



# Buffalo Tales



Volume 26, No. 2

Buffalo County Historical Society

March-April, 2003

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*Alice Shaneyfelt Howell:*

*Friend of Kearney—Friend of Buffalo County Historical Society*

*by Margaret Stines Nielsen*

On January 25, 2003, the Buffalo County Historical Society lost one of its most devoted supporters with the death of Alice Howell. She was one of the founders of the Buffalo County Historical Society and served as its president and secretary. She also edited *Buffalo Tales* and was a frequent contributor. Her tireless work behind the scenes kept the Society running smoothly for many years.



**Alice Shaneyfelt Howell**

Born in Dalton, Nebraska (near Sidney), Alice was the second of six children born to Joseph L. and Erma Shaneyfelt. Her father operated a dairy and in 1924 decided to move the family to Hastings where he could better support his growing family. Realizing that he could not compete with larger dairies, Joseph bought a truck for hauling. In 1928, while hauling hay near Kenesaw, he was struck by a train and killed. After his death Erma supported the family by taking in sewing while the older children worked odd jobs to help. After graduating from high school, Alice attended business school and soon found a job as a legal secretary. Upon landing this job Alice stated, "I knew I had found my place in the business world." In 1942 Alice married Frank Howell and the couple moved to Kearney in 1943 when Frank was appointed manager of the Nebraska State Employment Service office. Alice found employment

with the law firm of H.L. Blackledge, where she remained for almost thirty years. The Howells had three children: Michael, Mary (Mais), and Eloise (Carpenter).

As a mother Alice was active in the PTA, Cub Scouts, and 4-H. She also became very active in various civic issues in Kearney. Alice once wrote that one of her first civic efforts was as "petition-carrier" to get the east side of Avenue A paved (in the 1950's the only paved east-bound street south of Highway 30 was 23rd Street to Avenue E). She was also a member of the Citizens Committee appointed to work with the Park and Recreations Board on the swimming pool and renovation of Harmon Park. From the time MONA opened she served as a volunteer either in the gift shop or helping catalog. Alice was also active in her church. The Presbyterian Church was "just a way of life from early childhood." She was a deacon, church librarian, and served on many boards and committees, especially in the women's group.

When in the name of progress the city began tearing down many landmark buildings with historical significance Alice worked to preserve them for future generations. She was especially active in trying to preserve the old courthouse and the Union Pacific Depot. Alice did the research and the paperwork that

## WITH THE SOCIETY

### A Note from the President:

With the arrival of Memorial Day it can only mean one thing at the society—The opening of the Trails and Rails Museum for the summer season! The winter months have been busy with cleaning and creating new displays for tourists. Our "look" is changing with a new Trails and Rails logo design in addition to the changes at the museum.

Our Annual Wagons West celebration will be Saturday, June 14th, from 1:00 to 4:00. We would like to invite you to attend the re-dedication of the refurbished school building and help us celebrate our fresh look and new gift shop area. As always, members and kids 14 and under are free. All others are asked to donate \$2 per person. Bring a friend who has not been to the museum and see what is new.

We held our annual meeting on April 27th at the Holiday Inn of Kearney. Don Briggs of Kearney served as our guest speaker. Fifty members and guests attended the event. With a sponsorship by Cash Wa Dist. Co. we were once again able to have a booth at Kidz Explore—1,200 children visited our booth and decorated a train picture frame. Thanks to the volunteers and coordinators for making this a great experience for the kids.

Have a great summer,  
Dora Day, President

### A Note from the Editor:

Here it is the middle of May and you are just receiving your March/April issue of *Buffalo Tales*. Sorry for the delay. The end of the year at the university is always busy and I've just now dug out from under a heavy load of student papers and exams. I look forward, however, to devoting more time to publications over the less hectic summer months. I have some open spots in upcoming issues, so please forward anything that you have written pertaining to Buffalo County's history.

This is an important issue of *Buffalo Tales* because it honors Alice Howell who passed away this past January. I didn't know Alice but after editing and reading this issue I feel like I know something about her character. It is hard to imagine that one person could have contributed so much time and energy to her community and friends. It would be hard to imagine the Buffalo County Historical Society or *Buffalo Tales* in existence without her tireless support. Mardi Anderson and Margaret Nielsen, both who are past contributors to *Buffalo Tales*, offered to write a memorial to Alice. I think you'll agree that both have done a wonderful job in chronicling and honoring the long and productive life and career of Alice Howell.

