

Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

March, 1990

THE KEARNEY PUBLIC LIBRARY, 1890-1990

by Margaret Stines Nielsen

Although the Kearney Public Library was not established until 1890, the availability of books for the public was a priority to the town fathers. In 1876 L. R. More was elected president of the Library Association. In 1877 a Reading Club was organized with a goal of "a permanent and valuable library."¹

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, organized June 10, 1880, took as one of its first projects "the necessity of a reading room." The room dominated the minutes for several months. In September it was voted to meet with a committee from the Good Templars Lodge, regarding the reading room.

Subscriptions were obtained and the "lot over Mr. Grables corner (on Tenth street) was procured."²

The *Buffalo Journal* of May 6, 1881 announced the rules for "The Reading Room Library"

All members may draw books and old magazines by paying 5¢ a book.

Life members contribute \$5.00

Transient members will deposit \$1.00, to be returned when the book is returned.

(Continued on Page 3)



Kearney Public Library, 1904

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, Merlin Burgland; Treasurer, Philip S. Holmgren, Directors: Frances Link, Barb Avery, Edna Hehner, Viola Livingston, Jim Cudaback, Michael Stauffer, Glen Wisch, Chad Anderson, Colleen Parker, Chandler Lynch III. Publications Chairman: Alice Howell.

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

Mark your calendar for the following upcoming events of the Buffalo County Historical Society:

- March 25 General Meeting (see below)
- April 7 Clean-up of Museum Grounds (see below)
- April 22 Annual Meeting
- May 13 Turn-of-the-Century Homes Tour
- May 28 Summer opening of Trails & Rails Museum
- June 2 Wagons West
- June 18-22 Tour of Colorado, Denver and surrounding area

March 25: Dr. Philip Holmgren will give a program, "Remembering the Kearney & Black Hills Railroad," at the general meeting of the Historical Society on Sunday, March 25, 2:00 p.m., at the Amherst Community Center. This 102-mile-long branch line was started in 1890 by a group of Kearney businessmen as an independent railroad, but became part of the Union Pacific eight years later. Although now abandoned, the story of the Kearney Branch is a story worth remembering now in what would have been its centennial year.

April 7: A clean-up day at Trails & Rails is planned for April 7, starting at 10:00 a.m. Bring rakes, pails, cleaning rags; also a sack lunch. Plan to spend the day so we will be ship-shape for the coming summer season.

June 2: Volunteers are needed as the day-long *Wagons West Celebration* plans are made for this June 2 event.

NEW LIFE MEMBERS

Chas. F. & Marjorie Pflaum Amherst Helen Kotsiopoulos Collins San Jose, CA

NEW BASIC MEMBERS

Dorothy M. Linder Kearney

1990 SUPPORTING MEMBERS

Fern Anderson	Kearney	Mr. & Mrs. Ward Minor	Kearney
Eldoris V. Bradley	Kearney	Gordon & Doralene Weed	Kearney
R. David & Margaret Clark	Kearney	Paul & Helen Casper	Elm Creek
Dr. & Mrs. Joel Johnson	Kearney	Richard & Barbara O'Neill	Pleasanton
Chandler Lynch III	Kearney	Mary Bessie Burcham	San Diego, CA

The W.C.T.U. thanked those who had contributed books, including County Superintendent Mallalieu—"a large French dictionary and other valuable books"; Mrs. Barnes, "a half bushel of books". By 1886 Kearney's first Y.M.C.A. was asking donations for its library at 2212 Central. Members of the executive committee were Drs. Keyes, Basten and Vance, and Charles Lyon.³

