



Buffalo Tales



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CAMP JOHN R. BROOKE

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

In today's world (1995) mention is often made of "rewritten history", "fractured history", or "revisionist history". This story is one of "blended history". Two outstanding events of local history have seemingly become blended into one. We will attempt to separate the two events, each outstanding on its own merits, and give you the story of Camp John R. Brooke and the story of Camp Henry A. Morrow, both held on the outskirts of Kearney in September of 1888. All of the participants are now gone so we have had to rely on military historians, newspaper, magazine and journal items to find the facts.

The United States Army Department of the Platte in 1888 included all of the states of Nebraska, Wyoming and Utah. During the summer many camps of instruction were established, manned by troops from selected forts within the Department. The largest of these summer camps in 1888 was located in southwest Kearney and was named in honor of John R. Brooke, Commanding General of the Department of the Platte. It was established September 1 and maintained throughout the month of September. Reporters and photographers from the east coast were sent to cover the activities of this large camp. The *Omaha Bee* had almost daily coverage. The *Kearney New Era* carried a few items.

Artist and photographer J. A. Finch was sent by *Harpers Magazine* of New York to cover the event. Copy of his story, dated October 27, with photographs, has been furnished by the Nebraska State Historical Society.

The largest body of regular troops that has been brought together for maneuvers since the close of the Civil War was assembled during the month of September at Kearney, Nebraska. 23 companies of Infantry went into camp there on the first of the month, and remained for four weeks. The camp was named



First Lieutenant James M. Burns, Major J. Morris Brown, General Frank Wheaton, First Lieutenant A. R. Egbert, First Lieutenant John S. Parke and Second Lieutenant William M. Wright. (Finch Photos: Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society)

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WITH THE SOCIETY

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:

Everything with the Buffalo County Historical Society and Trails and Rails Museum is in a very positive mode.

To bring you up-to-date, we applied for money from the Kearney Keno Fund and received \$12,500 of the \$25,000 that we had requested. We will be using these funds for restoration on the Boyd House.

A few months ago we contacted the City of Kearney for some of the old bricks that were being removed from the downtown area so we could use them to construct more sidewalks on the museum grounds. We did receive the bricks and we owe Burton Mougey a big "thank you" for laying a lot of them.

Our budget request to the County Board was approved and we are very appreciative of that.

The Board of Directors has appointed a building committee to get the wheels turning on a new all purpose building at the museum. They have had 3 meetings and the input and plans are progressing nicely.

Larry K. Nansel, President

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Memorial received in memory of Ward Minor

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Plans are being made for a Buffalo County Historical Society bus tour on Sunday, October 22, 1995. The tour will include some of the historic sites along the Mormon Trail in Buffalo County. We will go on to the Susan Hale grave in northwest Adams County for a viewing of the Oregon Trail "ruts", and also to the point where all of the overland routes came together.

Members will be notified as to the sign-up and other arrangements of the tour when details are complete.

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It isn't too early to be thinking of Christmas giving. Remember *Tales of Buffalo County*, Volumes I, II, III and IV. These books are available at ABC Drug, read all about it, MONA and hastings book store.

Or a membership in the Buffalo County Historical Society. A new 1996 membership purchased this year includes the September-October and the November-December issues of *Buffalo Tales*. Write to Buffalo County Historical Society, Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848, or call 234.3041 or 237-7858.

in honor of Brigadier-General John R. Brooke, commanding the Department of the Platte, in which the troops are stationed. They consisted of five companies of the 21st Infantry, Col. Henry A. Morrow commanding; eight companies of the 17th Infantry, Col. Henry R. Mizner commanding; ten companies of the 2nd Infantry, Lieutenant-Colonel J. S. Fletcher commanding. The camp was commanded by Brevet Major-General Frank Wheaton, Colonel of the 2nd Infantry . . .

It was something of a coincidence that General Wheaton, well remembered as a Division Commander in the Sixth Corps of the Army of the Potomac, had been stationed at old Fort Kearny thirty-two years before, when central and western Nebraska were given up to the occupation of buffaloes, coyotes, and Indians of the plains. The contrast must have seemed to him great in finding his camp placed near a town of 10,000 people with a well-farmed country all around Lake Kearney. The camp was established on a broad grassy plain a mile west of the courthouse.

The unusual number of troops in camp allowed them to be organized as an infantry brigade, so that brigade and battalion reviews, parades, and drills could be held, as well as exercises of smaller commands. The daily camp routine included reveille at 5:30 a.m.; company or battalion drill from 6:30 to 7:30; battalion guard mount at 8:00; brigade drill from 9:30 to 11:30; grand guard mounting, 1 p.m.; outpost duty from 1 to 4 p.m.; battalion or brigade dress parade, 5:30 p.m.

Scouting parties were sent out as if in an enemy's country, and escorts were supplied for wagon trains, which were attacked by other detachments, the result being either their capture or else the repulse of the assailants. These and the other military exercises were regarded as of much utility in promoting the efficiency of the troops assembled; they also were enjoyed by the townspeople and others who visited the camp.

