

# Buffalo Tales

March/April 2019

Buffalo County Historical Society

## Kearney's First Cemetery: Why a Community Decides to Move a Cemetery and Forget its Past, Part II

By: Cannon Marchand

Kearney Lake also becomes a satisfying answer to why the bodies at the first Kearney Cemetery would be moved by the city to the current cemetery. The lake was man-made with the creation of the Kearney Canal system in the early 1880s. The canal along with Kearney Lake was finished sometime in late 1885 or early 1886. The canal had the dual purpose of providing electric power to Kearney and providing irrigation to fields along the canal's flow. City boosters and leaders also saw another purpose for the lake that the canal had formed overlooking the city on the outskirts. They thought the lake could be turned into a recreational resort of sorts. This plan was highlighted in a story run in the Kearney Hub in July of 1889. In this article a large resort is proposed to compete with any other resort in Nebraska. It is thought that the space could attract businessmen as far away as Omaha to spend their vacation days in Kearney. The lake itself already had some amenities for recreation as early as 1887 in the form of an ice house, but the proposed ideas were more ambitious. The article describes proposed ideas for the lake to include a hotel, improved horse hitching, café, and bath houses for the lake.

Except for the community bathhouse these larger facilities would never actually take form, but the lake was used for recreational activities on a smaller scale. Also, large meetings would take place in the area. The first notable one was the aforementioned GAR reunion, but also community get-togethers known as Chautauquas. These get-togethers were a cross country phenomena in the U.S. in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They brought communities together to hear readings, musical performances, and inform people of political and local cultural happenings. The first Chautauqua in the U.S. happened in a lake resort in New York bearing the name of Chautauqua in 1875. Kearney wanted to also bring these kinds of events to the West, and Lake Kearney seemed like an ideal place for the happenings. A Hub article from 1889 described the lake as "far better than many noted summer resorts, and as good as the best. The air is pure and free from all malaria, and the water is of the best known. Add to the coolness of the lake, the comfortable accommodations furnished on the grounds, the precautionary conditions of health." The Chautauquas would happen around Lake Kearney and provide entertainment and recreation to the community.

However, there was a problem with developing Lake Kearney into a resort location, or rather, at least thirty-two known problems. These were the graves and burial grounds that were located above the lake. It is understandable that a cemetery could dampen the feelings of recreation and joy. Large get-togethers for Chautauquas and GAR reunions might find a cemetery to be in the way. Perhaps even more of a problem, at least to the people of the time, were health concerns. People of the time did not have a modern sense of medicine and even though bodies of the time were often embalmed, they were seen as spreaders of disease. In fact, there was a trend in nineteenth century America to move cemeteries out of urban centers to the fringes of settlement to prevent supposed spreading of diseases

from corpses. It would seem to Kearneyites and Americans of the time paradoxical to speak of the health surrounding Kearney Lake if there was a cemetery nearby. In a hard to explain part of a Hub article about bringing Chautauquas to Kearney it is mentioned, in reference to Kearney Lake, that, "In fact the assembly will have all the institutions of civilized life save one, it has no cemetery." This is an odd point for the Hub to make as the article was written in early July of 1889 and the bodies were disinterred and moved in August of 1889. It would seem that this was a lie. Even though the bodies buried at the site of the lake had only been there for a short period of time, twenty years at most, that was too long. For a young western community filled with boosterism and a desire for forward progress and thinking and better things, an old burial ground filled with dead that were tied to early deaths from the harshness of frontier life would have been a bad scar on the landscape to the people at the time. Lake Kearney as a resort and Kearney as a community wanted to move forward. It is for that reason the bodies were moved in August 1889 to the current cemetery, which was at that time far on the outskirts of Kearney.

