



Buffalo Tales



Volume 15, No. 4

Buffalo County Historical Society

July-August, 1992

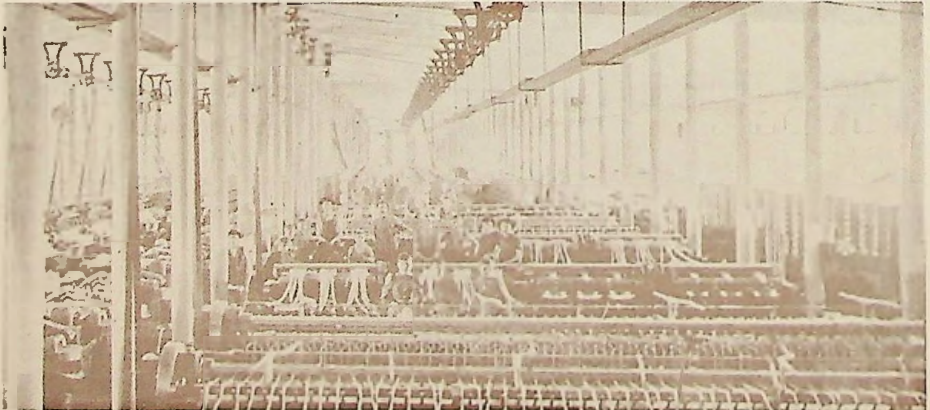
INDUSTRIAL BOOM REACHES ITS ZENITH

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

The completion of the Kearney Canal in 1886 started an industrial boom of unusual proportions in the city of Kearney with new factories, new business houses, new homes and new people. For five years, through 1890, everything pointed to a "bigger, better, more promising tomorrow." (*Buffalo Tales*, January 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991).

A review of the local press of early 1891—there were five newspapers in Kearney then—reveals for the first time some talk of hard times coming. The state was experiencing an economic depression but Kearney had so far felt no repercussions. There must have been a feeling of discouragement by some, however. Early in February 1891 a meeting of more than sixty leading businessmen was held at City Hall to assess the situation. All present were agreed that Kearney's future was secure, that the depression talked about was largely imaginary, and that their role as promoters of Kearney's great future was to "keep the ball rolling" and to "kick the kickers." The *Kearney Weekly Hub* reported that easterners were still investigating the merits of investing in the city, that there "has never been a time since the *Hub* started when there were so many subscriptions for the paper from persons in the east." Augustus Frank II, returning from a trip to New York, was quoted on Kearney's future that "prospects never looked better."

In March the Kearney Real Estate Exchange was organized and a monthly paper, *The Kearney Gait*, was sent out in all directions to promote Kearney. The first issue pointed out that the "Kearney Gait" as an expression originated in Kearney and represented what was progressive in the city's growth. The *Kearney Gait* gave this city "the cotton mill, the Kearney & Black Hills Railroad, the electric road, a free public library, a water power—the finest in the state, electric lights, both arc and incandescent; city water, sewerage, free delivery, schools among the best in the west, a magnificent opera house, an Episcopal College, and other improvements aggregating over two million



Card Room of Kearney Cotton Mill

WITH THE SOCIETY

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT

It is hard to believe that summer is nearing an end. But, what a summer it has been. Your Society has been busy with a full schedule of meetings ranging from the Wagons West Celebration, the usual Board of Directors' meetings, and planning sessions for locating a new carriage and wagon shed to house wagons, carts, etc.

I would like to say a special "Thank You" to Merlin Burgland for taking charge of a special project on which he has worked diligently over the past year. The Mormon handcart is now completed and ready for display. It is absolutely beautiful in all its simplicity and quality of workmanship. It will be displayed soon so be sure to come by and see this treasure. Thanks, Merlin.

In addition to the cart, the exterior of the 1860's log cabin is also now completed, and the grounds around it seeded to buffalo grass. Under the capable hands and skills of Glen Wisch, Merlin Burgland and several dedicated volunteers with "know-how", the log cabin is our newest source of pride among the buildings on the museum grounds.

