

Buffalo Tales

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Buffalo County Historical Society

One Man, the Media, and Morale: S.Sgt. Hugh Benson and the Kearney Army Air Field By Tatiana Moore



On May 28, 1943, an article in the Kearney Air Base News read, “First there’s the tum-te-tum strains of the Air Corps song. Then there’s a nasal, twangy voice airing quips and cracks. And finally, there’s solid sent music from the bands of [Benny] Goodman, [Jimmy and Tommy] Dorsey, [Bing] Crosby, [Fats] Waller, [Duke] Ellington, [Cab] Calloway and scores of others. That’s Khaki Serenade.” The “nasal, twangy voice” from the program aired on Kearney, Nebraska’s local radio station KGFW belonged to Hugh Benson, a staff sergeant from Kearney Army Air Field (KAAF). He not only voiced a radio show but also helped to bring one of the most important forms of media to Kearney Army Air Field in 1943. Though around for only a short time, Benson’s contributions to media outlets for and on the base provided his fellow servicemen and the citizens of the Kearney area with entertainment and the necessary pride they needed to continue serving their country.

Kearney Army Air Field opened its doors in February 1943. Shortly thereafter, officials identified a problem on the base. According to declassified military documents, the status of morale remained low at first because no entertainment yet existed on the base. Kearney Army Air Field had the status of a processing base, which meant it was one of the last stops made by soldiers before going overseas. Therefore, a remedy became top priority because low morale here did not adequately prepare soldiers for war. One of the first solutions to the morale issue emerged in the form of sound waves.

Though it is unclear as to precisely when the relationship between KGFW and Kearney Army Air Field began, documentation of it started in early April 1943, two months after the opening of the base. Benson’s role in the ordeal stands out, though, as he had high involvement in the provision of entertainment at Kearney Army Air Field. Prior to this, and what likely helped him to become well versed in recreation, Benson and entertainment already shared a deep bond. When he attended the University of Southern California, Benson participated and majored in speech, drama, film, and radio related activities. Following his time at USC, in 1938, Benson started doing voice work for the Los Angeles, California radio station KFBW. Then, in 1941 before Benson enlisted, he announced for a radio station in New York. After he enlisted, Benson manned the radio shows and all

S.Sgt. Hugh Benson and the Kearney Army Air Field

entertainment for the Lowry and Buckley Air Fields in Denver, Colorado. By the time Benson reached Kearney, he had learned how to effectively entertain soldiers and claimed this laid the foundation upon which their morale could be built. At the Fort Kearney Hotel in March 1943, Benson provided information to the Cosmopolitan Club members on how to best amuse the men of the air field. By April, Benson had already helped to employ some of his tips.

As officials worked to bring fun to the base for the soldiers, Benson worked with KGFW to supply entertainment on the radio. Benson started this endeavor on a show called "Khaki Serenade." The program aired local and base talent at KGFW and remained a song request show for a long time. Eventually, "Meet the Boys at the USO" branched from "Khaki Serenade." By April 1943, these programs aired primarily for people at Kearney Army Air Field and boasted Benson as emcee. The promise of another program came with the announcement of a direct wire at the base by KGFW radio manager Anson Thomas later that month. This show, later titled "Party Time At the Air Base," would be the only remaining program aired for the base by personnel from the base by the end of 1944. "Party Time" gained much of its fan base because of Benson. The show, in its earliest stages, aired in the base recreation hall and had the purpose of allowing folks to see the broadcasts as they happened. Benson auditioned people for the show, both on and off the base, and captivated the audience with his suave and silly personality. SGT George Kiesling acted as Benson's partner-in-crime for the "Party Time" broadcasts. Oftentimes, the people who worked with Benson on the program earned the name "Party Time Troupe," because they were so recognizable. The entertainment show did not remain confined to the base, either. In one case, Benson and his entertainers traveled into town to perform at the World Theatre. "Party Time," claimed the Kearney Air Base News, brought an evening of "fun, frolic, and music to entertain the soldiers."

While officials at Kearney Army Air Field began organizing entertainment, Benson collaborated with the other important media outlet on the base: the newspaper. At its start, the fledgling paper only produced four pages, but there still existed a need for writers. Benson stepped into this role until it could be filled for various organizations on the base, though his specialty did not exist in writing. As far as can be determined, he wrote about eight columns for the newspaper. In one, he noted that he had begun writing for squadrons, but once people with a talent for writing were discovered, Benson was relieved of his post. Though he acted as a filler person, Benson maintained his professional popularity. He continued to help with the newspaper while conducting the radio shows until permanent writers could be found.