If the cemetery was indeed on the land north of Kearney Lake, the next logical question is who was buried there, and why did they represent a more undesired frontier past from which boosters and the people of Kearney were trying to distance themselves. The city cemetery interment records offer some information by noting the bodies that were moved from the "old cemetery by Lake Kearney" and sometimes a description of the remains. Unfortunately, of the thirty-two known bodies disinterred from the grounds only eight are named. The rest are unknown. Two of the bodies moved were James Allen, now at lot 811, and Annie McEntire also known as Mame, at 909. They have no headstones and are laid to rest in unmarked graves with the rest of the unknown bodies from the cemetery above Lake Kearney. It is possible when D. M. Swisher, the cemetery Sexton, put out notice that he was moving the bodies, that these two had families who provided their information but could not afford new permanent stone markers and their own lots. The next individual with a known grave is Mary Elizabeth Graback. She was five at the time of her death in 1875. Her description in the interment records made note of her "marble slab" and the fact she was disinterred from the old cemetery. She is buried next to the other unmarked graves from the old cemetery and is perhaps known only because of the quality of the stone marker her parents bought for her after her death.

The next known grave belongs to Julia Ann Webb and her mother Mrs. A.L. Webb who presumably died during childbirth. Webb and her daughter are interesting for a few reasons. Most notable is that they are not buried by the rest of the bodies that came from the cemetery. They are buried in a more central location of the current cemetery and have a large and most likely expensive marker. The location and expense of the marker can be explained by the fact Mr. A.L. Webb was a mayor of Kearney in the early 1870s. This is intriguing because it means that individuals of higher social status were buried at the cemetery north of Kearney Lake.

The last three known bodies are the most interesting and all died together. They are Eugene L. Leake, Ben Hildebrand, and W. H. Bell. The three were citizens of Gibbon who in 1873 were on a hunting and trapping trip along the Loup river in Buffalo county. According to a Hub story of the event, they never returned and a search party was sent out to find them. The Hub reported that they were found massacred by the "red skins" and that little was known of their death. Attributing the killing to Indians is a convenient excuse for the time when people died under unknown circumstances. It is impossible to say whether Indians did murder them or not, but there is also they were murdered by other white criminals on the plains too. When the bodies were disinterred a record was kept describing characteristics of the bodies being moved, mostly likely in hopes the bodies might be identified later. What the Hub does not report the interment records do--that all three were shot in the head or had damage to their skulls as if they were executed. This is an interesting manner of death for Native Americans or some other group to commit. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding their death, Bell and Hildebrand are both buried in the unmarked mass grave with the rest of the bodies moved from the old cemetery on the far end of the current cemetery. Leake is more fortunate. He was the brother of a prominent judge and apparently from a more affluent family. His grave along with that of the Webbs is the only other grave not located with the other relocated bodies. Leake's plot is in the middle of the current cemetery in a family grave. His family marker is a large obelisk that no doubt would have been very costly for the time.

The rest of the bodies are all unknown except for brief descriptions in the city interment records. One body is completely unknown of either sex or age. Twelve unknown children and infants are buried in the mass grave. One is noted as being "colored". Four

infants are, interestingly, all buried together. One of the infants had a seven pointed star plate, one a small walnut coffin, and one had a purple ribbon band on her shroud. All of these descriptions and the fact they are children and infants leaves one with feelings of sadness and a reminder of the high degree of infant and child mortality at the time. People moved so often back then and had little access to wealth to afford the more permanent markers made from stone versus wood. There probably was no one to remember many of them by the time they were moved in 1889.

Beyond the young there were ten unknown men and seven unknown women. One of the men buried is described as being interred wearing "Knit shirt and drawers small black neck tie". Another man was described as "well preserved, mustache, goatee dark hair," and another as wearing "Heavy brown clothes, cap on head". One man's body was described as being placed in a black walnut coffin and that he had light long hair and was wearing red flannel drawers. This particular body also was thought to be possibly the remains of Ally Smith. One more man was described as being "Very large, small grave". One of the unknown men had a coffin with a glass viewing portal over his face, but no other descriptors. One last man is described as having sandy hair. One of the women is described as having artificial teeth and also having a glass portal over her face on her coffin. Another woman is described as having five artificial teeth and wearing a small barred dark silk dress. A woman buried next to her was wearing a "Green Delaine dress trimmed with black". The women next to her: "Black walnut coffin, round black rubber comb and black bow at neck". The final woman with a description is just described as having light hair and being marked by I.B. Wanbough and Dr. Brown. It may seem slightly macabre or disturbing to go to the effort of listing the details of the unknown that were disinterred to the current Kearney cemetery, but they have only these cataloged facts to replace their name. They have no one to remember them. So at least they have something as they are listed above.

