

Buffalo Tales

July/August 2018

Buffalo County Historical Society

Tourist Parks in Kearney

By: Mardi Anderson

In the early 1900's and maybe even in the late 1890's curious young men began trying to attach motors to wagons and carriages. These "horseless carriages" soon evolved into our early automobiles. One such enterprising man in Kearney was T. H. Bolte who built the first automobile not only in Kearney but in Nebraska.

In the summer of 1903 the first automobile was driven across the continent from San Francisco to New York. The driver, Dr. H. Nelson Jackson, and his companion, a young mechanic, passed through Kearney in July. They stopped over an extra day so Mr. Bolt could overhaul their vehicle.

As more and more people acquired automobiles they were able to travel longer distances from home with more freedom than the restrictions of the rail routes. They wanted to explore this country. Adventurous folks would take off for several days at a time. They packed their clothes, a few cooking utensils and a tent and took off.

These tourists followed the existing roads and stopped for the night wherever the end of a day found them. They might camp in a pasture beside the road but they referred camping on the edge of towns. Not only did they feel more protected there, but food and water was more readily available.

It wasn't long before towns recognized the need for a campground. It was to the advantage of a town to provide such space. These travelers would purchase groceries and gas and maybe even eat in a local restaurant. The question was who would provide the campground? Should it be privately owned and operated as a business? Or should the town provide the campground as an attraction for tourists who would stop and use the local businesses? That was a controversy that continued in Kearney for many years.

In late 1919 the Third Ward Park was suggested as a campground. The park had been the site of Chautauqua for many years and those who attended from out of town would set up camp there for the week. Travelers were already stopping at the park. But although there was a drinking fountain, there was no other running water. Also there were no lights and campers had to use their car lights to set up camp.

The neighbors were not happy. In August of the following year they brought their protest to the City Council. Their lawyer, Hector Sinclair, pointed out that the park had been deeded to city in 1876 by the Perkins estate. If not used as a park for citizens of Kearney it would revert back to the Perkins estate. The news report of this meeting ended with this quote, "All of the speakers, pro and con, seemed to understand and appreciate the fact that some parking or camping facilities should be provided for tourists but the general opinion prevailed that such ground should not be in 'my back yard.'"

It was suggested that the Kearney Amusement park on the west edge of the city would be an ideal location. The owner, Lincoln Denison, had already let contracts for building of 40 cabins north of the pavilion and planned to plant a thousand trees. The tourist park did not materialize but they did have camping space there.

In 1921 there were many discussions, suggestions made, and temporary lots set up. The Chamber of Commerce, Kiwanis, and Rotary were working together to develop a plan. They recommended two acres on Watson Blvd

east of the Theo Bolte home. Vacant lots north of the post office were being used in recent weeks. This would be the current (2018) MONA parking lot. The City even cleared the grounds to be used temporarily. The Kearney City Beautiful Committee suggested acquiring land on the west side of Kearney for a tourist park and use this temporary space as a rest park with trees, grass, fountain, and benches for visitors and Kearney citizens. No final decisions were made.

The following summer there were more temporary lots used. The vacant lots at 21st & A (probably the current Copy Cat lots) were cleared for use as a temporary tourist camp. The White Eagle Oil Co, at 22 E 21st, opened a free camp. First Ward Park, (Collins Park) was suggested but due to the vocal opposition it was ruled out by City Council

The Manhattan Oil Co. at 23 East 25th, the east end of what is now the MONA parking lot, began putting in improvements to make a tourist camp on their property. Mrs. Nye, who lived across the street, obtained an injunction to stop them. A trial date was set for July 8 but the Manhattan manager said he thought Mrs. Nye's lawyer intended to get a postponement until Sept. to prevent him from doing business all summer.

Injunctions were served on all the employees as well as the manager. When the business closed that day and everyone went home, eight campers came in and spent the night.

Now it was 1923 and there was still no agreement on a city tourist park. The City was considering a proposal but nothing happened, probably due



"A Camper Bus – photo from Nebraska State Historical Society"

to lack of funds. A privately owned camp was established on the west edge of the city and went into business in June. The Courtwright place was considered an ideal location for a tourist camp. It was located at 2532 17th Ave. just west of the tailrace, on the north side of street. Now it is the site of the Education building on the University of Nebraska/Kearney (UNK) campus. Then it was shady and part of a large home that could be used as shelter in case of storms. All Courtwright asked for was signs directing tourists to his place.

After a year in operation Courtwright sold the tourist park. Over the next two years there were no more discussions about tourist camps. Some tourist camps operated privately but were not listed in the City Directory. One, the Kearney Tourist Park, advertised its "fried spring chicken dinners" and hatching eggs but did not include its location. The city did continue to clear the lot at 21st and A for a couple years but never did settle on a city owned tourist park.