Please send materials, comments, questions to: Mark R. Ellis, Department of History, UNK, Copeland Hall, Kearney, NE 68849

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eventually led to the designation of the Frank House, the old Kearney Post Office, and St. Luke's Episcopal Church for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Marian Johnson, curator of the Frank House for many years, gives Alice credit for much of what was accomplished. "If I did anything at the Frank House in our seventeen years there, it was to her credit," claims Marian Johnson.

Frank Howell may well have stimulated Alice's interest in history. As a boy in northwest Nebraska the drought had exposed arrowheads and other Indian artifacts. They were the basis of an extensive collection and an interest in Indian history. He also started a collection of clocks. After his death in 1973, Alice felt that she needed something to occupy her time. "I had always been interested in

the fascinating history of Kearney," claimed Alice, "but had done nothing about it until the early 70's." Alice was one of those who reorganized the Buffalo County Historical Society. When she retired the BCHS became her full time job. She served on the board of directors, was president, and secretary. As a member of the Kearney Centennial Board, "my time and talents (if any) went in the direction of promoting and preserving Kearney's rich heritage and history and my focus never changed." Alice worked on the Souvenir Booklet Committee that compiled and edited the booklet. Material was later added and it was republished for the 125th Anniversary of Kearney. It is an invaluable source of information about the history of Kearney and Buffalo County. "This is probably when my interest in writing was born," claimed Alice, "because up to that time I had written only what was dictated to me in my work as a secretary." "I believe my historical research of the streets, business buildings, churches and homes, and providing tours, sponsored by the Buffalo County Historical Society, has been one of my greatest contributions as a friend of Kearney."

Her contributions to Kearney were many but it was as historian that she will best be remembered. Steve Chatelain, publisher of the *Kearney Hub*, wrote that she was the "go to" person for any questions about Kearney's past. "She was always helpful and thorough, and always uneasy with attention or praise." Because she didn't have letters after her name denoting a degree she once said, "I'm not a historian, I'm just interested in the history of Kearney." It was that interest which brought her two prestigious awards: the Service to Mankind nomination (1991) and the Friend of Kearney award (1998) given by the Chamber of Commerce.



**Alice and Frank Howell  
on their wedding day  
(September 19, 1942).**

Alice wrote the original grant that financed the first year of publishing *Buffalo Tales*. When I wrote articles for *Buffalo Tales* I learned that the easiest research was to ask Alice. If she didn't have the answer she could tell me where to look,

or she went to the courthouse to establish the ownership of a property at a given time. Even before she was editor she worked behind the scenes, reminding contributors to get their work in, taking the completed issue to the printer, editing it, and mailing the finished product. Before she gave up her car she distributed copies to the library and other public institutions. Only once did my mistake escape her eagle eye. I had given the later name of Dobytown as Sartoria when it should have been Centoria. Between the two of us we scratched the error and penciled in the correction on the 450 printed copies.

This is Alice Howell as remembered by her friends, family, and associates. She was a cheerful, modest, competent woman who contributed so much to all our lives. Her grandson, Tyler Carpenter who read "A Celebration" at her funeral described her like this: "You stepped quietly through life, a small woman making big waves, with actions more than words."

### *A Tribute to Alice Howell*

by Mardi Anderson

Kearney and Buffalo County lost a giant in the field of local history with the death of Alice Howell. I doubt there was anyone who knew more about the history of this county than Alice. I had the privilege of working with her for many years. It did not take long to recognize what a vast wealth of knowledge she possessed about the history of this county.

Do you remember the first time you met her? I don't. When we moved here in the summer of 1972 the Buffalo County Historical Society was the first organization I joined. The Society was new then, less than a year old. There were monthly programs and I am sure Alice was there. But she did not present the programs, she just made all the arrangements for them. She was so modest and unassuming, avoiding the spotlight but always there in the background getting things done.

Alice was one of the group that reorganized the BCHS in 1972 and she remained active until about 2000 when health prevented her from doing more. She served on the Board of Directors, was president, and secretary. She kept the membership list current, mailed *Buffalo Tales* and membership renewal notices. Although no one realized it, she was the Society Director. As a volunteer she did all those things that a society director would have done to keep the organization running smoothly. If anyone was ever in doubt about something all we had to do was ask Alice. Alice served on the committees that planned Society activities and then quietly took care of the details to see that they happened. Tours of the county were planned. Then she did all the research about the places we visited.

