



# Buffalo Tales



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## BICO'S CAFE

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

Bico's Cafe on West Highway 30 in Kearney is one of the few cafes and restaurants of the past that has survived the competition of Interstate 80 eateries and is today (1997) still in operation. It has changed location once, moving a short distance further west on Highway 30, and there has been one change of ownership, but the name and the menu have remained much the same.

Cesar and Ruth Bico started their cafe in Kearney in 1953 in the previous restaurant building of the Elliott Motor Lodge. When the Elliotts retired and sold their motor lodge to Dean and Vena Cannon in 1953, it included several tourist cabins, residence for the owners, gas station and restaurant building. The Cannons could manage all of the operation except the restaurant. They placed an ad in the Omaha World-Herald for someone to lease the restaurant. The Bicos saw the ad, came to an agreement with the Cannons and moved to Kearney.

Cesar Bico was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts in 1918. His parents and a sister had previously emigrated from Portugal to this country. The father died two months before Cesar's birth. When Cesar was four years old his mother remarried and the family returned to Portugal. When he was 15 his mother decided he should return to America so that he could maintain his citizenship. In 1934, at age 16, he returned to New York, found work in a restaurant in Brooklyn and remained there until 1942 when he joined the Army. His first assignment was at Lincoln, Nebraska.



Bico's Cafe, 1953-1965, Postcard.



WITH THE SOCIETY

**A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:**

The Christmas Season is nearly upon us. You may be trying to think what to give that special friend or a loved one. The Historical Society is the place to look if you were thinking of a way to honor or pay tribute to someone you love. If you would be interested in giving a donation to the Historical Society you will find the Society listed in the Community Gift Catalog sponsored by the Kearney Area Community Foundation. Just visit with Marge Lauer at the Kearney Chamber of Commerce Office or with any board member.

If this idea isn't what you want to do, then maybe a copy of the recently printed Volume V of Buffalo Tales, or better yet, all five volumes would make a wonderful gift of history of Buffalo County.

On behalf of myself and the entire Board of Directors, we wish you a very Merry and Blessed Christmas!

Larry Nansel, President



**FROM MEMBERSHIP CHAIRMAN Mitzi Steinbrink —**

At the annual meeting of our Historical Society last April, I challenged each of you to sign up one new member during 1997. This would give our membership a boost of 500. Have you met the challenge? Time is running out. Consider a Christmas gift membership now for someone you know who is interested in Buffalo County's rich history.

The Q125 celebration coming up in 1998, plans for a much-needed new building, and continuation of our present programs all depend on membership support. That support makes possible the collection and preservation of Buffalo County history, which is the vital part of our work. To adopt the slogan of Educational TV, "If we don't do it, who will?"

Let's pledge our efforts to work together to achieve our goals. We'll see you at the Christmas Tree Walk!



**Gift Memberships**

A gift membership in the Buffalo County Historical Society is an ideal gift.

Basic Membership . . . . . annual dues . . . . .	\$15.00
Business Membership . . . . . annual dues . . . . .	\$20.00
Supporting Membership . . . . . annual dues . . . . .	\$30.00 +
Life Memberships (one time payment):	
Individual . . . . .	\$100.00
Husband and wife . . . . .	\$150.00

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

Ruth Homan was from Weeping Water, Nebraska. She graduated from high school, after which she worked there as a waitress, cook or cashier. Later she moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, and was working in the diner of a Wahlgren Drug Store when she met Cesar. They became good friends and were married. Because both of them were experienced in cafe work, they opened their own cafe on O Street in Lincoln, called Perry's Cafe, which Ruth ran when Cesar was away on army assignments. Because of Cesar's restaurant experience he was sent to Ashland, (Nebraska) where he cooked for 300 soldiers, then sent to cook on troop trains running all across the nation. At one time, because he could speak Portugese, he was sent to Winfield, Kansas, serving as an interpreter for Brazilian pilots training for war service for the United States.

When the war was over in 1946 Cesar and Ruth returned to Brooklyn but were not satisfied there and in 1952 moved back to Nebraska, settling in Ruth's home town of Weeping Water. Both of them were anxious to get back into the restaurant business and the opportunity to come to Kearney and operate a cafe at the Cannon Motel was their dream come true.