In 1888 William Skinner, News Editor of the *Hub*, went east where he bought about 1,000 books. He opened the Kearney Library in a house on the corner of 25th Street and 1st Avenue in 1889. The catalog shows the usual mixture of classics and fiction and a fair number of travel and history books. A forerunner of the *Reader's Digest* books was the "International Study Program," divided into three categories of four volumes each titled *Half Hours With American Authors*, . . . *British Authors*, . . . *Humorous Authors*. Stationery and such things as "feigning pads" were sold. Yearly subscriptions were \$4.00 for a single person and \$5.00 for a family. In June a committee of prominent citizens tried to raise funds for the library, but apparently with little success. A public library tax was voted upon favorably soon after this. The city council appointed the first Board of Trustees; Dr. O. S. Marden, Ira B. Marston, Judge A. H. Conner. Reverend John Askin, Captain Joseph Black, H. M. Seeley, Mrs. Nancy Hull, Mrs. Nora Jones, and Mrs. Etta R. Holmes.

The board voted to buy the Skinner collection and the books were moved to the City Hall council room on September 1, 1890. Mrs. Hadassah Grant Seaman was the first librarian. The library was opened every day from 2:00 to 6:00 p.m. and from 7:00 to 10:00 p.m., and 2:00 to 6:00 p.m. on Sundays. The only days for checking out or returning books were Tuesday and Saturday afternoons.

Mrs. S. P. Sibley who wrote a brief history of the library for *New Era* of June 9, 1896, also registered her concern about the amount of fiction. "Reading like many other amusements may be carried to extremes and become a dissipation . . . The novel is reaching more people and tainting more lives."

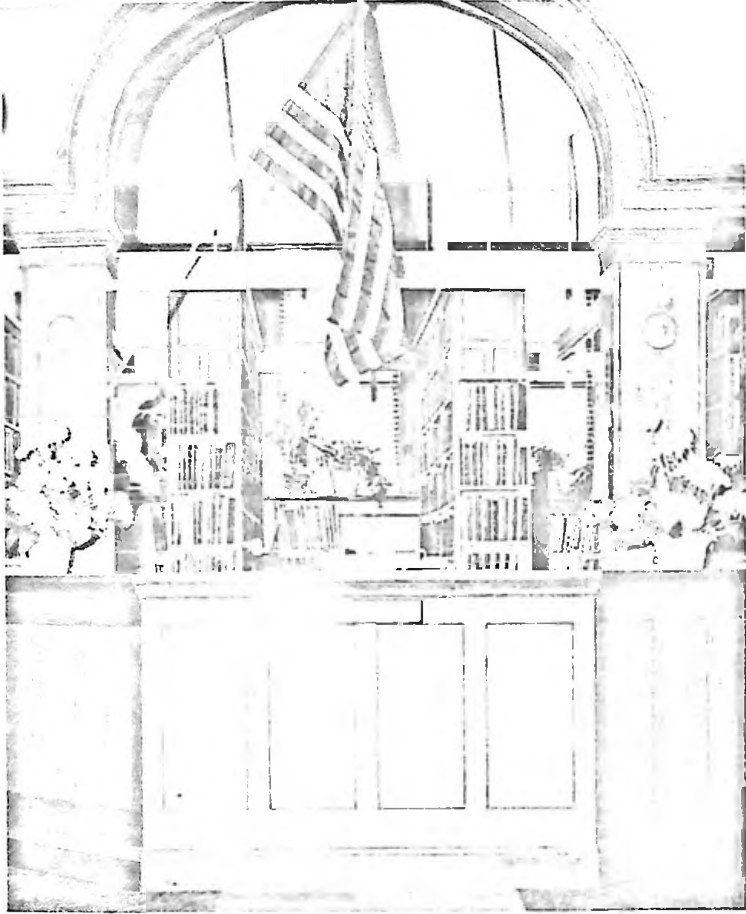
Belle Farley, a trained librarian, succeeded Mrs. Seaman in 1899. She was responsible for guiding the board through the period when they applied to the Carnegie Foundation for funds to build a new library. In 1903 \$10,000 was granted and Mrs. C. O. Norton gave a valuable lot at the corner of 21st and 1st Avenue, across the street from her home.⁴ Carnegie later granted another \$2,000 for maintenance. Construction was in charge of Knutzen and Isdell, of Kearney, and James Tyler and Son, of Lincoln.

