



# Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

July-August, 1996

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CHURCHES IN BUFFALO COUNTY

### Part I

by Alice Shanefelt Howell

A deep faith in God had to have been a major characteristic in the make-up of the early pioneers, especially the women. In the diaries of women pioneers we are given some insight into their feelings, which in many cases were quite different from those of the men, as together they made their first trek into a new and unsettled land. Men were caught up in the adventure; the excitement overshadowed the hardships. Women endured the hardships for the sake of the husband's dream and to keep the family together. Perhaps many of them would rather have lived out their lives in the places from whence they came.

Those pioneers who settled in Buffalo County have given us a fine heritage because they saw the possibilities of the new land. They lived and died in faith that with God's help the possibilities would be fulfilled.

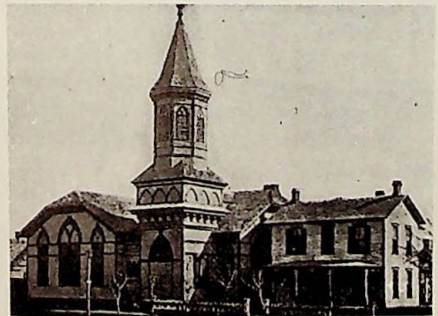
This historical background of the churches of Buffalo County will deal largely with organized congregations in the first fifty years of settlement. Religious gatherings were held in Buffalo County many years before its actual settlement—the Plains Indians who roamed this land, the explorers, the "trails" people on the wagon trains going west; families at the Boyd Ranch at Nebraska Centre on the west edge of present Gibbon where many emigrant trains stopped to rest up and stock up before proceeding on west. And surely Mormon Joseph E. Johnson and his wives and children held religious services at Wood River Center (now Shelton) during the time he operated a general outfitting and merchandising business for emigrants from 1858 until August of 1861.

Local historian S. C. Bassett tells us that "the first preaching services held in the county appear to have been in the winter of 1869-70. These services, a series of

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**Gibbon Presbyterian Church**  
First church in Buffalo County, 1872.



**Methodist Episcopal Church**  
Kearney Junction 1874  
Moved to 22nd Street & Avenue A  
and parsonage added, 1877.

WITH THE SOCIETY

**A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:**

The Buffalo County Historical Society has launched into another season.

Our Annual Meeting at Apple Annie's was well attended. We elected one new member to our Board of Directors, that being Mark Hadenfeldt from Kearney. Helen Kinnaman, Wilma Harder and Margaret Hohnholt were all re-elected to serve for another 3 years.

We had Marge Lauer, Executive Director of the Kearney Area Community Foundation, as the speaker. At a recent meeting the Museum Board voted to become a charter member of the Foundation and also to be included in the "Christmas Catalog" that the Foundation is publishing.

The first meeting in June, the Board elected officers for the coming year. All present officers were re-elected: Larry Nansel, President; Merlin Burgland, Vice President; Mardi Anderson, Treasurer; and Susan Underhill, Secretary.

The Building Committee is hard at work trying to get some definite plans for the new building to be located on the Museum grounds.

Wagons West was held on Saturday, June 1st with a good crowd attending. This was the first Wagons West in about 5 years that we didn't have a rainy day. More about Wagons West elsewhere in this Buffalo Tales.

Larry Nansel, President

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**Caring For Your Collections**

Thirty men and women from central Nebraska attended the "Caring for your Collections" workshop held in the church building at Trails & Rails Museum on May 30. Julie Reilly, chief conservator at the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center in Omaha was the leader of this workshop which was sponsored by the Nebraska State Historical Society. Julie used a wide variety of slides to illustrate the various aspects of conservation.

According to Ms. Reilly, the first step in conservation is to examine the item to determine its present condition. This includes documenting what is observed, and then documenting what is done to the artifact later in the preservation process.

In treating an artifact, it must first be stabilized to prevent, or at least slow down, further deterioration. As much of the original materials as possible should be preserved. If the article is to be used in an exhibit, some restoration may be necessary. This depends on whether it is to be exhibited as it appeared when new or as it appears after being used.

Measures should be taken to prevent further deterioration in the future. This means placing the artifact in a place with heat and humidity control, handling and using it as little as possible, keeping it clean, and keeping it out of harmful light as much as possible.

Metal polishes are abrasive and usually contain ammonia. Hot soapy water is usually best to use for cleaning.

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**Memorial** received from Eugene and Donna Marshall in memory of Don Thornton.

