



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

October 1985

THE ARTS IN EARLY KEARNEY

Part II

by Margaret Stines Nielsen

On the frontier, "Books were rare and were valued in proportion to the difficulty of obtaining them." This was especially true for women who spent many long hours alone. Maud Marston Burrows wrote, "One lady told me that, with her only companion a dog, she spent many days reading old newspapers, perusing with interest even the advertisements".

The desire for books led to Kearney's first community theater when, in 1876, a group met at the office of L. R. More for the purpose of raising money for a library. Mr. More was named president of the Library Association, and James A. Smith was manager for two plays, to be presented as a money-making project. "I've Written to Browne" and "A Little More Cider" were duly presented on July third at More's Hall.

In 1877 the Kearney Reading Club was formed with F. G. Hamer as president. The *Kearney Daily Press* stated, "It is hoped that this club will lay the foundation for a permanent and valuable library."

The writer was unable to find any more information about either the Dramatics Club or the Reading Club. It would be November of 1889 before "a carefully selected library of at least 500 books" was to be purchased by W. S. Skinner, City Editor of the *Kearney Daily Hub*. A yearly fee of \$4.00 for individuals or \$5.00 for families was charged for library privileges. By the summer of 1890, a public library had been organized with Dr. O. S. Marden as chairman of the library board.

The new Opera House opened to a glittering first-night audience on May 2, 1891 with the play, "Mr. Barnes of New York". As the "largest theater between the Missouri and Denver", the Opera House played host to many of the great actors of the time. Madam Modjeska was supported by Otis Skinner in "Henry the Eighth". One of the more famous casts, for "The Rivals", was composed of Mrs. John Drew as Mrs. Malaprop, her son, Bob Acres, Mrs. Sydney Drew, Mr. Drew, and "a rising young actor, Lionel Barrymore." Lewis Morrison, a matinee idol of his day appeared in "Faust", Richard Bennett, "father of the beautiful Bennett sisters of the pictures", brought one of his major successes, "Charley's Aunt". Other productions ranged from Shakespeare to "Peck's Bad Boy," with such distinguished actors as Thomas Keene, Charles Hanford, Clara Morris and Mrs. Fiske.

With this wealth of theatrical productions, amateur drama seems to have dropped off for a number of years. "Readings" were popular for many years. Grace Hamer (Kanzler) graduated from a School of Expression in Chicago, and taught "elocution" for four years in a studio at the Opera House. She joined the original faculty of

(Continued on Page 3)

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Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people.

Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Family Membership	\$ 7.50	Institutional Membership	\$10.00
Individual Membership	\$ 5.00	Supporting Membership	\$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual, \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly. Contact Alice Howell, Publications Chairman, 237-7858.

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Trails and Rails Museum, Mardi Anderson, Director.

Phone 234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

November 17. Due to the weather the meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society of September 29 was postponed. It is rescheduled for November 17 at 2:00 p.m. at the Community Hall in Elm Creek. Dr. Joe Jeffrey will give the program.

Fort Robinson Tour. A reminder that if you are interested in the tour to Fort Robinson on June 17-20, 1986, a \$12.00 deposit for lodging must be made by November 30.

Christmas Gifts. The Christmas season is approaching. For gifts, consider giving a membership in the Buffalo County Historical Society, or books, notepaper, Union Pacific dining car pieces, and other items from the gift shop at Trails and Rails Museum.

1986 Schedule of Memberships

Annual Basic Membership	\$ 7.50
Annual Institutional Membership	\$ 10.00
Annual Supporting Membership	\$ 25.00
Life Membership (individual)	\$100.00
Life Membership (husband and wife)	\$150.00

All memberships entitle the member to a subscription to *Buffalo Tales*, participation in meetings, tours and other events sponsored by the Society.

Books

<i>Tales of Buffalo County</i> , Volume 2. Reprints of stories originally published during 1981-83.	\$5.95
<i>Trail Dust to Star Dust</i> , Gibbon Centennial, 1871-1971, by Mabel Vohland.	\$8.00
<i>The Untold Story of Boot Hill</i> (Lowell in the 1870's) by Mrs. George H. Myers.	\$5.00
<i>Judge William Gaslin</i> , Nebraska Jurist, by John Haskell.	\$5.00

Notepaper

Sketches of early Kearney or Historic Fort Kearny.	\$4.00
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Kearney Normal where she taught Speech and Physical Education.

The Dramatics Club was organized at the college in 1908 for the purpose of "giving each member an opportunity of appearing before the public."

Debate coach, Ralph Noyes, was the first to produce Shakespeare plays. Senior Class plays were presented from 1911 to 1936.

Miriam Eckhardt joined the faculty in 1925. She sponsored the Theatre Arts League and directed twenty-four productions in the next seven years. She is credited with improving the literary quality of the plays produced. In 1927, she married Oscar Drake, an active member of the Kearney Drama League. The Miriam Drake Theater in the Fine Arts Building is named in her honor.

