



# Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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## HISTORIC HOMES OF RAVENNA—THE POLENZ HOUSE

### Part I

by Valerie Vierk

#### Introduction

When the early settlers arrived in Nebraska in the 1870's and 80's they were greeted by a mostly treeless prairie. The exception was some trees growing along the rivers and creeks. One of the settlers first tasks was to erect some sort of shelter from wild animals and weather. Many of the early homes in central Nebraska were made of sod due to the lack of wood. A few years later, when the new towns obtained saw mills, wooden houses started going up. Many of these were crude little structures that would make any architect cringe. They were thrown up quickly, hopefully before winter set in. But by the time most little prairie towns were ten to twenty years old, more aesthetically pleasing and elaborate homes were being built. Some were built by people who had made quick fortunes in livestock or business in the new towns. Others, like the subject of this article, were built by people with no visible means of wealth. They simply had a vision, and enough business sense to somehow obtain the money to finance these large, elaborate houses. Mrs. Bertha Polenz was one of these people.

The "Polenz" house, now called Aunt Betty's Bed and Breakfast, is located at 804 Grand Avenue, which is main street Ravenna. Harold Polenz, born April 1910, grandson of the original owner, has provided excellent information about the house. It was built in 1906-07 by Bertha (Sperling) Polenz, a 39-year-old widow. She was born in Germany in 1867 and came to America at a young age. On Thanksgiving Day, 1884, at age 17, she married Julius Polenz at his farm four miles northwest of Ravenna. He and his brothers had begun homesteading the place in 1880. Julius also came from Germany. He died in March 1905 at age 42 as a result of an accident while digging a well. His widow was left with five children: Herman, Minnie, Albert, Lillie and Esther, all at home.



The Polenz House — 1907

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## WITH THE SOCIETY

### **A Note from the President:**

Wayne Humphrey and Jan Fern, both of Kearney, and Joyce Sullwold of Elm Creek were elected as new Board Members at the Annual Meeting. Congratulations to the new members and best wishes for productive terms.

—Larry Nansel, President

### **A Message from the Editor:**

Remember the person who knew the local history of this neighborhood or that building, or was there when the church burned down? How often folks said they should write those memories down, but, they never did. We all have a story or two that is part of the mosaic of the history of the community. If you have an historical tale or interesting footnote to tell, write it down now and send it in to the *Buffalo Tales*. And, if you enjoy doing some researching and writing on local history, please send along what you have. I would love to review what you have and work with you to present it in our pages.

Please send your historical stories, anecdotes, and essays to: Roger P. Davis, 513 West 28th Street, Kearney, NE 68845. If you choose to send something in an electronic format, send your material to davisr@unk.edu. I look forward to hearing from you.

### **Bus Tour to North Platte:**

A reminder that on August 26 the BCHS will sponsor a bus tour to North Platte. The tour will leave the Trails and Rails Museum at 9:15 a.m. At 11:30 a.m. there will be a sack lunch at Cody Park by the train engines. Bring your own lunch and we will furnish the lemonade. At 1:00 p.m. we will tour the Union Pacific Railroad Yards and the Hump. Our guide will be a retired railroad man. This should be lots of fun, and the cost is only \$30 per person. If you have questions call Ed Anderson at 237-7339. Send reservations to P.O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848.

### **Tales of Buffalo County:**

Volume VI of *Tales of Buffalo County* is now available, and on August 5 the BCHS and Hastings Books, Music & Video Store featured a book signing by some of the contributing authors: Alice Howell, Valerie Vierk, Otto Lohrenz, Emma Jane Wilder, Margaret Nielsen and Sue Hankins. Thanks to Hastings for their support of the BCHS. The cost of Volume VI is \$14, but only \$12.50 for Historical Society members if you purchase your edition at Trails and Rails Museum. A full set of all six volumes is \$75.

### **County Board Gift of Plat Books:**

The County Board of Supervisors donated 20 copies of the 1994 Buffalo County Plat Book to the Historical Society to be sold at the Trails and Rails Museum. The books are \$60 each. One copy has been held back and placed in the archives. The book shows property ownership, describes all the rural residents families in the county and includes hundreds of photographs of residents. This is a very large book, chocked full of information.