Some important conclusions can be drawn from the diversity of those that were buried at the old cemetery. The first is that they are not all connected other than the fact that they were buried at the same location. From this we learn that it was not a family grave site. The next fact learned is the income difference of those buried there. Leake and the Webbs were from the upper parts of Kearney society, while unknown individuals without stone markers would be more towards the middle and lower classes. Also, the one unknown "colored" infant is interesting as the African American population of Kearney of the time would have been small and mixed-race burial grounds were also not always common at the time. When looking at the demographics of the bodies that were removed they are reflective of the larger community of Kearney at the time. The distribution of men to women and the understandable high infant mortality.

The conclusion that must be drawn from all these different people united by their shared burial ground and the fact the city of Kearney paid for their disinterment is that they were buried at what should be considered Kearney's first community cemetery that was located north of what is now Kearney Lake. Kearney in the late nineteenth century could best be described as hopeful and full of ambition. The members of the community had high hopes to become the beacon of civilization on the plains and a city imbued with the same elements of refined culture as Eastern communities. The people of Kearney in the late 1800s did not have to time to look back or remember where they were yesterday. The cemetery was moved because it was on land made more valuable by the creation of Kearney Lake, but also because it represented that harsh life and reality of frontier living.

In truth the development of Kearney could also be used as a case study for the wider phenomenon of "Wild West" transitioning to be the developed Western United States. The boosters that were trying to build Kearney into something grand were not served well by having a reminder of that harsh life present next to Kearney Lake that they wished to turn into a resort. Those graves were better off put in an unmarked plot in the new municipal cemetery to be forgotten. The young and unknown who perished during the founding years of Kearney deserve more thoughts of respect from today's community. They deserve more than just an unmarked plot of grass as they have today. These individuals represent an important part of the early history of Kearney and U.S. that should not be left unknown. In a quote attributed to William Gladstone it is said, "Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respects for the laws of the land and their loyalty to high ideals." The question could be asked if the people of Kearney did and are still living according to high ideals by allowing an unmarked mass grave of its founding citizens to exist in perpetuity?

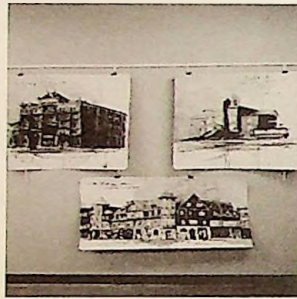
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### Director's Report—Jennifer Murrish

We put a plea out on Facebook and via email for funding to frame these beautiful pieces that were created by Donn Guge, son of Bob & Norma Guge, in 1976. Each image is 30 in x 40 in. Thanks for the gracious donations provided by Marcia Welch, Corene Phillips, Elaine Batenhorst, Mardi Anderson, Geraldine Walter Brewer, and an anonymous donor. You can see the amazing difference that the frames added. Thank you for helping us preserve and share these fun, gorgeous pieces of art!



The 2018 attendance was finalized and we ended up with 6,509 guests for 2018. This truly reflects having 11th Street closed during our entire busy season. We had 12,534 in 2017, but that was when we opened the FHC and we were on the Nebraska Passport program. For a truer comparison, we had 7,517 in 2016. The rest of the attendance numbers, by year, are listed below:

#### Attendance Numbers:

- 2004: 1811
- 2005: 3356
- 2006: 5321 (150th Anniversary of Mormon Trek during Wagons West)
- 2007: 4440
- 2008: 4463
- 2009: 6636 (Smithsonian Exhibit, New Harmonies, in August)
- 2010: 5928
- 2011: 7589
- 2012: 8676 (Smithsonian Exhibit, Journey Stories, in June)
- 2013: 8042
- 2014: 6498 (closed holidays and an extra week at Thanksgiving)
- 2015: 6620
- 2016: 7517
- 2017: 12,534 (new Family History Center opened & Neb. Passport program participant)
- 2018: 6509 (11th Street was closed during the entire summer)

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(Contact Trails & Rails Museum for more information on becoming an Engineer)

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Blake Weeder, Editor

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