



# Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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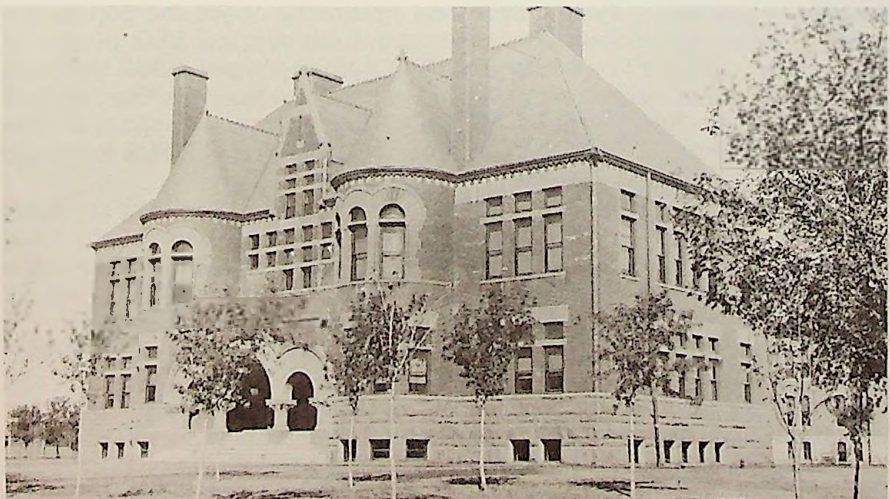
March-April, 2004

## *Schoolhouses, Students, and Teachers in Nineteenth-Century Kearney*

by Chris McClemens

The Kearney Public School system is among the best in the state. Its students consistently score high on exams such as the SAT (Scholastic Achievement Test) and the ACT (American College Testing). Kearney's school system has changed dramatically since 1872 when it had only one school and thirty-six students. In 2004 more than 4,500 students attend public schools in the Kearney School District. The district has nine elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school.

Like churches, banks, and businesses, schools appeared in Kearney almost as soon as the city was founded. Many of the first settlers in Kearney were middle class families who needed a place for their children to be educated. Kearney's first school was nothing more than a rented building that was shared with the local newspaper. According to Samuel Basset, a noted Buffalo County historian, the only "suitable place" for a school was in this building. This must have been a difficult place to study as the noise of printing presses and workers going about their daily duties must have made learning difficult. To make matters worse the school had no black board, only one desk, and students sat on benches. The historical record also indicates that various homes were periodically rented for the use of education. The Asbury Collins house, for example, sometimes served as a one-room school.



**Longfellow High School, Kearney, NE January 12, 1894**

(continued from Page 1)

By 1873, the citizens of Kearney Junction raised funds and built a schoolhouse at the southwest corner of present day 24th Street and Avenue A. For unknown reasons local residents did not like the school in their neighborhood and made complaints to city officials. A strong storm, however, quickly put complaints to a rest when the structure blew down during a severe thunderstorm. The city built a new structure in what was in 1874 the northwest part of the city. Located at the intersection of 27th Street and 4th Avenue, the school was constructed at a cost of \$2,200.

By the end of the 1870's several other schools appeared in town. An 1876 map of Kearney, for example, indicates that the town now had two schoolhouses. In 1877 the editor of the *Kenesaw Times* made some interesting comments on Kearney and public education. "The citizens of Kearney are...really desirous of having first class schools...Kearney has sufficient appreciation of education, and sufficient public spirit to secure the best teachers to be had, and to sustain the school board in putting the schools upon a high basis."

Early schoolhouses looked like everyday residences. If one looks at them in a photograph it would be difficult to distinguish schools from houses. By 1879, however, school buildings began to look more like modern-day educational facilities. The first brick schoolhouse was completed on June 6, 1879. The building was called Whittier (after a member of the school board named James Whittier) and served as Kearney's chief schoolhouse for many years. The building housed a library with 300 books, including complete works of Dickinson and other well-known writers. The school had a basement and was made of brick with a limestone foundation. It was also made fireproof with the installation of a tin roof. The building really seemed like a schoolhouse with its various classrooms, library, fenced in grounds, and staircases. The Whittier building, however, would not be the main facility for long.

By the 1880's Kearney entered a boom period that saw its economy diversify and its population explode. The city was described as the Gateway to the West. People were very optimistic about the population growth. Kearney's population increased from around 200 people in 1873 to around 8,500 by 1890. By 1888 approximately 1,300 students attended school in Kearney. According to local newspapers Kearney had the third largest enrollment in the state behind Lincoln and Omaha. The increased student body demanded more schools and in 1888 Kenwood opened its doors to Kearney's students.

With this growth Kearney needed more schools for the many students that settled in the city. During the 1880's the school board built several first-rate brick schoolhouses. Before 1900 new schools were usually named after prominent American authors. Bryant School admitted students for the first time in 1885 and taught students in the third, second, and first primary grades as well as the first intermediate grade. Emerson School also opened in 1885 and taught primary and intermediate students. Whittier served as the high school until 1890 but also taught students in the primary and intermediate grades. At least a few one-room schools still operated in and around Kearney during the 1880's. The *Kearney Hub* directories from the time listed Idlewood



School (also known as Island School), West School, and Dove Hill. Collins School, located on 11th Street in West Kearney operated as a one-room school until the early 1930's.

