



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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LOOKING BACK ON KEARNEY'S ANNIVERSARIES PART II

by Margaret Stines Nielsen

The twenties brought a number of new developments to Kearney, beginning with the opening of a new hospital. The Good Samaritan Hospital, under the auspices of the Catholic Church, was dedicated on July 23, 1924. St. Lukes Hospital, which had been operated by the Episcopal Church since 1912, closed its doors soon afterwards.¹

The first airfield was Auxiliary Field east of the Military School. Birdsall Field, south of the Platte River bridge, was popular with flyers during the twenties and thirties. F.G. Keens Field, funded by W.P.A. and the city was dedicated on April 24, 1942 and taken over by the Federal Government on September fifth.

The twenties roared to a sudden halt with the Wall Street crash of November, 1929.

The Wall Street crash had little effect on Kearney for the first year or two. Chamber of Commerce releases were optimistic with several projects in the making. But by 1932, there was much unemployment. The county and city were trying to meet the need. The Red Cross issued cloth to the needy for use in making garments. Food distributions were announced.

With the New Deal came "make work" projects as well as permanent benefits for the city and assistance for farmers. Structures partly funded by PWA were a new city



Centennial Queen JoAnne (Mrs. Douglas) Jones

WITH THE SOCIETY

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:

The Board of Directors of the Historical Society has been busy this winter and spring trying to put together plans for the new building at the Trails and Rails Museum. They have contacted a local contractor who has provided an estimated cost for an 80x90 ft. building with unfinished second floor at approximately \$640,000. With this much done we feel it is time to get started with raising the money so construction can begin in the very near future. We are looking for someone to step forward to spearhead the fundraising drive.

My six years as a member of the Board will expire on May 31st. The last three years I have served as your president and have enjoyed working with all of you.

I do want to thank everyone who I have worked with the past 6 years.

We can all be proud of the accomplishments of the Buffalo County Historical Society and the Trails and Rails Museum thanks to your volunteer help.

Larry Nansel, President

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Directors elected to 3-year terms at the Annual Meeting April 19, 1998 are Janeen Vokoun, Ed Anderson, Wilma Larson and Lana Stickney.

“Wagons West”

June 6, 1998

10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Featuring: Kearney Businesses of the Past.

Food will be available on the grounds.

MEMORIAL GIFTS RECEIVED:

Floretta Sullwold in memory of Kenneth Holsten.

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NEW BASIC MEMBERS

Tami Hellman, Kearney

Marian Brown, Kearney

Gary and Lana Stickney, Kearney

hall, swimming pool and sonatorium at Harmon Park, Men's Hall, Kenwood School and the high school stadium. In 1939, there were still 780 individuals and 796 families receiving some form of government assistance. Kearney, with three state institutions, fared better than many towns but it would take a war to solve the unemployment problem.

Ask a group of seniors what they remember about the depression and their first response is "the dust storms." With corn at thirteen cents a bushel, the farmers were already in desperate straits but the drouth of 1933 and 1934 meant not only the loss of crops but the effect the dust storms had on everyone. Marian Brown described "black skies with angry clouds boiling over the sun—a dust storm coming up from Oklahoma and Kansas." The teachers at Emerson School told the pupils "to run for home and we did! ... Mother was there waiting, covering the windows with wet towels to let the air in but keep the oppressive dust out."² Margaret "Tancie" Martin remembers keeping a damp cloth over the crib of her new born daughter, Patty.

December 7, 1941 had been a quiet Sunday but left the nation in a state of shock. The news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor spread quickly in Kearney, even emptying the movie theaters. People gathered around radio sets. Telephones were flooded as Kearneyites tried to learn the fate of loved ones. Monday's *HUB* headlined the attack and the Declaration of War. One article reported that Jack McBride, son of Mr. and Mrs. J.W. McBride, went down on board the Oklahoma. Other deaths were soon confirmed as the nation girded itself for war.

Men volunteered or were drafted and women went to work to take their places. Mayor Ivan Mattson appointed a county Defense Committee. The county War Price and Rationing Board later presided over items rationed or in short supply. War bond auctions, scrap drives, blackouts and victory gardens became a way of life.

On September 5, 1942, the army took over F.G. Keens Field and condemned 2,227.5 acres. Construction began soon after. Housing was an immediate problem as garages, attics and basements were made available. The Military Academy was opened to both civilian and military personnel.³

Harold Oldfather was named chairman of the Kearney Recreation Committee which



1973 Kearney Centennial Commission

raised over \$10,000 to provide a hospitality center for the incoming military. A USO hostess corps was organized with Mrs. Horace Cary as chairman. Young, single women who acted as hostesses were subject to strict rules when they attended dances at the base. The corps also staffed the canteen at the base which provided snacks and coffee.

The Gray Ladies, under the chairmanship of Mrs. H.L. Blackledge, visited the base hospital in groups of four assuring that every patient received a daily visit. In addition to morale building, they distributed literature, wrote letters, shopped or helped with recreation and crafts.

A recreational facility was provided for Negroes at 2220 Avenue A. Harold Oldfather and his vice chairman, Sid Sidner, pushed this project to completion even serving as bartenders until a staff was hired. The 1733 swimming pool was made available to Negro troops.

After the war, the base was home to the Eighth Air Force's 27th Fighter Wing. By 1948, the base was considered substandard by the military because of inadequate housing and a lack of funding. In spite of the efforts of local business men, the base was declared excess in 1949.

When the war was over and building materials became available, Kearney began to fill a long felt need for housing. The Nebraska State Teachers College at Kearney was soon bulging at the seams as the G.I. Bill went into effect. The first housing for married students consisted of veterans' units moved from Geneva to a site west of Men's Hall. Other dormitories, classroom buildings and Cushing Coliseum improved the appearance and efficiency of the campus.