Meanwhile, the 1733 Amusement Park had opened in 1925 about four miles west of Kearney. There was a dance hall, a swimming pool and a fountain on which colored lights were shown at night. In 1927 tourist houses were added on the land west of the dance hall for tourists who did not have tents. These were not individual cabins, but a long shed-like structure facing the pasture on the south. There were six rooms with space for an automobile beside each room.

Also that year a new tourist park, City Tourist Camp, was established on land west of Kearney, east of the tailrace along the Lincoln Highway. There were five cabins to start with. Several large elm trees provide shade. Work was also begun on a new filling station at the City Tourist Park. When the property was advertised for sale the following November, a grocery store had also been added.

In more recent times these cabins were known as the Ideal Motel and then the Ideal Apartments. Now (in 2018) no trace remains. Instead a building holds several businesses serving the students attending UNK, across the highway.

By 1929 there were two tourist camps on each side of town. In May J. S. Elliott started construction of a new tourist camp and was open for business for the July 4th holiday. The Elliott Motor Lodge was one of first of the next generation of tourist facilities, the motel.

Midway City Tourist Park

Plans were announced for Midway City Tourist Park on March 30, 1927. It was to be located one mile east of the Midway Hotel on the north side of the Lincoln Highway. Currently it is the site of University Stor-It storage units on east Highway 30. This tourist park was built on four acres of land designed to have an entrance, a circle drive, and an exit at the other end of the property. A general store and filling station with mechanic were located between the entrance and the exit. There were to be 72 parking spots spaced on both sides of the drive.

An eight-sided pavilion was to be built in the center with a fireplace, a place to gather, eat meals, and be a shelter during storms. Radiating from four sides of the pavilion, four groups of cabins were planned, each group with five rooms for a total of 20 rooms. Each room would have an electric stove – put a nickel in the slot to use it – hot and cold water, a tub and shower, and beds. There was an added fee for linens.

Extensive landscaping was planned. To get a jump start, several full grown linden trees were brought in. (They all survived) Evergreens, shrubs and flowers were planted that spring.

By the time the Midway Tourist Park open for business at the end of June, 14 cabins were done. Camping spots cost 50¢ a night, a cabin \$1, a cabin and garage \$1.50. The central pavilion contained the kitchen with eight electric stoves



and an adjoining community room where people can eat. A swimming pool had been built to the right of the entrance and general store. The park manager lived in back of the store.

After the first season in business came to an end, the owners could foresee year round

The Siesta Motel picture is “The center pavilion and one wing of cabins at the Kearney Midway Tourist Camp, later renamed the Siesta Motel”

travelers staying at tourist parks. Late the following summer the park was designated an official AAA camp in

Kearney. By this time more new cottages had been added.

Over the following years, as the Midway Tourist Park changed ownership, it also changed names. In 1940 it became the Shambaugh Motor Lodge. Seven years later it was the Midway Auto Court. In 1955 the name was changed to the Midway Siesta Motel. About three years later the “Midway” was dropped and it was known as the Siesta Motel until it finally closed and was demolished about 1974.

Coming Events and
Education notes (see website for additional details):
2018-2019 BCHS Pet Contest



BCHS and Trails & Rails Museum is having a contest during the 2018-2019 year to build the pet registry in our archives. Complete a line in our Pet Registry Book for one entry, submit a picture of your pet and sign into our registry for three entries, or enter a picture of you and your pet, sign the pet registry, and write a story about your pet for ten entries. We also have a new display, replacing the wedding dress display, promoting the pet contest in the Family History Center. Come check it out!

Director's Report—Jennifer Murrish

This is a very exciting time for BCHS. The 11th Street construction has decreased our summer attendance, but we are using that time to continue to move items in to the new Family History Center. To date, I feel that we have approximately 60% of the archives moved in from the old archive building, the Church building, the Depot's 3rd room and from the basement of the Depot. Plans for the opera house curtain celebration have been in the works and several volunteers are spending a great deal of time preparing this evening so you will each have a lot of fun! Several other volunteers have been planning and working with the KCLC afterschool program. They meet here at the Museum once a week for two months of the summer and help do service learning projects. Stay tuned to see the new butterfly/pollinator garden, funded in part by a Monsanto grant. Several new volunteers have emerged and are currently loving the projects that have chosen. If you are interested in joining this dynamic team as a volunteer during one of our most pivotal (dare I say, historic) moments, please let us know! We will work with you to find a project that you will enjoy while also serving a need of the Society—a true win-win situation! Thank you, sincerely, to each and every one of our volunteers.

Follow us on Facebook: “BuffaloCountyHistoricalSociety” and “Kearney Cultural Partners”. Not a Society member yet? Join Today! Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

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Your name could be here. Ask any staff or board member!

A Huge Thanks to our Silver and Gold Engineers for their support of the BCBS/Trails & Rails Museum
(Contact Trails & Rails Museum for more information on becoming an Engineer)

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P.O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848-0523.

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Broc Anderson, Editor

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Trails & Rails Museum

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