



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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KEARNEY 100 YEARS AGO

1886 in Review

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

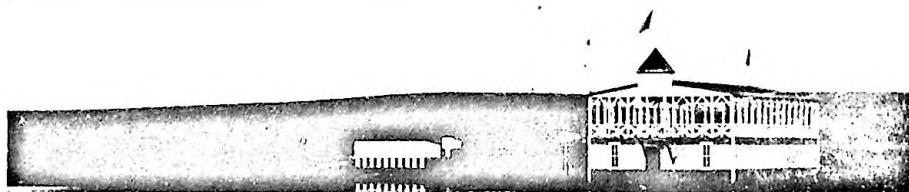
The fast-growing city of Kearney, incorporated in 1873, had grown to 3400 in 1885, doubled its population to 6770 from 1885 to 1888, and then doubled it again from 1888 to 1892, the peak of the boom period.

Kearney had had good growth into the 1880's, but perhaps no more outstanding than other cities in the still young state of Nebraska. Being on a transcontinental railroad system was a plus, as was the junction of the Burlington with the Union Pacific at this point, but it was the final completion in 1886 of the long-dreamed-of Kearney Canal that triggered the rapid growth in population and the spectacular growth of industry. The availability of power was the single important contributing factor that led to Kearney's boom period, those skyrocketing years of business and industry from 1886 to 1893.

A canal from the Platte River to Kearney had been talked of as early as 1873 and some serious efforts made in 1877 and again in 1881 to organize a canal project. However, opposition by farmers and disputes and controversy as to the method of funding and the method of building hampered the project. Finally, in 1882, a joint effort by the city of Kearney and the Kearney Canal and Water Supply Company succeeded in getting the project started. The company was to build, operate and maintain a canal or canals for irrigation and water power purposes. Excavation started in the fall of 1882 and continued in 1883 and 1884, but money ran out and no more funds could be raised, even though the canal itself was virtually completed.

In August of 1885, George W. Frank of Corning, Iowa, purchased four-fifths of the stock of the Kearney Canal and Water Supply Company and proceeded to bring the canal project to completion by mid-1886.

Mr. Frank had been interested and involved in the development of Kearney since the founding of the city. He owned several parcels of land; his son, George, Jr., had



Lake View Pavillion, Kearney Lake

(Continued on Page 3)

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	\$ 7.50
Institutional Membership	\$10.00
Supporting Membership	\$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

Officers and Directors: President, Chandler Lynch III; Vice-President, Margaret Hohnholt; Secretary, Alice Howell; Treasurer, Leo Henriksen; Directors: Glen E. Wisch, Frances Link, Barb Avery, Merlin Berglund, Philip S. Holmgren, Minnette Steinbrink, Henrietta Rhamy, Edna Hehner, Robert Stubblefield and Marian Johnson. Publications Chairman, Alice Howell.

WITH THE SOCIETY

Dates to remember:

January 25: General Meeting at Shelton, in the Community Room of First State Bank, 2:00 p.m.

April 26: Annual Meeting, time and place to be announced.

May 30-31: Wagons West Celebration.

The third annual Wagons West celebration will be held at Trails and Rails Museum on May 30-31. The theme of the event will center around the early 1920's and the transition from horse to motor transportation. A tourism assistance grant of \$325.00 has been awarded to the Buffalo County Historical Society by the Department of Economic Development division of travel and tourism. Grant funds will be used to underwrite publicity costs for the Wagons West event.

Memberships continue to come in. Dues become delinquent on January 31. Response in Life Memberships and Supporting Memberships has been gratifying and is very much appreciated.

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moved to the city in 1885 and built a fine home on West 27th Street, and his father was a frequent visitor. It was not until April of 1886 that George Frank, Sr. and his wife moved to Kearney, buying a home at 509 West 25th Street. He had earlier established the Phil Kearney Ranch just west of the city where he raised thoroughbred horses. He carried on business from an office on the ranch and another office downtown.

