



Buffalo Tales



Volume 21, No. 1

Buffalo County Historical Society

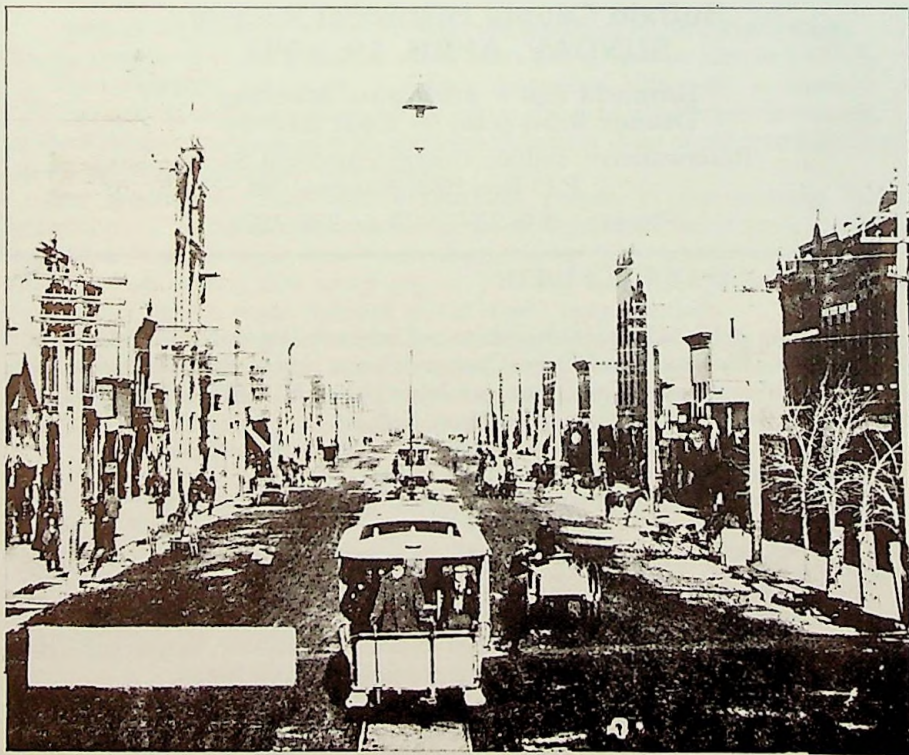
January-February, 1998

LOOKING BACK ON KEARNEY'S ANNIVERSARIES PART I

by Margaret Stines Nielsen

Kearney, as with other towns, had many ups and downs in its history. But few have been as explosive as the town's first twenty-five years.

It all began with Moses Sydenham, an Englishman who was postmaster at Fort Kearney. When the Fort closed in 1871 Moses moved his family to the infamous Dobytown, a trading post nearby. To make it more respectable Moses changed the name to Sartoria. There he published a newspaper called *The Central Star* where he would later promote the Fort Kearney reservation as the new national capitol, with the capitol building to be located on the intersection of Thirty-ninth Street and Second Avenue.



"Electric street cars on "Central"

WITH THE SOCIETY

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:

Here we are well into a new year. What a year it will be with the Q125 and all the activities to highlight the early history of the area. How important it is to preserve the history for all the men, women and children of Buffalo County, to give them a better understanding and appreciation of our heritage. I would encourage any and all of you to be ready to say "yes" if asked to take part in any of the activities in the coming months.

How proud I was to be in attendance at the Chamber of Commerce Banquet the evening of January 23rd when Alice Howell was presented the 1997 Friends of Kearney Award. Alice has been a resident of Kearney since 1943. She helped reorganize the Buffalo County Historical Society, establish the Trails and Rails Museum, initiated and continued the publication of the *Buffalo Tales* newsletter for twenty years. Alice has researched the historic buildings in Kearney Centre and the older homes in southwest Kearney and has led many walking tours in these areas. It's been a privilege just to know and work with her in the various programs of the Society. All of us at the Historical Society want to say CONGRATULATIONS and Thank You Alice for all you have done to preserve the History of Buffalo County.

Larry Nansel, President

Notice

ANNUAL MEETING **Buffalo County Historical Society** **SUNDAY, APRIL 19, 1998**

Notice

Ramada Inn • 4:00 p.m. Meeting
Dinner 5:30 p.m. — Cost \$10.00

Reservations: Buffalo County Historical Society
P.O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848

Phone: 308-237-7927 or 237-7327

MEMORIAL GIFTS RECEIVED:

1997

From Russ and Sue Bayne, Jack and Janice Cudaback, Wayne and Dolly Daugherty, Ruth Denison, Dayle and Carol Fitzke, Craig and Janine Hamik, Philip Holmgren, Alice Howell, Melvin and Beulah John, Ron and Joyce Lieske, Bernard and Thelma Lyons and Barbara Stevenson, in memory of Louis Koeppel.

From Paul and Mitzi Steinbrink, in memory of Paula Kotsiopolis.