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**1996 SUPPORTING MEMBERS**

- Ben Kimball, Kearney
- Con and Joan Smith, Kearney
- C. R. Rundstrom, Kearney

- Opal K. Reese, Pleasanton
- Everett and Mable Harvey, Gibbon

meetings, were held in the first schoolhouse." (This would have been the sod school at Wood River Center before District No. 1 schoolhouse was built in 1871). The services were conducted by Rev. D. Marquette, a Methodist missionary, who wrote: "A pleasing and interesting feature of these meetings was the sweet singing by the Owen family. Mrs. David Owen, her two daughters and son, Joseph. . . During the winter of 1869-70 I held a series of meetings which resulted in a gracious revival and in the conversion of about twenty and in the organization of the first class in the bounds of Buffalo County, and for that matter the first Methodist organization in all the territory embraced in the West Nebraska Conference.

"The weather being cold, the people who crowded the house laid down buffalo robes on the floor and hung shawls up at the sides of the house to keep out the cutting winter wind and make the room endurable." Present at these meetings was a very pious German by the name of George Stearley who could not preach in English but was the only one who could lead in public prayer. When called upon to do so he would usually, in deference to his English-speaking brethren, begin his prayer in English, but would soon cut loose and pass over into German and make an excellent impression by his earnestness and sincerity, although no one could understand a word he said.

The largest group of emigrants to settle in one area in Buffalo County was the Soldiers Free Homestead Colony. They arrived by train in Gibbon on April 7, 1871, 136 men and 22 women, and on the first Sunday after their arrival they held a religious service with a sermon preached by the Rev. J. N. Allen, a member of the colony, who was a Methodist minister.

Four days after the arrival of the Gibbon colonists, on April 11, 1871, D. N. Smith, the Rev. Asbury Collins, and Moses Sydenham set the junction point for the Burlington and the Union Pacific Railroads. This point would become Kearney Junction, later the City of Kearney. The town was surveyed in the summer of 1871, land companies were ready to sell lots, and another town was born. The first record of a sermon preached in Kearney Junction was on July 12, 1871, at the home of the Rev. Asbury Collins. A United Brethren missionary was the preacher.

The Collins family in Kearney Junction was the first to settle in the new town, and in their home services for emigrants and settlers of all religions were held regularly. When the members of the Dayton Emigration Association of Dayton, Ohio arrived and settled in and around Kearney Junction in July of 1871, their small group of not more than eight or ten families gathered at the Asbury Collins home for a church service and sermon. These colonists met in homes until churches were



**Gibbon Baptist Church 1889  
Now Gibbon Heritage Center.**



**Christian (Disciples of Christ) Church,  
Kearney, organized 1874; Church  
erected 1889. Later Zion Lutheran at  
25th Street and Avenue C  
from 1914-1951.**

organized, but out of this nucleus came the organization of the Christian (Disciples of Christ) Church in Kearney in 1874.

A fourth settlement on the Union Pacific was Elm Creek. Many pioneers of Elm Creek were Irish Catholic railroaders, possibly more than at other points on the railroad in the county, because Elm Creek was a railroad stop for meals before the days of dining cars. All passengers left the train to be served at designated restaurants or dining rooms along the way. These Catholic railroaders and settlers held services at the section house there in 1871 and 1872. Elm Creek's Methodist Church dates back to a class in 1873, with a church built in 1883.

On January 16, 1872, a Baptist home missionary preached a sermon in the schoolhouse at Gibbon, after which the first Regular Baptist Church of Gibbon was organized. One week later, the Presbyterian Church of Gibbon was organized. Their brick building was completed in March of 1873, the first church building in Buffalo County and first church building in Nebraska west of Grand Island. It was constructed with Gibbon-made brick.

The first organized meeting of the Methodists in Gibbon took place in October, 1871, when the Rev. A. G. White, presiding elder of the Omaha District, preached in LaBarre Hall and organized a class of twelve persons. This class developed into a church organization and later became the Methodist Church of Gibbon. Their first church was erected in 1882. A second church built in 1900 served for seventy years until the Methodist and Presbyterian congregations merged into what is now the Faith United Church of Gibbon in 1970.

The class that began meeting in 1872-73 in the District 1 schoolhouse became the United Methodist Church of Shelton. Its first church was built in 1882 and the congregation is now in its third church home.

