

Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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THE AVIATION MEET Kearney's First Air Show

Vapor trails created by jet planes flying the Platte River route hardly rate a second glance today. But there was a time when the flight of an airplane over the city of Kearney was a rare occasion reported in the daily newspaper.

Summer, 1911 - William Howard Taft was president of the United States. The Senate passed a bill granting statehood to New Mexico and Arizona. The Crescent Theatre in Kearney was showing *The Atonement of Thias* and *The Panama Canal* in 1911, silent movies, of course. The marble work in the new Post Office at 24th and Central was almost completed. C. E. Barney, proprietor at Kearney Lake, advertised "fine boating and bathing. Come and spend a pleasant evening." Lomax and Fife advertised Storz Triumph beer. The Normal Grocery had flour for \$1.35 per sack (size of sack not specified). Women's skirts were ankle length, straight and sheathlike in appearance.

The most exciting event of the summer of 1911 in Kearney was the Aviation Meet. Aeroplanes were only seven years old and very few people in Kearney had actually seen one.

Aeroplanes had already come a long way from that first flight at Kitty Hawk in December, 1903. Within two years the Wright brothers had developed a more practical plane which could stay airborne for as long as a half hour. Among competitors who soon began to appear was the Aerial Experiment Association, formed by Alexander Graham Bell and his wife. They brought young Glenn H. Curtiss into their organization. Curtiss was a racing cyclist who had, like the Wright brothers,



Aeroplane in flight on August 9, 1911, above grounds west of the college. Note powerhouse and ice houses in background. (Continued on Page 3)

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:

Basic Membership	\$10.00
Institutional Membership	\$15.00
Supporting Membership	\$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

Officers and Directors: President, Margaret Hohnholt; Vice-President, Alice Howell; Secretary, Colleen Parker; Treasurer, Philip S. Holmgren. Directors: Glen E. Wisch, Frances Link, Barb Avery, Merlin Burgland, Minnette Steinbrink, Edna Hehner, Robert Stubblefield, Viola Livingston and Chandler Lynch III. Publications Chairman: Alice Howell.

WITH THE SOCIETY

Sunday, February 21. Monthly meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society at the Holiday Inn in Kearney, 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. "Briefing Session" on plans for the Kearney Army Air Base reunion co-sponsored by the Kearney Area Chamber of Commerce and the Historical Society.

We would like for you to bring stories of the Air Base, pictures (and help identify people in the pictures we already have), memorabilia which may be used for displays, and anything else you may think of. Even if you did not live in Buffalo County at the time the Air Base was in operation, it was a very important part of Buffalo County history, so do plan to attend.

Sunday, March 20. Monthly meeting at the Dawson County Historical Society Museum, 805 North Taft, Lexington, 2:30 p.m. Special exhibit, *Corn is King - Alfalfa is Queen*, and tour of the museum.

Message from President. The Buffalo County Historical Society held a meeting of concerned members Saturday, January 30 to address funding problems. The board recently discontinued the only paid position of Director of the Museum and has been looking at alternatives to continue to provide access to the museum and the special programs. Several creative ideas were mentioned, such as a Century Club to help provide operating funds and other goals, such as to eventually build a building on the museum grounds.

The board was gratified at the responses of the 25 people who attended the meeting and wants the public to know that the museum will be open thru the summer months and programs such as the one room country school program will be continued. The museum phone is being answered at a separate location and the museum is open by appointment until Memorial Day.

—Margaret Hohnholt, President

NEW LIFE MEMBERS

Norma E. Ahrendts	Kearney	Helen & Mike Stauffer	Kearney
Maynard Envick	Kearney	Mabel Vohland	Gibbon

1988 SUPPORTING MEMBERS

Wilma A. Larsen	Kearney	Mr. & Mrs. Richard Nutter	Gibbon
Ruth M. Anderson	Kearney	Mr. and Mrs. Edward Harvey	Gibbon
Robert & Lois Lawhead	Kearney	Violet E. Wensel	Gibbon
Doralene & Gordon Weed	Kearney	Dick & Barb O'Neill	Pleasanton
E. Mae Fritz	Phoenix, AZ	Betty Pabian	Ravenna

started a bicycle business. He wanted his bikes to go faster so he built engines to put on them. After joining the Aerial Experiment Association, he designed a biplane using his 30 horsepower Curtiss engine. When the Association dissolved the following year (1909) Curtiss took over some of the patents and designs and started his own company.

Enthusiasm for aviation was developing in Europe also. A young English pilot, Henry Farman, became one of Europe's most prominent aeroplane manufacturers. His Henry Farman biplane was a very popular sporting machine. Both the Farman and the second Curtiss plane which it resembled were developed in 1909.

