

# Buffalo Tales

March/April 2014

## Stage Coach lines

By Mardi Anderson

**Western Stage Company** The history of Buffalo County is rich with stories of the many transportation routes along the Great Platte River Road. There was the Mormon Trail, the Union Pacific and Burlington & Missouri River Railroads, the Lincoln Highway which became Highway 30, Interstate 80, even airplanes flying overhead. But one other mode of transportation has received very little attention – the stagecoach. The stagecoach served a dual purpose. Passengers could move faster from one place to another than by wagon train and the stagecoach carried mail to places along its route.

On September 13, 1860 Joseph Johnson reported in his *Huntsman's Echo at Wood River Center* that:

*"The people of the Pike's Peak mining district, together with all concerned, will be pleased to learn that after being swindled, gouged, imposed upon, and literally robbed in the matter of mail facilities and service, by that arch-monopoly, Jones, Russell & Co., for nearly two years they are now provided by the department, at American rates, a mail from Omaha, by this place and Fort Kearney, once a week and back. The Western Stage Company, the most punctual, accommodating and reliable in mail service, has the contract and have already sent out one mail." (1)*

In fact the stagecoach had made a record trip from Fort Kearney to Omaha in thirty-three hours carrying six passengers.

Once a week the stagecoach ran along the north side of the Platte River from Omaha, through Wood River Center, to present day Buda. There it crossed the Platte to Ft. Kearny. Here the Western Stage met the Overland Stage from Atchison, Kansas, which went to the west coast. This route is believed to have been the first mail route established through Buffalo County.

The stagecoaches used by the Western Stage Company came from the Downing & Abbott Co. in Concord, New Hampshire. Each of these coaches weighed about 2,700 pounds. They cost between \$775 and \$1,250.

Kearney was a hub for local stagecoach routes almost as soon as it was founded. First came a stage route north out of Kearney to Loup City and another south to Republican City. Then a third route went up the Wood River to Armada and north into Custer County. By 1884 there were five stagecoach routes out of Kearney.

**Loup City Route** north out of Kearney—Kearney had been in existence for barely two years when Nick Harris of Grand Island started a private stage line for travelers in February 1874. He was subsidized by a bonus of \$70 per month paid by Loup City and Kearney. His stage ran about six weeks and then was bought out by F. E. Rosseter. Rosseter ran the route until the bridges on the Sweetwater and other area streams were washed away. Then he abandoned the route.

A stage mail route was established the following year by John Dryden & H. B. Andrews. They started out with a mail wagon after securing a contract from the Star Route contractor. John Dryden was 19 at the time. His family had just settled in Custer County. As Dryden remembered in later years

*"In the fall of 1875, having nothing else to do, I came to Kearney Junction (as everybody called it then) to seek work....George Hulbert was then proprietor of a stage line plying between Kearney and Republican City. I greatly admired the stage coach and soon had a Star Route of my own extending from Kearney north to Loup City and west for sixty miles to New Helena, our home post office. I had to ford the Loup River, a considerable stream, at Douglas Grove near the present town of Comstock. I could not afford a stage coach but a democratic wagon purchased from John D. Seaman propelled by a couple of wild broncos made a respectable outfit, and enabled me to make the round trip in six days."* (2)



John N. Dryden

The partners carried mail, passengers, express and freight on this weekly route. They sold the business to C.H.Finch 1877. John Dryden was now a student at the Gibbon Academy, an educational

journey which would result in his being admitted to the bar in 1886 and becoming a prominent attorney in Kearney.

Finch operated the Kearney to Loup City stage line for nine years until June 1887 when the Union Pacific spur line to Loup City was completed. During the time it was in operation there was a daily, except Sunday, stagecoach north to Loup City and all points in the Upper Loup Valley. It would leave at 7 a.m. and return by 6 p.m.

At first the route went straight north from Kearney to More's Ranch and McGee's Ranch, near present day Sweetwater, before leaving the county. Later the route changed to veer eastward making stops in Buffalo County at Prairie Center, Majors, Beaver Creek (later renamed Ravenna) and Sweetwater before going into Sherman County. It cost \$2 to ride the stage from Kearney to the McGee Ranch.

**Republican Valley Route** south out of Kearney – George Hulbert had the first stage coach route south to Republican City in 1875. By 1884 this stage went south to all points in the Republican Valley on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays; returning on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. A year later the route split with one stage going to Bloomington and points south on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. The other went to Alma and then southwest, leaving Kearney at 7 a.m. on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.