Miss Farley died before the building was completed and her sister, Mrs. Mary E. O'Brien, served briefly as librarian until Mary Ray took over in 1903. The Carnegie library opened on December 21, 1904 with less than 2,000 books on the shelves.

Mrs. Pauline (Augustus) Frank succeeded Miss Ray in 1907, and served until 1919. She is credited with cataloging all the books. A "library hour" for children was held on Saturday afternoons. A *New Era-Standard* article of 1909, titled "Kearney's Pretty New Library", stated that during the past year books loaned totaled 32,337. "This on a working capital of less than 8,000 books. Our library is inadequate in equipment to demands put on it"

Mrs. O'Brien again assumed the position of librarian from 1920 to 1939. By this time the need for more space was urgent. Present Library Director Ron Norman, has observed that during depressions more people go to the library for diversion. On May 11, 1939 a special meeting was called to discuss a W.P.A. project for a new west wing. By December 14, 1939 the new wing, with full basement, was completed.

During World War II the library collected books and magazines to send to military bases. After the Kearney Air Base opened nearly 2,000 of the men stationed there were



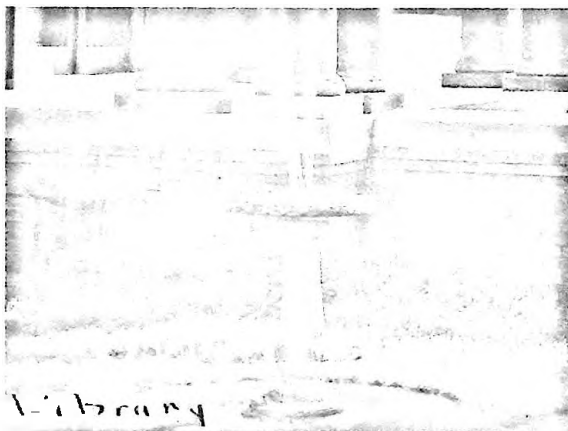
Library Circulation Center. The desk was a gift from Mrs. C. Van Dyck Basten. The desk and the wood arch and pillars were moved from the old library to the Kearney Room of the present building.

library patrons, along with others who used the facilities for reading and writing letters.

In 1958 a new wing for the children's library, along with a new entrance, was added. But it became evident that even more space was needed. From 1951 to 1972 the annual circulation increased from 32,000 to 212,000 as the town and the college continued to grow. Since Mrs. Norton had stipulated that the site of the library should always be used for that purpose, three lots south of the library were purchased for expansion.

Friends of the Library organized in 1969 with Mrs. Gordon Morrow as President. They were to play an active part in the campaign for a new library.

Library Directors from 1940 to 1971 were: Mrs. Margaret M. Caffal, 1940-42; Mrs. P. L. Knight, 1942-52; Mrs. Clarence Brasch, 1952-62; Mary McConnell (acting director) 1962; Mrs. Hazel Tewell, 1962-67; Mrs. Ellen Thompson, 1967-69. During the period from 1969 to 1971 there were three acting directors: Mrs. Phillis Winn, Mrs. Pat Clark, and Beverly Bailey.



**Bird Bath and Fountain, gift of
Maud Marston Burrows and
her brothers, 1930.**

In 1966 a request for funds for a new library had been turned down by the voters. When Ron Norman took over as Director in 1971 an all-out campaign for a bond issue began. With the efforts of the Board, the Friends and other interested persons, and extensive coverage by the *Hub*, the issue was passed overwhelmingly, in November, 1972. Additional funds of \$132,000 for equipment and furnishings were received from the Library Services and Construction Act of the Federal Government. In June, 1973 the books were moved to Randall Hall, and the old building was razed. A bookmobile was also located at various supermarket parking lots during construction.