The Farman and Curtiss planes, like most aeroplanes in those early days, were biplanes with one pair of wings built above the other. The entire plane was made of a wood framework, usually spruce, and wire braces. The wings were covered with silk or linen. A 30 to 100 horsepower engine was attached to the lower wings. Part of the framework extended out in the back to hold the tail rudder. Some models, including both the Farman and the Curtiss planes, also had a framework extending out in front to hold the forward controls. Two wheels were usually attached under the wings and one or two under the tail. The pilot sat in the open on the framework, usually on the wing in front of the engine.

The rival companies operated by the Wright brothers and by Glenn Curtiss hired teams of fliers in 1910 to tour the U.S. giving exhibition flights and promoting their aircraft. One of those exhibitions took place in Omaha that year. During the following summer these exhibitions reached central Nebraska. On July 18-19, 1911, the Hastings Chamber of Commerce sponsored an aviation meet by the Glenn Curtiss Exhibition company.

The meet was well advertised in the Kearney papers. Possibly to encourage a larger crowd, the first day of the exhibition was declared Kearney Day. Plans were made for a train of 30-40 autos to drive from Kearney to Hastings to see the air show. Kearney Auto company was going to run a supply car in the train to assist with any break-downs. A Kearney band was to ride along.

When the big day arrived, several dozen people went to Hastings by train because recent rains had made the roads so bad. Several autos left early. Only a dozen flag-decorated cars left Kearney together. They all separated after leaving the city, each taking his own route. The only two to arrive in Hastings together were a car which had broken down and was pulled into town by another Kearney car. One man reported seven blowouts on one tire on that trip from Kearney to Hastings.

Those who had traveled by train returned to Kearney with such glowing accounts of the air show that a larger crowd left the next morning by train. They enjoyed the air



Charles E. Oehler, Kearney lawyer, was secretary of the Commercial Club and responsible for making arrangements with the Glenn Curtiss' company for the Aviation Meet. At the time he was also a candidate for the position of County Judge in the fall elections.

show but most of them did not get back to Kearney until the following day because the Burlington Railroad did not have accommodations for passengers to make the return trip that evening.



Louisa Collins, 81, sat in the plane on August 9 but did not go up for a flight. Mrs. Collins was known as the Mother of Kearney because she and her husband Asbury were its first residents.

One week later it was announced that Kearney would have its own aviation meet. Charles E. Oehler, secretary of the Kearney Commercial Club which sponsored the event, met with Carl Johanson of the Curtiss Aeroplane company to draw up the agreement. The meet would be held the afternoon of Friday, August 4, 1911, at the Athletic park. The Athletic park was located between the present Kearney State College campus and the U. P. Railroad track, south of Highway 30, east of the tailrace. The aviator, Charles F. Walsh, would first explain his machine, a Farman aeroplane, and then give some flying demonstrations "of quick rising into the air, sharp turns, and easy descension, the like of which has never been seen at an aviation meet out of the big cities." Four flights were planned. Price of admission would be 50¢.

A baseball game with Columbus which had been scheduled for that afternoon at the Athletic park was rescheduled for 11 a.m. that same day. The Kearney & Black Hills Railroad was asked to run a special train from Callaway to Kearney, staying until the show was over. Apparently the Commercial Club did not want a repeat of the Hastings incident. Every day during the week before the air show new information appeared in the *Kearney Daily Hub* along with a summary of the information already published.

Saturday - The Commercial Club announced it had cloth aviation banners available to attach to one's auto to advertise the show. Anyone traveling out of town was encouraged to get one.

Monday - The ladies of the Evangelical Church announced they would serve a chicken dinner for 25¢ on Aviation Day.

Tuesday - Plans were being made for two passengers to be carried on at least one

of the flights. It was suggested that Commercial Club secretary, Charles Oehler, might be one of the passengers.

Wednesday - The Empire Store advertised its Aviation Sale of clothing and dry goods. The Union Pacific confirmed that it would run a special train from Callaway to replace the usual motor. It would arrive in Kearney at 10:30 a.m. and leave at 8 p.m. There would also be a special train leaving Grand Island at 9 a.m., returning from Kearney at 8 p.m. Grocers announced they would close their stores that afternoon so their employees could see the show.

