



# Buffalo Tales



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## Kearney's 50th Anniversary Pioneer Celebration: The Come Back Letters

By Mardi Anderson

(Editors Note: This issue expands on the November-December 2005 issue, "History Through A Camera Lens: Kearney's 50th Anniversary Parade.")

The first residents of Kearney arrived in May 1871 shortly after D.N. Smith designated this site as the spot where the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad would form a junction with the Union Pacific Railroad. People began moving to the Kearney region immediately and on November 30, 1872 they incorporated as the Town of Kearney Junction. The population continued to expand and on December 3, 1873, the city fathers reincorporated as Kearney, a city of the second class. This date rather than the original founding in 1871 has most often been used as the birth date for the city. In 1923, therefore, Kearney celebrated its fiftieth anniversary.

From September 11-14, 1923, Kearney celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with a grand celebration that included a parade on Central Avenue, community barbecue at the high school, Indian performance, and fireworks show. Part of the anniversary celebration also included the 1873 Pioneer Reunion. The *Kearney Daily Hub* and Chamber of Commerce worked together to send letters to former residents inviting them to return home and join in the celebration.

The letters received in response have been preserved and are now part of the archival collection held by the Buffalo County Historical Society. Several excerpts from the letters are presented in this issue. In order to let the author's voice be heard, the letters were not edited and are printed in their original format. Along with each letter is some biographical information about the author.



The organizers of the 50th Anniversary celebration hired fifty Indians to perform song, dances, and ceremonies. Several Indians rode on the Kaufmann-Wernert Department Store's float.

### From the Society

The past few months have been very busy at the Buffalo County Historical Society and the Trails and Rails Museum! The Livery Barn will be FINISHED very shortly and the Depot renovation is 57% complete. We invite everyone to come down and take a look at the new and exciting progress made possible with your support!

The Livery Barn is only the first phase of our expansion. We now will be moving the artifacts from the west side of the Archive Building to their new home in the Livery Barn. The next phase is to enclose the Archive Building and expand it on to our new property to the west. We are currently reviewing the architectural drawings and are looking forward to placing the archival materials currently in storage into their new temperature/humidity-controlled environment. Our new facility will offer researchers better access to our collections. Fund-raising will begin immediately. I am sure you will be hearing a lot about this in the very near future. Please contact Jennifer if you are interested in learning about different types of donations. We are currently looking for heavy-duty shelves, acid-free storage boxes, filing cabinets, and other storage materials. We also appreciate monetary support. We are a non-profit organization and your gift can be a tax deduction. We can give you a monetary receipt and/or a donated goods receipt. The Buffalo County Historical Society appreciates your time and support!

We currently have seven UNK students and two Kearney High School students helping us in a variety of different ways. Please don't hesitate to introduce yourselves to the new faces. We are excited to be building such a wonderful relationship with these institutions.

On February 11, 2006 we held our Valentine Dance/Volunteer Appreciation Day. It was held in the remarkable Riverdale Community Center with the Special Blend band playing for the crowd. Riverdale K-6 students provided creative decorations while the State Bank of Riverdale sponsored the building rental and refreshments. Everyone that attended had a lot of fun! Our organization absolutely would not be able to do everything it does without reliable volunteers! **We do appreciate you** and are grateful you enjoy helping out!

My door is open for your comments!

Sincerely, Jennifer

### Note From the Editor

The editor of *Buffalo Tales* along with Heather Stauffer (UNK history student and former intern at Trails and Rails) are putting together a photographic history of Kearney. The book, titled *Kearney: The Midway City*, will include 250 historic photographs with interpretive captions that examine the origins and evolution of Kearney. Arcadia Press will publish the book and it will hopefully be available by December. Most of the photographs will come from the collections housed at Trails & Rails Museum. The authors, however, would like to include as many rare photographs as possible. We are calling on members of the Buffalo County Historical Society to allow us access to old photographs of Kearney and the surrounding region. If you have any photographs that might be of interest, please contact us at the Trails & Rails Museum or at the email/phone listed below. We are especially interested in photographs of downtown Kearney streets and businesses, the college and public schools, farmsteads, sporting events/teams, churches, entertainment/leisure, fire department/police department. Thanks in advance for helping us in our endeavor to preserve Kearney's history. (Mark Ellis, 308-865-8767, ellismr@unk.edu)

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*(The following was the letter sent out by the Chamber of Commerce to former residents on July 31, 1923.)*

Dear Friend:

The Come Back Club has been organized by the Kearney Chamber of Commerce in co-operation with The Hub, to extend an invitation to former residents of Kearney and Buffalo County to come back home during the Fiftieth Anniversary celebration to be held the week of September 11th-14th.

