



Buffalo Tales



Volume 22, No. 2

Buffalo County Historical Society

March-April, 1999

Notice to Members of Buffalo County Historical Society

ANNUAL MEETING

Sunday, April 18, 1999, 4:00 p.m.

**First United Methodist Church
Fellowship Hall**

**4500 Linden Drive
Kearney, Nebraska**

The annual meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society will be held in the Fellowship Hall of the First United Methodist Church on April 18, 1999.

The business meeting will start at 4:00 o'clock. On the agenda for the business meeting is the election of four directors. A report of the year's work will be given, acknowledgments and recognitions made.

At 5:30 o'clock a dinner will be served and a program will follow. Cost of the dinner is \$10.00. Reservations must be made by April 15 and paid for in advance. Send check to cover the dinner cost to Buffalo County Historical Society, Box 523, Kearney, Nebraska 68848. Checks should be made payable to Buffalo County Historical Society.

The program will be a film of Kearney streets and businesses in 1926, which has been recently restored by the State Historical Society.

THE EMPRESS AND THE FORT THEATERS 1914 — 1988

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

Movie theaters have been a part of the social life of the American community from the small village to the large city since their advent early in this century.

Oldtimers will remember the early days of silent films and the noisy click of the projector as it was cranked by hand by the operator, and the sign, "One Moment, Please", when the movie stopped and the reels were changed by hand. Those were the days when there was musical accompaniment to the action of the show. Small theaters usually had a hometown pianist or organist who furnished the music, but large movie theaters were often accompanied by house orchestras.

When a silent movie was released, cue sheets for musicians accompanied the film. These included the minutes and seconds of music needed for each scene, and also suggested certain musical compositions to use. It was up to the musicians as to whether they would use the suggestions on the cue sheet or would select their own music.

WITH THE SOCIETY

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:

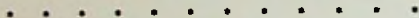
Our Annual Meeting is on April 18, 1999. See the separate write up.

Ed Anderson, our program chairman, has had some fine programs and has a very fine trip planned for May 1.

Wagons West will be held on June 5, 1999. The program will be the dedication of the Boyd House.

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

—Wilma Harder, President



REPORT OF BUILDING COMMITTEE:

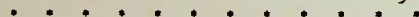
The progress of our new Exhibit and Administrative Building for the Trails & Rails Museum is going very well. We have a committee of 23 selected from the membership of the Buffalo County Historical Society to oversee the progress.

First off, we have gone to the Kearney Community Foundation for assistance. We have Autumn Kowalski from the shared staff office of the Foundation hired part-time. An excellent brochure was recently mailed to many county residents.

The Committee has since been divided into 3 groups—the building, fund-raising and public relations. The building committee is now working with a local contractor to have the building plans drawn. As soon as this is done the fund-raising committee will be meeting to set an amount to be raised.

This is where we are at the present time on the goal of having a new building in the year 2000.

Larry Nansel, Past President



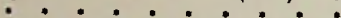
MEETINGS AND TOURS COMMITTEE

Sunday, March 28: A visit to the Ravenna Museum, 210 Grand Avenue, Ravenna, Nebraska at 2:30 p.m.

Sunday, April 18: Annual Meeting. (See page 1)

Saturday, May 1: Bus Tour to North Platte area. Leave Kearney 7:00 a.m. Return (approximately) 8:00 p.m. Cost \$35.00 per member, \$40.00 per non-member, \$30.00 per child. See Dancing Leaf Earth Lodge, Lincoln County Historical Museum, Buffalo Bill's Ranch and Railroad Museum at Cody Park.

Lunch provided. Stop at fast food for evening meal, not provided. Reservations due by April 18. Send reservations and check to Program Chairman Ed Anderson, 4320 West Highway 30, Kearney, NE 68847. Phone (308) 237-7339.



MEMORIAL GIFTS in memory of Philip S. Holmgren received from Ed and Mardi Anderson, Catharine Bahnsen, Dick and Eileen Mercer, Mabel Patterson, Jackie Rosenlof, Eric, Lori, Clark and Lynn; Ann Wiles, Glen and Marian Wisch, all of Kearney; Michael B. Yanney and Joe Mettenbrink of Omaha; Jack and Janice Cudaback of Riverdale; and Margaret Daggett of Scottsbluff.

