. They knew the importance and the necessity of making sure the store always had the items customers wanted, especially with Kearney the nucleus of a large trade area.

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One change in operation was to a self-serve system. Before, each aisle had a register where purchases were paid for, wrapped and sacked. With self-service, customers made their own selections, bringing items of merchandise to a checkout counter where cashiers took care of all the customer's purchases. There were always employees on the floor to help a customer if an item was not on hand, or not what the customer wanted. One of the joys of shopping Kaufmann & Wernert's was the willingness of the store operators to make special orders without charging extra for doing so.

On November 2, 1960, fire gutted the basement of the store causing smoke and water damage throughout the building. The Hellmans promised to be back in business "bigger and better than ever, as quickly as possible," and they were.

One of the changes brought about in the renovation after the fire was a new fountain-luncheonette which served shoppers and downtown office workers alike for noon lunches, morning and afternoon refreshment. Another change was becoming a part of the True Value Hardware Stores, enabling them to buy in greater quantity and at a better price.

The Hellmans not only operated a fine store, but played a leading role in community affairs. John J. Morrissey, general manager of the store from 1956 until the store was sold in 1985, says of the Hellmans: "They were great merchandisers, making every effort to be sure the store always had the items customers wanted. Both Sid and Jake Hellman were community-spirited citizens, giving a tremendous amount of funds and time to the community. They worked in the Chamber of Commerce, with Kearney State College, and on the United Fund. As employers they treated their employees right."

The Hellmans sold the store on August 1, 1985 to Joseph F. Burke Corporation of Council Bluffs, Iowa. The new owners redecorated, rearranged the store, closed some departments, taking out of stock much of the old merchandise which had kept customers coming back again and again. The changed mode of merchandising probably brought about the beginning of the end, helped along perhaps by the exodus of downtown shoppers to the new Hilltop Mall. The store closed in July, 1988.

There are many who remember Kaufmann & Wernert's as the center of Kearney's downtown world. It is a memory of how good things really were in the eighty years of the store's operation.

SOURCES

Personal and telephone interviews with Wm. A. Reutlinger, Sid Hellman, Jake Hellman, John J. Morrissey, Ron Cope, Dick Cepel, Vera Hanneman, Ruth Anderson, Mabel Lade, Opal Merryman; Correspondence from North Platte Public Library, Grace Mae Egle, County Clerk of Platte County; Newspaper clippings (undated) from *Kearney Daily Hub* and *Grand Island Independent: History of Lincoln County*.