



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

April 1985

FREIGHTING IN BUFFALO COUNTY — Part III

by Mardi Anderson

Other Wagon Routes

In addition to the wagon roads already described, there was a branch from the Kearney-Loup City Road which went to Broken Bow. After crossing the South Loup River near present day Pleasanton, this road turned northwest through Pleasant Valley, past the Mahila Post Office and into Sherman County. Here the road came out of Pleasant Valley and followed a ridge for some distance before going into the Muddy Creek valley near Jim MacEndeffer's ranch just south of Algernon in Custer County. The trail then followed Muddy Creek through Algernon and Ansley to Broken Bow. From MacEndeffer's to Broken Bow the road was well traveled because this was part of the road to Grand Island. It was used by homesteaders in eastern Custer County and by freighters who went to Grand Island rather than Kearney for supplies. The portion of the wagon road up through Pleasant Valley to Muddy Creek was not traveled as frequently. According to Solomon D. Butcher, who used this road, they "left the main road leading from Kearney to this upper country at a point in Buffalo County, in Pleasant Valley and went north through the hills following a very dim trail which per-



All that remains now are traces of the old wagon roads in some Buffalo County pastures. This rut was once part of the Kearney-Black Hills Trail where it passed through the Larsen property northwest of Kearney.

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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 68847. 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:

Family Membership	\$ 7.50	Institutional Membership	\$10.00
Individual Membership	\$ 5.00	Supporting Membership	\$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly. Contact Alice Howell, Publications Chairman, 237-7858.

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Trails and Rails Museum, Mardi Anderson, Director. Phone 234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

Come to the Annual Meeting on Sunday, April 21, at First Lutheran Church, 3315 Avenue G, in Kearney. (Note: the **third** Sunday of the month). There will be a covered dish dinner at 1:00 o'clock followed by the business meeting and program.

The Action's Back on Main Street is the theme of National Preservation Week, May 12-18. To carry out this theme, the Historical Society will conduct a walking tour of Central Avenue on Sunday afternoon, May 19, at two o'clock. Historic buildings, longtime businesses and unusual happenings in Kearney's main street history will be emphasized. Request is made for historical photos of Central Avenue for display during Preservation Week. Contact Chan Lynch, Margaret Hohnholt or Alice Howell, or bring to museum.

WAGONS WEST CELEBRATION

Back in the pioneer days the first wagon trains of the season would reach Buffalo County toward the end of May or early June. To commemorate that event, Trails and Rails Museum is planning a *Wagons West Celebration*, to be held on Saturday, June 8, 1985 at the museum grounds from 10:00 a.m. to sundown.

People from different countries came west on wagon trains; we will have ethnic food booths. People left behind items which would not fit into wagons; we will have a flea market. Pioneers rode endless miles across the prairie; we will have wagon rides. In the evenings pioneers entertained themselves with music around the campfire; our musical entertainment will include Tom Michels, Clarence Colip's one-man band with Robert French at the organ, Susan McFarren on a 12-string guitar; and the Senior Citizens Band. Living history demonstrations will be given in the Freighters Hotel.

Members of the *Wagons West Celebration* planning committee ask Society members to volunteer to help with concession stand, souvenir shop and the various exhibits. Volunteer now and get your choice of time and activity.

NEW MEMBERS

- | | |
|---|---|
| Mr. & Mrs. Wilbur Brown . . . Elm Creek | Mr. & Mrs. Larry VollmerKearney |
| Mr. & Mrs. Marlin HeidenKearney | Mrs. Lester WarrenKearney |

sisted in growing dimmer, and which, as darkness came on, disappeared altogether."

Marie Gebbhart, an 11-year-old girl, and her 13-year-old brother, Fred, were given the responsibility of driving a springboard wagon from their ranch near Broken Bow to Kearney to buy groceries and an 8" x 8" timber, 16 feet long, to be used in a hay sweep. Returning home, they went north from Kearney to the South Loup River and then northwest up through Pleasant Valley. It was growing dark and rain had made this faint trail slippery. The wagon tipped over and broke a wheel. Fred walked seven miles to the nearest settler's home to borrow another wagon. A bucket of lard in the groceries had come open when the wagon tipped. While waiting for her brother, Marie wiped lard off herself with dried grass and tried to clean up the wreckage. They eventually arrived home safely.

John Morris contracted to haul a very heavy safe for Custer County from Kearney to Broken Bow. O. M. Kem, who later became a Congressman, assisted him with this move. It was near the end of March and a freezing rain had fallen making it icy under foot. According to Kem, the worst part of the trip was the divide between Pleasant Valley and the Muddy Creek valley. A misstep would have brought them all tumbling down into one valley or the other. They were able to navigate the slippery trail safely and stayed that night with Major Ellison at Algernon.

