



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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FREIGHTING IN BUFFALO COUNTY

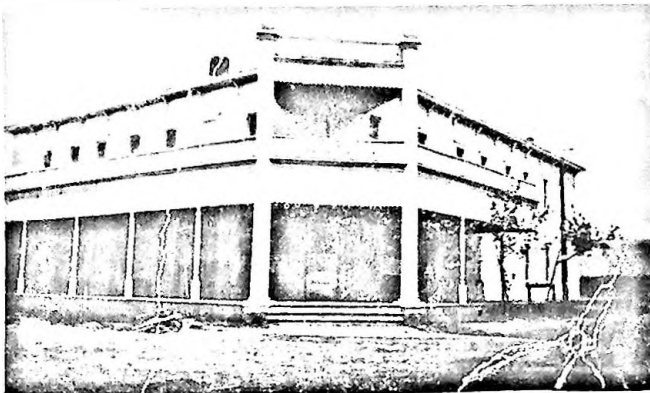
Part II - "Kearney, The Trade Center for Buffalo County Freighting in the 1880's"

by Mardi Anderson

As homesteaders claimed the land north and west of Buffalo County, freighting practices changed. Distances traveled were shorter, 80 to 100 miles compared to the 330 miles to the Black Hills. The loads were lighter by half than the 7,000 pound loads of flour, grain and mining supplies hauled up the Kearney-Black Hills Trail to Deadwood. Horses and mules were used for pulling instead of oxen. Also, more farm wagons were used to carry freight during the 1880's.

Between 1880 and 1886, tons of freight were hauled out of Kearney annually, most of it destined for Custer County. Kearney was the nearest railroad town, and therefore, the nearest source of supplies. A Kearney newspaper reported on one occasion that at least 100 wagon loads of freight had come via the Union Pacific and the Burlington and Missouri River Railroads to Kearney. Most of it was hauled out during the week to Broken Bow and other towns in Custer County. Later it was reported that "an unusually large amount of freight" had come by rail to be hauled to Custer and Sherman Counties.

There were times when the freighters could not keep up with the demand. An early Custer County pioneer, Mrs. L. L. Crawford recalled, "We arrived at Broken Bow April 4, 1883, at 6 p. m. and there were seventy covered wagons camped on the southwest of the public square....So great were the crowds of land seekers coming every day that there was a scarcity of provisions as everything had to be hauled overland from Kearney."



When this first hotel was built in Broken Bow, all the lumber and building supplies were freighted by wagon from Kearney. (Photo from Nebraska State Historical Society)

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Membership in the Buffalo County Historical Society is open to anyone who has an interest in Buffalo County and its people, or in the history of the area.

Annual dues, payable January 1:
 Family membership \$ 7.50
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Trails and Rails Museum, Mardi Anderson, Director. Phone 234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

Sunday, March 24, at 2:00 p.m. The Historical Society and the Fort Kearny Genealogical Society will hold a joint meeting at the Freighters Hotel on the museum grounds. The program on *Archives - Buried Treasure* will be given by members of the committee who are indexing Buffalo County records for the museum archives. This will be an entertaining and informative meeting.

The Annual Meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society will be held on April 21 at the First Lutheran Church in Kearney. A covered dish dinner will precede the business meeting and program. *Music in the Life of Nineteenth Century Settlers in Nebraska* is the subject of the program. Karen M. Dyer, doctoral student at the University of Nebraska, has developed this slide presentation under a grant from the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities. Plan to attend.