The Kearney Dramatics Club was organized in 1913 by Mrs. W. O. King and "Mrs. Dr. Bell".¹ Its object was "to promote dramatic art and appreciation through study and production of plays." Much of the time was spent on monthly studio plays, climaxed by one annual production for the public. The Drama League became a member of the Drama League of America in 1925. They had "a well appointed Little Theatre" at 2416½ Central Avenue. "The Thirteenth Chair" was the last of the annual productions to be presented on the Opera House stage, on March 3, 1925. Members of the cast included Thelma Langthwait, Ivan Mattson, Mary Jane Skeffington, Charlotte Abrahamson, Florence Miller, Miriam Anderson, Bessie Stansbury, Everett Randall, Martin Nelson, Oscar Drake, Kenneth Dryden, Montague Worlock, and Robert Huston. It was directed by Dr. A. M. Skeffington.

In 1931, "The Trial of Mary Dugan" was presented at the Buffalo County courthouse. John Dryden was the judge. Among the characters were Florence Buck (Venn), Theresea Grantham (Champagne), Hazel and Carroll Morrow, Alice Parsons, Bob Huston, Jack Lancaster, Kenneth Dryden, Dr. M. V. Wilcox, Dr. H. V. Smith, Joe Tye, Ivan Mattson, Oscar Drake, and John Dryden.



**"The Trial of Mary Dugan"—staged at the Buffalo County Courthouse—1931
Prosecutor Ivan Mattson confronts witness Florence Buck (Venn). John Dryden is the judge.**

1. Probably the wife of Dr. Henry S. Bell, physician at the Industrial School.

Plays were given at the State Teacher's Convention a number of times. One of the more notable was Arthur Pinero's "The Enchanted Cottage" presenting the Little Theater Players, with Kenneth Dryden directing and a large cast including Nell Skeffington, Helen Kennedy, Alice Parsons, Carroll Morrow, and Oscar Drake.

Chautauqua in Kearney

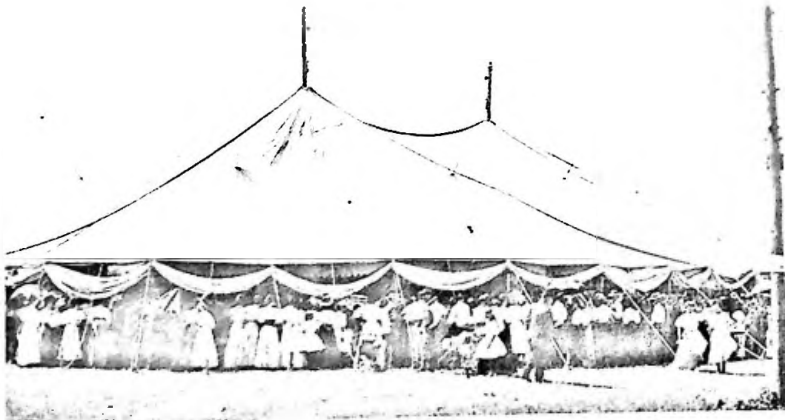
The Hesperian Chautauqua circle was organized in 1887. This was a reading and discussion group with programs based on a four year cycle of reading sent out by the Chautauqua Assembly in New York. Tent Chautauqua, which became "culture under canvas" to countless small towns, came to Kearney about 1904. Gladys Grantham Benthack, in her paper, "Tent Chautauqua" tells of the Redpath-Horner circuit which came through Kearney for many years. Her uncle, Charles A. Horner, brought his premier circuit for a week every summer during which other affairs came to a virtual standstill. Ministers announced its arrival, area families pitched their tents at Third Ward Park (Harmon Park) where performances were held. Performances were held afternoon and evening; season tickets were \$2.00 for adults, \$1.00 for each child.

A circuit was composed of nine chautauquas, each with its own assortment of talent, which appeared in a different town every night. The program for one six day circuit appearing in Kearney consisted of the Temple Opera Singers, the Cleveland Symphony Quintette, Kilties Band, lecturers Dr. S. L. Joshi, Josephus Daniels, M. H. Mertins, the Sorority Singers, Pamahiska and His Pets. The play, on the final night, was "The Great Commoner" concerning the life of Abraham Lincoln.

Gladys Benthack was a "junior girl" in 1928. Her duties were to sell single admission tickets, sit with the children during lectures to keep order, take charge of the children's hour every morning, and produce a pageant on the last afternoon.

Chautauqua faded with the coming of talking pictures, radios and more cars. Mr. Horner sold his last circuit in 1928.

In the early thirties, Esther Drake Agnew and Pauline Nichols conducted a Children's Theater in the League studio. Pauline was dressed as Mother Goose and was often recognized in that role when children saw her on the street.