In the days of freighting to the Black Hills over the Kearney-Black Hills Trail, Armada had been the last stop on the trail before leaving Buffalo County. At that time it was little more than a post office along the Wood River. In 1881 William Craven, Armada's first citizen, set up a store in the sod house he had just built. Four years later he built a frame store and then in 1887 he built a frame house which also served as a hotel. Craven's place became a relay station for stage coaches and a stop for freight wagons. Because Armada was approximately half way between Kearney and Broken Bow, his hotel was known as the Halfway House. Although greatly changed, the building is still used today as the home of Raymond Hazzard, Jr.

After the gold rush, freighters going to Broken Bow continued to follow the same wagon road to Armada. Some continued on that road up the Wood River into Dawson and then Custer County before turning north to Broken Bow. There was an alternate route which turned north at Armada and followed the Buffalo-Dawson county line until, upon reaching the Custer County line, the trail dropped down into the South Loup River valley and followed the South Loup to Georgetown. Faint traces of this wagon road can still be seen in a pasture in the extreme northwest corner of the county.

Railroads and the End of Freighting by Wagon

During the 1880's there was intense competition between the Union Pacific and the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad to build branch lines in Nebraska. Each formed smaller companies to construct lines in various parts of the state. Speculation ran high in Kearney and surrounding towns as to which railroad would build and what routes would be chosen.

During the summer and fall of 1884, as the B. & M. R. R. completed a line westward through Holdrege from Hastings, civil engineers were sent to run a line from Kearney to Broken Bow. At the same time there were reports that a railroad was being constructed by the B. & M. northwestward from Grand Island with the rumored intention of going to Broken Bow. The KEARNEY NEW ERA newspaper was certain that when the B. & M. built northward, the line would go from Kearney. Then in July,

1885. the NEW ERA reported that

"...a large force of graders with their machinery and camping outfits passed east through Kearney for Grand Island, where they go to work on the B. & M. extension from that point. The graders come from the B. & M. extension west from Holdrege. It is not known which of the surveys will be worked, the one through Broken Bow or the one running up the South Loup River through the northern part of this county."

By January, 1886, it was apparent that one route to be constructed would pass through the northeast corner of Buffalo County. The B. & M. purchased land from Erastus Smith who lived at the mouth of Beaver Creek. The railroad planned to make this the site of a division station and a town - Ravenna.

At the same time, there was speculation about another railroad line being built along the South Loup River. On January 15, 1886, A. D. "Dick" Brown of Mahila wrote to his brother, Bill,

"well we are sure of a road up the muddy they are at work now at sweet water....there is 225 teams on the road now all owned by one man he has the contract from the island to the bow 100 miles away....the U. P. is on the south loup running a survey this is the 2nd time for them this winter there is a lot of teams unloaded at Kearney that don't belong to the B. and M. I think the first thing we know they will be at work on the loup they are bound to beat the B. and M. they are keep it sly the serveyers are at work on both ends of the rout one going below the bow and one down here they run through sweensons (John Swenson of Sartoria) feed yards day before yesterday excitement is high and well it may be for we are bound to have two rails next summer and that will give us a boom."

It is ironic that the building of railroads, which caused the end of freighting by wagon in Buffalo County, also caused the last flurry of freighting activity in the county. Equipment was being shipped to Kearney by rail and freighted to the northeast corner of the county. On January 7, 1886, two train car loads of tents and other camping equipment for the men building that line were unloaded in Kearney. Four-mule teams were used to pull the wagons loaded with this equipment out of Kearney the following



Although greatly changed to serve as the home of Raymond Hazzard, Jr. of Miller, this house once was the Halfway House hotel at Armada.

day. Throughout the month of February occasional mention was made in the KEARNEY NEW ERA about the railroad construction preparations in the north part of the county. Supplies continued to come to Kearney and be shipped north via mule teams. By the end of the month, "freighters (were) hauling goods north to railroad headquarters daily and active work (was expected to) commence shortly."

Then during the first week in March "several carloads of mules for freighting to the new railroad were brought in on the B. & M." By mid-March, despite bad weather, over 200 wagon loads of materials and supplies had been hauled out of Kearney. Freighting all those supplies was not easy and working with the mules must have been a strain on the temper at times. In May it was reported that "One of the railroad teamsters, hauling iron pipe from Kearney to the B. & M. railroad, north, was arrested on Saturday for unmercifully beating one of his mules."

Excitement mounted in the new town of Ravenna as construction brought the railroad tracks nearer. Bridges had been built across the South Loup River and Beaver Creek. Two hundred men with 16 teams were laying track on the newly graded road bed. Citizens of Ravenna planned to celebrate when the first train arrived. "The Bohemia lodge in regalia, with their excellent band (would) be present and other suitable arrangements" were being made.