AT THE MUSEUM

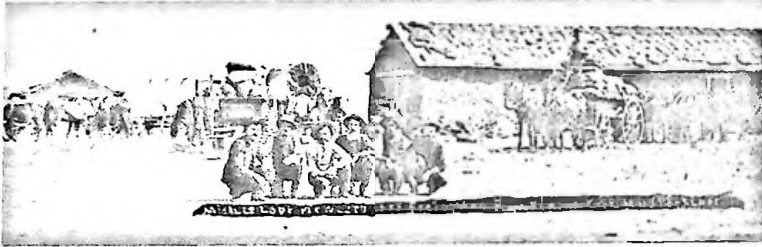
Recent Donations to Trails and Rails Museum include a Hamilton organ, treadle sewing machine, rugs and quilts from Leland and Lewis Triplett, Louise Butler and Lucile Stefanski of Kearney. An ox-drawn breaking plow and several other items have been donated by Ron Luth of Kearney.

Nebraska History Network will meet at Trails and Rails Museum on Saturday, March 23. The meeting will be held in the Freighters Hotel beginning at 10:00 a.m. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss areas in which the NHN members wish information and possible assistance, and to plan courses of action. Historical Society members are invited to attend. Please call the museum to make reservations for lunch.

NEW LIFE MEMBERSHIPS

David K. Martin Arlington, VA Michael B. Yanney Omaha, NE

During the 1880's freight was hauled for two purposes. One was to supply merchants in Broken Bow and other Custer and Sherman County towns with lumber to build their stores and goods to stock their shelves. The businessman might drive a wagon to Kearney himself to get the lumber and supplies, or he might hire one or more freighters to drive teams for him. The other hauling was done by the homesteaders who brought their crops to market in Kearney and hauled back the supplies they needed on their homesteads.



Middle Loup pioneers freighting from Kearney in 1885. (Photo from Solomon D. Butcher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society)

Merchant Freighting

One of the earliest freighters was David Furbush of Loup City. A gentleman of about 60, he freighted from Kearney for Lalk and Kreichbaum in the late 1870's. This routine job had its moments of excitement. One night late in January, 1879, "Doc" Middleton and his gang of horse thieves were known to be in the Loup City area and suspected of planning a raid. A group of men set up a trap for him at the Loup bridge. A capture was made but it was "soon discovered that their prisoners were David Furbush and his two large black mules" returning from Kearney with a heavy load of goods.

C. D. Pelham came to Kearney to get supplies to stock the first store in Broken Bow. Sometimes he hired a neighboring farmer, John DeMerritt, to come along and drive a second wagon for him. When the first hotel was built in Broken Bow, all the lumber and building materials came from Kearney. After it was open for business, the food supplies were also freighted in from Kearney.

R. B. Henchman opened a lumber yard in 1883, the first in Broken Bow. He sent 25 teams to Kearney to bring in the lumber for his initial stock. During the following year, not only was Henchman still hiring drivers to haul his lumber from Kearney, but a second lumber company, opened by Biggerstaff and Hensley, also freighted their merchandise from Kearney. The Graham Brothers freighted "an immense amount of dry goods" from Kearney in 1883. John Hume and John Johnson were two freighters from Kearney who arranged for the hauling of goods to Broken Bow. On one occasion in May, 1886, they loaded 11 wagons, each with 2,500 pounds of goods. J. W. Preston hauled lumber from Kearney to Ansley to build his new drug store when that town was first settled.

These freighters hauled lumber to build businesses and merchandise to stock the stores when they were completed. They also hauled flour, binder twine, and barrels of apples. Sometimes they were paid 50¢ per 100 pounds of freight hauled from Kearney to Broken Bow. For a 2,500 pound load, a freighter would earn \$12.50. Sometimes the pay was \$8 to \$10 worth of goods in the store for which the man

freighted.

Farm Freighting

Before the homesteaders in Custer County had crops to sell, some brought loads of wood to Kearney and sold it for \$2 a load. Others brought cedar posts or deer meat to sell. Once the crops grew, they brought in wagon loads of corn, wheat, and hogs.

Not all of these settlers had wagons appropriate for hauling freight or teams to pull the wagons. In the case of Lyle Hunter, an early Custer County settler, after shelling his corn, he either borrowed a team and wagon or went along with some other homesteader who was bringing his corn to Kearney.