In memory of Charles P. Brink received from Shirley Buettner, Maxine Butcher, David and Margaret Clark, Robert Cole, Frank and Bernadine Dineen, Jack and Joan Erickson, Elmer and Margaret Holzrichter, Alice Howell, Louise Kellaway, A.B. Kriz, George and Letha Raffety, Charlotte Robinson, Lee and Delphine Sanks, Barbara Schug and Lewis Westman, all of Kearney; Agnes M. McKee and Herbert and Anita Roeser of Grand Island; Mark and Margaret McCoy of Laurel; Glen and Susan Underhill of Riverdale; Paul and Edie Wright, Canby, OR; Sally and Bill Miller, Stanton, VA; Don and Donna Reid, South Australia.

It was in February of 1914 that Fred G. Keens, early pioneer businessman of Kearney, bought the lot at 2205 Central Avenue on which he would build the Empress Theater. There were at the time four downtown movie houses in Kearney—the Crescent, the Isis, the Radio, and the Air Dome, plus offerings of special movies with vaudeville and/or music at the Kearney Opera House.

By September of 1914 the building was finished to a point where the Empress could be open to the public. The marble for the lobby had not arrived, but was expected any day. Mr. Keens had no part in the operation of the theater but leased the building to other managers or proprietors, who offered movies along with vaudeville or musical groups.

The grand opening of the Empress was on Monday, September 21, 1914. A news article in the *Kearney Daily Hub* of September 19 announced that the management of the theater promised something extra good in the way of pictures, with Famous Player Features being shown every Friday night, and that an orchestra had been secured to furnish music every night. The program set out in the grand opening ad in the *Hub* of the 21st stated:

Big Strong 101 Bison Feature, "The Lure of Ceisha", produced in Japan by Henry McRay. Also, Ford Sterling Comedy with Ford Himself. Six Piece Orchestra. Admission 5¢ and 10¢, Loge Seats 15¢.

The Empress was an impressive building and was a popular theater from its beginning. The main floor and the balcony seated 654, more than any other movie house in the city at that time. The lobby walls were marble trimmed, and the huge wooden front doors were brass trimmed. The multi-lighted marquee was a bright spot on Central Avenue.

Musical accompaniment to the silent films was provided by local orchestras, organists or pianists. Fred Boucher is remembered as one who often provided organ music. Mildred Burman and a Mrs. Riggs were among others who furnished music. No matter what accompaniment was used, it was no small task for the musicians to flip from one piece of music to another to keep the music correct as the movie progressed.

The silent era of films came to an end around 1927. There were some movies with sound as early as 1923, but the talking movie did not come into its own until 1929. Vitaphone is one of the famous names related to movies with sound. The 1930's brought



**Empress Theater, circa 1920's
Copy of an early postcard.**

all of those wonderful, extravagant musicals in black and white, with singing and dancing, and where Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers and many other stars found their places of fame. Next came movies in Technicolor with their casts of thousands.

On Friday night, January 18, 1940, at about 8:30 p.m., a fire started in the basement of the theater. The 150 people attending the show escaped injury. However, the fire gutted the Empress and caused considerable damage to the building to the south. The Empress was still owned by the Estate of its builder, Fred G. Keens, and the equipment, which was a complete loss, belonged to George O. Monroe of Lincoln, proprietor of the theater.

It was a cold night with temperatures below zero and a north wind. The *Kearney Daily Hub* reported that pieces of burning material were flying through the air over the Hub building to the south and east. Hub personnel were on the roof guarding against the start of another fire. Smoke was so thick one could not see halfway across 22nd Street south of the city hall, reported the Hub. The fire was not well under control until 11:30 p.m. and water continued to be poured on the smoking embers the following morning.