**Broken Bow Route** northwest out of Kearney – This route began as a Monday and Thursday stage up the Wood River through Huntville, and Armada, to New Helena in Custer County. Within a year the route was ending in Broken Bow and was running daily except Sundays. As towns sprang up, died or moved, the route passed through Riverdale, Stanley, Greendale, Armada, Guernsey and Georgetown, on its way to Broken Bow. The stage left Kearney at 6:00 a.m. and got back into town at 7:00 p.m. A way station for changing teams was located on a hilltop about three miles northwest of present day Miller. From here the stage dropped down north into the valley in Custer County on its way to



Concord Stage used by  
Western Stage Co.

Georgetown.

**Holdrege Route** southwest out of Kearney – This route was operated by the Pioneer Stage Lines. The company had its headquarters in the Grand Central Hotel at Railroad and Nebraska Street, now Ave.

A. At first this stage left Kearney on Tuesdays and Thursdays for Watson, Williamsburg, Fort Hays and northwestern Kansas. Then it expanded to daily runs, except for Sundays, leaving at 8 a.m. Later the route went through Frank, Fraser, Williamsburg, and Phelps in Phelps County before reaching Holdrege. By then it was back to Tuesday, Thursday, 7:00 a.m. departures from Kearney and Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 6 p.m. returns.

By 1886 there was a second stage to Holdrege leaving Kearney at 7:30 a.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and going by way of Blainville and Oscar in Phelps County. This stage returned at 4:00 p.m. on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.

**Minden Route** southeast out of Kearney – The stage to Minden and back ran daily except Sundays. A year later this route had expanded to some points southwest of Minden. It was the latest starting stage, leaving Kearney at 8:45 a.m.

**Later Local Buffalo County Routes** – The Gibbon Route east out of Kearney was a late addition started by a Mr. Jones in 1886. It just went to Gibbon and back. Also by 1886 another stagecoach route was coming down into northern Buffalo County from Sherman County. This stage left from Cedarville, later called Litchfield, by way of Paradise, a community in Sherman county, through Bentora, later called Hazard, into Buffalo County. Here it went southeast past Mahila in Pleasant Valley to Riverview, later called Pleasanton, and Prairie Center on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Probably the last stage line in Kearney, the Belle Union, operating out of the Belle Union stable on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street near City Hall, ran from Kearney to Ravenna in the 1890s. Like the rural mail carrier of today who reports on the status of crops along the mail route, so did the stage driver. "*Jim Nichols, the stage driver between here and Ravenna says that a great deal of hail fell last night about five miles north of this city doing considerable damage.*" (3) W. D. Williams, the Belle Union stage proprietor, let it be known that he would run an extra trip to Ravenna on the day the Teacher's Institute would be held in Kearney in July 1894.

Most of the stage routes were replaced by railroad spur lines in the late 1880's. On April 5, 1894 the *Kearney Hub*, published the following letter.

*Dear Editor: --On the Connor lot, corner of Central Ave and Twenty-fourth street, is an old stagecoach which in Kearney's early history was run between here and the Black Hills to carry passengers. It is now weather beaten and worn enough to be a relic, and as such should be preserved.*

*Put it under cover and keep it. Every day it will be more and more interesting, and will be prized more and more by those who come after us, our children and grand children.*

*When our young city reaches the one hundred thousand population so confidently predicted by that distinguished gentleman, Dr. Miller, of Omaha, the old coach will be brought out on public occasions and will be a relic worth seeing. Save it now when it can be done.* (4)

Don't we wish that had been done!

- (1) *History of Buffalo County, Vol. I*, Samuel Bassett, p. 24-25, Quote from Morton's History of Nebraska, who in turn is quoting from the Huntsman's Echo.
- (2) "John N. Dryden, Pioneer Lawyer," *Where the Buffalo Roamed: Stories of Early Days in Buffalo County, Nebraska*, compiled by Kearney Business and Professional Women's Club, 1967, p. 130
- (3) *Kearney Semi-Weekly Hub*, June 11, 1894
- (4) *Kearney Daily Hub*, April 5, 1894

