



Buffalo Tales



Volume 20, No. 2

Buffalo County Historical Society

March-April, 1997

JOHN PESEK — THE WRESTLER FROM RAVENNA

by Valerie Vierk, Mary Lee Pesek and Geoffrey Pesek

The man who would one day be named World Heavyweight Champion came from humble beginnings. John Pesek was born on February 2, 1894, nine miles south of Ravenna to Bohemian parents, Martin and Anna (Ruzicka) Pesek. Two older sisters, Daisy and Emma, and two brothers, Frank and Albert, had preceded John, and twin brothers, Hubert and Charlie followed.

Life was difficult on the prairie, but this grueling physical labor prepared John for his career in wrestling. One of the greatest hardships for this pioneer family came on a cool, May evening in 1906. After a week of unseasonably cold temperatures, the weather suddenly changed, and from the black sky a devastating tornado dropped, striking the little homestead, destroying every building. During the storm's fury young John was actually lifted up by the "cyclone", tossed about and carried a considerable distance. This terrifying experience stayed with John, and for the rest of his life he had tremendous respect for gathering storm clouds.

A few weeks later, John's father, Martin, was coming home with a load of lumber to rebuild the farm when the wagon upset, pinning Martin under the lumber and killing him within a few minutes. Now Anna was alone with seven children to feed.

The boys had to become men quickly in order to work the farm. And between the five brothers, there was no lack of wrestling and rough-housing. In the summer when the threshing crews were assembled, wrestling matches for entertainment would often spring up during the noon hours. Young John quickly proved to be a force to be reckoned with.

Traveling carnivals also attracted the local youths who were encouraged to challenge the carnival strong men. One day a farm boy in overalls stepped up to

(Continued on Page 3)



John Pesek 1894 - 1978

WITH THE SOCIETY

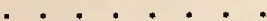
A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:

Our Annual Meeting is on April 20th. We really need to have all of our members present at this meeting, as we have some very important decisions to make and election of new Board members.

We will be taking part in the Hub sponsored "Kids Explore" on April 19th and 20th, and you may receive a call and be asked to volunteer to help.

We've had a couple interesting programs recently on the Mormon trek across Nebraska. Hope all of you will participate in the activities in the area the first week in May. So you can see we have a very busy Spring and early Summer coming up.

On June 7th, we will have our annual Wagon's West on the Museum grounds.



REMEMBER the Annual Meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society on Sunday, April 20, at Apple Annie's, 1010 3rd Avenue, Kearney. Business meeting will start at 4:00 o'clock and a 5:30 dinner will be served. A program will follow the dinner with Carl Spelts speaking on plans and ideas for Kearney's Q-125 celebration in 1998. Carl is chairman of the Q-125 event.

Cost of the dinner is \$8.00 and reservations must be made by April 16 and paid for in advance. Send check to Buffalo County Historical Society, P.O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848.



RURAL ROUTE MEMBERS in Buffalo County: Please be sure to send your change of address to us. A new mailing list will be ready for the next issue of *Buffalo Tales*. Many of you have advised us of your new addresses, but some have not. Please send to Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848.



MEMORIAL GIFTS have been received in memory of Bonnie Clabaugh from Mardi Anderson, Catharine Bahnsen, Leland Bredthauer, Pauline Cepel, Betty Clabaugh, John and Jean Clabaugh, John and Peggy Clabaugh, Harvey and Lois Cole, Robert and Lucile Cole, Charles and Janelle Davis, Janet Eickmeier, Sam and Mildred Forney, Helen Frazer, Jean Gallant, Kay Grone, Robert and Karen Harp, Joan Hartman, Philip Holmgren, Elmer and Margaret Holzrichter, Alice Howell, Archie and Emma Kring, Gary Lambert, Wilma Larsen, Pamela Long, David and Margaret Martin, Tom and Mercedes Michels, Maxine Miller, Leon and Nancy Narvaez, Marj Newlon, Virginia Parrish, Tom and Debra Pratt, Jerold and Ardith Ransdell, Phyllis Roberts, Nina Russell, Dwight and Brenda Schneider, Jacqueline Schutt, Maurice Sergeant, Marjorie Silkett, Lorange and June Smith, E.L. and Marjorie Sommer, C.D. Tillson, Evelyn Triplett, Clayton and Ethelean True, Margaret Tunks, Donna Vahling, Lawrence and Ardella Webb, Winona Whitney and Paul and Gertrude Wilhelmy; a total of \$1,175.00.