Market prices had an effect on what was brought in to be sold. In 1883 the price of wheat was 65¢ per bushel and the wagon loads of wheat rolled into Kearney. One Custer County farmer came in with 10 loads of White Mediterranean wheat. The following year, after a second bumper crop of both wheat and corn, the prices dropped to 40¢ for wheat and from 25¢ to 15¢ for corn. There were no reports of grain being brought in to sell that year. According to the Loup City newspaper, farmers were burning corn for fuel rather than selling it. Reports from the Stanley (Amherst) area in Buffalo County indicate that farmers in that area were also burning corn for fuel. A harbinger of these depressed grain prices was seen in late spring of 1884 when the KEARNEY NEW ERA newspaper reported, "Six wagon loads of fat hogs from Custer county came filing into town.... It is more profitable, it appears, for farmers in that county to feed and haul in the large hogs than it is to sell the corn." On another occasion, the following year, "A farmer from Custer county came in (to Kearney) with a doubledecker wagon.... The lower deck contained six large hogs and the top one thirty fat turkeys." Then the editorial comment is added, "Hogs at \$3.00 and \$1 apiece for turkeys beats selling corn at 15 to 20 cents." The price of wheat, however, had gone back up in 1885 and again the Custer County farmers brought it in to Kearney by the wagon load.

The freighters usually returned home with empty wagons after delivering their loads of goods, or, if the driver was from Custer or Sherman County, he came with an empty wagon and returned home with a load. The homesteaders, however, did not always return empty-handed. They hauled in loads of grain, hogs, or wood to sell. They brought back the supplies they needed to live and work on their homesteads. They might haul flour, cornmeal, groceries, a beam for a hay sweep, or food and clothing to last until the next trip to town in about six months. Later, when they had crops to sell and could afford it, they started hauling lumber. They loaded up window and door frames for their sod houses and barns. They bought lumber for roofs on the sod houses and later for barns, sheds, and houses that replaced the soddies.

The Samuel Cannon family homesteaded near Westerville, about 12 miles east of Broken Bow. According to Dean Cannon of Kearney, his grandmother, Lottie, was from the South. She refused to live in a sod house. His grandfather had to bring three 4-horse teams and wagons to Kearney to purchase lumber for one of the first frame houses in that area. When Solomon D. Butcher's family settled near Ansley, he hauled lumber from Kearney for their house. Once the frame houses were built, then there was a demand for coal to be hauled out of Kearney for these homes.