As soon as the canal was on its way to completion many projects began to develop, as evidenced by a reading of the newspapers of the period. Much of the information in this article is gleaned from the weekly **Kearney New Era** of 1886, which kept its readers well informed of local happenings. On May 8 it was reported that the canal would be completed in sixty days, and that "eastern manufacturers are already looking over the ground, preparatory to establishing various manufactories. A large paper firm of Holyoke, Mass. is interested in starting a paper mill."

On June 19 comes the good news that the Kearney Canal is completed and water turned into the reservoirs. It would take about ten days to fill all the reservoirs, and then contracts would be let for the use of power as soon as the waste water race was completed.

Kearney celebrated the 4th of July, 1886 by a formal opening of the canal. Boats were provided and the people indulged in delightful boat rides on the beautiful lake or canal reservoirs. Prior to the formal opening, the honor of taking the first boat ride on the canal was given Mr. Frank, J. J. Bartlett and J. T. O'Brien. Their promotional and organizational skills surpassed their boatsmanship because the boat capsized and the crew were all treated to a good ducking.

The citizens of Kearney felt deeply indebted to Mr. Frank for the successful completion of the Kearney Canal, "the one improvement above all others that will make the future of the town great." It was decided to present him with a suitable testimonial for his accomplishments, a handsome, gold-headed cane, suitably inscribed. On the evening of June 26, led by the Reform School brass band, a large party of friends gathered at Phil Kearney Ranch to witness the presentation. Col. John M. Finch was master of ceremonies. Judge A. H. Conner made the presentation speech, completing his remarks by placing in the hands of Mr. Frank the beautiful cane, the head

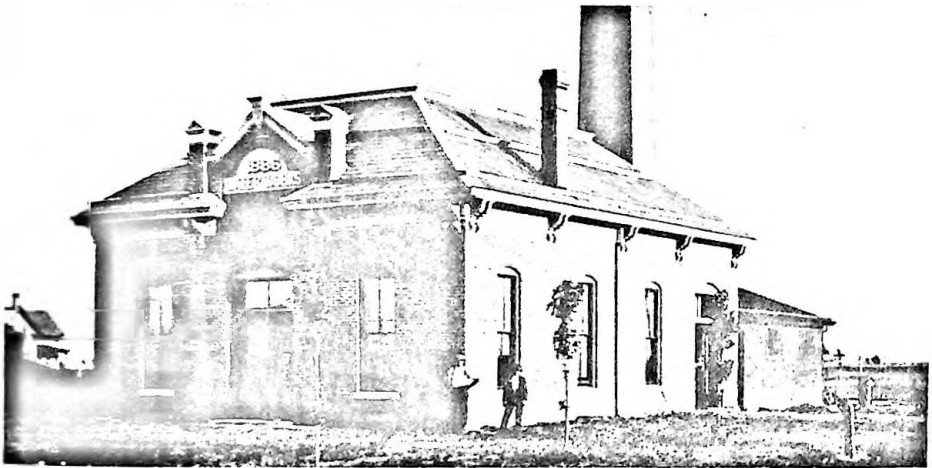


Phil Kearney Ranch

of the staff bearing the following inscription:

A Souvenir of Respect
by Kearney Citizens
to
George W. Frank
On the completion of the Kearney Canal
June 26, 1886

This totally unexpected presentation almost unmanned Mr. Frank, but in a few moments he recovered his self-possession and expressed in most elegant terms his deep appreciation, according to the *New Era*.



Kearney Water Works, 21st Street and 7th Avenue

Juan Boyle, another key figure of Kearney's boom years, leased the lake for five years with the privilege of keeping pleasure boats for rent. The Lake View opening on August 14 was described:

Saturday night Mr. Juan Boyle held the grand opening of his Lake View Pavillion. Fully seventeen hundred citizens attended. The night was beautiful moonlight, and the air cool and the affair was enjoyable in every way. The Kearney Cornet Band furnished good music. During the evening a splendid display of fireworks was given, consisting in the shooting of sky rockets and Roman candles over the water from boats and from the south bank of the lake. The bath house for ladies and gentlemen will be completed this week and everything perfected to make Lake View a great pleasure resort.