In Kearney Junction the Methodists, with the Rev. William Morse as their pastor, were the first church to be organized in 1872, and the first to build their own church in 1874 on the northeast corner of 18th Street and Central Avenue. Their building was shared with other denominations until they could acquire facilities of their own. In March of 1873, the Presbyterians became the second church to complete its organization. The following year the First Baptist and the Christian (Disciples of Christ) organized, and St. James Catholic built their first church at 18th Street and Avenue A in 1876.

The Methodists were the leaders in establishing early churches in Buffalo County as their missionary ministers traveled to new settlements, both towns and rural. The Rev. William Morse was appointed a leader of the West Nebraska Methodist



**Rural Bethel Methodist Church, now United Methodist.  
Building erected April 1900.**

Mission District in 1872-73 and he traveled throughout the Buffalo County settlements organizing classes of twenty or more, not only in Gibbon and Kearney, but in rural communities, at rural schools or in homes.

After 1872 the county had an influx of church organizations and new churches. A home, a church and a school were important to the early pioneers. Religious services were held in homes first. Church buildings took second place to school houses. After the school house was built, the Sunday services were held in it until a church could be built.

Methodist churches were among the first in other parts of the county. Ravenna's church dates back to 1887; Huntsville in 1874, later Stanley in 1888, then Amherst in 1910. Armada had a Methodist congregation when the town in 1890 moved across the river to become the new town of Miller where a church was built in 1893. It disbanded in 1913. Watertown had a congregation but no church, and Riverdale's church, founded in the early 1900's, is now disbanded. Kearney's Trinity Methodist was a second church in the city and disbanded many years ago. A rural church in the Prairie Center community in Thornton Township is Havens Chapel, organized in 1884. It is still an active church and in its third building. Rural Sharon Methodist Church was built two miles east and two and one half miles north of Gibbon in 1885. Ministers drove out from Shelton on Sunday afternoons to conduct services, and if baptism was desired by immersion, this sacrament was conducted in the Wood River nearby. Their church was sold to the United Evangelicals in 1898 and is disbanded.

United Brethren, Evangelical, Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregational and Catholic churches were organized very early in Buffalo County. The Lutherans were strong in some early German settlements but did not seem to organize in the towns as early as other denominations. With the mergers of Evangelical, United Brethren and Methodist churches, there are some Methodist churches today originally organized by United Brethren or Evangelicals.

Other early Presbyterian congregations were organized at Shelton, Miller, Sweetwater, Sodtown and Berg in Schneider Township. United Presbyterians had early churches in Kearney, Poole and Majors, and a Kearney city directory for 1892 lists a German Presbyterian Church.

United Brethren were on the scene early. The first of their churches was organized in School District 22 in Shelton Township in 1873 at the farm home of George Stearley, the German pioneer mentioned earlier. He was licensed as a local preacher and was active in its affairs until his death. The Stearleys and the Zimmermans were charter members, and the church was known as the Zimmerman Church. A building was constructed in 1897. This was an active congregation for many years, but is now disbanded.

Another United Brethren rural church was Bethel, north and west of Gibbon, organized in 1899. It continues today as the Bethel United Methodist congregation. Other early United Brethren churches were organized in Kearney, Butler, Pleasanton, Miller and Amherst.

There were several Evangelical churches in the early years, Kearney in 1893, Odessa in 1885, Shelton in 1896, and Amherst. One rural congregation started in 1879 in Schneider Township is the present Zion Ravenna United Methodist Church. Their first meetings were in a sod schoolhouse. A small frame church was built in 1880, and later a new building was erected three miles east and one mile north in Gardner Township where it is located today.

*NOTE:* Part II of the history of Buffalo County churches will appear in the September-October issue. Sources for the entire history will follow the Part II issue.

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- 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**

An entirely different "Wagons West" is over. All buildings were featured, especially the church with the restored murals from the old Presbyterian Church, which were dedicated that day. They fit in the church very well. Thanks goes to Bonnie Clabaugh for excellent help and organization in preparing for this.

Many people visited the Museum during the Olympic Torch Relay celebration. It was amazing to see the numbers on the grounds watching the horseshoe tournament, visiting the buildings and just visiting with friends. The activities in the depot included selling T-shirts, caps, pins and stamping of letters by the Postal Service.

Thanks to the help of volunteers many schools toured the Museum during April and May. Jo Bissell does an excellent job of organizing this project.

We are now almost back to normal with travelers, tour groups, 4-H groups, Extension Clubs, etc. The Garden Kids are meeting each Monday from 10:00 to 11:30 a.m. Each participant gets a discount coupon from Burger King.

—Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

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

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