The Cannon Motel, like its predecessor Elliott Motor Lodge, was a favorite of tourists. Kearney, midway between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, and on the trans-continental Lincoln Highway, later Highway 30, was an ideal location. In the days before air-conditioned buildings and cars, the trees shading the tourist cabins were a delight to travelers during the summer tourist season. Highway 30, until the completion of Interstate 80, was the busiest highway in the nation, drawing tourists from both coasts. The famous Watson 1733 Ranch and the Covered Wagon a few miles west of the city were landmarks for travelers going either east or west. Bico's Cafe, from 1953 to 1965, was famous for its American and Italian food. Ruth and Cesar did all the cooking, hiring high school and college students for kitchen and waitring help. Kearney State College was a few blocks east of the cafe and the Bicos offered a special meal to college students, all they could eat for \$1.00, which was a great attraction to those students who were attending classes with very little money. A Sunday dinner at Bico's Cafe in the first year or two of operation cost \$1.50, which included everything from soup to dessert. Townspeople and tourists alike enjoyed the meals.

Bico's Cafe was the first to introduce Italian food to Kearney. In an interview with Cesar he said that when they first brought out Pizza Pie for people to sample, they wanted to know where the fruit and the top crust were. He enjoyed teaching people, especially children, the art of eating spaghetti.

Everything went well for the Bicos from 1953 to 1965. They repaid the Cannons for their financial help in buying equipment and supplies to get started, living in the basement of the restaurant until they were "on their feet" financially. Cesar and Ruth were "in charge" at all times, taking care of the public and watching over the young people without experience who were working for them.

When the Interstate was opened in 1966, tourist traffic on Highway 30 slowed to a mere trickle. The Bicos decided they had to make a move. They heard that a cafe outside Kearney's city limits on West Highway 30 was closing, so rented it and bought the beer license of another tavern on West Highway 30 that was closing. They wanted to locate outside the city limits where they could sell beer, which meant that their new operation would not be the family style restaurant they had at the Cannon Motel, but it seemed the only way to survive.

March and April of 1966 were spent cleaning and buying equipment for the new location. The new Bico's Cafe opened in May with a menu of both American and Italian food. It was June before clearance to sell beer was okayed. Two or three years later the Bicos had a chance to buy the cafe and surrounding property, which included a



gas station and a service garage. Getting permission to sell beer on Sunday made for better profits.

In their new operation, along with the Italian foods that included several varieties of pizza, spaghetti, lasagna and raviolis, the Bicos added to the menu and became famous for their charco-burgers, boiled shrimp and barbecued ribs, and always homemade bread. There was also the choice between carry-out or being served at the cafe. The barbecued ribs were the Friday night special and it was usually their busiest time.

In December of 1975 Cesar developed a serious lung infection. His health began to decline and the cafe was advertised to be sold. In May of 1976 the business and the building were sold to Mr. and Mrs. Brian Halbert, with Brian taking over the chef and kitchen duties, and his wife Nita managing the dining area. Like the Bicos before them, Brian and Nita have always been "in charge". When the cafe is open, they are both there. The Halberts have continued serving all of the menu items that the Bicos offered, even using the same recipes. It is not often that one can count on the same food year after year prepared in the same way without altering the recipe. They made one change in hours—they have never served breakfast, but are open only for lunch and dinner. The choices of Italian food and the special charco-burgers, boiled shrimp, barbecued ribs and homemade breads are always on the menu, with the ever-popular Friday night special of the barbecued ribs, which continues to be the busiest night of the week.

Changes have been made over the years in the building and grounds. The gas station and repair service are no longer in operation, the gas pumps have been removed, and the exterior paint color has been changed. However, Bico's Cafe of Kearney has served the best of food to local diners and the traveling public in all walks of life for over forty-five years. It has been historically important for its association with the transcontinental Lincoln Highway bringing travelers to Kearney and Buffalo County from both coasts and all points in between. It is an enviable record!

