



Buffalo Tales



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FLOUR MILLS IN BUFFALO COUNTY Part II

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

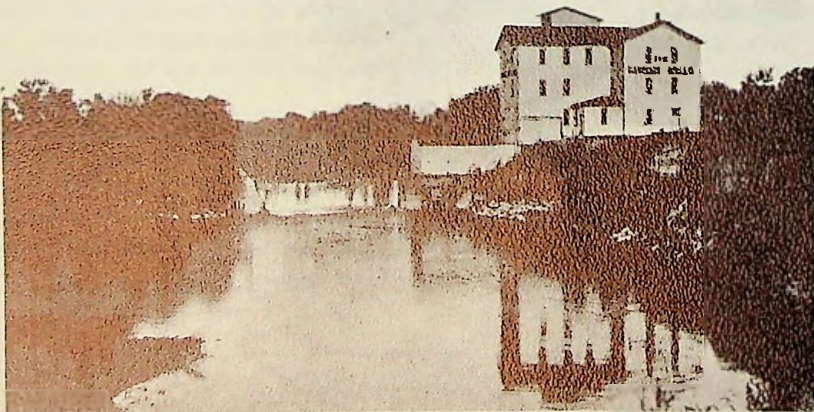
In Andreas: *History of Nebraska*, 1882, the Wood River in Buffalo County is described as "one of the most beautiful streams of the county, and, with its abundant and rapid flow of water, it affords some of the very best water-power privileges that can be found in the State."

The Gibbon Mill was the first to take advantage of that water power (Part I). A few months later the Shelton Flouring Mill was erected on the Wood River in the fall of 1873 by Jason I. and Dr. I. P. George, brothers. The original mill was 24 feet by 36 feet and two and one-half stories high. A second building was added within a few years, 24 feet by 40 feet and three and one-half stories high, containing four run of stone. The mills had a capacity of 75 barrels of flour in a 24-hour period, and could produce 20 to 40 bushel of feed per hour in the same 24-hour period.

In 1893 the mill was changed from the old stone system to the roller process. In 1901 the name was changed to Shelton Milling Company. The milling capacity in 1915 was 100 barrels a day. Although flour was not made in its later years, the Shelton mill continued to operate until 1935, when it was destroyed by fire and not rebuilt.

Oldtimers remember Lake Shelton at the north edge of town which was formed above the dam. It was a popular picnic spot—a place to ice skate in winter and to swim and boat in summer. For several years in the early 1900's a small steamboat ran on the lake, and area boat races were held.

The Blue Mills on the Wood River north of Kearney was a flourishing mill for nearly fifty years. A story in the *Kearney Daily Hub* of November 10, 1970, was written by Patricia Richter Reinhardt, who lived as a child on the farm where the mill was located.



Rayona Mills and Dam across Beaver Creek, Rayona, 1915

WITH THE SOCIETY

From the Editor:

It is with some feelings of sadness that I tell you that this is the last issue of *Buffalo Tales* under my editorship. The publication started in January of 1978; this is the 139th issue. I have been closely associated with it since its beginning.

Never having had experience in writing or publishing, I was very grateful to Dr. Gene E. Hamaker, Professor of the History Department of then Kearney State College, for offering to be editor of the new publication. From him I learned much about writing and all about editing, and upon his death in October 1984, I took on the full responsibility of editorship.

It has been a labor of love, but the time has come to resign. The publication of *Buffalo Tales* will now be the responsibility of a Publications Board, chaired by Dr. Philip S. Holmgren, Professor of History and Historian of the University of Nebraska at Kearney. I do not intend to lay down the pen, but hope to contribute an article now and then for future issues.

Thanks to all of the writers of the stories that have appeared in *Buffalo Tales*, especially to Margaret Nielsen who has contributed at least two, and often more, articles each year. Thanks to Zimmerman Printing for helping me learn what layouts are all about. And thanks to all of you readers, whose letters and comments have made it all worthwhile.

Alice Howell

From the President:

Like so many of you, I have always anticipated the arrival of *Buffalo Tales*, without giving much thought as to how the publication even got put together, or to my mailbox. It was one of the things that I received automatically from an organization to which I happened to belong.