In late summer of 1886 Mr. Boyle announced plans to build an ice house near the canal to hold 200 tons of ice. However, this venture seems to have become a project of an Omaha Company. The December 18 *New Era* announced that the work of building immense ice houses below Lake View was commenced, and the company "will push rapidly toward filling the houses with the prettiest and cleanest ice ever harvested in this state." It was estimated that 500,000 tons would be harvested "this season." The ice harvest at Kearney Lake was eventually taken over by the Nebraska Ice Company, a local corporation, and it was a flourishing industry for many years,

furnishing ice to the Union Pacific Railroad, to surrounding towns and to the Nebraska State Fair.

But all of the activity of the city in 1886 was not taking place at the lake. The Nebraska Telephone Company, located on the second floor of the W. A. Downing building at 2108 Central Avenue, enlarged its Kearney exchange to make room for two hundred subscribers. There had been 70 new subscribers since June 1885, making a total of 102. This placed Kearney ahead of Grand Island, Columbus and Fremont in the number of telephone customers.

At a special meeting of the City Council in early August, an ordinance was passed giving the Kearney Street Railway Company permission to lay a track for street cars. It was a horse drawn trolley system, and the *New Era* of November 13 reported that the street cars were running from Grand Avenue (25th Street) to the court house.

In the late summer a system of gas works was installed in the city by the firm of Maxwell and Son, and in September the City Council contracted with the American Water Works Co. of Chicago to provide the city with water for public and private purposes. The company was to construct a system of water works, including a building and a 70 ft. high smoke stack. The contract would provide for installation of fire hydrants rented from the company, but giving the city the option to purchase. The water works station was to be located at 7th Avenue and 21st Street.

Digging ditches all over the city to lay both water and gas mains presented some street and traffic problems, but the water and the gas works companies put all the men they could employ at work to complete both projects in as short time as possible. Unemployment was not a problem in Kearney in the summer and fall of 1886. Richard Hibberd and W. L. Mannix, owners of brickworks in the city, were receiving more orders than they could fill. Hibberd ordered another machine to enlarge and double his output of brick for local projects as well as to fill orders from the eastern part of the state.

Several business buildings completed or begun in 1886 more than doubled the brick frontage on downtown streets in Kearney. A 4-story hotel (the first Midway) was



Midway Hotel, 25th Street and Central Avenue

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started on the northwest corner of Wyoming and Grand Avenues. The Evans and Hanson Buildings (2113-17 Central Avenue) and the Barnd and St. John Bldg. (2210-12 Central Avenue) were nearly completed during the year. W. T. Scott's 3-story brick block (15-23 West 22nd Street) and George W. Frank's 3-story business building (2224 Central Avenue) were started in 1886 but not completed until the following year. The Kearney Milling Company completed a large new mill south of the tracks at 20th Street and Avenue A at a cost of \$40,000.00. A new Catholic Church, 80 x 115, with a steeple 185 ft. high, was being erected on Minneapolis and Fourth (517 West 26th Street). An item in the December 25 **New Era** reported that the foundation walls were laid for J. D. Hawthorne's new residence (2120 4th Avenue). "When finished it will cost about \$5,000 and be one of the finest residences in the city."

Walter Knutzen, contractor for much of the new building construction, reported that he was working a full force and it would not be his fault if the buildings are not completed on schedule. The great drawback as to the downtown buildings was the inability to procure plate glass for the front windows.

1886 was the beginning of a period of big dreams for Kearneyites. Great things were in store for the city, and their big dreams did come true—for a little while.

SOURCES

Kearney New Era, Jan. to Dec 1886; Buffalo Tales, June, July, September 1978.

LIFE MEMBERS

- Mr. & Mrs. Robert MunroKearney
- Mrs. Pearl SpahrKearney
- Doris EckAlma
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- Evelyn Snell WhislerMcFarland, CA
- George C. MitchellPittsburgh, PA
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