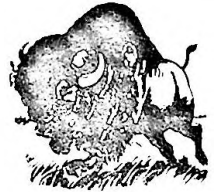


Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

June 1988

FORT KEARNY — GUARDIAN OF THE PLAINS

by Beverly Murray Kimball

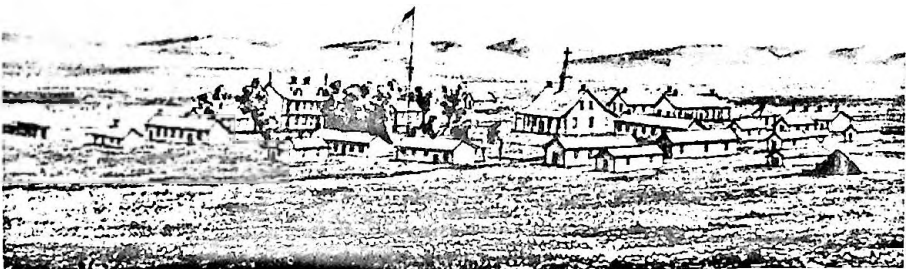
The Great Platte River valley was a focal point in the settling of the West from the days of Coronado, who in 1541 marched northeast from Sante Fe seeking the kingdom of Quivera, to the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869.

Thomas Jefferson, who initiated the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, could hardly appreciate the vastness or the potential of this land. In 1804, Lewis and Clark began their explorations where the Platte empties into the Missouri River. In 1835, Col. Henry Dodge and 117 men were sent by the government to explore the Platte River valley and attempt to get the Pawnee Indians to accept a reservation. In following years, John C. Fremont, other explorers and cartographers, fur trappers, emigrants, Mormons, missionaries and endless wagon trains crossed this territory on the way West.

Kansas City, Leavenworth, St. Joe, Nebraska City and Council Bluffs-Omaha were the main "jumping-off places" on the Missouri River and the starting points for the Oregon Trail and California Road on the south side of the Platte and the Mormon Trail and Council Bluffs Road on the north side. The government, realizing a series of military posts were necessary to support and protect the mass migration, in 1836 passed an act providing for such installations.

It was not until 1846 that the first Fort Kearny was established at Table Creek (near present Nebraska City) by Col. Stephen Watts Kearny. This was the same year as the acquisition of the Oregon Territory, the outbreak of the Mexican War and the mass exodus of the Mormons from Nauvoo, Illinois. The Table Creek site proved to be too near the beginning of the Oregon Trail and was discontinued. A new site was chosen some 197 miles farther west near the head of the Grand Island. Originally called Fort Childs, this post was later named Fort Kearny.

(Continued on Page 3)



1870 Artist's View of Fort Kearny, looking from the southwest..

(Courtesy of Amon Carter Museum)

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

Report of Chan Lynch, Chairman of Airbase Reunion Committee:

I am happy to report that the 1988 Wagons West celebration was a great success. Over 500 people came from all over the country to take part in the Airbase Reunion festivities. All events were well attended. The B-17 bomber drew over 10,000 visitors at the airport. The highlight of the weekend celebration was the Big Band dance at the Armory featuring music from the '40's by the Harvey Larson Band.

Approximately \$17,000 has been received from contributions, sales, calendar advertising, admissions and grants. We are confident that all expenses, including the cost of bringing the B-17 from California, will be taken care of.

Special thanks and appreciation is given to Reunion Committee members: Henry and Margaret Hohnholt, Chandler and Jean Lynch, Gene and Loree Maddux, Orson and Letha Lewis, G. Wm. Potter, Gene Hunt, Maurice May, Susan McFerrin, Vena Cannon, Joe Meuret, Tom Tye and Roger Wisch. Also to the Kearney Daily Hub for its excellent coverage, including the special Souvenir Section in the June 1 edition. Extra copies of this section, the April and May Buffalo Tales and the Airbase calendar are available.



Memorials

Buffalo County Memorial gifts have been received from Margaret Cary Tunks to honor the Lyman Cary and the Fred Nye families, Horace, Lucile and Jack Cary. And from Eleanor Bessie Herzman in memory of C. Albert, Frank E., Ella, Charles D., Jemima Gary and Ursula Jackson Bessie.

One way to support the historical society is to remember friends and family through memorial gifts. We hope the idea will grow and more members will participate.



From the Trails & Rails Museum

Over 300 people visited the museum during the three days of the Airbase Reunion celebration. A special thanks to the volunteers who helped during this time. The special World War II exhibit will continue on display during June.

Over 600 students from 23 schools toured the museum this spring. Jo Bissell and Virginia Parrish helped with this project. Jo also went to Northeast school and to Glenwood, and Chan Lynch talked to Kenwood pupils.

