

Buffalo Tales

September/October 2013



Politics, the President and Gods

Harry S. Truman's 1948 Whistle-Stop Tour Comes to Kearney (part II)

By Ross Huxoll

As the motorcade pulled up to the church, a nervous Rev. Pearson hurried down the walkway to formally greet the president and his family. In his haste, the reverend inadvertently triggered an impulsive response from the secret service detail at which point they met Mr. Pearson and restrained him as a possible assassin. After the reverend had been cleared as a potential threat, the group made its way into the church's vestibule. During the "midnight meeting" at the church the night before, the secret servicemen had instructed Mr. Pearson to inform the ushers to make certain no one was allowed in the vestibule the morning of the president's arrival. Unfortunately, however, a church member had managed to inadvertently "slip through" the security net of ushers and found himself in the middle of the "forbidden hallway" directly in the president's path. Once again, the president's security detail sprang into action and "covered the man in the vestibule." Fortunately, no one was hurt in the commotion; however, Reverend Pearson suffered a broken boutonniere and riven suit button simply because he was unfortunate enough to be standing too near the "trespasser" in the "forbidden hallway." Having survived his second "security threat," the reverend now had to contend with a wardrobe malfunction for the upcoming service that had yet to begin. "Imagine," Reverend Pearson stated, "preaching before the president of the United States with a button of your coat conspicuously missing." Feeling a bit abashed, the reverend stood at the pulpit and began the Sunday morning worship service.

As a welcomed change from previous events that morning, the worship service went rather smoothly. Reverend Pearson briefly acknowledged the president's presence and thanked him for worshipping with them that morning. Several worshippers remembered the secret servicemen "glaring all around" during the service and even Mrs. Ethel Pearson, the reverend's wife, described an agent with "a big machine gun bulging out of his pocket." Apparently not much of a singer, President Truman refrained from singing hymns but did take part in reciting responses to the scripture readings. When the offering plate reached the president, he placed an autographed five-dollar bill in with the rest of the congregation's offerings. Once the offertory response had been concluded, Reverend Pearson preached his sermon on "The Essence of Christianity" and finished the service in an "abridged" 40 minutes. Then, Rev. Pearson instructed his congregation to remain seated until the president and his family had left the building; their train would depart the station at 12:00 p.m. sharp and time could not be wasted due to admiring crowds or other impedimentary events. Prior to her departure from the church, Mrs. Truman presented Mrs. Pearson with a bouquet of roses and then waded through the sea of spectators to an awaiting car. Members of other churches in town had either skipped their own services to wait outside the First Baptist Church for the president to appear, or, in some cases, pastors of other denominations had dismissed their services early to afford their parishioners time to possibly catch a glimpse of the president exiting the church at 22nd Street and 4th Avenue. As the presidential motorcade pulled away from the church, "the orderly Sunday morning crowd clapped and smiled, while Mr. Truman waved his hat and smiled back."

Upon returning to the train station, President Truman ascended the observation platform at the rear of his special train car and addressed the throng of thousands who had gathered to bid him farewell:

I want to say to you that I am not in the habit of making speeches of any sort on the Sabbath, but I couldn't help but say to you that I appreciate most highly the cordial reception which you have given me and my family here today. We had a most wonderful service over at the Baptist Church and a sermon that I wish all of you could have heard. It would have done you good. And I hope that sometime you will hear that sermon and that you will practice it after you have heard it. Thanks a lot. I hope I can come back to Kearney sometime when I am not in such a hurry.

Richard Gingrich, head of the Kearney Jaycees, presented the president with a pair of cowboy boots. In accepting them the president joked, "I was presented a set of silver spurs in Grand Island, and now with these boots, I'll really be able to ride herd on Congress." Officials allowed Howard Nims to climb the train platform to have the president sign the registry of the Fort Kearney Coffee Club. "This book contains the signatures of [Thomas] Dewey, [Harold] Stassen, and [William] Taft," exclaimed Nims, "but I want the signature of a real president." Chuckling, the president acquiesced and signed: "Harry S. Truman, Independence, MO., 6/6/48." And, in one final act of largess, White House Secretary Charley Ross gave Mayor Johnson a book of White House matches as a souvenir. With the niceties and formalities over, the presidential train pulled out of the Kearney station at 11:54 a.m. — exactly 6 minutes ahead of schedule.