The 1890's also saw the addition of new schools in the Kearney Public School District. In 1890, for example, Longfellow High School was built at 303 West 22nd Street and served as Kearney's primary high school until the 1960's. With the opening of Longfellow School, Whittier lost its position as the dominant schoolhouse. Longfellow High School was built differently than the previous schoolhouses. It was a work of architectural art. According to an account in *Where the Buffalo Roamed*, Longfellow School had "hand carved entrance arches, round tower rooms, white oak fireplaces in the administration offices and a unique stairway." Schools were now being built to stand the test of time. An addition was added to the building in 1912 and it was completely renovated during the 1930's. The building was demolished in 1969.

Hawthorne and Alcott schools (also named after American authors) were built in 1892-93. Hawthorne, located at 3400 Avenue A, and Alcott School at 1112 E. 16th Street looked almost identical because they were built from the same design plan. Both schools had the same elaborate design as Longfellow. One could now see that a new era in education was beginning.

The Kearney School Board made regular allocations to improve or update school facilities. During the 1887 school year, for example, the classrooms were overhauled with new slates for the blackboards while the desks and chairs received fresh coats of varnish. School buildings also received fresh paint inside and out. The school board spent \$1,700 dollars on the improvements.

During the late nineteenth century Kearney teachers dedicated themselves to improving their teaching skills. Many of the city's teachers, for example, were involved in the Nebraska Teachers Association (NTA), an organization that trained teachers in various disciplines to enhance their teaching. At an NTA meeting in Kearney, teaching experts lectured upon the subjects of physiology, mathematics, reading, and composition. Kearney teachers also attended NTA meetings in Hastings where they listened to lectures titled "Neglected Education" and "German and American methods of Education."

Kearney's early teachers also encouraged parents to keep abreast of their child's progress. An article in the *Kearney New Era* reported that "Miss Stewart especially desires to have the parents of scholars visit the school the first half of the term as well as the last..." Miss Stewart seemed to be a well-liked teacher in Kearney. The Kearney School Board reportedly increased her annual paycheck by \$250 at a school board hearing. This would have been a hefty sum during the 1880's.

Students also seemed to be enthusiastic about education. In a natural science class some students became so interested in the subject matter that they brought a live badger and owl to class. With such student interest, talk soon began about opening a museum to hold different natural specimens. Mock trials were also quite popular and members of the school board sometimes participated. In another activity students held "education exhibitions" such as spelling bees and geography bees where they would show off their academic talent. In one

particular school activity, students debated over who was a more important historical figure, Napoleon Bonaparte or Julius Caesar.

Students even found time to have fun. The following poem was printed in the *Kearney New Era* and poked fun at Miss Burkhead's classroom.

### Scholars of Room No. 10

Taught by Miss Burkhead

We are awful Scholars in room number ten  
But we all expect to be great Ladies and Men;  
We are always in Mischief, no matter what 'tis  
We got firecrackers, and made a big fizz.

We put pins in the chair where are teacher  
Doth sit;  
And when she jumped we cried not a bit;  
We cheat in our lessons and draw pictures of goats

We throw paper wads; we knock on the door;  
And sometimes we push the boys on the floor.  
When the teacher goes out then we have lots  
Of fun;

We Yell and we holler, do everything else  
Under the sun.

We chew sugar-gum and all things we like;  
We play with everything from a pin to a spike,  
We spit on the floor and write on our desks  
And we think the teacher thinks we are terrible  
Pests

The Scholars that stay in at noon, make all the  
Noise they can  
Except when Miss Stewart is there, and then  
They sit and plan;  
And the teacher's bell we stuff with paper,  
All the time;  
And now you see dear friends this ends our  
Little rhyme.

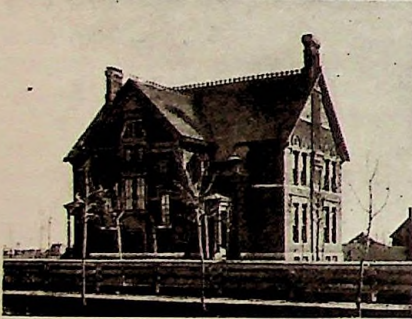


**Kearney's first public school building 24th Street and Avenue A.**

By the 1930's, the schoolhouses built in the 1880's were becoming outdated and in need of repair. Rather than making expensive renovations the old schoolhouses were razed and new ones built. The original Emerson, Bryant, and Kenwood buildings were all demolished and replaced by new schools with the same name. Longfellow was one of the last to go. It was destroyed when the new high school was built north of Harmon Park.

Kearney has grown tremendously from the days of a simple schoolhouse that taught thirty-six students. From the lower floor of a newspaper facility to being a leader in education for the state of Nebraska, Kearney has grown substantially over the years and will continue to follow in the steps laid down more than 130 years ago.

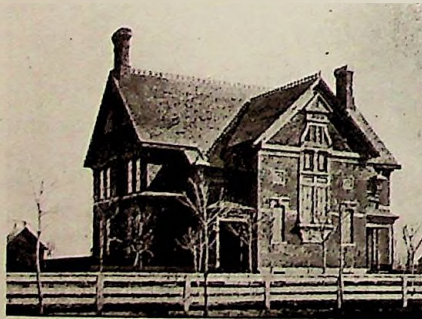
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**Bryant - 1885.**



**Kenwood - 1888.**



**Emerson - 1885.**



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**A Note from the Society:**

It's that time of year again! The Trails and Rails Museum will be open for the summer season beginning May 22nd. Summer hours are 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Monday-Saturday and 1:00 to 5:00 on Sunday.

If you would be willing to share your time and talents with us this summer in the archives building, at the guest book or one of many other volunteer opportunities, please contact the society office at 308-234-3041. We would welcome the opportunity to have you as part of the summer "crew".

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