From Alice Howell, in memory of Dave Martin.

From Marjorie Pflaum, in memory of Minnie Rice.

1998

From Charlotte Robinson, in memory of Leslie Robinson.

From Paul and Mitzi Steinbrink, in memory of Bob Rosenlof.

From Ruth Dier, in memory of Francis Richards.

From Gary and Mildred Heusel, Dorothy Wilke, Grace Nutter, Wayne and Valma Urwiller, Mr. and Mrs. LaVern Scheides, in memory of Susie Nutter.

* * * * *

NEW LIFE MEMBERS

June Koeppel, Kearney
Jim Bish, Manassas, VA

Marian Wisch, Kearney

Wayne Urwiller, Ravenna
Vivian Blomenkamp, Palo Alto, CA

In April of 1871 D. N. Smith town locator, and the Reverend Asbury Collins arrived at the Collins home in a snowstorm. The next day Moses guided the men across the river where they chose the spot for the junction of a new line of the Burlington and Missouri Railroad with the Union Pacific. Mrs. Louisa Collins wrote, "Mr. Smith hadn't intended to locate the railroad but thought he might as well and my husband took his claim."

In May the Collins family returned to begin work on their new home. The "Junction House" welcomed all newcomers; it was the site of the first church service, first wedding, first funeral and Louisa became known as the "Mother of Kearney".

By the time Kearney was incorporated, on December 3, 1873 it was already a bustling town of several hundred people. While it was a law-abiding town the peace was occasionally disturbed by herders who drove their cattle from Texas to be loaded on the Union Pacific. The Collins' son, Milton was shot when he impounded cattle which had strayed on his property.¹ The "cowboy troubles" soon ended.

Work was started on a canal west of Kearney in 1882, but the original cost estimate was about \$400,000.00 short of the mark. The Kearney Canal and Water Supply Company contacted George W. Frank who already had property in the area. Frank took over the company and in 1886 the canal was completed. Then in 1887 a power house was erected and electric generators added. Power was the magic word which launched a period of phenomenal growth. H.D. Watson bought a half interest in the Frank holdings and went East to sell the town and its potentialities. Within ninety days he brought out three trainloads of businessmen and the boom was on. By 1890 there were forty industries operating in Kearney, the Cottonmill was completed the next year.

The social life kept pace with economic development with Maud Marston describing the parties and the fabulous new mansions in flowery language. On May 1, 1891 the new Opera House was opened by a glittering crowd which included Governor James E. Boyd who had operated a ranch near Gibbon in the early days. Governor Boyd commented he never dreamed that such a town, or such a theater would be built where he had once chased buffalo.

Festivities at the Opera House marked the beginning of the end. The grandiose plans were based on credit; the top-heavy financial structure toppled of its own weight. All four of the Kearney banks failed so the investors salvaged what they could and returned East. Of the 1,400 homes in Kearney, half stood vacant.

In 1898 Kearney had little reason to celebrate its Silver Anniversary. What few Hubs survive that period carry expedition rates for the Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha and news of the special "days" set up to attract farmers, firemen and other groups. The Exposition was intended to be a state-wide undertaking but the City Council voted against its continuance for another year. "We have proven our loyalty...notwithstanding it has been a considerable detriment to our business...and home interests."

The Spanish-American War was the chief news topic of the time. The volunteers who had marched off to war four months before were marching back again. A banquet to welcome them home was held in early September with Mayor B.O. Hostetler presiding.

The two thriving industries were celery and muslin, although the cottonmill lost money every year. The only celebration had been in August when the volunteers launched a merry-go-round, with considerable noise from the steam calliope, and free street entertainment. The only casualty was a dog killed at the merry-go-round.

One promising headline, A QUARTER CENTURY, turned out to be an article about the first twenty-five years since the founding of *The Central Nebraska Press* which had

been taken over by *The Hub*.

The year ended with a Grand Cake Walk and Mask Ball. The Casino Theatrical Company was presenting a varied program of comedies and dramas at The Opera House.

The Kearney Democrat described the reaction on September 1, 1903 to the news that the State Board of Education had chosen Kearney as the site of the new State Normal School on the 111th ballot:

"The whistles blew, the cannon roared, the people yelled, the Eagle soared".

The North Platte Tribune was one of the few newspapers to have anything favorable to say about the choice of Kearney over other towns competing for the site, "...while North Platte is disappointed in not securing the school, it congratulates Kearney...The school is the biggest thing for the town that Kearney has ever captured, it is worth twenty cotton mills".²

Certainly it is true that the Normal, through all its stages up to the rank of "University" has meant the most to the town, not only for economic benefits but for education at all levels, for the culture and the quality of residents it attracted.

The cornerstone of the Administration Building was laid on October 8, 1904 with completion scheduled for the first full term on September 20, 1905. When school opened the building had no windows, no floors in the halls and no stairs to the third floor. Classes were "migratory" according to Phil Holmgren. "It was not uncommon to see a professor, followed by a class of students, looking for a room where a class could be held without interruption."