For this issue I wrote the usual letter of what is taking place at the Museum, and within the organization, but I have decided to put that information aside. Instead, I would like to say just a few words about a very special lady, Mrs. Alice Howell, who is stepping down as editor of your *Buffalo Tales*. She has been the editor since 1984. The hours of researching stories to provide the reader with facts cannot be closely calculated. In addition Mrs. Howell has kept the mailing lists current, has labeled, sorted and posted a copy to each member—here and throughout the United States. Her enthusiasm, wealth of knowledge and hours of physical being as our editor will be sorely missed. A lady of many hats, and a master of all! I'm sure I speak for all our members when I say "Thank You" for all you have done. It has been, and always will be, appreciated, Mrs. Howell.

—Susan C. Lynch

Memorial Gifts have been received:

- From Dr. and Mrs. R. L. Link and Frances Link in memory of Naida Gross
- From Esther, Larry, Rex, David, JoAnn Musil and families in memory of Naida Gross
- From Eleanor Bessie Herzman in memory of Fredalene Maddux Bessie Hartzell

NEW BASIC MEMBERS

- Rebecca A. Cyza Gibbon
- Rosemary Grandy North Platte
- Bernice Ashburn Mims Gainesville, FL

Excerpts from her story are as follows:

Sylvester Bearss and his descendants operated the mill continually through various difficulties until a few months before the dramatic fire which destroyed it in October of 1920. Not only did it serve the community by milling grain but it provided an amusement park in the area above the dam. Family members say the name Blue Mills came from an outcropping of blue clay he found in the river bed. County records show he bought the land in 1883 and filed for flowage rights for a dam 12 feet high in 1884.

The first mill building, described by Mr. Bearss' grandson, Chelcy Bearss, was a small frame structure with a gate-type water wheel. The mill stones were about two and one-half feet in diameter and set in a steel frame. The first dams were of sod with brush on both sides and were frequently washed out by floods.

The mill burned about 1892, and was rebuilt with more modern machinery, and a steam engine was added to assist water power. To avoid flood destruction, a concrete dam was built. However, before too many years, a loud explosion, the cause of which was never known, destroyed the dam. The next dam was concrete built on top of the first one.

In 1908 the business was taken over by Guy Bearss, a son. Guy's wife Cordelia is said to have baked a batch of bread from each milling to test the quality of the flour. Three grades of flour were made. The mill had a 50-barrel capacity in 24 hours. Farmers hauled their wheat to the mill and traded it for flour and other products, such as cracked wheat for breakfast food, pancake flour, or poultry feed. During World War I rye, buckwheat, barley and corn flour were sometimes substituted for wheat flour.

In 1920 the mill was sold to Warren Ewell. A fifty percent drop in retail flour prices later that year caused Mr. Ewell to go into debt and to lose business. Eight months after the mill was sold, a Halloween night fire completely destroyed the Blue Mills. Ewell was later arrested for arson, tried and found guilty. The mill was never rebuilt.

Glenwood Park, created at the widened river above the dam, was the scene in the late 1880's of family picnics, swimming, boating, fishing, even a baseball field on the flat area above the river bed. The park was owned and operated by Charles Nelson and closed around 1910 after his death.

A mill was built in 1889 on the Wood River northwest of the old town of Stanley in Grant Township. Tom and Rebecca Smith owners of the land, and their son John started construction of the mill.

According to an item in the *Armada Watchman* of that time, as many as fifteen men worked on the dam. "The dam is about 40 feet across at the top . . . Mr. Smith has a water power sufficient to run . . . several hundred barrel capacity a day . . . is prepared to grind flour, meal and chopped feed." By February of 1890 Mr. Smith had plans to put in the new roller process of milling, according to the *Watchman*.

The T. N. Smith Flour Mill was listed in the 1892-3 directory of Buffalo County, with a capacity of 40 barrels in 24 hours. The business ended in failure in 1902.

Another flour mill was built in the 1890's along the Wood River southeast of Watertown between present Amherst and Miller. There was enough flow of the river to use a wooden water wheel. A dam was built across the river and a mill pond formed behind it. This mill closed around 1915.