The new library opened June 26th, 1975 and a gala dedication was held on July 27th.

For their efforts in a successful bond issue the Library Board was awarded the Trustees Citation by the Nebraska Library Association in October, 1973. Members of the board were Jackie Rosenlof, president; Mary Elliott, Dr. L. Dean Lane, Emma Jane Wilder, Marian Brown.

The library joined the communication revolution when the Ellen Craig Foundation granted funds for computers for public use. Because of these funds and other gifts the Kearney Public Library Foundation was set up in December of 1981. To more adequately describe the changing role of the library, the board voted in 1982 to change its name to The Kearney Public Library and Information Center.

When the book budget was reduced in 1987-88 to about \$2,000 from \$25,000, due to a city budget shortfall, the Friends of the Library spearheaded a drive to have the cut restored. The budget for the next year was raised to \$35,000. For this, and many other contributions, the Friends received the Meritorious Service Award by the Nebraska Library Association.

The Collections

The chief collection of the library is its books and periodicals, which account for 90% of its circulation. However, the library has received many other valuable gifts. Coming to Kearney in 1945, the writer's first impression of the library was the sunny west wing, with the top bookshelves lined with glass enclosed foreign dolls; an oil portrait of a young woman, far superior to the usual library art; and a bust of a bearded man with a battered cowboy hat perched rakishly on its head. I learned the bust was that of General Phil Kearny, and the hat, worn by Buffalo Bill was a gift of Ken Senders of Kansas City, along with four letters by Cody.

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The painting, "Portrait of an English Girl" was given to the library by its creator, Lawton Parker, Kearney's first artist of note.⁵ The dolls were collected by the Kearney Rotary Club when Everett Randall was president in 1934-35. As an international project Mr. Randall had suggested that the club contact all countries represented in Rotary, asking them to send a pair of dolls in native dress, the club offering to pay the cost of the dolls and transportation. Between forty and fifty dolls were collected, some of them free with bills of lading attached. Scotland was the only country to make no charge.

The intricately carved sailing ships on the divider shelves which mark the children's library were given, in 1909, by N. C. Dunlap, foreman of the 1733 Ranch, who had carved them with a pocket knife. Among them were scale models of the "Mayflower" and the "Constitution". The "Fort Kearny", started by a former sailor stationed at the fort, was finished by MR. Dunlap. It is now a permanent loan at the Fort Kearny Visitor's Center.⁶

In his address at the dedication of the new library, Victor P. Hass (then Book Editor of the *Omaha World-Herald*) quoted Thomas Paine, "... what we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly; 'tis dearthness only that gives everything its value." During the past one hundred years, Kearney people have rallied around many times to show how much they esteem their library.

SOURCES

Ron Norman, "A History of the Kearney Public Library"; interview with Ron Norman; library records; *Kearney Hub*; *New Era*; City Directories; Albert B. Tollefsen, "40th Anniversary Souvenir History, Kearney Rotary Club" (1958); Hass, "From a Bookman's Notebook" *Omaha World-Herald* July 1975; Telephone interview with Gene Hunt, director of Fort Kearny Historical Park.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Cody letters referred to above seem to have disappeared. If any of our readers have any information about what happened to them, please let us know.

1. *Tales of Buffalo County*, Vol. III, page 88.
2. Ella Peck, "Mother Hull House Notes, Winter 1979-80."
3. In the 1892-93 *City Directory* the W.C.T.U. library was listed at 22nd and Central. The Y.M.C.A. Library was at 2115 2nd Avenue. The Y.M.C.A. Auxiliary, Miss M. J. Dryden, President, had use of the Y. rooms once a week.
4. Site of the Elks Club.
5. *Tales of Buffalo County*, Vol. III, pages 85-86.
6. Other articles on loan at the center are Indian artifacts given by Maud Marston Burrows, and the bust of General Kearny.