Gradually heat was installed, floors finished and doors hung. By the end of the year 863 students had matriculated, including 464 who registered for summer school in 1906.

Another asset to Kearney was its location on a transcontinental highway. In 1915 the "seedling mile" was completed. Although seedlings added to the attraction of the mile as the trees began to arch over the highway, the term referred to a paved strip laid down in many towns to attract the Lincoln Highway through the town. Also in 1915 Central Avenue was finally paved.

When the United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917 Kearney answered the "call to colors" wholeheartedly. In Buffalo County 800 men enlisted; twenty-two would give their lives during the War. The National Guard was called to active duty; the Kearney Military Academy cadets acted as military escorts and marched in parades. Almost everyone was involved in the War on the home front.



Lawton Parker
A Gold Medal winner for a Golden Anniversary.

The Red Cross was organized on May 2, 1917 with Dr. C.H. Fox as Chairman and Mrs. S.A.D. Henline Vice-Chairman. Women worked daily on the second floor of the Post Office rolling bandages, knitting sweaters, helmets, scarves and socks and making refugee garments. A Canteen Service was set up to supply soldiers passing through the town with sandwiches, coffee, cakes, magazines, 10,000 cigars and 25,000 cigarettes. Food conservation was stressed, fruit pits were saved to be used in the manufacture of gas masks. The youth raised gardens and canned fruits and vegetables.

The five Liberty Bond drives held, under the chairmanship of John W. Patterson were all successful. Four of the five, held over a period of ten days, were over-subscribed. The sale of War and Thrift stamps brought in another \$750,000. All fund drives were coordinated by the Four Minute Men under the chairmanship of Frank W. Brown.

By 1923, life had returned to normal and the town was ready to celebrate its Golden Anniversary. Months before the event the Chamber of Commerce began sending out letters to former residents, inviting them to a "Homecoming" as guests of the city. "Scores" of replies were received, ranging from postcards to several pages of descriptions of the earliest days from pioneers, quotes from the letters were printed in local papers, they have proven invaluable to historians.³

On September eighth the Chamber of Commerce received a cablegram from Laughton (Lawton) Parker, an internationally known artist:

Regret sincerely unable attend anniversary have wandered but heart always with home town to which am indebted for inspiration and encouragement.

In memory of father and mother am presenting public library my painting entitled "An English Girl" that received gold medals at Munich and Chicago.

The painting hung in the library for many years and is now on loan at MONA.

The celebration began on Tuesday, September 12th with a barbecue of 1,200 pounds of baby beef and a camp fire rally in charge of Will Maupin, former reporter for the *Kearney Enterprise*, who presided over a lantern show of old-timers and some not so old, with appropriate comments.

On Wednesday there was a historical parade in the morning, Indian "entertainment" in the afternoon and a circus at night at the fairgrounds. Thursday featured a "gigantic style show" with fireworks at night. Shuttle trains provided transportation costing 20¢ round trip or 10¢ one way. 15,000 people attended the display. Tickets, which included all the events were one dollar.

The historical displays in many store windows prompted an article about the need for a museum to house the many historical items which might otherwise be lost. Is it possible that the Quasqui-Centennial will bring to reality the need for a modern fireproof building to preserve what's left?

NOTES

1. The Collins' only other son, D. Finley, was killed in a hunting accident in 1882.
2. Philip Holmgren, *Kearney State College 1905-1980*
3. When contents of the Fort Kearney Hotel were auctioned off Sue and John Morissey saved the bound volume of "Kearney Come Back Letters", they were given to the Historical Society. Marian Johnson indexed them, making notes about the contents of each letter.

NEW 1998 BASIC MEMBERS

John Murphy, Kearney

Mr. and Mrs. Robert Matheny, Kearney

NEW 1998 INSTITUTIONAL MEMBER

Carol Alpsteg, Kearney

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.

1997 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, 1998: Merlin Burgland, Larry Nansel, Janeen Vokoun, Jerry Idt.

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

Term expiring June 1, 2000: Minnette Steinbrink, Susan Underhill, Pauline Wells, Dale Wright.

Officers (1 year term)

President Larry Nansel
 Vice-President Mark Hadenfeldt
 Secretary Janeen Vokoun
 Treasurer (to be appointed)

TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM

Big plans are being made for Wagon's West in cooperation with the Q125 Celebration in Kearney. Many plans for the Museum are being made featuring early Kearney, so watch us closely.

We will be soon having schools coming in. The last two weeks in April have been reserved for the Kearney Public Schools. If you know of area schools who would like to schedule a time, please have them call 234-3041.

We really want to thank all of you who have helped to make 1997 a very successful year. Without our volunteers we could not operate. Your talents and support are much appreciated. If you have a special talent you would like to share, do call and we can plan a time to discuss it. We need lots of new ideas.

— Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

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

Buffalo County Historical Society
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