### **Archives Update:**

The Archives Committee continues to work on abstracting the marriage records of the county. Numerous requests for genealogical information have been received and answered over the summer. A large photograph album has been donated to the archives.

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Shortly after the accident, Mrs. Polenz purchased three lots from the Lincoln Land Co. for \$350. She went to Omaha to consult her brother-in-law, an architect, about the plans for her intended house, which was to be a boarding house. It was expected to cost between \$5,000-\$6,000 to build. This was no small sum in those days, especially for a widow! The author inquired of Bertha's two grandsons if they knew where she obtained the money, but they didn't know. Perhaps her husband's brothers gave her some funds as they homesteaded with Julius. Or perhaps Mrs. Polenz simply obtained a bank loan on her own behalf since her plan to build a boarding house in a growing town was a good idea. At that time the location was at the north edge of the little prairie town, right across the street from the public school. (Through the years the town has grown up around the big house and now it is hard to believe the old pictures that show the house standing all alone.)

*The Ravenna News* had the privilege of looking over the blueprints for the house and concluded that it would be the handsomest and most modern in town. (The blueprints were stored in the house for many years but are no longer available.) Dimensions were to be 30'x48' on the ground, two stories and an attic above. The local paper said, "It will be something of the Colonial style of architecture, although not strictly so, there being some suggestions of the Queen Anne style in the arrangement of porches and roof."

The same source stated on December 12, 1906 that the foundation for the house had been laid (cement blocks) and that work would progress as rapidly as the weather would permit. The August 16, 1907 edition reported that the house would be almost completed by the end of the week. Considering the size of the house and the fact that it was started in the winter, this seems quite a feat, especially since power saws did not exist at this time. Mrs. Polenz and her children moved in that summer. She also started taking in boarders, many who were teachers at the high school right across the street.

There was a huge coal burning hot-air furnace and two rooms in the basement. The first floor held the kitchen, large walk in pantry, three bedrooms, a half bath, a living and dining room. Cooking would be done on a wood/cob burning range. The large dining and living rooms had floors with borders of beautiful inlay wood (mahogany, maple and walnut) in a geometric pattern. There were sliding doors between the dining and living rooms and between the living room and hallway that led to the second floor. The turret on the southeast was of a curved design so that the windows of the living room "parlor" were similar to a bay window except there is no window seat. This curved outward design gave the room an even more spacious effect.

The second floor had six bedrooms and a full bath. The large bedroom on the southeast that was part of the turret also has the bay window effect.

The loft, or third floor was accessed by a steep stairway from the hallway on second floor. Harold remembers studying the unfinished attic where he took note of the solid construction of the house, the use of 2x8 studding instead of the usual 2'x4's or 2'x6's. (Years later this heavy studding would provide a controversy.) He also remembers the well used billiard table and wondered how it was transported up the steep stairway.

Outside, the house had three porches, one on the east, the south and the west. The south porch was curved and very decorative with its six columns and balustrade crowns. The front, or east porch had smaller columns and was not curved although it too had balustrade crowns. The trim was painted white with gray and black trim. The siding was narrow wood except for under the eaves, which was a wider wood. The turret had a spire topping it and a wreath-like design of filigree (carved wood) just above the bowed windows.

A barn set north of the house on the adjoining lot. When Harold was a freshman in high school in the mid-1920's, he would ride his pony the four miles into town and leave her at Grandma's barn or sometimes take the pony out to the west edge of town and turn her loose. She would then find her way home. A carriage house set southwest of the house. In November 1913 Mrs. Polenz and a friend, Mrs. George West, took a nasty spill out north of town when the team became frightened and leaped a bank. The back yard just west of the house was surrounded by a 5' green lattice fence that was covered with grape vines. There was a vegetable garden and a brick lined cave to store vegetables. As Harold stated, the place was like a small self-supporting farm right in town. For aesthetic purposes there was a circular flower garden and a little handmade pond. Although there were no trees initially, by the time Harold was old enough to take notice, there were several elm trees and a linden.