As the train lumbered down the tracks and the crowd began dispersing, city officials were apprised of the fact that 4 secret servicemen had apparently missed the train due to its early departure. George Woods, a special agent with the Union Pacific Railroad, sprang into action and managed to catch the train two miles west of Kearney. Woods successfully coerced the engineer into slowing the train to a "virtual creep," at which time a message was relayed to Woods "advising him that the train was stopping for no one." As a result, Woods traveled back to Kearney and drove the 4 agents to the Kearney Air Base. Here, they boarded a plane, and the United States Air Force "personally chauffeured" the secret servicemen to the train's next scheduled stop at North Platte, Nebraska. President Truman's short, yet exciting visit to Kearney had come to an end.

The president's stay in Kearney had lasted little more than an hour; yet, this ephemeral event left an indelible mark on the city and its residents. Even though Kearney could claim an impressive pantheon of famous visitors to have traveled through its city gates, this marked the first time a president had visited while still serving in office. The visit imbued the city and its citizens with a sense of pride and national importance, as can be illustrated in the scope and national media attention the visit had garnered. The day after Truman's visit, the *Kearney Hub* reported Kearney had officially been thrust into the "national limelight."

The president's visit on Sunday, June 6, 1948, may have impacted the Pearson household more than any other in Kearney. In addition to leading the worship service attended by the president, this monumental visit coincided with the reverend's 35th birthday and the due date of the couple's second child. In recognition of Rev. Pearson's special day, the congregation held a birthday party that Sunday evening for the pastor and presented him with the five-dollar bill President Truman had signed during the church service. And, as a result of the presidential visit, Mr. Pearson expressed his desire to name their yet unborn child "Harry" if it happened to be a boy. The name "Harry" "did not sound very exciting" to Ethel and much to her relief, two days after the presidential visit, she gave birth to a daughter whom the couple named "Margaret." Subsequent to Margaret's arrival, Mrs. Pearson wrote Mrs.

Truman a letter informing her of her daughter's birth, in which she received a reply from Mrs. Truman "saying that she hoped they would be as happy with their Margaret as they had been with theirs." The legacy of the Truman family's visit to Kearney would literally "live on" in the Pearson family.

As the presidential campaign slowly wended down in the latter months of 1948, so, too, did the excitement in Kearney bringing a return to normalcy for most of its citizens. President Truman's visit had brought much merriment to the city, but it failed to help him politically. In November, Thomas Dewey, the Republican nominee for president, not only carried Buffalo County by more than 1,000 votes, but also won the state of Nebraska as a whole. Of course, however, President Truman proved the naysayers wrong and edged out the favored candidate to win the national election of 1948. In reflection, having been thrust into the "national limelight," the city of Kearney was also a winner thanks to Truman's visit. Reminiscing years later on the president's attendance at the First Baptist Church, Ethel Pearson recalled wistfully how that had been "the most exciting time we had in all our pastoral ministry." President Truman's visit had meant a lot to the city and to those who lived there at the time, having left an indelible mark on Kearney's historical record and resplendent memories forever etched in the minds of its citizens. But, for the time being, Reverend Pearson would have to save those memories for his more senescent days, as he had to prepare for next week's service and for a far more important figure who would be attending. Outside the First Baptist Church, on its bulletin board, the reverend displayed the following message: "PRESIDENT TRUMAN WILL NOT BE HERE NEXT SUNDAY. BUT GOD WILL."

Epilogue

Reverend Vernon Pearson continued to minister until he retired at the age of 70. Shortly after President Truman's visit in 1948, the reverend moved to Iowa where he served as the director of evangelism for all Baptist churches in the state. He later moved to Fort Dodge, Iowa, where he served for 20 years, and then ended up in York, Nebraska, where he retired after having served 8 years. In the mid-1980s the Buffalo County Historical Society presented Mrs. Rowena Bissell, who became proprietor of the vacant church building after a new church had been established across town, with a plaque commemorating President Truman's visit there. The "old" First Baptist Church still stands at 22nd Street and 4th Avenue, often evoking nostalgic memories and cause for wonderment in visitors who pause to envision the grand display of public affection and regality that occurred there more than 60 years ago. The church, however, is not the only relic still extant from the president's visit to Kearney. To see another, more "personable" item from President Truman's visit, you must come to the Trails and Rails Museum in Kearney to personally be able to answer the question that has baffled people for decades: What ever happened to the Fort Kearney Coffee Club registry and the five-dollar bill Truman signed?

Sources:

Buffalo County Historical Society Archives (President Truman's File Folder)

Harry S. Truman Presidential Library

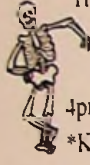
Pictures of President Truman's visit to Kearney will be in the November/December 2013 issue of Buffalo Tales!

3rd Annual Old-Fashioned Halloween Party

Halloween is right around the corner and so is the 3rd Annual Old-Fashioned Halloween Party at the Trails & Rails!

