



# Buffalo Tales



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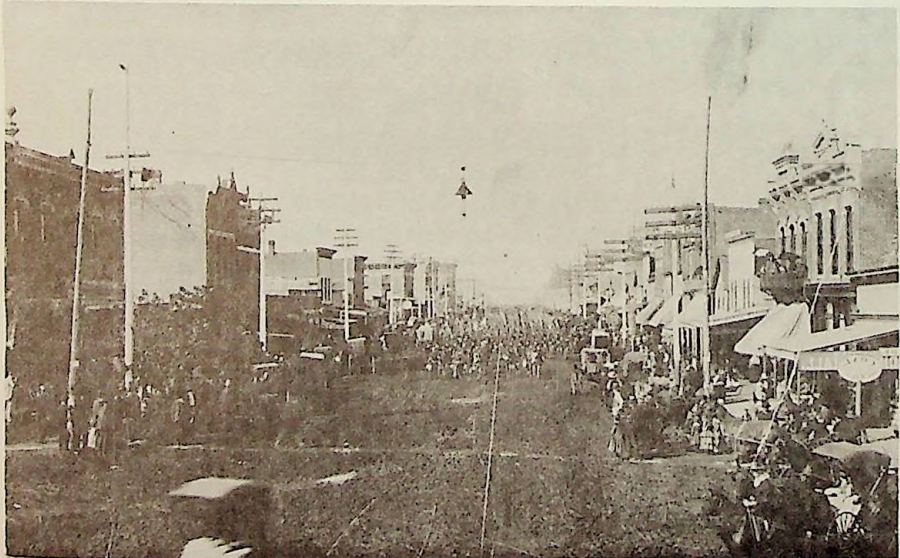
## CAMP HENRY A. MORROW *The G.A.R. Reunion of 1888*

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

Kearney in 1888 was a city well on its way to becoming a metropolis. From the final completion of the Kearney Canal in 1886, which meant power and electricity for industry, homes and business, the rate of growth of the city was phenomenal. By 1888 population had reached the point where Kearney was declared by the Governor of Nebraska to be a city of the second class.

As the population grew, the hustle and bustle of the townbuilders were evident in construction of new factories, new business buildings, and new homes. Social life was also carried on at a frenzied pace with balls, parties and dinners at the new 4-story Midway Hotel and the many events at the pavilion at Lake Kearney. Reading the society columns of the day, one wonders how any business could have been transacted amid the whirl of social activities day and night.

In this situation it is not surprising that Kearney's Sedgwick Post No. 1 of the Grand Army of the Republic<sup>1</sup> planned a state reunion during the week of September 17 to 22 while the encampment of the U. S. Army camp of instruction was being held at Camp John R. Brooke on the outskirts of the city. (*Buffalo Tales*, September-October, 1995) A reunion of the G.A.R. had never been held in Kearney. Usually



G.A.R. Parade on Wyoming (Central) Avenue, the largest of three parades held during the Reunion.

(Continued on Page 3)

WITH THE SOCIETY

**A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:**

The activity of the Building Committee at the Trails and Rails is still waiting to hear from the Deyle family on some options for the property adjacent to the museum.

We are looking forward to making a new home for the murals from the Presbyterian Church at the church located on the museum grounds.

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Buffalo County Historical Society I want to wish everyone a Happy and Joyful Holiday Season!

Larry K. Nansel, President

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**Memorial Gifts** in remembrance of Lorand Bahnsen have been received from Everett and Ardys Pitcher, Harvey and Lois Cole, J. Robert and Margaret Rizer, Jack and Joan Erickson, Mrs. Harold D. Richardson, Vena Cannon, Jo Bissell, Mary Quinton Nye, Alice Howell and Philip S. Holmgren, of Kearney; Lois Bahnsen of Grant, Clinton and Georgia Olmsted of Arapahoe, Susan Underhill, Howard and Wilma Dunn, of Riverdale; R. A. and Evelyn Snyder of Hastings and Sharon Knapp of Lincoln.

. . . . .

Next spring a bus tour to the north and northwest part of the county is planned which will include the ghost town sites of Peak, Mahila, Sartoria, Armada, Watertown, Greendale, Stanley, Huntsville and Crowellton, and present towns of Pleasanton, Miller, Amherst and Odessa.

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they were held in Hastings, Grand Island or Lincoln, closer to the state population centers. These reunions were second in popularity only to the state fair and Ak-Sar-Ben and drew many people besides the veterans and their families to town.

Special trains with special low round-trip rates from any part of the state were arranged for the visitors. It was on a trip to Omaha to charter these special arrangements with both the Union Pacific and the Burlington & Missouri River railroads that E. A. Aitken, the chairman of the reunion from Kearney, was interviewed at the Millard Hotel by a reporter from the *Omaha Bee*. Headlined "KEARNEY'S ATTRACTION — A Grand Exhibition in Preparation at Buffalo's Capital," the interview appeared in the *Bee* of September 2, as follows:

Mr. Aitkin is a whole-souled man, whose sole object seems to be the success of the encampment. A *Bee* man found him enjoying his cigar. As the clouds of fragrant havana smoke floated toward the ceiling, the reporter propounded the following questions:

"What are you going to do at Kearney between September 17 and 22, Mr. Aitkin?"