From 1907-1919 Mrs. Polenz kept the social notes of the town lively as she hosted many activities in her showplace. In May of 1908 the high school Junior/Senior banquet was held here. There were six seniors and twelve juniors. In February of 1910 Mrs. Polenz's eldest daughter, Minnie, married Lieutenant Hathaway and her wedding reception was in her mother's house. Thirty-five guests were seated and the tables were decorated with white carnations and smilax. *The Ravenna News* reported that "An elaborate five course dinner was served." In July 1911 the second daughter, Lillie, married Fred Hayes and her wedding dinner for fifty was also here. The rooms were decorated with rose and green and the tables adorned with lilies of the valley and ferns.



**Bertha Polenz and granddaughter, Faith Laverne Circa 1917**  
Photo by Valerie Vierk

Bertha's son, Albert married a local woman, Nellie Stark, in June 1912. In November 1913 Nellie gave birth to a little girl, but something went wrong and the 23-year-old mother didn't recover from the birth. She died when the baby, Faith Laverne,

was three weeks old. The local paper carried a touching account of the impressive funeral, how six young married women, Fair Ladies of LesMore Castle, Royal Highlanders, acted as pallbearers. (The Royal Highlanders were a Sodtown band.) One hundred members of this band provided an escort as they marched to Highland cemetery. Nellie's class of 1907 carried a wreath of white flowers to the cemetery. When Faith Laverne was about age four, she posed for a formal photograph with Grandma Polenz. (Laverne grew up, married and had a daughter. Laverne died in 1989.)

## WITH THE SOCIETY

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It contains pictures of Kearney and the Air Base during World War II. There are some excellent aerial photos of downtown Kearney. Plans are being made to copy many of these pictures so our members can see them and perhaps even help identify some of the individuals. This album was found at a garage sale in Fon du Lac, Wisconsin and contact was made with the historical society through our web site!

### Do You E-Bay?

At the recent State Historical Records Advisory Board meeting it was reported that local Nebraska historical documents are showing up for sale on the e-bay auction web site. The Sherman County school records were sold just recently. If you visit e-bay and notice any Nebraska historical documents for sale, please contact Andrea Faling, Associate Director of the Nebraska State Historical Society, at 402-471-3100 or via email at bun@nebraskahistory.org. If items are purchased, for personal or local museum use, the Historical Society can still microfilm them and leave ownership with the purchaser. Thanks for your help.

### Farmstead Site Update:

Repair and restoration work at the farmstead is progressing. The pasture is to be returned to natural prairie like when the first wagon trains came through here. All unwanted trees in the pasture property line have been removed and an old septic tank has been filled in. We are ready to plant the prairie grass later in the fall. A grant from the Central Platte Natural Resource District is covering the cost of preparing the land and planting the grass.

The chicken house has been painted. The metal sheets have been removed from the garage and it is being painted. The chicken house roof is being repaired and reshingled. The Bryon Cottage residents at the YRTC are helping with this work.

Application was made to the County Board of Supervisors and approved for property tax exemption for the farmstead property, except the house, since it is being used as a museum. The house could not be exempted because it is rented to produce some income for this project.

### Accident Update:

Retirement brings its surprises and for Alice Howell this included a auto accident which produced some broken ribs and many bruises. Alice is ok and on the mend, but a card or call is always nice. If you would like to wish her well, you can contact Alice at 237-7858, or send a card or letter to: Alice Howell, Kearney Manor #134, Avenue M, Kearney, NE 68847.

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Dr. Roger P. Davis, Editor

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Supporting Membership .....\$30.00 +  
Life memberships are \$150.00 for individual;  
\$200.00 for husband and wife.

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TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM

This has been a very busy summer and it's hard to believe that school will soon be starting. Two of our summer employees have left for teaching, etc. The others will try to fit their work in with the first two weeks at UNK. We really appreciate their dedication. Anyone who can volunteer to be at the desk during the morning hours would be greatly appreciated.

The LIVING HISTORY DAY will be August 19th. Many things are planned—A Quilt Show, instruction on quilt making, games for the young and old, a horse-shoe tournament, story telling, etc. Come one and all.

It's not too early to start thinking about the Christmas Tree Walk. If you haven't turned in your reservation please do so or if your organization has not previously taken part, please let me know.

—Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

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

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