On this subject, I would like to inform you that on August 9, at 2:00 p.m., a dedication of the cabin will take place at the Trails & Rails Museum. Mrs. Mary Snow, who donated the cabin to our facility as a memorial to her brother, will be our special guest of honor. Please mark your calendar and make plans to attend.

On one last note, I would like to invite THINKERS in our Society to join a committee who will begin developing fund-raisers and meet the challenges of writing grants. This committee will be an exciting mind-tickler, to say the least. Please call me for more information at 236-6319. I think you will find it very exhilarating.

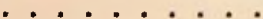
Until later.

Susan C. Lynch, President



Summer Museum Director Margaret Hohnholt reports that visitors and donations at the Trails & Rails Museum are running ahead of last year. Green shades have now been installed in the school house, thanks to a donation from Philip S. Holmgren.

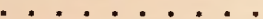
On the Museum's Wish List are a new flag for the flagpole, steel file, and an electric typewriter.



MEMORIAL GIFTS have been received:

In memory of Helen Middleton, from Dr. R. L. Link

In memory of Helen Dobesh, from Dr. R. L. Link



"RAISE THE ROOF" donation for shingles has been received from Emma Jane Wilder.



NEW ANNUAL MEMBERS

Supporting

Horace Dannehl Riverdale

Basic

- Mr. and Mrs. Wm. M. Nelson Kearney
- Barbara Larson Kearney
- Gene Beerbohn Kearney
- Lola Mast Gibbon
- Avnelle Lauer Gibbon
- Mrs. D. C. Kilbourn Kent, WA
- Dr. Beverly G. Merrick Statesboro, GA

dollars in the last two years." In September a new Kearney booklet was published and 15,000 copies distributed. It stated that "thirteen stock companies are in active business," plus seven banks; also that "eighteen doctors look after our health, but owing to our climate, several of them have lots of vacation."

Kearney forged ahead during 1891 and 1892, and into 1893, completing already-started projects and initiating a few new ones. The new Union Pacific depot was opened in February 1891. Constructed of "Kearney pressed brick, trimmed with Fort Collins red sandstone," a roof of Cortright patent metallic shingles, fire and weather-proof, with a 12 foot cupola, it was said to be the finest depot between Omaha and Cheyenne. Moving the location from the east side of Central Avenue to the west side necessitated tearing down George Downing's elevators and relocating his coal and lumber business.

The United Brethren Church at 25th Street and Avenue D was completed and dedicated February 20, 1891, and the Swedish Lutheran Church at Avenue C and 19th Street was dedicated on September 27, 1892, although the building had been completed eight years earlier.

Assurance of the new Episcopal College and its campus location at East Lawn was announced in March of 1891 by Bishop A. R. Graves. The *Weekly Hub* of November 29 reported that "The first spadeful of dirt was thrown up Saturday at the site of the Episcopal College at East Lawn, and excavation will continue until Kearney Hall . . . (is) completed." The contract was awarded to Richard Hibberd, with completion date of July 1892. Hibberd was also awarded a contract for the erection of two dormitories, and an agreement was made between Bishop Graves and Professor C. A. Murch "whereby Professor Murch will take charge of the school when it opens, and will close his Midway College of Business." The new college was named the Platte Institute and would be opened to students September 6, 1892.

The opening of the Kearney Opera House on May 1, 1891, was a highlight of the period. The citizens had felt a need for such a facility, and in March of 1890 a committee was appointed to plan it. A company was formed and incorporated under the name of Kearney Opera House Company. W. A. Downing was president; Homer J. Allen, vice-president; John J. Osborn, secretary and W. C. Tillson, treasurer. The southwest corner of the intersection of Central Avenue and 21st Street was the chosen site. The building was designed by J. B. McElpatrick & Son of St. Louis, and contract for construction was awarded to Richards & Company of Omaha with J. A. Archibald of Kearney supervisor of construction. The contract was let on July 30, 1890 and the building was completed and opened for its first performance on May 1, 1891.

It was indeed a showplace. (*Buffalo Tales*, September 1986). The theater had a seating capacity of 1200, all with an unobstructed view of the stage, and the acoustics were said to be perfect. The building was lighted by electricity, but planners, apparently not too confident of the city's electric system, also installed a complete gas lighting system. The theater area did not take up the entire space in the building. The Kearney National Bank, a department store, grocery store, barbershop, tavern and some 45 offices, plus clubrooms for social organizations, operated within the building.

