



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

February, 1989

JOHN A. STRYKER, PHOTOGRAPHER

by Mardith Anderson

"A picture is worth a thousand words." This old adage is certainly true when recording history. The history of Kearney during its "Boom" period cannot be told without A. T. Anderson's photographs of homes, downtown business buildings and factories. Another photographer who has left us a record of Kearney's history in pictures is John A. Stryker.

Who was this man who spent only 15 years of his long and adventurous life in Kearney but who left us such a valuable pictorial record? He was a tall, robust man with thick red hair, a man who believed in daily exercise to stay fit even when he was well into his 80's. He was a penmanship professor who had a sense of humor and enjoyed telling stories. Those who remember him have described him as "quite a character."

John Addison Stryker was born in 1883 in Rockford, Illinois, the second of four brothers. The family moved to a farm in the McCook, Nebraska, area when he was six. As a child he had about three months of formal schooling. However, his mother was a former teacher and she taught the fundamentals of reading, writing, and arithmetic to her children at home.

When John was 18, the family moved to the Northbranch, Kansas, area, about 16 miles southeast of Red Cloud. John attended public school for a short time and then enrolled in the Franklin Academy. It was here that he was introduced to the art of penmanship. He became so interested that he attended the Zaner Art College, also

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John A. Stryker
Professor of Penmanship, Kearney State Normal
BLUE and GOLD yearbook, 1910

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. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- Basic Membership \$10.00
- Institutional Membership \$15.00
- Supporting Membership \$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

Officers and Directors: President, Margaret Hohnholt; Vice-President, Merlin Berglund; Secretary, Colleen Parker; Treasurer, Philip S. Holmgren. Directors: Frances Link, Barb Avery, Minnette Steinbrink, Edna Hehner, Alice Howell, Robert Stubblefield, Viola Livingston, Chandler Lynch III, and Jim Cudaback. Publications Chairman: Alice Howell.

Trails & Rails Museum

706 West 11th Street

(308) 234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

Sunday, February 26, 2:30 p.m. The Buffalo County Historical Society will meet at the community room of First State Bank at Shelton. "Anecdotes of Hall County," will be the subject of the program to be given by Dale Clark, Director of Education at Stuhr Museum.

Meetings of the historical society are open to anyone interested in the history and heritage of the area. Come and bring a friend.

Plans for the Annual Meeting and dinner on April 26 are being made. Notice of time and place will be sent to each member.

Volunteers are working at the museum each Monday afternoon, abstracting public records. Their current project covers old school census records in the county.

The Kearney Centennial booklet is now out of print. This has been a popular book of the city's first 100-year history. Plans are being made to reprint the book, update to the present time, and add a section on the Kearney Army Air Base from declassified material and remembrances of those attending last year's Air Base Reunion. Proceeds of the reunion will help finance the book. Dr. Philip S. Holmgren is chairman of the project.

NEW LIFE MEMBERS

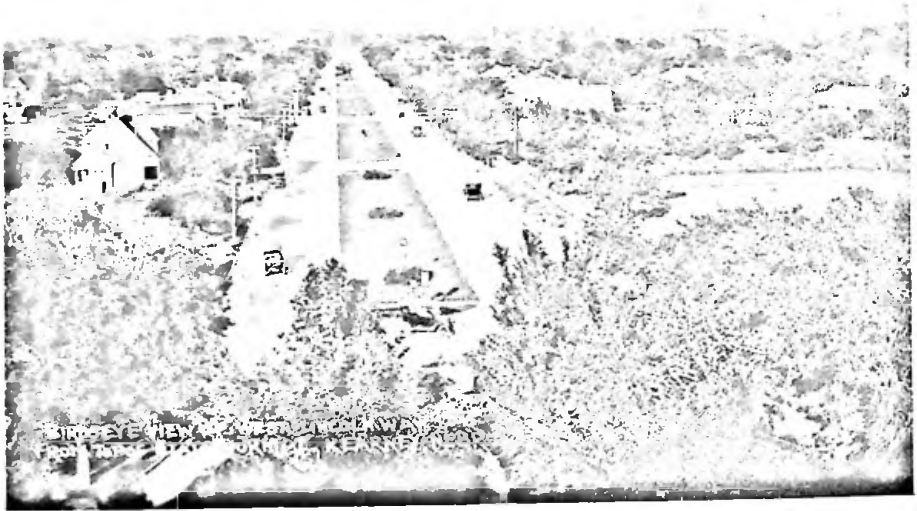
- Esther Zimmerman Kearney
- Hannah Anderson Kearney
- Jim Cudaback Riverdale
- LaMoyne and Jan Fern Kearney
- Ed and Lois Tollefsen Kearney

NEW ANNUAL MEMBERS

- Thelma Woods Kearney
- Lelah Roth Kearney
- Leila Anderson Kearney

1989 SUPPORTING MEMBERS

- Mr. and Mrs. Chas. F. Pflaum . . . Amherst
- Edgar A. King Gibbon
- Harold K. Nutter Gibbon
- Betty Pabian Ravenna
- Jeanne L. Patterson Houston, TX
- Fred E. Hammer APO New York
- Robert and Lois Lawhead Kearney
- Mr. and Mrs. Ward Minor Kearney
- G. Wm. and Marjorie Potter Kearney



West 25th Street in Kearney - 1914
Looking east from top of Administration Building, KSC

known as the Zanerian School of Penmanship, in Columbus, Ohio. He graduated with high honors and was regarded by Professor Zaner as one of his best students.