When Trails & Rails Museum was established Alice was the one who went to the Nebraska State Historical Society to learn how to operate it. She set up the numbering and cataloging system that is used to keep track of all the donations of artifacts and archival documents. Alice was totally in charge of the museum for the first years. She gave it up when she agreed to serve as president because she said she could not do both. But she was always there to assist, answer questions, help wherever she could.

In the early 1990's Alice turned her focus to the Archives. Volunteers from the Ft. Kearny Genealogy Society had been abstracting the school census and various other records for several years. Alice set up the Archives and organized those records as well as other paper, map, and photograph donations that the Society had received. Until she set out to organize these records, making them accessible and available, we really did not know what we had.

But mainly we remember Alice for all the research she did. She answered innumerable requests for information. She researched many, many historic

Kearney homes. She was instrumental in establishing *Buffalo Tales*, even writing the initial grant that financed the first year of publication. From the time the first issue came out in 1978 through 1999, there were a total of 186 articles written. Alice wrote (or edited) 54 of them or 29%, including the very first one. If she did not write the story she was always on the look out for someone who would.

The *Buffalo Tales* published during those years were compiled and published in six volumes. Alice indexed the first five volumes and edited volumes III-VI. I used a computer to alphabetize the last volume. She found that quite astonishing. She never did convert to the computer but remained faithful to her typewriter.

Alice wrote about such a variety of subjects. Her first article was about the Oregon Trail and the *Randall Journal*. Then she went on to railroads in Buffalo County, early Post Offices, towns in the Wood River Valley, and Nebraska Centre and the Boyd Ranch. She wrote about Sodtown, Sartoria, Elm Creek, Watertown, the Dayton Emigration Association, the Lincoln Highway, the Kearney Volunteer Fire Department, and the KVFD Emergency Medical Service. Alice did not usually write biographies but she did write a story about B.O. Hostetler, District Judge. Then she went on to research and write about Kearney High School, weddings, Christmas traditions, the Mitchell-Ketchum tragedy, opera houses in the county, the ice industry, the Kaufmann & Wernert Store, Harmon Park, brickmaking and brickyards, quilts and quilting, and Washington Day (1889).

Sometimes someone would provide the information but claim they could not write so Alice would put it together for them. Other times she would write an article that became the lead-in for one written by someone else. Her article "Early Days in Elm Creek" accompanied "Elm Creek in 1942" by Stephen King. She wrote "Barnstormers, A Flying Parson and Other Aviators" to go along with my air show article. These were followed by two stories about the Kearney Air Base that she spent many hours researching. Later there was an article on flour mills in Buffalo County to accompany an article about the Gibbon flour mill that Phil Holmgren edited.

On two different occasions the Society received collections of historical letters that Alice edited and turned into *Buffalo Tales* articles. The first was a set of letters that had been used to establish a date of birth for a delayed birth certificate and then were sent on to us. These became "Letters of Sally Coffman to her Daughter Marilla, 1877, 1879, 1880". The other was a packet of letters from a mother in Kearney to her daughter who had gone off to college. These became a two-part article, "Letters to Nellie". Her research and writing of the two-part article on the first Greeks in Kearney led to a series of stories by other county residents about other ethnic groups who have settled here. Sometimes when there was no specific topic to write about, Alice would collect miscellaneous notes, do some more research and then write about what it was like 100 years ago. Thus she wrote about 1886, 1888, 1889, and 1890. These last two led to a story about the Kearney Boom.

The variety of articles continued. She wrote about the Rural Electrical Association in Buffalo County, the Post South Loup Fork (that's Ft. Banishment) and the New York to Paris Automobile Race in 1908. Then came stories about the West Nebraska Holiness Camp Meetings, churches in Buffalo County, a Kearney bank robbery, and Camp John R. Brooke and Camp Henry A. Morrow, the G.A.R. Reunion of 1888. There had always been confusion about the two camps and Alice did her best in these two articles to separate the information. Her last two stories were about Bico's Cafe' and the Empress and Fort Theaters.

When researching the history of Buffalo County a basic source is Samuel Bassett's *History of Buffalo County*, which was published in 1916. Alice Howell was the modern-day Samuel Bassett pulling together information about this county from a variety of sources—books, newspapers, letters, and personal interviews. We have inherited from Alice a vast collection of information about Buffalo County and its history.

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.

Dr. Mark R. Ellis, Editor

2001 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

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

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

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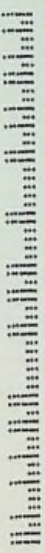
Dalton, Nebraska: Alice's birthplace.

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