NEW LIFE MEMBERS

Ruth Payne, Kearney

Margaret McClure, Kearney

NEW BASIC MEMBERS

Julie Brooker, Kearney

Vivian I. Pope, Shelton

Mary Margaret Wing, Kearney

Gloria Rader, Portland, OR

challenge the experienced carnival champion and beat him. After that no one underestimated young Pesek.

John's reputation grew, and before too long wrestlers were coming to central Nebraska to see what all the talk was about, if the young Pesek was really as quick and strong as his reputation. The talk proved correct. In the little towns of Ravenna, Gibbon and Shelton, Pesek met and defeated many of the top wrestlers of the day. There was a lot of excitement on the days of the matches. Special trains were run from Lincoln and Omaha to carry the fans.

In 1914 one of Pesek's first prominent matches was held at Gordon, Nebraska. He was matched against a well known professional wrestler, Wladek Zbyszko. Pesek weighed 175 pounds against the 250 pound Zbyszko. When Pesek defeated Zbyszko, he was entering the "big time" competition, and his ability began to be recognized by the wrestling world. A number of years ago the family was given a newspaper clipping from this match showing a picture of Pesek surrounded by a dozen Native American chiefs in full regalia.

One of the most famous matches was in Madison Square Garden in 1926 against the huge Marin Plestina. The referees declared Pesek the winner when they thought Plestina was stalling, when in fact he was being severely mauled by the much smaller Pesek.

On February 14, 1921, Pesek married Myrl Mahoney. Seven children were eventually born to this marriage: Elizabeth, Jack, Virginia, Mary Lee, Kevin, Catherine and Steve. In the early years, Mrs. Pesek often traveled with her husband, but as the family grew, she stayed at home, and the children helped run the farm. In addition to presiding over her children, Mrs. Pesek meticulously recorded the pedigrees of the champion greyhounds.



"Tiger Man"

Pesek was first dubbed the "Tiger Man" by an Omaha sports writer. It was a perfect characterization as Pesek had the grace of movement, the cunning, the spring, the lithe muscles and the flexibility of the jungle beast. He had also learned acrobatic hand springs and vaults from a traveling circus performer early in his youth that later aided him in his wrestling matches. Pesek's prime weight was 180-185 and he stood just a shade under 6'. Almost always he would wrestle much larger men, but often it seemed that their greater weight put them at a disadvantage against the agile Pesek.

Many documented accounts of Pesek's great strength exist. He could bend an iron bar and often took the curves out of horseshoes, but he used speed and leverage as well. In 1920 he traveled to San Francisco for a bout with Jim Londos, a favorite of the day. While in San Francisco, he performed a stunt to demonstrate his strength. He laid down and let a fully loaded car pass over his abdomen several times with no apparent harm. A man from Cairo remembered another incident of Pesek's strength.

The man was having his hair cut in Elfman's barber shop when he noticed a couple struggling to get their car backed away from the curb. It was winter and the car had become jammed in an ice rut. Pesek happened along the street, bent down and simply lifted the front of the car up to free it.

In the 1920's Pesek encountered the "trust clique," the promoters who controlled wrestling in those days. Pesek was a "straight shooter" who believed the best man should win, and that would determine the true champion. Often the trust didn't see it that way, and Pesek was often "disciplined" by not being booked for title matches. Many considered Pesek the rightful premier of all heavyweights, but he was often denied the opportunity to display his true ability.