A program vastly surpassing anything ever before attempted in Kearney has been arranged for each day by the citizens who have contributed handsomely for the purpose. It is believed, however, that the most enjoyable features of the week will be the reawakening of the the old time memories and the renewal of early associations and affection through the return of hundreds of former Kearneyites. In behalf of all the people of Kearney, we urge you to endeavor to revisit your old home for as long a time as possible during the week.

We, of Kearney, are still warmly interested in the welfare of all who may at anytime have made their homes here.

Whether you can return to Kearney or not during the home coming week, won't you write a letter to the Chamber of Commerce or The Hub, showing that you still retain a place in your memory for the old town? Make it personal. Write about yourself, because our interest in you is a personal one.

We hope to print on Saturday, September 8th, a list of the names and addresses of as many former residents as we can secure and also as many letters from them as space will permit. Please write us at once and then prepare to visit Kearney during the week.

The latch string is on the outside, the welcome hearty and the entertainment abundant.

Yours fraternally,

THE COME BACK CLUB  
Kearney, Nebraska

#### **Charles E. Chambers**

(This first letter was written by Charles E. Chambers who was 63 years old when Kearney celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. He and his brother, Frank, were both living in Gibbon. Some years earlier, Charles farmed with his father but by 1923 he did general labor while Frank worked as a carpenter. Charles died in 1936 and is buried in the Gibbon cemetery with his parents and brother.)

[in 1884] *"there were but few houses west of Central Avenue....The race track was West North of the railroad. They was several sod Houses in the country in 1884, the prairie was full of Rattlers & Bull snakes. What Kearney needs is a condensed milk factory it would increase the Dairy interest of the county."*

#### **Sarah Ann Brown**

(The next letter was written by Mrs. S. A. Brown of Brady, Nebraska who wrote that she came to Kearney in 1886 and lived here until 1922. During that time she saw many changes. Her husband, Josiah L. Brown, was a nurseryman who was the proprietor of the Midway Nursery located on Grand Avenue in the section of Kearney then called East Lawn. He died August 12, 1921 and is buried in the Kearney Cemetery. Sarah Ann Brown died in October 1930 and is buried beside him.)



*"I have seen the one story shack on Central Ave, replaced by the present handsome business blocks, the native mud by miles of paved streets, the bare fields by beautiful tree lined streets avenues those trees are a mute testimony of the work of J. L. Brown who labored twenty six years planting trees on the streets of Kearney. West 22' St was planted by him also many homes in Kenwood and other parts of the city.*

*"J. L. Brown has been dead for eleven years but his trees still live and are admired and enjoyed by many people who never heard of the jolly old man who planted them and tended them with such love and care. I have the honor of being J. L. Browns wife."*

#### **Louise Wilson Griffins**

Mrs. E. R. Griffins (Louise Wilson Griffins) who wrote the next letter thought that 1923 should have been the 51st Anniversary of Kearney's founding because her family arrived here in 1872. She noted that her father, Peter W. Wilson, and her brother Frank, came from Mt. Ayre, Iowa where he had been a dry goods merchant. They built a grocery store three lots from the corner of 10th and Wyoming (later renamed 21st and Central). Frank was employed by the railroad and Peter was a grocer in Kearney for many years. Peter died in 1908 at age 88 and is buried in the Kearney Cemetery. His wife, Harriet, died of pneumonia at age 94 in 1918 probably in the aftermath of Spanish Influenza that swept the country in that year.)