Museum summer guides Gus Brown and Kay Vetter are on the job, as well as Lana Saunders from the Summer Youth Employment Program. The museum is open from 10:00 to 12:00 noon and 1:00 to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Saturday, and 1:00 to 5:00 on Sunday. Flower beds have been planted with flowers, courtesy of Kearney Floral, Builders Warehouse and the Hohnholts.

Margaret Hohnholt, President

Kearney City, March 1st 1869

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Page from Kearney City (Dobytown) ledger, March 1, 1869.

Lt. Daniel P. Woodbury had chosen this site because it was on a slight elevation two-thirds of a mile from the river — a guarantee against flooding; for the heavy stand of timber on the islands needed in the construction of buildings; for the natural hay bottoms which would provide forage for the cavalry horses; and for its strategic location for keeping the peace between the warring Pawnee and the Sioux. Construction began in 1848 and the fort became functional in 1849.

As in ancient times all roads led to Rome so in the mid-1800's all roads led to Fort Kearny on the Platte which became the starting point of the Great Platte River Road. The stream of wagons in 1848 became a torrent of emigration the following year. Though the fort would endure for more than twenty years, the greatest demands were made on this infant outpost during its first year.

Of the 30,000 people who made up the Gold Rush of '49, 25,000 used the Oregon Trail that passed Fort Kearny. Diaries of over 100 of these emigrants have survived and it is mainly from these personal accounts, plus government records, that frontier history is obtained.

In addition to the usual ten miles square, the military reserve was extended downstream for an additional six miles to include more timber. All timber and hay was for the sole use of the garrison, and no camping was allowed on the reservation. The fort was located two miles from the reserve's western boundary, eight miles from its eastern boundary, and midway between its north and south boundaries. The nearest and largest camping area was located just beyond the western border near Kearney

City, better known as Dobytown, but some camping took place at Valley City, also known as Dogtown, eight miles to the east.

When application for the Fort Kearny post office was made, an extra "e" was inadvertently added and never corrected. Fort Kearny now uses the correct spelling of the name of the man for whom the fort is named, Stephen Watts Kearny. Brig. Gen. Kearny's distinguished military service in the Mexican War led to the honor of having the fort named for him. (See *Buffalo Tales*, January 1979.)

The fort was laid out on a square with buildings surrounding the four-acre parade ground with a flagpole in its center. The buildings were primarily made of sod with native timber supports and earthen roofs, although there was some use of adobe, burned brick and rammed earth. By the spring of 1850, the principal buildings were a large adobe storehouse with a lead roof; the soldiers' quarters, blacksmith shop, trading store and stable made of sod; and two frame buildings — the hospital and a double two-story officers' quarters. By the end of 1859, a frame guardhouse, a two-story soldiers' barracks and quarters for the post commander were added around the parade ground. Outbuildings consisted of stables, corrals, the sutler's store and a post church. A third officers' barracks was added in 1852 and later more stables, an adjutant's office, laundresses' headquarters, a bakery and a powder magazine.

One journalist's account about soddies revealed, "The walls are thick and the interior is lined with coarse canvas. They are comfortable but not impervious to snakes which bore through and very frequently bivouac on the beds." A bullwacker, who agreed that the fort was "not a very prepossessing place," went on to say, "but after a journey of 300 miles through the wilderness, we welcomed the sight as we also did the sound of the bugle that night and the roll of drums and the shriek of life the next morning."

Many travelers were disappointed with the drab appearance of the buildings. Others condemned the fort as a desolate spot, a sickly place with "musquitoes by the bushel" and plagued with storms. Another diary reveals, "One could not stand up for fear of being struck by lightning nor lie down for fear of being drowned" Lightning could produce eerie effects illuminating everything that stood upright. It stunned and killed both animals and men but its biggest threat was causing a stampede. The choking road dust became axle-deep mires after rainstorms, often requiring twelve teams of oxen to pull wagons out. Yet other diarists commented, "The fort was an oasis" and "a breath of civilization on the endless prairie."

Travelers on the northern trail sometimes braved crossing the Platte to check on mail, buy provisions or just to say they had visited Fort Kearny. Many, however, felt the crossing of a river described as two miles wide and having ten channels and full of quicksand not worth risking life and limb especially when cholera was prevalent on the south bank.

It must be remembered that the fort was primarily established as a functional military post and with the scarcity of building materials took a lot of ingenuity and effort to build. Being halfway between the Missouri River and Fort Laramie, it was important as a way station, a message center and a supply post for emigrants and for military installations farther west.