The high point of Pesek's career was his triumphant tour of Australia in 1929. He sailed from British Columbia with his manager, Al Haft; trainer, Clarence Eckland and a few other wrestlers. They stopped off in New Zealand where Pesek easily defeated the reigning British Isles champion, George Walker. This set off a wave of excitement in Australia. The Australian champs, Jim Browning and the great Ad Santel grew a little uneasy when they heard the "Tiger" was coming to town.

Pesek's matches with these two men filled the stadiums in Sidney and Melbourne. Pesek won 47 bouts in a row with various wrestlers. The Australians loved and revered the American. Forty years later, when Pesek's son, Jack, also toured Australia, the elder Pesek was still remembered fondly.

In the 20's, Pesek already had a kennel of part breed stag hounds/greyhounds. While in Australia, he purchased a much heralded greyhound, "Just Andrew" for an exorbitant price. He was considered the fastest greyhound in Australia at the time. When Pesek sailed for home, the great dog was with him, along with the . . . "best wishes of Australian sportsmen for the success of his dog." "Just Andrew" was the first greyhound ever imported from Australia, and it proved to be a wise decision, for he revolutionized greyhound racing with his offspring. In 1975 "Just Andrew" was inducted into the Greyhound Hall of Fame in Abilene, Kansas. Approximately thirty of his offspring also share this honor. A survey done by the American Greyhound Association in 1978 stated that approximately 80% of the greyhounds racing were descended from "Just Andrew".

Pesek also imported "Gangster" and this dog also proved to be a champion, winning six national championships. In 1933 "Gangster" won the classic prize of dog racing, the Waterloo cup. He shared the honor with two other kennelmates, "Curly" and "Rusty Andrew". At the presentation, Mr. D.G. Smith paid tribute to Pesek and his dogs:

"Some years ago a great world's champion athlete, who had vanquished everything in the northern world, crossed the equator and went to the "land below" seeking new worlds to conquer. After accomplishing his purpose he returned with the great Australian greyhound, "Just Andrew", and promised that he would revolutionize the greyhounds of America. The dividing of the Waterloo Cup three deep, the dividing of the Futurity, the winning of the Sapling and practically all special stakes amply justify this statement and prove it to have been no idle boast. We see no greyhounds today that can compete with the kennel of Mr. Pesek. It appears that in the future, national coursing Meets will be, not contests of the supremacy of one kennel over another, but rather contests of the supremacy of the individuals of the Pesek kennel."

In 1964 "Gangster" was enshrined in the Greyhound Hall of Fame in Abilene, Kansas.

Pesek himself was enshrined in 1978 for his contributions to greyhound racing.

Although Pesek continued to train in the gymnasium on his farm, he now focused more attention on greyhound racing. In the 30's his kennel became known as one of the finest in the nation. At one time there were approximately 200 dogs being trained

by John's younger brother, Charlie.

Pesek built his own racetrack on his land along the Loup River. He also dug a lake where he could train by rowing. He stocked his lake with game fish, and in the surrounding trees roamed several species of exotic birds that he had brought back from his tours of Cuba, Florida and South America. Among these were the regal peacocks and golden pheasants. Pesek also raised Canada geese, and these were probably his favorites.

In September, 1936, the National Wrestling Association of America attempted to determine who should be given the title of Heavyweight World Champion as several were clamoring for the title. Twenty of the best were named, which included Pesek. Each man was to post \$1,000, then elimination matches would be scheduled. Pesek was the only man to post the money. After the deadline passed and the N.W.A. remained strangely silent, the Hon. L.B. Hokuf, Nebr. Athletic Commissioner, pressed the N.W.A. to declare Pesek World Champion. The N.W.A. answered that champions were made in the ring, not on paper. The association seemed to have forgotten that Pesek had repeatedly agreed to meet all challengers, but none had stepped forward.