There is a photo in the *Miller Area Heritage book*, 1988, showing a small building in Miller with a sign: "MILLER ROLLER MILLS, Mfg. of Graham Flour. Corn Meal, Feed and Flour for Sale. R. A. Acheson, Prop." No further information could be found on this mill or its period of operation.

Beaver Creek (now named Mud Creek) was also a source of fine water power for mills in Sweetwater and Ravenna. In 1880 Henry Zulauf and others built the Sweetwater Mill on Section 4 in Beaver Township. Joseph Tritt was probably

one of the original founders, also. Henry Wilke and Paul Livingston both settled in Sweetwater around 1883, and they, along with Tritt, were identified with the Sweetwater Mill over many of its years of existence.

This mill survived for many years through several changes in operation and ownership. The *Kearney New Era* reported on May 14, 1887 that one of the "solid improvements on the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad to Broken Bow was the new mill at Sweetwater." It was erected by a farmers' stock company. "The roller mill has a capacity of 100 barrels a day and utilizes the finest water power in the state."

Periodic washouts of the dam were experienced, and a tornado that hit Sweetwater on June 22, 1890, not only destroyed the mill, but virtually wiped out the town. The *Ravenna News* reported:

The Sweetwater Mill, one of the best and finest roller mills in central Nebraska, had evidently been raised into the air, crushed together by some tremendous force, and dashed to the ground again, a series of shapeless ruins."

Several days after the storm a part of the mill's roof was found six miles away.

Reconstruction did not take place until 1899 when Herman Wilke and Andrew Rosvold formed a partnership to rebuild. The Sweetwater Mill continued operation into the late teens.

Two other mills were located on the John Perry property just south of Sweetwater, but details of their operation are not known.

The Ravenna Mill also on Beaver Creek, was built around 1891 by C. S. Seeley. Ownership was transferred to Shellenbarger and Davenport in 1901, and a fire totally destroyed the mill in 1902. It was immediately rebuilt. In 1904 it was sold and the name changed to Ravenna Mills, Inc., with A. R. Kinney, president and manager, and Robert S. Dickinson, secretary and treasurer.



The mill in 1915, according to historian S. C. Bassett, had a capacity of 500 quarter-barrel sacks of flour daily. The mill products were marketed chiefly in northwest Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming and South Dakota. Some flour was sold in eastern cities and some exported to England.

The mill was enlarged and in 1919 the Ravenna Mills joined with three other mills in central Nebraska to form Nebraska Consolidated Mill Company. The other mills were Glade Mills of Grand Island, Hastings Mills of Hastings and Blackburn Milling of St. Edward. A. R. Kinney of the Ravenna Mills organized the consolidation and was named its first president, with headquarters in Grand Island. With acquisition of an Omaha mill in 1922, the milling capacity doubled, and later that year the headquarters were moved to Omaha. Nebraska Consolidated Mills of Omaha is now the huge corporate structure of ConAgra, Inc.

Tragedy again struck the Ravenna plant in late November of 1939. The three-story Ravenna Mills was totally destroyed by fire, together with all machinery and equipment and stocks of flour. It was the biggest fire in the history of Ravenna. The flouring mill and feed mill did not rebuild.

Andreas: *supra*, (1882) states: "There is no mill or manufactory (in Kearney) other than a steam flouring mill with four run of buhrs, which turns out a large quantity of the finest flour." A. H. Boltin apparently opened the mill in 1879. An ad on an 1880 map of the city cites: "Williams & Boltin, Flour-Feed-Grain." Location of the mill was Twelfth Street (present 23rd Street).

The Kearney Milling and Elevator Company was one of the first major industries to use power from the Kearney Canal, completed in 1886. By early 1887 a stock company was organized, and construction had started. The *New Era* of January 22, 1887 described the building, which was located at Avenue A and South Railroad Street. Dimensions were 40 by 90 feet on the ground; extreme height: 64½ feet, foundation: 2 feet thick to the floor of basement, a depth of 10 feet, resting on a 4-foot base. The grinding room on the ground floor will house nine 4-roll wheat grinders and two 4-roll grinders for corn, rye and buckwheat. The mill will turn out 150 barrels of flour a day.