In the early 1900's elementary teachers were required to have a certificate in the Palmer method of handwriting in order to receive a teaching certificate. When Kearney Normal School added the position of penmanship instructor to its faculty, John Stryker was hired to fill that position. The Stryker family, consisting of John, his three brothers and his widowed mother, moved to Kearney in 1909 when John began his teaching career here.

Professor Stryker's philosophy was that students work better if their work is pleasant. He told stories in his classes, generally created a pleasant environment and built enthusiasm in his students. He even noted students suffering from homesickness and did what he could to cheer them up. As a result, his classes were large and he was considered to be quite a successful teacher.

Stryker's professional reputation grew as he wrote lectures on the subject of penmanship and served as president of the National Association of Penmanship Teachers. He made presentations at National Commercial Teachers' Federation conventions on several occasions.

In the spring of 1919 John Stryker married Elsie Johnson, a penmanship supervisor in the North Platte public school system. They built a house across from the Normal School campus at 924 West 24th Street. This house was later known as the Grantham house. It can be recognized today as the gray stucco house with white trim across the street south of Bruner Hall of Science.

Among his other activities at Kearney Normal School, John Stryker did some publicity for the school. This had led to his acquisition of a Kodak camera in 1916. His fascination with photography proved to be a turning point in his life and led him into



Kearney Roundup - 1919

an entirely new career. The first sign of his photographic talent can be seen in the marked improvement in the quality of the pictures in the 1917 school annual.

John resigned from his position as penmanship professor in 1919. He was replaced by his wife. Stryker turned his efforts toward photography but he did not set up a studio in Kearney. He preferred action pictures and outdoor scenes. Many of his photographs of local residences and street scenes soon appeared on post cards for sale in Kearney.

Stryker took many pictures of the campus and of the city of Kearney. He liked to take photographs from high places in order to get a "bird's eye view" of his subject. One of his most familiar pictures is a view of West Lincoln Highway (west 25th Street) looking east. This photo was taken from the roof of the old Administration building on campus. Stryker produced two booklets of pictures of houses and views in Kearney. When the city celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1923, John Stryker produced a booklet of pictures of houses and views in Kearney which became a souvenir of the event.

In his quest for action pictures Stryker started taking pictures at rodeos in Kearney and the surrounding area. In 1920 Eastman Kodak used one of his pictures of a bucking horse in its nationwide advertising.

Photographing the action at rodeos led to another, secondary occupational parallel to his photography, that of announcing. This career began in 1921 when Stryker went to a rodeo in Holdrege to take pictures. He did not think the announcer was doing a very good job, so he decided to give it a try himself. Not only could he



New Home of John A. Stryker - circa 1919

make himself heard, he also proved to be a very entertaining announcer. He continued to announce for almost twenty years.

For some time Stryker announced for Ringling Bros. Circus. He announced 52 consecutive shows for them in New York and then went on the road with the circus. While at Madison Square Garden in New York City, on April, 1928, John Stryker had the privilege of announcing, "Now, ladies and gentlemen, for the first time in America — three high on the highwire — the Great Wallenda Troupe."

John Stryker had a powerful voice. He never used a microphone, yet he could be heard $3/4$ mile away. Just as he used to tell stories in his penmanship classes to make the environment more pleasant for his students, so he would sprinkle his announcing with stories, gags, and bits of information for the entertainment of the crowd.

He was a man of varied talents. When he announced a rodeo held in Broken Bow, probably in the mid-1930's, the newspaper reported "His control of nerves and muscles and his accuracy of sight were interestingly demonstrated . . . when, with his brother, Roy, who resides at Brady, Nebraska, he engaged in a rifle contest. At a distance of about fifteen paces each man shot at the head of a spike. With a strange rifle he hit the nail three times out of five, grazing it with the other two bullets."

In 1940 John and Elsie Stryker settled in Fort Worth, Texas. Here Stryker spent the rest of his life taking pictures to promote the area. He started by reproducing colored pictures of the city on placemats which he sold to a downtown hotel. Then he made large pictures of zoo animals and places of interest in the city suitable for framing to be hung in the hotels and motels of the city.

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When Elsie died in 1969, shortly after their 50th wedding anniversary, John sold his color postcard business and retired for a while. But retirement was not for him. Soon he was taking pictures again. He discovered a way to take a "properly composed" 16" by 20" color photo and split it down the middle to make a matched pair of pictures to hang in hotels and motels.

In 1970, at age 87, Stryker made arrangements with the Fort Worth Fire Department to be hoisted 85 feet into the air in their snorkel truck so he could get the right angle to photograph the Tarrant County Convention Center. He explained, "No other way to get just the right angle I need to photograph that beautiful center like it should be done."

From the roof of the Kearney Normal School to the snorkel of a Fort Worth fire truck, John Stryker's photographic career covered over 54 action-packed years.

SOURCES

Catharine Bahnsen and Miriam Worlock, interviews; 1910 Census of Buffalo County; Kearney City Directories, 1910-1950; Kearney DAILY HUB, September 6 1909, February 12, 1919; Clipping Custer County Chief, undated; Fort Worth STAR/TELEGRAM, May 31, 1970; Real estate records in Register of Deeds office, Buffalo County; KSC Annuals - THE BLUE AND GOLD - 1908-1921.