In December, 1936 Pesek posted \$2,500 guaranteed to meet and defeat, in one night, three recognized "champions". The challenge remained unanswered.

In 1937, Pesek was belatedly awarded the title of Heavyweight World Champion. It was a title many felt had been denied him far too long. He continued to wrestle through the 30's, 40's and 50's.

He wrestled all over the United States, but no matter how far he ventured, Ravenna was always home. Often the Ravenna band would meet him at the train station to welcome him home. And for his family and friends, Pesek brought gifts, including black opals when he returned from Australia.

In 1957 he was inducted into the Nebraska Sports Hall of Fame.

He stepped into the ring for the last time in his hometown of Ravenna in 1959, where he shared the card with his son, Jack, also a professional wrestler. John quickly pinned a big policeman from Kansas City. After the match the city fathers presented John with a gold watch and expressed once more, their appreciation for their hometown athlete who had "put Ravenna on the map."

Mrs. Pesek died in January, 1966, and in 1971 John moved into Ravenna. Here he continued to train, riding his three wheel bike, and cruising in his gold cadillac.

In the summer of 1977, a local sculptor, Nick Moffet began a 3/4 scale sculpture of Pesek and two of his greyhounds. Two papers carried the story and donations began to flood in, for his fans had not forgotten the Tiger. The statue still stands on the main street of Ravenna.

On Sunday morning, March 12, 1978, while Pesek was having breakfast with his two oldest children, Elizabeth and Jack, he was suddenly stricken with a heart attack. Elizabeth, a registered nurse, attempted to revive him, but the champion was gone. Four days later his eight grandsons carried him to his final resting place at Highland Cemetery just west of Ravenna. Here he lies beside his wife of forty-five years. Their graves are only a mile northwest of their home that had been a hub of activity for so long.

SOURCES

The Life and Times of "Nebraska Tigerman" John Pesek written by Jack and Mary Lee Pesek, 1978; *The Ravenna News*, June 6, 1906; *Greyhound Stud Book*, Vol. XXVI, 1933; and *Greyhound Racing Record*, Vol. III, No. 49, December 16, 1949.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This article was submitted by Valerie Vierk, a granddaughter of John Pesek. She was assisted by Mary Lee Pesek, a daughter of John and by Geoffrey Pesek, a grandson of John.

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.

1996 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, 1997: Mardi Anderson, Janet Eickmeier, Minnette Steinbrink, Susan Underhill.

Term expiring June 1, 1998: Merlin Burgland, Larry Nansel, Janeen Vokoun, Jack Cudaback

Term expiring June 1 1999: Wilma Harder, Helen Kinnaman, Margaret Hohnholt, Mark Hadenfeldt.

Officers (1 year term)

- President Larry Nansel
- Vice-President Merlin Burgland
- Secretary Susan Underhill
- Treasurer Mardi Anderson

TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM

Spring finds us getting ready for the 1997 season. Many of our displays this summer will feature the 150th memorial of the Mormon Trail. These will have started by the time we open and I hope many of you are taking part in them. Of course the school program will be starting soon. Schools requesting times for tours should be aware that April 21-May 1 has been reserved for the Kearney Public Schools 4th grades.

We will be participating in the KIDS EXPLORE—A Family Festival of Fun and Learning, to be held at UNK Cushing Coliseum Fieldhouse, April 19 and 20. The Mormon Trail Wagon Train will be in Kearney at the Fairgrounds on May 7. Watch your paper for information. Our own Wagons West will be held June 7th. This will also celebrate the Mormon Trail. Many of the trails merged at or near Kearney. We are looking forward to an exciting summer.

— Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

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

Buffalo County Historical Society
Box 523
Kearney, NE 68848-0523
Address Correction Requested

Non-Profit Organization Bulk Rate	U.S. Postage PAID
	Postal Permit No. 7 Kearney, Nebraska