R. L. Downing was president of the company and J. J. Bartlett was vice-president. These two men were identified with the Kearney Flour Mills through Keamey's "boom" of the 1890's. It was a prosperous industry. The mills were kept running until midnight to receive the wheat that rolled into Kearney. Much grain was exported to England, and the flour was in such demand that it was shipped in trainloads to eastern seaboard markets. "Electric Patent" was a brand name.

The mill closed for a time during the economic depression that followed the "boom". Around 1898 Frank H. Roby purchased the mill, enlarged and modernized it to a capacity of 500 barrels a day. He promoted the growing of turkey red winter wheat, because Nebraska wheat flour was more preferable for exportation than northern grown grain.

In the *Kearney Daily Hub* of September 12, 1923, the Kearney Flour Mills advertised their popular Red Moon flour: "Watch the Red Moon Rise. Red Moon Flour is known from London Bridge to the Golden Gate."

The mill under Frank F. Roby made Kearney a milling center and its flour was sold coast to coast and was shipped to all parts of the world. A change in ownership around 1925, followed by low markets in flour and erratic ups-and-downs in the wheat market brought about its closing sometime in the late 1920's.

Elm Creek Milling Co. at Mill Road and Front Streets operated a steam mill as early as 1887. It is listed in the 1892-3 directory of Buffalo County as having a capacity of 50 barrels of flour, and 20,000 lbs. of feed in a 24-hour period. The company went

through several changes of ownership and operation. Duerr's High Quality Pancake Flour was introduced in 1919 by then-owners George and Henry Duerr. The last owner, A. C. Anderson, dismantled the mill in 1927 and built the Red Top Cabins on its site.

All of the flouring mills of Buffalo County have been closed for at least fifty years, going the way of the carriage factory and the blacksmith shop. The Biblical litany of fire, flood and insect plague regularly visited these mills during their operation. A mill owner might rebound from natural disasters, but he could not, and never did, recover from the changes in farm practices that took place in the early decades of the 20th century.

SOURCES

Adams County Historical Society, *Historical News*, March 1978; *Amherst Centennial Book*, 1990; Andreas, *History of Nebraska*, 1882; Bassett: *History of Buffalo County, Buffalo County Plat Book*, 1907; *Elm Creek Beacon*, September 30, 1898; *Elm Creek Centennial Book*, 1987; *Kearney City & Buffalo County Directory*, 1892-93; *Keamey Daily Hub*, October 27, 1913, September 12, 1923, November 10, 1970; *Kearney New Era*, January 22, May 14, 1887; *Miller Area Heritage Book*, 1988; *Ravenna Centennial Book*, 1986; *Ravenna News*, June 1890; Wilke: *A History of Sweetwater*, 1985. Telephone interviews: Irene Garrett and Fred and Maxine Schroeder, Shelton; Lyman Cass, Linda Wilke, Ravenna; Irene Mollard, Amherst; Opal Quail, Miller; Barbara Saum, Elm Creek; Archie Williams, Catharine Bahnson, Kearney.

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:

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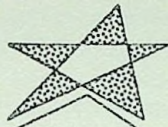
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Trails & Rails Museum will be open December 7 through 15 for the 1991 Christmas Tree Walk. Hours are from 1:00 to 5:00 p.m. daily. Baked goods will be for sale each day.

Volunteers are needed at the Museum during the Christmas Walk. Call Margaret Hohnhoit at 237-7327 if you can help. Donations of items for the continuous bake sale will also be appreciated.

The Museum Gift Shop has many items for Christmas giving.

Books

NEW!! *Tales of Buffalo County*, Volume IV, 1990. Reprints of stories originally published in *Buffalo Tales*, 1987-1989.

161 pages, 100 illustrations, 30 stories, indexed.

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All memberships entitle the member to the publication *Buffalo Tales*, participation in meetings, tours and other events sponsored by the Society.

Miscellaneous Gift Items

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