Thursday - Aviator Walsh arrived in Kearney early in the morning with two "mechanicians"; his plane arrived about noon. No mention was made of how the men or the plane arrived but, since the "mechanicians" were "putting (the plane) together in the afternoon Thursday", one might conclude they had arrived by train. Company A of the Nebraska National Guard, the Norris Brown unit of Kearney, was asked to do guard duty during the aviation meet. They met that evening to plan their strategy. The Kearney Flour Mill and dry goods stores, as well as the grocery stores, planned to close for the afternoon. The *Hub* planned to go to press at 2:30. The gates would open at 2 p.m. on Friday, the show would begin at 3 p.m. with Mr. Walsh's explanation of the machine. This was to be followed by the flying demonstrations. Besides the 50¢ admission price, autos would be admitted for 50¢; tickets were on sale at Lee's Drug Store.

Friday - The *Hub*, printed before the air show, reported that special trains had arrived so crowded there was standing room only - about 100 people. A special train from the west brought another 600. Crowds were gathering at the field. Stores and manufacturing businesses closed at noon. The two "mechanicians" and Mr. Walsh had worked on the plane all morning. Mr. Walsh thought the weather would be fine for the flights. The National Guard was guarding the Athletic field. They had taken the fence down on the west end to provide plenty of space for the aviator to rise and land. Autos had been arriving in town all day. The restaurants were all very busy. Boarding houses and hotels were full of people who had arrived the night before.

The great day had finally arrived!

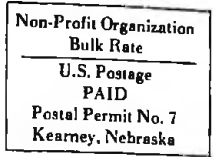
An estimated 5,000 people, including 1,000 from out of town, were gathered at the Athletic park. For most it was the first time they had ever seen an aeroplane.

Explanations completed, the aviator climbed aboard his plane for the first flight. He was not successful in getting off the ground so his "mechanicians" and some National Guardsmen dragged the machine back into place.

On the next try the plane traveled nearly 400 yards along the ground and then began to rise into the air. As the plane rose to a height of about 30 feet, the crowd cheered. Then the plane heeled over, the lower part of the frame caught a telephone wire, and the plane crashed into a cottonwood tree on the bank of the tailrace.

"For an instant the crowd stood noiseless and motionless and then with yells swooped down on the aviator and his broken machine," reported the *Kearney Daily Hub*. "The Norris Brown guards sprinted the distance to the wrecked aeroplane and formed a circle about Walsh and his working assistants. With fixed bayonets they kept the crowd back but the clamor for souvenirs became so great that in a few minutes Walsh gave them permission to take strips of the silken wings. In fifteen minutes the frame and planes were carried away."

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Walsh, who was not hurt, explained the accident. "If I had been going against the wind I could have made it higher in the air. The wind was from the east and as I was going west I could not raise. I felt the machine tilt and tried to right it but could not." What today seems to be basic rules of flying had to be learned through experience in those first years of air travel.

The people of the Kearney area were not to be disappointed. They would see an aeroplane fly. A new plane was ordered and the air show was rescheduled for Wednesday, August 9. Again articles about plans for the air show appeared in the *Hub*. This time the privilege of being a passenger on one flight was "promised to a Kearney girl who says she has the 'nerve' to fly."

The site of the aviation meet was changed to a bluegrass field immediately south of the Industrial School (Youth Development Center) and east of the cottonmill building. People were asked not to trample the new mown alfalfa field to the east which belonged to the Scout brothers.

No admission was charged for the show this time. The First Methodist Episcopal Church ladies aid meeting was postponed because of the aviation meet. Since the aviator had to stay in Kearney until the new plane arrived, he sent for his wife and children to join him here. They had been staying in Salt Lake City.

About 4,000 people turned out for the air show on August 9. This time it was a success from start to finish. A total of six flights were made. On one flight, Walsh took the plane up and headed toward Kearney, going as far as the Normal School (Kearney State College) before turning back. Two other flights also went to the edge of town and back. The first passenger Walsh carried was the Kearney girl with "nerve enough to fly". She was Miss Marguerite Scoutt, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. W. J. Scoutt. A. M. Easterling of the *Hub* was a passenger on another flight. During a third flight with passengers, two people were carried. One was Oliver G. Norton and the other was Curtis Oehler, son of Commercial Club secretary Charles Oehler.

The next morning the aviator, his "mechanicians" and their equipment left for Fremont to prepare for the next exhibition. Thus ended Kearney's first experience with aeroplanes. It was not to be the last.

SOURCES

Aviation; an Historical Survey from Its Origins to the end of World War II by Charles H. Gibbs-Smith (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office), 1970. *The Conquest of the Air* by Frank Howard and Bill Gunston (New York: Random House), 1972. *Kearney Daily Hub*, July 8 - August 12, 1911.