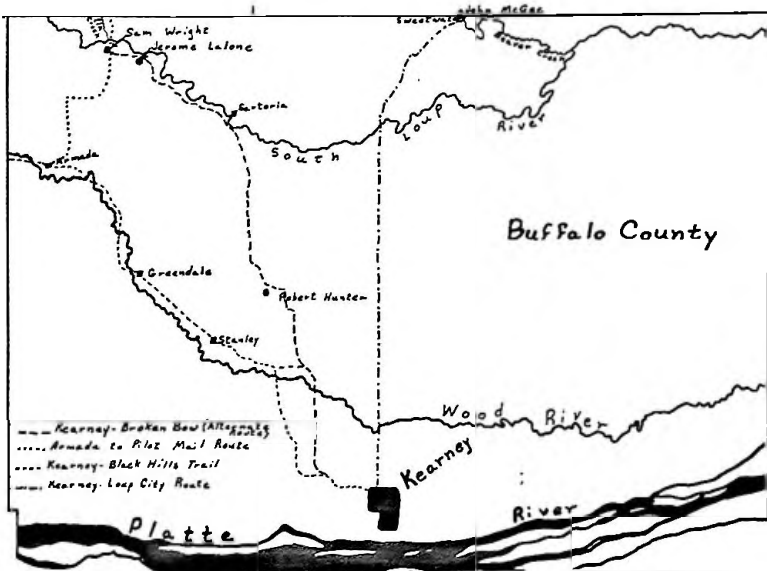
Living along the Freight Routes

By 1884 most of the land had been homesteaded between the two towns of

Kearney and Broken Bow. Freight wagon drivers would stop at the homes of settlers along the wagon roads to spend the night. There were so many freighters on the road, nearly every house and stable would be filled and it was difficult to find a place to stay at night. A Custer county pioneer who did some freighting recalled, "We always had to take our grub with us and cook it in the wagon or at a freighter stop. We'd come to one of the regular stopping places at night and cook our grub after they had already eaten. Then they'd go to bed so we could come in and sleep on the floor. We always paid them for the horses' hay (a quarter was the charge) the night before, so we could get up early and cook our breakfast and be gone before they wanted to get out of bed."

Mrs. Alice Wilkinson Hanson, whose family homesteaded at Ansley, recalled that "team freighters used often to stop with us overnight. Sometimes our floor would be almost covered with beds."

Living along a wagon road could have a direct effect on the future of a homesteader and his family; Robert Hunter, his wife and two daughters had come to Buffalo County in 1885 from Illinois. They settled on a farm halfway between present day Riverdale and Amherst, about four miles north of the Wood River. One route used by the freighters turned north from the Wood River to reach the South Loup River at Sartoria. "In the summer of 1887-1888, (Hunter) watched as long wagons and trains of freighter-wagons went by his place from Kearney heading northward to....Broken Bow....Kearney was the big shipping point for provisions, materials and supplies; some days, 50 wagons would wind their way up this trail past the Hunter farm...." Many stopped for the night at Hunter's and they told interesting stories about the Custer county area. Bob Hunter was so impressed by these freighters' descriptions that in the summer of 1889 he packed up his family and moved to Broken Bow. There he traded a broncho, harness and sulky for the right to homestead a few miles north of that town.



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The route from Kearney to Loup City passed through John McGee's ranch on Beaver Creek at Sweetwater, on the border between Buffalo and Sherman counties. This was one of the regular stops on the stage route between the two towns. It was also used as a stopping place for freighters who were carrying supplies north from Kearney. McGee had a kind of hotel there for travelers to use.

Another person who took advantage of having a wagon road past his home was Sam M. Wright. This young man, along with various other relatives, lived on the south side of the South Loup River, across from the point where Elk Creek empties into the Loup. It was here that the wagon road from the south and a mail route from Armada joined to cross the Loup. Mr. Wright set up a general store in a sod house here at Wrightsville. He came to Kearney to buy stock for his store which did a flourishing business. Through the years the land changed hands, being bought by Ezra Wright and later by Waldo Flagg. The sod store was replaced by a frame building across the road and continued to serve that community for many years.

Jerome Lalone, a house painter in Kearney and a homesteader, purchased land along the South Loup River a mile or so east of the Wrights. His farm also became a stopping place for freighters. He built a large, two-story, five-bedroom house on his property so he would have rooms to rent to the freighters who stopped for the night.

The days of wagon freighting in Buffalo County were numbered. Plans, and rumors of plans, for new railroad lines had been afloat for some time. Soon some of these plans were to become reality.

SOURCES

Interviews with Dean Cannon and Claude Parish; Buffalo County Register of Deeds Office; Buffalo County Historical Society archives; Custer County Historical Library files; KEARNEY NEW ERA Oct. 1883-June 1886; CUSTER COUNTY REPUBLICAN Sept. 1883; CUSTER COUNTY CHIEF Golden Anniversary issue; HISTORY OF BUFFALO COUNTY by Bassett; BOOK OF FACTS CONCERNING THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF SHERMAN COUNTY by G. E. Benschoter; HISTORY OF CUSTER COUNTY, NEBRASKA by Gaston & Humphrey; PIONEER HISTORY OF CUSTER COUNTY NEBRASKA by S. D. Butcher; WHEN YOU AND I WERE YOUNG, NEBRASKA! by B. H. Chrisman; PIONEER STORIES OF CUSTER COUNTY NEBRASKA by E. R. Purcell.



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