The Keens family decided not to rebuild. Proprietor George O. Monroe who also owned and operated theaters in many cities in Nebraska including the Colonial in Lincoln and the Rivoli in Hastings, purchased the real estate and rebuilt the theater, renaming it the Fort. The new Fort opened its doors to the public on Friday night, August 2, 1940. According to the *Kearney Daily Hub* of August 1 the opening movie would be "It's a Date", starring Deanna Durbin, and would run through Monday. The Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday picture was "His Girl Friday", featuring Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant. The regular schedule would call for single feature, first-run pictures the first three days of the week, with an admission price of 30¢ evenings and 20¢ matinees. The balance of the week double features and action pictures would be shown at a charge of 20¢ at night and 15¢ matinees. Several popular films of the time had been booked, including "Pygmalion", "My Little Chickadee", with Mae West and W.C. Fields, "Too Many Husbands", with Jean Arthur, Melvyn Douglas and Fred MacMurray, and "Destry Rides Again".

On opening night the doors opened at 7:30 p.m. so that the public could tour the interior before the lights were dimmed for the movie. The furnishings and equipment



Empress Theater, 1914-1940

were brand new throughout. The design of the theater was art deco. The side walls were decorated with large murals painted by Joyce Ballantine, family friend of the Monroes. One side depicted a covered wagon scene and the other a Native American campsite. The design of the stage was a new concept. Instead of the usual wide space and arch in front of the curtain, only enough room was provided for a resting place for the screen and the curtain.

The auditorium which could seat 689 patrons had been acoustically treated to ensure high quality sound reproduction. The luxurious carpets, indirect lighting and comfortable seats insured the comfort of movie fans. Couples and men and women of large stature appreciated the large double seats which were placed in several of the rows, another new design of the theater.

The exterior of the front of the building above the canopy was not damaged in the fire, and from available photographs its design is shown to be unchanged since it was originally built. The lobby was completely redecorated and the heavy front doors refinished and their brass trim polished to look like new. The exterior front walls were covered with slabs of granite up to the canopy and the marquee design streamlined with distinctive lines and brilliant lights to make an impressive entrance.

Associated with George O. Monroe in the operation of the new Fort were his sons, Don and George Monroe, Jr. Don operated the theater until his brother was released from the management of the Westland Theater of Greeley, after which George F. Monroe became operator until it closed in 1984, a total of forty-four years.

The Fort and the Empress together gave their patrons seventy years of the best of motion pictures from the beginning of the silent film era to the 1980's. They were family theaters, enjoyed by people of all ages and have left us with fond memories of going to the movies, having a sack of hot, buttered popcorn and spending an afternoon or an evening watching a good picture show. Those were days to be remembered.

SOURCES

Telephone interviews with Don Monroe, James Monroe, Catharine Bahnsen, Elsie Boucher, Glen and Marian Wisch and Chan Lynch. *Kearney Daily Hub*, September 19 and 21, 1914, August 1, 1940.



Fort Theater, 1940-1984

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.

1999 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- 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, 1999: Wilma Harder, Helen Kinnaman, Margaret Hohnholt and Dick Iltenberry.

Term expiring June 1, 2000: Minnette Steinbrink, Susan Underhill, Pauline Wells, and Dora Day.

Term expiring June 1, 2001: Edward Anderson, Wilma Larsen, Janean Vokoun, and Jack M. Horner.

Officers (1 year term)

- President Wilma Harder
- Vice-President Susan Underhill
- Secretary Janean Vokoun
- Treasurer Mardi Anderson

Non-Profit Organization
Bulk Rate
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Kearney, Nebraska

TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM

This nice weather has been a good time to get many things done at the Museum. Some of the men have been doing odds and ends and sprucing up and doing some painting. We soon need to have all the buildings ready for spring guests. If you or a small group would like to choose a building and deep clean, just give me a call and we will make arrangements.

During this nice weather, we have had some small groups who have come to tour. We also have several school groups scheduled and the Kearney fourth graders will be there during the last two weeks in April.

We still need stories about the Boyd House. Also it is time to start thinking about what you would like to show on Collections Day on July 16. Quite a number have told me they would share their collection with us. We have room for all of you. Just let me know.

If you would like to volunteer in any capacity, please let me know. We can always use help and I can work with you to schedule a time. Wilma Larsen will soon be calling for summer volunteers to sit during the afternoon.

—Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

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

Buffalo County Historical Society

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Address Correction Requested

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