

Buffalo Tales



July/August 2013

Politics, the President and God:

Harry S. Truman's 1948 Whistle-Stop Tour Comes to Kearney (part 1)

By Ross Huxell

As the sun began to rise in the early morning hours of June 6, 1948, more than 2,500 enamored spectators began crowding around the Kearney railway station to catch a glimpse of the train procession due to arrive in town at precisely 10:50 a.m. Many of the eager audience members had slept in their cars the previous night after having traveled more than 100 miles for the occasion. Several news reporters "from all over the country" snaked their way to the front of the crowd to vie for the most advantageous position along the tracks. After having waited for nearly two hours in the summer sun, the anxious onlookers grew frenetic when they spotted a "pilot train composed of a large steam engine and four cars" making its way into the station. This "pilot train," typically sent five miles ahead of the main procession, insured "the safety of the tracks" farther down the line for the special campaign train that followed behind. At 10:47 a.m., exactly three minutes ahead of schedule, a 17-car train came to a halt at the Kearney railway station and out stepped from the last car in the procession a man wearing "a light tan suit." This man, of course, was President Harry S. Truman. Although Truman's visit to Kearney during his 1948 Whistle-Stop Tour "missed its mark of being a political success," his visit to Kearney was undoubtedly one of the greatest religious and social events in the city's history.

For over a century, many historic notables have passed through Kearney. Beginning in 1872, during the early years of the nascent community, Russia's Grand Duke Alexis passed through with Philip Sheridan and George A. Custer en route to their now-famous buffalo hunt led by Bill Cody. Most of Kearney's notable visitors, however, have been well-known politicians: Theodore Roosevelt, William Jennings Bryan, William Howard Taft, Warren G. Harding (funeral train passing through Kearney), Richard Nixon, John and Robert Kennedy, and most recently, Bill Clinton. Aside from the politicians and presidents to have passed through Kearney, a 66-ton whale named "Big Bertha" lumbered through town in a custom-made steel railroad car in 1930. One year prior to Big Bertha's visit, Leo, the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) lion, also "roared" through town. In keeping with national celebrities and personalities, citizens caught a glimpse of another famous face when the cowboy actor Tom Mix and his horse, Tony, made an appearance in the early 1930s. And, yet, even though this record of notable visitors is vast and impressive, President Truman's visit in 1948 stands out as nonpareil amongst them.

It had remained a bit of a mystery as to whether the president would actually stop in Kearney or continue straight through the town

en route to another planned stop farther west at North Platte, Nebraska. It was *known*, however, that President Truman would attend a World War I reunion with the 35th Division in Omaha on Saturday, June 5, but the immediate details subsequent to this event remained somewhat of an enigma for security purposes. News reporters carefully used words such as "rumored" and "assumed" in their daily news articles throughout the first week in June. There was a good chance the presidential party would stop in either Kearney or Grand Island to attend church services on Sunday, June 6, but the general public remained "kept in the dark by those in charge of arrangements."

Behind the scenes concealed from the public eye, preparations for President Truman's campaign moved forward. As early as the first week in May, the many cogs in the president's wheel of security came together and began planning for a possible stop in Kearney: Chief of the Secret Service, James J. Maloney; the White House Secret Service overseer, Jim Rowley; and the Chief of the Omaha Secret Service, Fremont E. Strout. As this bevy of security personnel began hammering out the details, they dispatched a U.S. Secret Service agent named Howard Anderson replete with a three-man team to make "more definitive arrangements." While on this "furtive mission," the U.S. Secret Service deemed it best to only include "ministers of the affected churches and possibly some of the city officials" in the web of local citizens who "will receive advance notice" of the president's possible visit. Yet, despite these necessary plans of precaution and measures of security, no one knew for sure (not even the Secret Service detail) if the president would stop in Grand Island or Kearney to attend church.