Chautauqua in Kearney

Nineteenth Century Club

The Nineteenth Century Club began as The Clio Club, consisting of a few women meeting in homes for discussions on a variety of subjects. In 1888, after the appearance in Kearney of Mrs. Elizabeth Saxon, vice-president of the National Women's Suffrage Association, the club was reorganized as the Nineteenth Century Club with Women's Rights as their chief objective. Mrs. Rebecca Hamer was the first president.

The program was gradually widened to include other subjects of interest to women, including a Fine Arts Department. The club became a member of the National Federation of Women's Clubs in 1911 but retained its name until 1935 when it became the Kearney Woman's Club. In 1931 the family of Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Downing donated their home at 723 West 22nd to the club, which has since held its meetings in the house. On June 4, 1949 a Pioneer Party and Reception was held at the club home honoring four long-time members of the club: Mrs. Warren Pratt, a charter member, Mrs. John N. Dryden (joined in 1891), Mrs. B. O. Hostetler (1893), and Mrs. C. D. Bessie (1901).



Drama League Costume Party—1927 or '28

First row—Cynthia Easterling (Binder), Mary Nichols Eckles, Ruth King, _____, Alta Kibler, Florence Buck (Venn), _____, Guy Pierce. Second row—Miriam Anderson (Worlock), Pauline Nichols, Alice Grantham (Utzinger), Esther Drake (Agnew), Harold Hayden, Helen Cruit (Downing), Montague Worlock, Bob Huston. Third row—Mrs. L. D. Martin, _____, Oscar Drake, Ruby Morris (Wrobel), Miriam Eckhardt (Drake), Carroll Morrow, Maud Marston Burrows, Jess Homan, Olive Morrow, Everett Randall. Fourth row—Ralph Moore, Jack Wheelock, Mrs. Burke, Alice Yoder (Dukes), Elaine Sullivan (Randall), Ada Kibler, Gladys Grantham (Benthack), Harold Smith, Juanita Bolin (Nickerson), Earl Arnold, Ivan Mattson.

Shakespeare Club

In her reminiscences at the Woman's Club party, Mrs. Warren Pratt told of another arts related club. When she came to Kearney as a teacher she joined a Shakespeare Club with the following members: Superintendent of Schools G. A. Miller and Mrs. Miller, Mr. and Mrs. John Hartman, Dr. and Mrs. Hoover, Mrs. E. N.

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Porterfield, Mr. Pratt and Dr. Vance. When she returned to Kearney after her marriage, the club had disbanded.

In 1902 the club was reorganized by the Reverend J. J. Parker. Membership was limited to twenty-five members. Although the chief emphasis was on Shakespeare and his plays, a perusal of the old programs shows that a wide variety of topics were subjects for discussion.

On April 26, 1916 a Shakespeare Tercentenary Celebration was held at the Opera House under the auspices of the Kearney Public Library.

Participating organizations each presented a scene from a Shakespeare play. In addition to the Shakespeare Club, they were: the Etude Club, Chapter AS, P.E.O. the Nineteenth Century Club, Kearney Dramatics Club, and a dramatics class from Kearney State College.

Among the active members over the years were Judge and Mrs. B. O. Hostetler, Lulu Wirt, Mary O'Brian, Mary Crawford, Mrs. L. M. Stearns, Mr. and Mrs. C. A. Murch. When the club was disbanded in the 1950's some of those belonging were: Mr. and Mrs. David T. Martin, Mr. and Mrs. M. H. Worlock, Dr. and Mrs. H. L. Cushing, Mr. and Mrs. George Munro, Mr. and Mrs. Harold Oldfather, Mr. and Mrs. John Henry.

Kearney has a long tradition of support for the arts, strengthened by the presence of the college and such present-day groups as Community Concerts, the Kearney Area Arts Council, the Community Theater, and the Artist's Guild.

SOURCES

"A Musical Life in Kearney", Lucy Hull; Scrapbook, Maud Marston Burrows, *Tales of Buffalo County*, Volume II; *Where the Buffalo Roamed*; *Kearney Daily Hub*; *Kearney State College 1905-1980*, Dr. Philip S. Holmgren; "Lawton Parker, Artist", compiled by Maud Marston Burrows; *Fine Arts Journal*, Chicago, May 1914; *Chicago Record-Herald*; *The Antelope*, 1924; *Who's Who in Chapter AS, P.E.O.*; "End of an Era", Paige Carlin; "Tent Chautauqua—1904-1928", Gladys Grantham Benthack; *Woman's Club Scrapbooks*; *Kearney Centennial—1873-1973*; *Shakespeare Club Scrapbook*. Those providing information: Catharine Bahnsen, Muriel Dungan, Letha Raffety, Elmer Holzrichter, Jeanette Mercer, Pauline Nichols, Carroll Morrow, Mr. and Mrs. David T. Martin, Miriam Drake.

Correction to Part I—The name of the Midway band and orchestra director should be spelled Benesch.