Young businessmen had formed a Junior Chamber of Commerce and were enthusiastic supporters of the Diamond Jubilee in 1948. Men were required to wear beards or mustaches and those who didn't were dunked in a horse tank; a kangaroo court meted out justice to other offenders. A Jubilee Queen was chosen at the Jaycee Follies.

On May 5th, President Harry Truman came to Kearney on his whistle stop campaign. He attended church at the First Baptist Church on 22nd and 4th Avenue. Returning to the train, he addressed the crowd and signed the guestbook of the Breakfast Club. On June 10th, the first night of the official celebration, Marilyn Fuller (Belschner) was crowned queen and a free street dance was sponsored by the Elks. On Tuesday, a whisker contest was judged by Ed Miller and other barbers. Governor Val Peterson was guest at a luncheon following which he was speaker at a cornerstone laying for



Original J.A. Baldwin Mfg. Plant

the new Consumer's Public Power building. A Cavalcade of Kearney was held the next three nights. It featured street scenes, three squares of square dancing and many horses from Kearney and surrounding towns. The Diamond Jubilee parade was held on Saturday with Guy N. Henninger as marshal.

After the airbase was returned to Kearney, it became a boon for the city. J.A. Baldwin was the first to take advantage of the base's potential for industry moving into a building on the field in 1953. Others soon followed. Development of the location continues today.

The old landmarks were coming down in the name of progress. The Opera House was the first to go, in 1954. Upkeep on the old building far outweighed income from the few tenants. Payne-Larsen Furniture and ITI Marketing Services occupy the space today. The Midway Hotel was razed in 1967. That space is now occupied by Grand Central IGA. The Administration Building at the college was torn down in 1968 to make room for Founder's Hall. A spectacular Christmas night fire in 1969 destroyed the First Methodist Church. A new fire station was built on the site with the former Fellowship Hall used for offices and sleeping quarters. The new church crowns the hill on Linden Drive. The new Kearney High was completed in 1960 but old Longfellow High stood watch until 1969.

The sixties brought the medical development which continues to make Kearney one of the most outstanding medical centers in the state. With completion of the overpass on 2nd Avenue, motels began to spring up, in turn leading to one of our chief industries—conventions and tourism.

The Centennial brought a flurry of events presided over by a committee with Dr. Philip S. Holmgren as president; Kent Stadler, vice president; Jane Smith, secretary and John G. Lowe III, treasurer. A long list of volunteers reached into the organizations who provided an even longer list of workers. Cotton print dresses and sunbonnets were sold along with Centennial dollars designed by A. J. Pierce. A committee comprised of Phil Holmgren, Alice Howell, Catharine Bahnsen and Chandler Lunch III produced a souvenir booklet which was a mini-history of Kearney. The contest for Centennial Queen was open to all Kearney women. Votes were based on the contestant who sold the most tickets for the Spectacular. Jo Anne Jones (Mrs. Douglas) was crowned queen.

The celebration ran from May 25th through the 30th with each day a recognition of a different phase of Kearney life ranging from Salute to Young America to Church Day. The Spectacular *ONE HUNDRED YEARS YOUNG* was produced each night at the college stadium. Other high points were the parade, burial of a time capsule in Centennial Park with the DAR in charge and Ladies' Day at the Frank House. Clubwomen had cleaned the old house and appealed to Kearneyites to loan their furniture and other treasures to decorate the home as it was in the nineties. A style show was held and pioneer families were honored.

Looking back at changes of the past twenty-five years, who can predict what the next millenium will bring?

NOTES

1. The Women's Christian Temperance Union started the first hospital in Kearney in 1893.
2. Marian Brown, *Hub*, 5-28, 29-98.
3. Alice Howell, *Tales of Buffalo County*, Vol. V.

SOURCES

Tales of Buffalo County, Vols. I-V, *Kearney Daily Hub*.
In the World War-1917-19; Souvenir Booklet the 100th Anniversary; Hub, As It Was; Bonnie Bernholtz, How It All Began; Dr. Philip S. Holmgren, Kearney State College, 1905-1980; Jo Anne (Mrs. Douglas) Jones, scrapbook loaned by Barb Reidy; interview with Margaret "Tancie" Martin.

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- Basic Membership \$15.00
- Institutional Membership \$20.00
- Supporting Membership \$30.00 +

Life memberships are \$150.00 for an individual; \$200.00 husband and wife.

Directors

Term expiring June 1, 1998: Merlin Burgland, Larry Nansel, Janeen Vokoun, Jerry Ilt.

Term expiring June 1, 1999: Wilma Harder, Helen Kinnaman, Margaret Hohnholt, Mark Hadenfeldt.

Term expiring June 1, 2000: Minnette Steinbrink, Susan Underhill, Pauline Wells, Dale Wright.

Officers (1 year term)

- President Larry Nansel
- Vice-President Mark Hadenfeldt
- Secretary Janeen Vokoun
- Treasurer (to be appointed)

TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM

We are just completing 8 full days of Living History with all fourth graders in the Kearney Public Schools — one or two schools each day. They arrive at 8:30 a.m. and leave at 2:30 p.m. They do special projects in each building plus a history lesson on each building, (dipping candles, writing with ink and quill pens, rope making, frontier games, etc.) Volunteers have helped at all stations. They have a lunch of beef stew, cornbread, cherry cake and lemonade.

During May, we have about 15 rural and city schools from surrounding areas. We will open officially on Memorial Day Weekend, with regular hours. We will have special displays in all of the buildings.

— Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

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

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