The opening performance was "Mr. Barnes of New York," with the original Broadway cast of 28 and original scenic effects. As described in the May 2 edition of the *Kearney Daily Hub*:

Before eight o'clock the opera house corner was the most animated spot in Kearney. A large crowd had gathered to watch the first audience enter the broad door and go up the marble steps . . . Carriages could be seen hurrying hither and thither, and as it grew dark, the throng of ladies and gentlemen in evening dress alighted beneath the electric light that but half

revealed the beauty of their costumes . . . At 8:28 the Midway Orchestra struck up the overture. Suddenly the lights flashed on in their full splendor. There was a hush of expectancy—then the magnificent drop curtain fell and its richness and beauty were revealed by the footlights.

Among the opening dignitaries present were Governor James E. Boyd, Secretary of State James E. Allen, State Treasurer John E. Hill, Commissioner George Humphrey and Labor Commissioner Andres. Choice box seats were also occupied by the building contractor, the scenic artists and members of the Opera House Company and their wives.

A new fairgrounds, named Downing Field, was built for the 1891 county fair. Since no fair was held the previous year a big fair was anticipated. Harvest excursionists from Chicago were expected to visit the new buildings and the one-mile race track, according to the *Hub*.

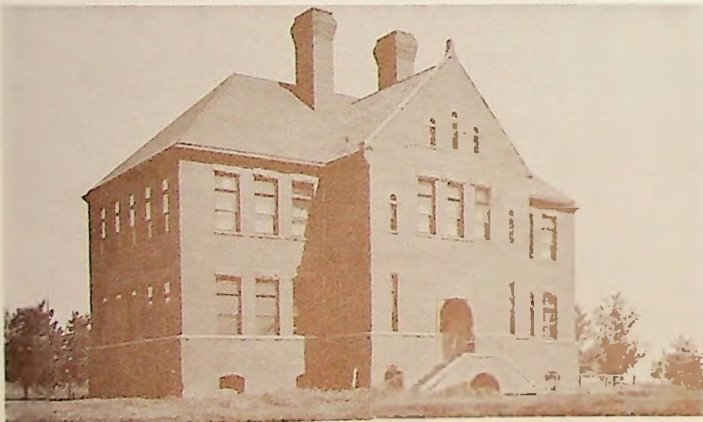
W. W. Kuhn of Winona, Minnesota opened an iron works late in 1891, which later became the Kearney Plow Factory. And on February 4, 1892, the Kearney Oat Meal Mill opened, "close by the Union Pacific tracks, $\frac{3}{4}$ mile east of City Hall." It was a $3\frac{1}{2}$ story frame structure capable of manufacturing 75 to 100 barrels a day.

The new Midway Hotel opened in 1893. The same year three new schools planned in 1890 became a reality. Longfellow High School was ready for occupancy July 1. First Ward Alcott opened January 1, and Fourth Ward Hawthorne was completed July 15. Kearney architect Frank Bailey designed the schools, and contracts for their construction were let to Richard Hibberd.

The crowning achievement of the industrial boom, however, was the Kearney Cotton Mill. It was the first cotton mill west of the Missouri River, unique in its location so far from the cotton fields of the south, or the milling operations on the waterways east. The cotton would be shipped from the south by boat to Plattsmouth, then by rail to Kearney, and the finished product shipped out by rail, most of it to the west coast.

The *Kearney Enterprise* in July, 1889, published a Cotton Mill Extra. In it is the story of how Kearney gained the cotton mill:

"It was Mr. Frank (who) first presented the advantage of Kearney to the largest cotton manufacturers in America—the Cumnocks." They were at first skeptical, but Mr. Frank said, "Come and see." So they came. The December 1888 excursion arrived in Kearney and the welcome the citizens gave opened the way for a satisfactory



Hawthorne School, 35th Street between Central and Avenue A.
Alcott School on Avenue M between 16th and 17th Streets was identical.

verdict. They went away pleased, satisfied but not certain. The 1st of June the Messrs. Cummnock returned, bringing with them their engineer, T. G. Jameson. "For days our people were in suspense." Then on the evening of June 10 they made a definite proposition which called for a subsidy of \$250,000, a mill site of 20 acres, free water power for five years and exemption from taxation for ten years. They in turn agreed to build, equip and operate a mill 400 ft. long, 100 ft. wide, and two stories high, with a capacity of 15,000 spindles.