*Author's Note:* Cesar and Ruth Bico were divorced in 1972. Ruth lives at Franklin, Nebraska; Cesar and his second wife Ruby reside in Republican City, Nebraska.

*SOURCES:* Kearney City Directories, 1955-1967; personal interviews with Vena Cannon, Cesar Bico, Brian and Nita Halbert; Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey, Buffalo County, 1993. Photos: Courtesy of the Halberts.



**Bico's Cafe, 1966 to date.**

## CHRISTMAS TREE EXTRAVAGANZA

December 6-14, 1997

1:00 - 5:00 p.m.

**Theme: THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS**

Celebrating the 10th year of the Annual Christmas Tree Walk at Trails & Rails Museum, 706 West 11th Street, in Kearney.

*Over 40 decorated trees*

*Bake Sale every day in the Depot*

Members are urged to participate by bringing baked items and other goodies on any day of the Extravaganza.

\$ 1.50 Donation Requested

All funds from the Christmas Tree Extravaganza are used to benefit the Trails & Rails Museum.

**COME AND JOIN US.**

**Shop Now For Christmas!!**

### Books

**Tales of Buffalo County**, Vol. V, 1996. Reprints of stories originally published in *Buffalo Tales*, 1990-1995.

146 pages, 88 illustrations, 30 stories, indexed, paperback.

**Tales of Buffalo County**, Vol. IV, 1990. Reprints of stories originally published in *Buffalo Tales*, 1987-1989.

161 pages, 100 illustrations, 30 stories, indexed, paperback.

**Tales of Buffalo County**, Vol. III, 1987. Reprints of stories originally published in *Buffalo Tales*, 1984-1986.

156 pages, 78 illustrations, 30 stories, indexed, paperback.

**Tales of Buffalo County**, Vol. II, 1984. Reprints of stories originally published in *Buffalo Tales*, 1981-1983.

149 pages, 94 illustrations, 30 stories, indexed, paperback.

**Tales of Buffalo County**, Vol. I, 1981. Reprinted in 1995. Reprints of stories originally published in *Buffalo Tales*, 1978-1980.

148 pages, 85 illustrations, 31 stories, indexed, paperback.

Each book is \$10 plus \$1.50 postage if mailed, a set of all five is \$45. These books are available at the Trails & Rails gift shop and also at ABC Drug in downtown Kearney Centre, read all about it at Hilltop Mall and at Hastings Book Store.

### Other Books For Christmas Giving

**Like It Was**, a collection of historical pictures,

Reprint 1996, *Kearney Daily Hub*, 176 pages

\$13.95

**Kearney State College**, 1905-1980, by Philip S. Holmgren

\$ 7.00

**Life and Times of Doc Nielsen**, by Margaret Ellen Nielsen

\$ 6.00

Note: Nebraska residents add 6% sales tax if mailed.

### Miscellaneous Gift Items

Christmas Trains, Railroad Striped Caps, Collector's Railroad Spoons, Pewter Trains, Key Chains, Note Paper, Christmas Quilt Patterns, Longfellow School Commemorative Plates, Train Whistles, selection of miscellaneous books, and many special Christmas items.

*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.

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

**TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM**

As I said in the last issue of *Buffalo Tales*, although we are closed, activities do not cease. If the gate is open, someone is coming in. We have had several appointments. There were 50 Gibbon Seniors at the Museum last week having class pictures taken. Thanks to Merlin Burgland the front gate has been repaired so that we can open it completely. He also cut the brush which had grown up by the gate.

Christmas is coming fast and final plans for the 10th annual Christmas Tree Extravaganza are being made. Wilma Larsen will soon be calling for volunteers to sit at the Museum during the Walk. The gift shop will again have many nice items for Christmas. Some are listed on page 5. Do join us for the start of the Christmas Season.

We are nearing the end of a successful year, and I want to take this opportunity to thank all of you who have volunteered at Trails & Rails Museum during the year. We can't say enough about our good volunteers who give many hours to keep our programs going. THANK YOU! We couldn't do it without you!

— Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

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

**Buffalo County Historical Society**  
**Box 523**  
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