Mr. Aitkin slowly removed the cigar from between his lips and said: "We are going to have an exhibition which will rival anything that Omaha or any other city can produce. In the first place we have eight or ten thousand United States troops in camp near Kearney who will assist us.

We are going to have a celebration at Lake Kearney. Yachting, rowing, music, dancing and opera are the attractions which we will place before our visitors. We intend to have a naval engagement on the lake, representing the battle between the Monitor and Merrimac. The lake is a beautiful sheet of water, and we are having built ships which will fitly represent the vessels in question. On the shore, at the encampment, is the camp of the veterans, who will withstand the bombardment. The regulars will be camped nearby and will take active part. The United States troops, to which I have reference, are on their annual march. Fifty thousand people can be accommodated. You know our lake, with its sloping banks, has an outlook which is unexcelled for spectacular effects. The camps upon its banks are all within view of the naval engagement and the fireworks exhibition."

"What prominent people do you expect there during the exhibition?"

"Well," said Mr. Aitkin, "Governor Thayer, with the state militia, (and) Senator Van Wyck, Senator Manderson and Congressman McShane have promised to be with us, and I think they will."

Except for the exaggerated number of U.S. troops (3000 would have been a better estimate), the high-sounding plans of Mr. Aitken and his committee seem to have been well carried out and the reunion was indeed the biggest and best ever held in the state.

General Henry A. Morrow, for whom the G.A.R. Encampment was named, was appointed by Camp Brooke Commander, General Frank Wheaton, to lay out plans for the grounds and for building of fortifications. General Morrow commanded the 21st Infantry at Camp Brooke, and was the senior officer in charge when General Wheaton was absent on other affairs. News items in the *Omaha Bee* reported:

Kearney, Nebraska, September 12—General Morrow is doing all in his power to make the Grand Army reunion of next week a success. An officer has been detailed to take charge of the construction of the works at Lake Kearney where the great sham fight will take place next week. This will be a decided novelty, in this part of Nebraska at least, and several of the eastern illustrated



journals have their correspondents and artists already here.

Kearney, Nebraska, September 13—General Morrow as commander of the G.A.R. camp, which will assemble next week, is pushing preparations with all his old time vigor. Fortifications are being erected at the lake where the naval combat will be held, and a sham battle between regulars and veterans is also on the programme. Applications for quarters for 6,000 men have already been received, and as the railroads sell tickets during the week from all points in Nebraska to Kearney at one fare for round trip, it is expected that a great crowd will be present.

The *Kearney New Era* of September 15 noted that J. A. Finch,<sup>2</sup> the representative from *Harper's Magazine* sent to cover the Camp Brooke and Camp Morrow encampments, was also "trying to arrange to fill a page of the *New York Illustrated News* with views of Camp Brooke, the naval engagement on the lake and other interesting features promised for next week's entertainment (Camp Morrow)."

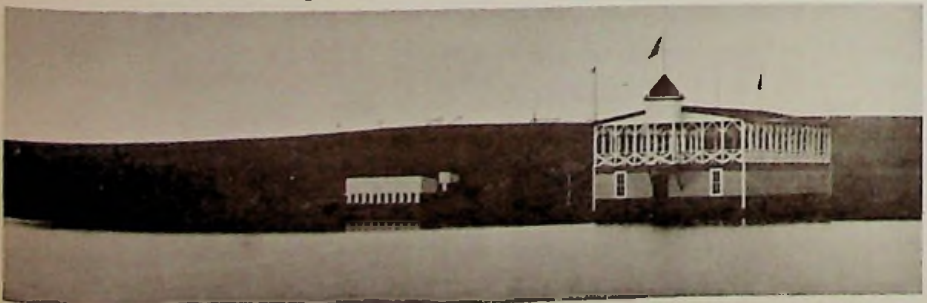
The official opening of the Reunion took place at ten o'clock on Monday morning when the camp was turned over to General Morrow. It is described in the *Omaha Bee*:

Kearney, Nebraska, September 19—The ceremony of turning over the Grand Army camp to General Morrow was performed yesterday in the presence of a large number of people. Judge Gillespie, of Kearney, in behalf of the G.A.R., in a very happy manner presented the camp to the general, who feelingly spoke of the services and sacrifices of the men who for four years upheld the honor and integrity of the government and declared that the high station of Nebraska for intelligence, enterprise, education and order among the states of the nation was to be attributed to the fact that so large a part of the population came from the soldier element of the country. The band of the Twenty-first infantry discoursed sweet music, a salute of thirteen guns was fired from a battery on the west side of Lake Kearney, and a magnificent flag floated gracefully at the top of a pole 100 feet high in the center of the camp.

On Monday evening General A. H. Conner of Kearney gave the welcoming address at the Kearney Lake pavilion.