*"My father P. W. Wilson went to Kearney in September of 1872 and was on the ground to attend the first sale of town lots which is one of the lots where the Opera House now stands. The family arrived November 2, 1872. Just as soon as my father and brother had a store building with living rooms back and above furnished. In fact were so anxious to get there that we did not wait for them to finish the house. Every one lived over their stores & offices. One reason was there was not workmen enough to put up houses and business places both. And Another reason was because we were afraid of the Indians. Altho I do not suppose there was any real danger. It was a wonderful winter as far as weather was concerned, with no real winter until the big three day snow storm commencing Apl 14th 1873. We went to school and sat on backless benches in the room under L. B. Cunningham newspaper office."*

#### **A. B. Steele**

A. B. Steele of Walla Walla, Washington apparently grew up in Kearney and stayed through the 1890's. Records exist of his paying poll taxes and personal taxes during the period of 1892-1896. Steele responded to the Come Back Club's request for information with the following story.

*"I wish to} "...walk the Streets of old Kearney again where I once was a Boy...and the Cow Boys used to Pull us on our Sleds behind there ponys down Central ave at break neck Speed."*

#### **Mr. and Mrs. D. C. Hostetter**

Mr. and Mrs. D. C. Hostetter were living in the Soldiers Home at Burkett, Nebraska (northwest of Grand Island in 1923). Today it is the Veterans Home which that city has now grown out to surround. David C. Hostetter was born in Pennsylvania. After serving in the Civil War he moved to Missouri where he worked as a "stove molder." In 1873 he and his wife came to Kearney. He worked for S. A. Webb in his hardware and implement business until the mid-1880's when he took the homestead described in the letter. The opera house referred to was probably the Moore Opera House, a

two-story building located just south of the UP tracks on the west side of present day Central Avenue that housed a business downstairs and the opera house on the second floor. The fire mentioned in the letter is also highlighted in Louisa Collins' diary. She wrote, "Apr 1st The first fire in our town today Smeads building burned to the ground three families lost nearly all their goods But there is sweet with the bitter the worst whisky & gambling hole in town burned with it."

"We came to Kearney 50 years ago 1873 in Sept. We seen the ups and downs We came late in the evening on the Burlington [immigrant trains arrived at 9:30 in the evening in those days]. Pawnee Indians were lying on the platform wrapped in their blankets Several of them there camped on the Island south of Kearney - first day of April 1874 we had our first fire a frame building I think third lot north of the Opera House families roomed upstairs My sister Mrs H Achey lost a bright colored shawl an Indian had found it among these household goods things had been (tossed? spilled?) out loose they took it from him she got it again that day. The building burned to the ground had only a bucket brigade pump and draw wells to get water. The cowboys were bad when under the influence of liquor and that was only time they came to town...

...There was one Church it was not finished the first M.E. Had several saloons Saw the cowboys ride in one door and out the back door on their ponies were Mr. Barth had his place of business now on railroad Street. there were 2 general stores and post office West 24 St one school house one room up Stairs and one down stairs on 21 and A. ave the building is there yet...

...4th of July 1874 we held a celebration in the School house had Speaking and Singing all were glad we were there were like one family...

...We took a homestead on the Island South of Alfalfa Center now. was called Stevenson then. We had no School nearer than Odessa or Kearney over 6 miles either place We tried to get a School house at Stephenson one end got beat several times So the men decided they would take their wives along 9 of us ladies went & beat them 3 votes they challenged [challenged] our votes and had no (---?) Sworn we all had children school age and we got the School house...

...I forgot the church last but not least belonged to the 1st M E since 1874 in Kearney."



Inside Steele and Boyle Grocery—corner 23rd and Central (Paul's Broiler)

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Dr. Mark R. Ellis, Editor

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Family	.....\$40.00
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Life-Individual	.....\$275.00
Life-Couple	.....\$350.00

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

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**Upcoming Events**

- March 14th-(Tuesday)-BCHS/Storm Hockey Night
- April 2nd-(Sunday)-BCHS Annual Meeting
- April 22nd and 23rd-Kidz Explore
- April 30th(Sunday)-2nd-Annual May Day Extravaganza
- May 26th(Friday)-1st-Annual Season Kick-Off
- June 3rd (Saturday) 21st-Annual Wagons West Celebration.

Trails & Rails Museum 710 West 11th Street (308) 234-3041

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