Benson not only contributed to media but also to social events on and around Kearney Army Air Field. For the year or so he remained at the base, Benson helped with numerous war bond sales, the exact number has yet to be determined. His efforts, along with others on Kearney Army Air Field, made an appearance in the Omaha World Herald in July 1943. The article claimed Benson sold twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of war bonds with his fellow servicemen, a major accomplishment.

While taking part in war bond sales, radio programs, and article writing, Benson also put his emcee talents to good work for entertainment events. These occasions typically included music, dancing, and fun. Benson emceed for several USO events, including the weekly dances they held. Kearney Army Air Field also used Benson as an emcee for events on the base. In November 1943, the base held a three-day open house for teen boys and their parents where they could tour, examine the planes, and take part in entertainment conducted by Benson and the other performing soldiers. A gala was held one evening in June, complete with dancing and music. Benson regaled the crowd as emcee here, too, and continued to build his reputation as the popular master of ceremonies.

As previously mentioned, Benson's contributions at Kearney Army Air Field not only involved entertaining men but also consisted of planning for that entertainment. Five months after the opening of the air base, officials began negotiating plans for the formation of a Non-Commissioned Officers Club, or an NCO Club. This club would be a place for NCOs to go for more entertainment. Benson,

up to his knees in entertainment, joined others on the location committee.

Though he did much around the base, Benson could not remain forever. Ten months after the opening of Kearney Army Air Field, Benson bid his comrades farewell. The last recorded mention of him came in a December 1943 column in the Kearney Air Base News. The article reported that Benson made his way off to "the real thing." He went on to the war in Europe, and though his wartime duties remain unknown, Benson survived the war. He made it all the way to Hollywood and became a famous producer and writer following World War II. In 1999, Benson passed away from cancer.

The significance of this old Hollywood producer in small town Kearney remains in the legacy of the entertainment of the base. First, Benson's contributions to the media outlets and entertainment facilities helped establish connections between the Kearney community and Kearney Army Air Field. Because Benson emceed three radio programs, he and the KGFW staff had to cooperate. The kindness with which the station loaned its resources to the base proves a good relationship existed. Each opportunity he had to thank them for their generosity, he took. And after he left, these connections grew. More media servicemen joined to help run the radio shows and provide entertainment, even up until the very end of the base's time. Second, Benson's work helped to provide a solution to the morale boosting issue that emerged at the base's establishment. His experience with entertainment and his talent with crowds equipped him well for the job of morale boosting. The radio programming, base newspapers, and weekly entertainment events helped to increase the morale of the processing base. With the implementation of other entertainment facilities such as the base movie theatre, morale no longer remained as low as it had been in the early months of Kearney Army Air Field.

Lastly, the year or so that Benson was stationed at Kearney Army Air Field helped to lay a foundation upon which others could build and continue his work. The base had about three years left after Benson departed, which meant three years of entertainment had to be conducted.

SGT Milton Cohen—former editor of the Kearney Air Base News—CPL Bill Bradford, and CPL Bev Watson were just a few of the men

who continued the radio programs. As with any modern thing, the shows were updated over the years but continued to remain true to what Benson had initially established: entertainment for morale boosting brought by civilian and military performers. The work Benson started at the base served as groundwork for media morale boosting that existed through the end of Kearney Army Air Field.

The year Benson served at the base in Kearney, Nebraska, proved to be an important year to the morale boosting of people in the area. His contributions to media and other entertainment forms on and around the base helped to provide recreation and the necessary pride the citizens of Kearney and the military personnel of Kearney Army Air Field needed to continue fighting the war. Benson's experience in show business, his willingness to help out with all things entertainment, and his natural talent and desire for his work supplemented each of his shows, emceeding gigs, and columns. He held an integral role in the development of the morale methods at Kearney Army Air Field, and a good deal of thanks is owed the old soldier. As stated by reporters from the Kearney Air Base News, "thanks to you, Benson, for being bold!"



Aerial view of K.A.A.F

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Director's Report—Jennifer Murrish

The museum staff and volunteers have been very busy with group tours, booths out in the public, bringing in additional donated shelving and fixtures, and working on the Textile Tales renovation.

The BCHS Board of Directors, staff, and I would like to commend and support Nathan LeFeber who is the Kearney High School band director. He is spearheading a project to restore the Sonatorium at Harmon Park. We love seeing our County's history preserved.



Thanks for choosing Trails & Rails Museum as your meeting location! Above is the Circle 5 of the United Methodist Women, First United Methodist Church! We loved your smiles, kindness, and your memories!

If YOUR organization is looking for a place to meet, contact Broc at bchs.buffalotales@hotmail.com.

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Broc Anderson, Editor

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