Routine camp orders of the day from Tuesday through Friday started with reveille gun at 5:30 a.m., followed by breakfast call at 7:00 and sick call at 7:30. Dinner call was at 12:00 noon, supper call at 5:00 p.m.; retreat and evening gun at sundown; tattoo<sup>3</sup> at 9:00 p.m. and taps at 10:00 p.m.

The attractions and entertainment throughout the week consisted of sham battles between regular army troops and the state militia taking place on the plateau in back of the lake where a grandstand was built to accommodate 6,000 people.



Lake Kearney and Pavilion, site of naval engagements, band concerts, speeches and main exercises of the Reunion.

On Wednesday night was the reenactment of running land batteries by U.S. gun boats in 1863 at Vicksburg.

A Kearney dispatch (undated) in the *Juniata Herald* stated: "The naval engagement on Lake Kearney this evening was one of the grandest exhibitions ever displayed in the west. Three batteries located at points on the opposite side of the lake were mounted with howitzers. The steamer Neptune approached them quietly with lights suppressed, and when within range of the guns the battle began to rage. Ominous clouds overhung the scene and sharp lightning added to the illumination."

There were military drills, band contests, rifle team competitions, military maneuvers galore, and fireworks every night. Also three big parades—the one in downtown Kearney on Wyoming (Central) Avenue was the largest ever held in the city, with 22 bands and 3,000 regular army troops, plus the state militia and G.A.R. veterans.

The spectacular closing on Friday night was the mock battle of the Monitor and the Merrimac on the lake. The converted steamboats armed with small cannon put on a thrilling battle. Fireworks were used to give the clash a realistic sight and sound. It was estimated that 25,000 people sat on the hillsides surrounding the lake and viewed the battle.

Crowds for the week were estimated at 40,000 to 45,000 visitors. They came by special and regular trains and by horse and buggy or wagons. Many slept in their wagons. All local hotels were filled and 1,400 tents were set up west of the lake and on the flat ground south of present Highway 30, not far from the lake area. For street transportation visitors rode the horse-drawn<sup>4</sup> trolley cars from downtown to the lake pavilion.

It was a glorious week. It certainly drew larger crowds to Kearney than the city had seen before, and larger, perhaps, than it has seen since.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. The Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) was a patriotic organization composed of Union veterans of the Civil War. It was founded in April, 1866 and was dissolved in 1956 following the death of its last member. Posts in Buffalo County were Sedgwick Post No. 1, Kearney, Joe Hooker Post No. 28, Shelton; G. K. Warren Post No. 113, Gibbon; Jewett Post No. 228, Miller; and Cedar Mountain Post, Ravenna.
2. J. A. Finch, photographer and artist from Harpers Magazine, remained in Kearney and had a studio for a few years. He and local photographer A. T. Anderson teamed up to take care of the photos and art work of two Kearney promotional booklets of 1889.
3. Tattoo was a call before taps notifying soldiers and sailors to repair to quarters.
4. Kearney's much publicized electric streetcar system was not put into operation until 1889.

#### SOURCES

*Omaha Bee*, September 2, 13, 14, 16, 20, 1888; *Kearney New Era*, September 1, 15, 1888; *Juniata (Nebraska) Herald*, September 27, 1888; *Army & Navy Journal*, October 3, 1888; Bassett, *History of Buffalo County*, (1916); *Where the Buffalo Roamed* (1967); *Kearney Daily Hub*, July 5, 1973; *Buffalo Tales*, "A View of Kearney in 1888," January 1989; Correspondence and telephone interviews with Nebraska State Historical Society

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Research on the above story has been handicapped by a lack of local sources. The *Kearney Journal* may have had good coverage of the events but there is no microfilm and no available copies of this newspaper. The *Kearney New Era* had very few items in its weekly paper. (The *Kearney Daily Hub* started its publication a month after these events.)

The only authentic source of detailed information was found in the microfilm of the *Omaha Bee*, which apparently had a reporter in Kearney for the full month of September 1888. I want to give special thanks to the Nebraska State Historical Society for the accounts of both the Army Encampment and the G.A.R. Reunion from their files of microfilm of the *Bee*. Without its help there would have been little or no detailed facts of these historic events of our local history.

I hope that somewhere, sometime copies of the *Journal's* articles will surface in a scrapbook, personal journal or newspaper clippings and will find their way to the Society's archives collection.

—Alice Howell

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**CHRISTMAS TREE WALK  
 TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM**

It's about December again and the Christmas Tree Walk is early this year. We have many trees this year and are planning on a fun time to start the Christmas Season. Our dates are December 2-10 from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. each day. We again need many volunteers to sit with the displays. We also need baked goods for the bake sale. Please bake an extra batch of anything and help us in this project.

We will have many new items for sale in the gift shop plus our own *Tales of Buffalo County*. All editions are available.

A membership in the Historical Society is also a nice gift for a friend or family member.

For information call Trails & Rails 234-3041, Margaret Hohnholt 237-7327, or Wilma Larsen 237-2697. —Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

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

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