"The citizens united almost to a man," and then came four hard weeks of raising the subsidy. C. H. Elmendorf announced that the George W. Frank Improvement Company would give \$50,000 in property, and the West Kearney Improvement Company \$30,000 in property and \$20,000 in cash. A large number of prominent citizens expressed themselves as favorable to the project. On June 13 the subscription had raised \$112,000. The next day was set apart for Cotton Mill Day. Soon after 9:00 o'clock the committee set forth from the Midway Hotel in carriages decorated with bunches of cotton, and wearing badges of pink and white cotton in their buttonholes. Two days later the total had risen to \$181,000.

The committee agreed that more dollars could not be raised until the question of location was settled. On July 2 it was announced that the site would be in the northwestern corner of West Kearney above Echo Lake. Late in the afternoon of July 6 a total of \$245,250 had been subscribed. After a meeting of the trustees of the fund it was reported that the sum had been raised. "There was one long-drawn breath of relief and then Kearney celebrated: bells, cannon, fireworks, music and more."

The Cummnocks later required that 50 neat and comfortable cottages to cost not less than \$1000 each would be needed. They would not allow the introduction of the eastern tenement house system, but wanted to see that the families of employees lived in healthful, uncrowded and comfortable homes. Not less than 2500 people would be added to Kearney's population when the mill was in operation.

In a letter dated May 9, 1973, Mary J. Adams of Aurora, Illinois, wrote about West Kearney and the cotton mill: "There were 30 or 40 four-family flats, one grocery store, the school, a large lake, a canal that was used to operate the mill substation. 80 years ago the Adams family immigrated from Austria to West Kearney to work in the mill and send the three children to school to learn the American ways and speak the English language. I was 11 years old."

The mill opened in the spring of 1892 and the first shipment of 76,000



Kearney Oat Meal Mill

yards of cotton cloth was shipped to points in Iowa, Kansas and Missouri on September 22, 1892. The mill operated until 1901. It was generally agreed that the principal factor in the failure of the mill was the lack of a cheap source of labor. The mill was subjected to a constant turnover of discontented, homesick help. It was said that a foreman might bring with him a crew of laborers, all of whom would leave with him when the foreman moved on.

Planned for 1894 but never completed were "the greatest bicycle factory in the world," Dr. Dietrich's sanitarium, enlargement of the Midway Hotel, a belt line of the electric railway and four new railroads. The national economic depression had reached Kearney, and along with it a season of drought and grasshoppers. It brought the ending of the industrial boom, and the let-down affected Kearney for years to come.

SOURCES

Maud Marston Burrows, "The Kearney Boom", *Nebraska History Magazine*, Vol. 18, No. 2; Charles Jenkins, "Kearney Cotton Mill", *Nebraska History Magazine*, Vol. 38, No. 3; *Kearney Enterprise*, July 1889; *Platte Valley Tribune*, April 23, 1939; Carlin, *End of an Era*, 1954; *Kearney Centennial Booklet*, 1973; Letter from Mary J. Adams, May 9, 1973; *Kearney Daily Hub*, February 9, 27, 12, 23, March 12, May 2, June 11, 19, August 6, September 10, November 12, 25, 26, 29, December 17, 1891, September 22, October 24, 1892, December 13, 1893, June 7, 1948.

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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Term expiring June 1, 1993: Alice Howell, Elmer Holzrichter, Susan C. Lynch, all of Kearney; Viola Livingston of Gibbon.
 Term expiring June 1, 1994: Howard Kolbo, Mard Anderson, Lois Rahmann, all of Kearney; Jim Cudaback of Fiveland.
 Term expiring June 1, 1995: Glen Wisch, Philip Holmgren, Larry Nansel, all of Kearney; Floretta Sullwold of Elm Creek.

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