Emigrants who found their supplies inadequate could buy such commodities as grain (when available), flour, bacon and pickled pork upon requisition from the commissary. Post gardens were inadequate to supply the vitamin-deficient diet of the garrison but buffalo meat was thought to be a source of vitamins and though professional hunters

kept the garrison supplied, travelers were told to hunt their own meat. If wagons needed repair, the fort blacksmith shop could be used, usually on a do-it-yourself basis. Prices at the post sutler's seemed extravagantly high.

The fort hospital administered to the needs of the soldiers and their families and served in part for the benefit of the emigrants. Scurvy was prevalent in the garrison and the deadly cholera came westward with the emigrants. Three years after the fort was abandoned, 198 bodies of soldiers were removed from the Fort Kearny cemetery, located about one-half mile south of the fort, and reinterred in Fort McPherson National Cemetery.

The most popular place at the fort was the post office where, no doubt, more mail was received to be sent than was ever delivered to anxious travelers who desperately longed for news from home. Moses Sydenham was appointed postmaster in 1858 and served until the fort was abandoned. He later took up residence in Dobytown publishing the first newspaper in the area.

Fort Kearny continued to play a primary role on the Great Platte River Road from the days following the '49ers to 1866. Monthly mail between Independence, Missouri, and Salt Lake City began in the summer of 1850. In 1858, mail service went on a weekly basis and with this began the systematic transportation of passengers, first by mail wagon and later by the famous Concord stagecoaches. Stage stations for the Overland Stage were built every ten to twelve miles and became the real reason for the establishment of both Dogtown and Dobytown. In 1862, stages were operated two or three times weekly and by 1865 were on a daily basis. The fort was a stop for the Pony Express in 1860-61. Telegraph communications were so important that when the Pacific Telegraph line was built that office was added to Moses Sydenham's post office.

With the outbreak of the Civil War all regular troops were withdrawn to aid in putting down the Southern rebellion and replaced by volunteer regiments. Heavy ordnance was transferred to Fort Leavenworth leaving the post without heavy armament.

The garrison was always very small in contrast to the hordes of Pawnee and Sioux in the area. With the outbreak of the Indian War of 1864, a stockade was built to better protect both soldiers and civilians; however, the fort never came under Indian attack. The soldiers proved their role as "Guardians of the Plains" making patrols, keeping Indians pacified and providing travelers with supplies, advice and moral support on their 2,000 mile journey. And as the Union Pacific was being built, soldiers provided protection to the railroad workers laying tracks through Indian country.

By 1865, the main Indian troubles had moved farther west. In 1866, Fort Kearny became the staging area for Col. Henry Carrington and his 2,000 troops as they



Reconstructed Blacksmith-Carpenter Shop with prairie schooners.

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headed west to establish new posts along the Bozeman Trail. The departure of this regiment was the last significant military event in Fort Kearny history.

The Union Pacific tracks, laid on the north side of the Platte in 1866, left the post stranded. With the railroad supplying cheaper, safer transportation for passengers, freight and mail, the need for Fort Kearny waned. For a time, the fort was used as a proving ground for several models of the new breech-loading rifles and a testing site for ammunition manufactured by the Ordnance Department and some private firms.

With the completion of the railroad in 1869, Fort Kearny was rendered obsolete. By 1870, the garrison had dwindled to fifty men. Early in 1871, on the recommendation of Gen. Wm. T. Sherman, the War Department ordered the abandonment of Fort Kearny as a military post. The garrison was transferred to Omaha Barracks and its stores to Fort McPherson.

Some 65,000 acres of military reservation was first occupied by squatters. In 1876, an Act of Congress transferred the land to the U.S. Department of the Interior to be disposed of under the Homestead Act of 1863. William O. Dungan, a Civil War veteran, filed on and patented the quarter section which included the parade ground.

In 1922, the Fort Kearny Memorial Association was formed by local citizens for "the perpetuation and preservation of the Old Fort Kearny Site as a patriotic and historic park and the marking of same by suitable monuments." Funds were raised to purchase the forty acres which were then deeded to the State of Nebraska. In 1960, Fort Kearny was officially classified as a state historical park and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the Nebraska State Historical Society devised a plan for the development and interpretation of this historic military post. The Memorial Association was replaced in 1960 by the Fort Kearny Preservation, Restoration and Development Board as decreed by Gov. Ralph Brooks. With the combined efforts of state personnel and private citizens, the future of Fort Kearny, the Quivera of the Plains, is assured.

NEW MEMBERS

LIFE

Harvey J. and Betty Henning Kearney

BASIC

Delphine Sanks Kearney Orson and Letha Lewis Kearney

SOURCES

Fort Kearny on the Platte by D. Ray Wilson, 1980; **The Great Platte River Road** by Merrill J. Mattes, 1969; and **Historical Atlas of Kearney County** by J. H. Sears, 1894. Photos courtesy of Fort Kearny Historical Park.