Owing to the president's rumored desire to attend church in one of these two cities, Reverend Vernon Pearson of the First Baptist Church in Kearney received a phone call from a local newspaper editor explaining to him the Associated Press was reporting Kearney as the president's scheduled place of worship on June 6. Unwilling to rely on "secondhand contacts" and his nerves getting the best of him, Rev. Pearson sent a wire to President Truman, who was Baptist, cordially inviting him to worship at the First Baptist Church in Kearney. Shortly thereafter, Rev. Pearson received a personal letter of thanks from President Truman in which he instructed the reverend to "plan his regular service" and to refrain from inserting anything relating to politics into his worship service. Aside from these guidelines set forth by the president, out of "necessary uncertainty," he would neither confirm nor deny the rumors of his possible visit to Kearney — the reverend and the city of Kearney would have to anxiously wait to see if these rumors would come to fruition.

As weeks passed by and the purported arrival date of President Truman neared, on June 5 the *Kearney Hub* reported "there has been rather grudging admittance that Mr. Truman would attend church here, and that is about all." That night, as most Kearneyites lay asleep in their beds, Rev. Pearson received a telephone call at midnight. The man on the other end of the line instructed him to meet him at the church immediately. Upon the reverend's arrival, he was amazed to see a large group of shadowy figures had already made their way to the First Baptist Church. The mayor of Kearney, Art Johnson, was present, as was the chief of police, the county sheriff, a detective from the Union Pacific Railroad, and members of the ever-present U.S. Secret Service. The security force surveyed the building, taking special notice of its exits and entrances. The men selected a pew in the back of the church where

the president, his wife, and his daughter were to be seated the following morning. The pew directly in front of, and to the rear of the president's, was to be reserved for secret servicemen. Also, the security detail made it known the president could not, at any point during the church service, sit under any hanging lights, nor would they permit the large tapestry hanging in the rear of the church to remain up during the service for fear of a potential assailant using it as a hiding spot. This "midnight meeting" at the church, then, was to serve as the "official notice" of President Truman's June 6 visit to Kearney.

By the time President Truman's train pulled into town that morning at 10:47 a.m., more than 10,000 spectators had gathered at the rail station and church hoping to at least catch a glimpse of the president. As the train crawled to a stop at the station, President Truman, along with his wife Bess and daughter Margaret, appeared from their special car located at the end of the train. This special car, named the *Ferdinand Magellan*, had originally been constructed for President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the early 1940s. Aside from being a "luxury car," this behemoth tipped the scales at more than 142 tons, spanned more than 80 feet in length, came equipped with an escape hatch, and provided protection to its occupants with three-inch-thick bulletproof glass. As the president and his family exited the platform and made their way into an awaiting brown convertible car, the Secret Service did their best to prevent the crowd from snapping pictures. Also assisting the U.S. Secret Service with "crowd control" was the Kearney Police Department, six members of the Nebraska Highway Patrol, nine officers from the Hastings Police Department, and ten military policemen from the Kearney Air Base. This transition from rail to motorcade went off without a hitch, with the exception of a secret serviceman inadvertently pinching one of Margaret's toes as he adjusted his seat. Through a sea of waving hands and cheering applause, the presidential motorcade of nearly 12 vehicles proceeded to the First Baptist Church where Reverend Pearson was nervously preparing for the 11 a.m. worship service.

A large crowd of news reporters and photographers had already gathered at the church eagerly awaiting the president's arrival. Earlier in the week, in order to insure members of the congregation would have a seat in church should the president happen to attend Sunday morning service there, Rev. Pearson had given out special tickets of admittance for his regular parishioners; those without them would be turned away at the door. To this end, Kearney resident Clarence Brooks was charged with "keeping the back door barred." In fact, "this may have been the only time a Kearney church had ever turned people away." By the time the president arrived at the church, it had already reached its 300-member capacity. The church was so full many worshippers had to stand throughout the entire service. Other members had to make do as well: Mrs. Art Johnson, the wife of Kearney's mayor, was not permitted to sit with her husband in a pew directly behind the president due to security measures. And, yet, regardless of these inconvenient vicissitudes, the lucky few to have been "admitted" to church were just happy to be inside the building no matter what the circumstances. Some of the "outsiders" such as Catholic resident Mr. Howard H. Nims, went so far as to wire Pope Pius XII and ask for permission to attend the First Baptist Church on June 6. Producing a telegram as proof, Nims told the *Kearney Hub* the pope had denied his request citing he (the pope) had "too much respect for the Baptist Church in Kearney. Permission refused." Yet, others tried more "duplicitous means" to gain entry into the church that day. Rowena Bissell, whose daughter was a member of the choir, recalled how "everyone tried to get in the choir; it was exceptionally large that day."