**Sources**

- 1) *History of Sherman County, Nebraska*, Meroe J. Owenes, printed by *The Norfolk Daily News*, 1952, Chap. 2, "Transportation and Communication (978.292/ow26 NSHS)
- 2) *History of Sweetwater, Nebraska* by Linda Wilke, 1982
- 3) *Book of Facts Concerning the Early Settlement of Sherman County, 1873-1897*, George E. Benschoter, (Loup City, Nebraska: Loup City Northwestern Print), p. 7-8, "The Old Kearney Stage Line"
- 4) *Custer County Republican*, March 15, 1883
- 5) *First United Methodist Church of Kearney, Nebraska, 1872-1972*, compiled by the Centennial Committee (Shenandoah, Iowa: World Publishing Co.), p. 72 (picture of John Dryden)
- 6) *History of Buffalo County, Vol. I*, Samuel Bassett, p. 24-25
- 7) *History of Buffalo County, Vol. II*, Samuel Bassett, p. 18-19, "John Dryden"
- 8) <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nephelps/postoffices.html>
- 9) <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nesherma/towns.html#cedarville>
- 10) <http://www.showcase.netins.net/web/marjned/hamco.html> "Hamilton County, Iowa, Stagecoach Lines"
- 11) "John N. Dryden, Pioneer Lawyer," *Where the Buffalo Roamed: Stories of Early Days in Buffalo County, Nebraska*, compiled by Kearney Business and Professional Women's Club, 1967, p. 129-31
- 12) *Kearney New Era*, September 6, 1884, p. 4, July 4, 1885: p. 4 (the stage line schedule); April 24, 1886, p. 2; May 8, 1886, p. 4 and several months after (the stage line schedule).
- 13) *Kearney Semi-Weekly Hub*, June 11, 1894; July 16, 1894
- 14) *Kearney Daily Hub*, April 5, 1894
- 15) *The History of Fort Kearney*, Lyle E. Mantor, (Bound, typewritten manuscript, no date), p. 150 & 217.
- 16) "The Hotels of Kearney, Part I" by Margaret Stines Nielsen, *Buffalo Tales*, Volume 10, No.8, September, 1987

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.

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Katherine Wielechowski, Editor

2014 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Individual.....	\$35.00
Family.....	\$40.00
Institutional Membership.....	\$50.00
Supporting Membership.....	\$75.00
Silver Engineer.....	\$125.00
Gold Engineer.....	\$250.00

\*\*We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.\*\*

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- Term expiring June 1, 2015: Corene Phillips, Dan Speirs, Gary Straatmann, Bernie Hascall
- Term expiring June 1, 2016: Dr. Roger Davis, Lance Hehner, Matt O'Callaghan, Jan Rodehorst

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## 2014 Calendar of Events

**Sunday, June 8:** 7th Annual ½ Marathon/5K: Buffalo County Stampede—Reg. @ 6 am, Race @ 7 –Enjoy the beautiful scenery during a chip-timed ½ marathon and/or 5K race.

**Saturday, June 28 from 10-2 pm:** 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Wagons West Celebration and Flea Market-Live music by Paul Siebert, delicious food, exhibitors, demonstrators, archive researchers, kids' games, contests, and a flea market. FREE admission/donations are appreciated. NEW in 2014: Beard Contest (see web site for details)

**All of November:** Christmas Decorating (during regular business hours)

**First two weekends in Dec. (Dec.6/7 and Dec. 13/14) from 1-5 pm:** Open to the public: 27th Annual Christmas Tree Walk \*\*\* Saturday, December 6 from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 27th Annual Christmas Tree Walk\*\*\*-check out dozens of trees decorated by area not-for-profits that tie their mission into this year's theme. Each theme is announced at the end of the current year's Tree Walk.

### Education notes:

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

**Trails & Rails Museum closed April 28 through May 9 for Kearney Public Schools.**

**Fabulous Fridays** are held on the 2nd Friday monthly at 2 pm. Locations vary, so check the web site.

**January:** Friendship Quilts

**February:** Dowsing

**March:** Jacob's Sheep and Spinning

**April:** Early Electricity in Buffalo County

**May:** Aprons - Now and Then

**June:** One Room Schools

**July:** Early Kitchen Utensils

**August:** Horse Shoeing

**September:** Apples

**October:** Old Time Musical Instruments

**November:** Hand Corn Husking

**December:** Christmas Traditions

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](mailto: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 KCLC after school program brought some of their older students to the blacksmith shop for a demonstration on Wed. March 5.

-The Don't Come Event has brought in \$810 with \$216 in expenses. That nets us \$594 so far.

- Wild Science Fridays will occur for eleven weeks this summer with the 'Bald Guy'.

-Synergy will be conducting ghost hunts here on April 12 and Oct. 4.

-The calendar project will be sent to the printers in March, so we can get them back and put in the gift shop by the summer season.

-The hospital asked me to attend a planning/brainstorming meeting about a hallway that they would like to put up a display about their history. We might be able to provide them with artifacts to rotate, pictures, stories, etc. They would like to have it wrapped up and opened by their celebration in July.

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**Trails & Rails Museum**



**Buffalo County Historical Society**

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