The troops reached the camp by moving from Fort Omaha, Fort Sidney, and Fort D. A. Russell, from which they were drawn, each regiment bringing its band. The troops stood the marching well, although it was the opinion of some officers that the distance of the rendezvous could be shortened with advantage in subsequent annual camps of instruction. However, the fine daily marches made on their return to their various stations which began on the 29th of



The Great Military Encampment

September. showed that they were in good condition after their month of camp exercise.

The policy of putting a portion of the troops of the departments into summer camps and cantonments for exercises in many of the minor operations of war, such as otherwise would not become familiar to them in the long continuance of peace, is now well established, and there can be no question as to its value.

In all, there were about 1,700 soldiers, with about fifty civilian employees at the encampment. The troops marched to Kearney, from Fort Omaha, 200 miles; from Fort Sidney, 250 miles; and from Fort D. A. Russell, near Cheyenne, Wyoming, 350 miles. Each regiment was accompanied by its Colonel and its band.

The *Omaha Bee* of September 11 notes that "the camp is about one and one-half miles southwest of Kearney on a beautiful piece of level ground. Several driven wells in each battalion camp furnish an excellent supply of good water, besides the surplus of water from the Kearney canal and lake runs just west of the camp." These directions indicate that the camp location was east of the 20th Avenue tail race from the lake, and south of the Union Pacific tracks. Estimated size of the camp was 1,500 feet north to south and 1,200 feet east to west.

From descriptions found in the *Army and Navy Journal* and in the *Omaha Bee*, there were parades, grand guard mounts, brigade drills, skirmishing and sham battles every day, together with instruction in all sentry, picket and escort duty. One week, in addition to regular drill, orders were issued to proceed to the Platte River and cut a supply of willows to be used in making fascines and gabions, and in field engineering. Gabions and fascines were made from bundles of willow sticks bound together, or filled with earth, used in building fieldworks, raising batteries, strengthening ramparts, etc. Several references were made to the naval battle which would be fought on Lake Kearney when the G.A.R. Reunion gathered during the encampment.

"The bands of each regiment showed excellent efficiency," reports the *Army and Navy Journal*, "and grand martial music has aided much in making camp life pass pleasantly." Praise was given to the citizens of Kearney who have "done all in their power to make the stay of our gallant soldiers pleasant, and the presence of the troops has been a great joy to the Kearney people." Hundreds of townspeople gathered around the camp to listen to the music and to observe the drills and maneuvers of the soldiers.



Camp Brooke, Kearney, Nebraska.



1888 Army Encampment Anderson Photo Collection

Concerts, musicales, receptions, and social events took place in the city as Kearney entertained the visiting soldiers. The *Omaha Bee* of September 5 gave an account of an "elegant reception at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Juan Boyle for officers and citizens in honor of General and Mrs. Wheaton." It was largely attended, the general being very popular with the officers and with Kearneyites as well. That evening there was to be "an invitation soiree at the lake pavilion." On another occasion was a concert at the Model Opera House given by Mlle. Rachel Franko, Mrs. Frank Wheaton, Mrs. W. C. Tillson and Lieutenant John Kinzie. "The house was crowded, and by the elite of the city."

Pay day at the camp on September 12 went smoothly according to the *Omaha Bee*. "It was expected by some that when the men received their money they would proceed to 'paint the city red,' but by midnight Kearney was wrapped in its usual quiet at that hour, thanks to the good conduct of the men themselves and the wise provisions of the officers in command."

The behavior of the soldiers during the encampment was above reproach. Except for one news item in the *Kearney New Era* stating that "a lass of fifteen summers was sent to the Reform School for loitering around Camp Brooke," there were only exemplary reports of the discipline of the camp men and the local citizenry.

On September 29, a letter from Kearney to the *Army and Navy Journal* reported: "But the white tents that have dotted our beautiful prairie have all been struck, and the gallant soldiers that occupied them are now enroute to their several posts. Camp Brooke is an existence of the past. The gallant General Wheaton and the gentlemanly officers, together with all the noble-hearted 'boys in blue' . . . take with them the best wishes of all the good citizens of Kearney."

SOURCES

Correspondence with Gary Weicks, Roy, Utah; Leroy Walker, Gibbon; Kieth Buss, Gothenburg; Nebraska State Historical Society; U.S. Army Center of Military History; Special Archives Division of National Archives and Records; *Army and Navy Journal*, August 18, September 22, October 3, 20, 27, 1888; *Omaha Bee*, September 2, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 20, 26, 1888; *Kearney New Era*, September 1, 15, 29, October 27, November 3, 1888.

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TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM

After a busy and successful summer with lots of activity the Trails and Rails Museum is officially closed until the Christmas Tree Walk December 2-10. Groups may arrange to visit the museum by appointment.

We wish to thank the guides for their good work this summer. A special vote of appreciation goes to Wilma Larson and all of the volunteers who have given so much of their time to greet the guests every afternoon.

During the summer some bricks were completed. The wood edging was provided by the Woodman Society. We thank Burton Mougey for laying the brick. The move of the Archives to their new location was done during the latter part of the summer.

We look forward to seeing you during the Christmas Tree Walk.
—Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

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

Buffalo County Historical Society

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