The railroad had entered Buffalo County near St. Michael. It followed the South Loup River to Nantasket and then after crossing the river, entered Ravenna. From here it followed Beaver Creek to Sweetwater and on into Sherman and Custer Counties following Beaver and then Muddy Creek to Broken Bow and on northwest.

After the railroad reached Broken Bow late in the summer of 1886, wagon freighting traffic between that town and Kearney was cut considerably. There was also a reduction in traffic by homesteaders living in the northern part of this county, except for business which had to be conducted in Kearney as the county seat. William Jones, a homesteader near Sartoria, wrote to his father telling about the railroads saying "there is one on the north of us 12 miles we can now go to town and back in one day instead of two as when we had to do all of our trading in Kearney."

Freighting continued on a limited scale between Kearney and Broken Bow for another four years. Reference has already been made to this period when the freight traffic went past Robert Hunter's homestead, Jerome Lalone's home was used as a freighter stop and freighters crossed the South Loup River at Elk Creek near Sam Wright's store. Other freighters continued to follow the Wood River through Armada into Dawson and Custer Counties.

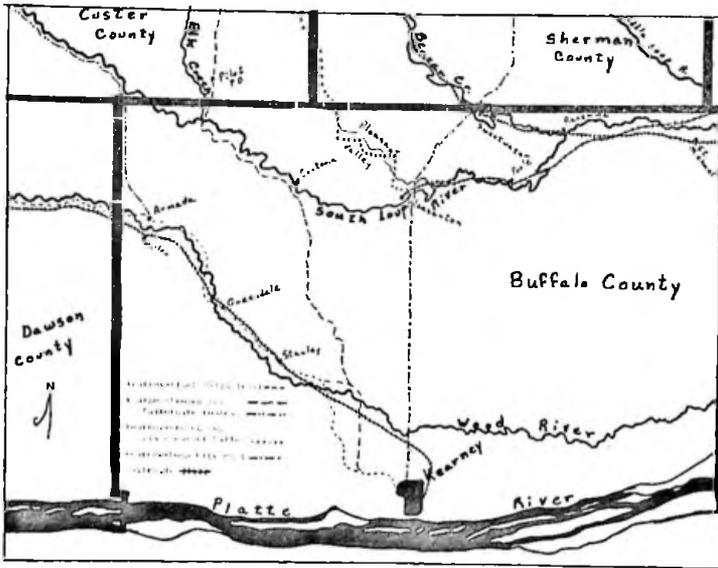
Late in 1886 Union Pacific railroad crews began grading the roadbed for the branch they surveyed which was to run from Boelus through Nantasket, Poole, and Pleasanton to Sartoria. In April, 1887, Owen Jones of Sartoria, wrote to his father, "Well our railroad has not been finished yet and I do not think that it will be this year." Two years later, in June, 1889, Owen's brother, William, wrote their father that "Our Rail Road up the Loup has never been finished..." Although the roadbed was graded beyond Sartoria, that branch line was never extended beyond Pleasanton.

There was one other railroad branch line to be constructed in Buffalo County before the freight wagons were completely eliminated. This line would follow the Wood River from Kearney northwest along the same route that had been used by the freight wagons in the Black Hills gold rush days and in carrying supplies to Broken Bow. During January and February, 1887, a Kearney newspaper kept its readers

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informed of progress in constructing this Wood River Branch of the U. P. railroad. It was not completed at that time however. Several Kearney business men organized the Kearney & Black Hills railroad with the objective of building the line all the way to the Black Hills. By October, 1890, it was completed through Miller south of Armada and on to Callaway. In 1912 it was extended to Stapleton, but never went any farther.

During the four years from 1886 through 1890 that railroad branch lines were constructed in the county, the demand for freighting supplies by wagon gradually diminished and became an obsolete mode of transportation. All that remains now are traces of the old wagon roads in some Buffalo County pastures and a few family stories about the days "when Grandpa freighted out of Kearney."

SOURCES

Solomon D. Butcher. *Pioneer History of Custer County Nebraska*, E. R. Purcell, *Pioneer Stories of Custer County Nebraska*; Custer County Historical Library files; *Miller Area Heritage* book and source materials; *Tales of Buffalo County, Vol. I*; *Nebraska History* quarterly, Sept. 1959; *Custer County Republican*, March, 1883; *Custer County Chief*, Golden Anniversary Number, *Kearney New Era*, June, 1884-February, 1887; Letters from Dick Brown, William Jones and Owen Jones collected by Glenn W. Hay; Interview with Bernard Shoemaker of Miller, Sept. 1984.



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