Get your little ghouls and goblins ready on October 26th from 2-4pm for games, trick-or-treating, and a costume contest!

*Kid-friendly only this year. If you want a spooky night out, visit the World Theater's haunted house!



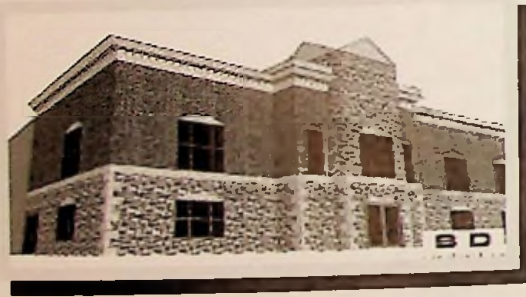
26th Annual Christmas Tree Walk



"Twas the Night Before Christmas" is the theme for the 26th Annual Christmas Tree Walk. We will be decorating all of November. There will be a special preview for members on November 30 12-1pm and open to the public the first two weekends in December (Nov. 30/Dec. 1 & Dec. 7/8) from 1-5 pm.

New Family History Center

Below is a picture of the new family history center being planned to enhance BCHS/Trails & Rails Museum. It will house the archives, offices, gift shop, and displays.



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Katherine Wielechowski, Editor

2013 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

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| Individual..... | \$35.00 |
| Family..... | \$40.00 |
| Institutional Membership..... | \$50.00 |
| Supporting Membership..... | \$75.00 |
| Silver Engineer..... | \$125.00 |
| Gold Engineer..... | \$250.00 |

We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.

Directors

Term expiring June 1, 2014: Mary Beth Lowe, Sharon Martin, Duane Muhlbach, Mike Peak
 Term expiring June 1, 2015: Corene Phillips, Dan Speirs, Gary Straatmann, Bernie Hascall
 Term expiring June 1, 2016: Dr. Roger Davis, Lance Hehner, Matt O'Callaghan, Jan Rodehorst

Officers (1 year term)

| | |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| President..... | Mary Beth Lowe |
| Vice-President..... | Lance Hehner |
| Secretary..... | Corene Phillips |
| Treasurer..... | Bernie Hascall |

2013 Calendar of Events

Saturday, Oct. 26 2-4pm: 3rd Annual Old-fashioned Halloween Party

All of November: Christmas Decorating (during regular business hours)

Saturday, November 30 from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 26th Annual Christmas Tree Walk, theme: "Twas the Night Before Christmas"

First two weekends in Dec. (Nov. 30/Dec.1 and Dec. 7/8) from 1-5 pm: Open to the public: 26th Annual Christmas Tree Walk, theme: "Twas the Night Before Christmas"

Education notes:

Fabulous Fridays will continue to be held on the 2nd Friday of each month.

Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

PO Box 523, 710 W. 11th St., Kearney, NE 68848

(308) 234-3041 www.bchs.us bchs.us@hotmail.com

We hope you enjoy these stories about Buffalo County. We would love to have a stock pile of Buffalo Tales ready so they can go out in a more timely manner. Please submit your memories and stories to us by e-mailing them to bchs.buffalotales@hotmail.com or sending them to the post office box: BCHS, PO Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848.

We appreciate your support!

Director's Report

-A large buggy, sulky, and sleigh arrived for the livery barn. Without the measurements prior, we thought we had made enough room, but we were wrong. It is a bit cramped in there now, so we will have to look at more options (the wooden horses that are not artifacts, but do display the harnesses may have to be relocated).

-Seth Fletcher has agreed to have his UNK Brass players come back on Sunday, Dec. 1 to perform for the Christmas Tree Walk. He said they might also participate by having a tree, too. He will keep me posted.

-Historic Homes book proof arrived. Elaine and I read over it and then I met with Brian to look over it one final time before it was submitted. These should hit shelves the week of Oct. 28.

-We did receive 13 saddles in the livery barn over Labor Day weekend. Some have spectacular stories. All are from Mike & Helen Stauffer. I hope to find some volunteers willing to build stands so these can hang on the walls above the wagons.

-I attended our Kearney Cultural Partners meeting and Fred Kempf attended to discuss his idea of the cemetery tour. The group sounded interested, but wants more information. Thus, I will be lining up a committee to move this forward.

-Linda Watson is still volunteering down here each Tuesday to tend to the flowers on property. We have received several compliments on the area by the front gate.

Be our friend on Facebook: BuffaloCountyHistoricalSociety



Trails & Rails Museum

**Buffalo County Historical Society
710 West 11th St. P.O. Box 523
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