Sources:

Buffalo County Historical Society Archives (President Truman's File Folder)
 Harry S. Truman Presidential Library

The story of President Truman's visit to Kearney will continue in the September/October 2013 issue of Buffalo Tales!

7th Annual Trivia Contest

Get a team together of your smartest friends on Tuesday, August 27th from 6-9:30pm for the 7th Annual Trivia Contest at the Merryman Theater! Cost is \$10/person and teams can be up to 8 people. Sign up to win raffle prizes and look for the trail mix buffet, also!



3rd Annual Old-Fashioned Halloween Party



Halloween is right around the corner and so is the 3rd Annual Old-Fashioned Halloween Party at the Trails & Rails!
 Get your little ghouls and goblins ready on October 26th for games, trick-or-treating, and a costume contest!

New Family History Center

Below is a picture of the new family history center being planned to enhance BCHS/Trails & Rails Museum. It will house the archives, offices, gift shop, and displays.



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Katherine Wielechowski, Editor

2013 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Individual.....	\$35.00
Family.....	\$40.00
Institutional Membership.....	\$50.00
Supporting Membership.....	\$75.00
Silver Engineer.....	\$125.00
Gold Engineer.....	\$250.00

We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.

Directors

Term expiring June 1, 2014: Mary Beth Lowe, Sharon Martin, Duane Muhlbach, Mike Peak

Term expiring June 1, 2015: Corene Phillips, Dan Speirs, Gary Straatmann, Bernie Hascall

Term expiring June 1, 2016: Dr. Roger Davis, Lance Hehner, Matt O'Callaghan, Jan Rodehorst

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2013 Calendar of Events

Tuesday, August 27th from 6-9:30pm: 7th Annual Trivia Contest & Dinner

Saturday, Oct. 26 (time TBD): 3rd Annual Old-fashioned Halloween Party

Monday, November 11 at 7pm (location TBD): Unveiling of new Veteran's Display (ceremony/unveiling at _____ & then the display will be at the Trails & Rails Museum for a year, until the next vets are honored)

All of November: Christmas Decorating (during regular business hours)

Saturday, November 30 from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 26th Annual Christmas Tree Walk

First two weekends in Dec. (Nov. 30/Dec.1 and Dec. 7/8) from 1-5 pm: Open to the public: 26th Annual Christmas Tree Walk

Education notes:

Fabulous Fridays will continue to be held on the 2nd Friday of each month.

Kearney Public Schools have the museum reserved for two weeks in May 2013!!

Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

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We hope you enjoy these stories about Buffalo County. We would love to have a stock pile of Buffalo Tales ready so they can go out in a more timely manner. Please submit your memories and stories to us by e-mailing them to bchs.buffalotales@hotmail.com or sending them to the post office box: BCHS, PO Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848.

We appreciate your support!

Director's Report

-Chan Lynch came in to give Ross photocopies of some air base pictures. He said he was trying to find a fire proof box to put the originals in and also asked if we would be interested in them. I said we would be interested and we could make room in one of the fire proof filing cabinets that we received from the County court house. He was very happy with that. We also chatted about his calendar idea a little bit.

-I submitted a grant to the Kearney Visitors Bureau requesting \$215,698.00 for 'exterior improvements' for our expansion. I put in there that we are not asking for these funds from the lodging tax dollars, as it won't be used for marketing, but that we are asking for the funds to come from the occupancy tax which is more flexible. Instead of me signing it, I had Dan sign it (Mary Beth wasn't available the day I turned it in).

-UPDATE: Roger Jasnoch called Dan Speirs at work to let him know the board approved \$15,000 which will be paid out over five years. So, three thousand a year for five years. I sent Roger the pledge form and he will get it back to us so it is in writing.

-Our UNK work study contract has been renewed. Wyatt will be coming back this fall and a gal named Grace already contacted us to work in the Fall, too!

Be our friend on Facebook: BuffaloCountyHistoricalSociety



Trails & Rails Museum

Buffalo County Historical Society

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