



# Buffalo Tales



Volume 22, No. 5 Buffalo County Historical Society September-October, 1999

## *Dedicated Professor and Citizen: Philip S. Holmgren of Kearney, Nebraska*

by Otto Lohrenz, Professor of History (emeritus),  
The University of Nebraska at Kearney

It was my good fortune to be closely associated with Professor Philip S. Holmgren for more than three decades. He was a gentleman in the classical sense, that is, his conduct conformed to the highest standard of propriety and correct behavior. He was kind, decent, and compassionate, and was soft-spoken, composed, and dignified, never losing self control. Patience and generosity were also among his attributes. Tolerant and considerate of others and their feelings, he did his best to avoid giving offense. When his best judgment was challenged, however, he could defend and maintain his position with vigor and persistence. He was never heard to utter a word of profanity. Although he was quiet and reserved by nature, he was nevertheless gregarious, wanting to socialize with people and be among them. He was a good listener and conversationalist and had a good sense of humor. His contributions to the University of Nebraska at Kearney as professor and to the community of Kearney as citizen were special and significant and his legacy should be recorded on the pages of history. His life and career merit our attention.

Professor Holmgren was proud of his roots and was very loyal and close to both his immediate and extended families. He was born on the family farm one mile west of Naper, Nebraska on October 25, 1921 of German-Russian parentage. His father, Philipp Holmgren, was born in Russian Georgia, and his mother, Elizabeth Wetzler, in the Ukraine and they migrated to Boyd County as young children with their parents in the late nineteenth century. Professor Holmgren, the youngest of nine surviving children, grew up on the family farm and was well acquainted with the hard work and inconveniences of rural life at that time. Seldom if ever did he miss family events, such as birthday and anniversary celebrations, weddings, funerals, and reunions.



**Dr. Philip S. Holmgren at the podium. Kearney State College Commencement, May 1985.**

WITH THE SOCIETY

**A Message from the President:**

What a great time of the year! Nice weather, cooler evenings, football games and marching bands!

It is also a busy time for the Trails & Rails Museum. We are in the process of getting the locomotive and tender painted. This is being paid for with the Keno money that we applied for in 1998. Howard Kolbo has been helping oversee this project.

I want to thank Jack Horner for chairing the last Directors meeting in my absence.

The Historical Society would like to thank the Buffalo County Board for supporting us with some financial assistance in their new budget. It would be impossible for us to function without help such as this.

On your next drive along 11th Street, I would encourage you to notice the newly painted locomotive and the new sign given to the Museum by Fred Hammer.

—Larry Nansel, President

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**New Sign:**

Fred Hammer has purchased a new sign to replace the old one that stands by the entrance of the Museum. A very nice addition to our Museum! Thank you, Fred, for your generosity!!

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**Memorial Gift in Memory of Delbert Kahle:**

The Kearney Lions Club has placed a new park bench on the Museum grounds with memorial money they received from the Delbert Kahle Family. A memorial plaque will be attached to the bench.

MEMORIAL GIFT received from Alice Howell in memory of Philip Holmgren III.

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**NEW EDITOR OF BUFFALO TALES:**

Dr. Roger Davis, a member of the faculty of the History Department of UNK, and member of the Nebraska State Historical Society's Historic Records Advisory Board, has volunteered to be the Editor of the *Buffalo Tales* publication beginning in January of the year 2000.

The late Philip S. Holmgren was the editor at the time of his death last November, and Alice Howell has assumed editorial responsibilities since then.

We are glad to welcome Dr. Davis to the Buffalo County Historical Society's publications staff.

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**A Reminder from the Membership Committee:**

Memberships after September 1 for the year 2000 will include the last two issues of the 1999 *Buffalo Tales*. Consider giving gift memberships.

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**HONORARY MEMBERSHIP**

John Shafer, Kearney

**NEW BASIC MEMBERS**

Roger Davis, Kearney

Doug and Rhonda King, Kearney

**NEW SUPPORTING MEMBER**

Gaylen D. Murrish, Kearney

He took both his elementary and secondary education in the public school in Naper, graduating from high school in 1938. He then attended Wayne State College and in three years earned his B.A. degree with majors in history, political science and industrial arts. During the next two school years he taught social studies and industrial arts and coached, first in the schools of Minden, Iowa and then in Naper, Nebraska, where he also served as principal.

World War II interrupted his teaching and from November 1942 to February 1946 he served in the United States Medical Corp. His military duties took him to England and Scotland where he spent thirty months. There he had the opportunity of taking short courses at Oxford and Glasgow Universities.

Professor Holmgren's year in Minden, Iowa was most eventful for there he met Lois Perry, a fellow teacher, with whom he fell in love and whom he married on July 29, 1943, in Medford, Oregon, a few weeks before shipping overseas to Britain. Two sons, Philip, Jr. and Perry, issued from this union. To Lois, who predeceased him in 1987, to his sons and their wives, and later to his two young grandchildren, he was sincerely and deeply devoted.

After returning to civilian life Professor Holmgren took up graduate studies at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln which awarded him an M.A. degree in 1948 and a Ph.D. degree in 1950. Both degrees were in American history. His masters thesis was entitled, "United States Recognition of the Soviet Union," and his dissertation, "Sioux and White Relations."

In 1950 he began his long and distinguished career as teacher and scholar at the Nebraska State Teachers College in Kearney, which became Kearney State College in 1963 and the University of Nebraska at Kearney in 1991. Professor Holmgren loved the University, identified himself closely with it, and came to personify it in the minds of many of its friends and alumni.

For forty-two years, which is a record, he gave his best efforts to the University. His long tenure meant that he taught not only the children of his early students but also their grandchildren in some instances. Today thousands carry the imprint of Professor Holmgren's academic, pedagogical, and moral influence.

Professor Holmgren served his students and the institution with uncommon dedication and ability. At first he taught a heavy load of eighteen hours in three of the social sciences, but later he confined his teaching to undergraduate and graduate American history courses. Professor Holmgren had high expectations for those in his classes: was a very knowledgeable and conscientious teacher; and succeeded in motivating his students, instilling in them a curiosity for learning and knowledge.

His service to students outside the classroom was noteworthy. Throughout his career he gave without complaint an enormous amount of time to counseling and advising his students. His character and integrity and his solicitude for their academic progress and personal welfare earned him the appreciation and respect of his students.

Professor Holmgren helped students with their extracurricular activities. He was actively involved in both the History Club and Phi Alpha Theta, the national history honorary. For many years he was the faculty sponsor for XI Phi, the scholastic and leadership fraternity for juniors and seniors. In promoting these activities he made a positive impact on many additional students. He also supported students and the University by attending virtually all special events staged on campus and was an avid sports fan, rarely missing a home football, basketball, or volleyball game.

With his characteristic commitment to excellence, Professor Holmgren served the University as administrator for twenty-one years. He was Chairman of the Social Science Division from 1961 to 1968 and was Chairman of the Department of History from 1969 to 1982. He devoted an inordinate amount of time to these administrative duties



and accepted the inevitable problems and frustrations with patience, good humor, and grace. Faculty members of the division and department could always count on his help, support, and encouragement. He also gave much time and effort to committee work, serving on all the important committees of the institution.

Throughout the state and region Professor Holmgren was recognized as an authority on the history of Nebraska and of the Native Americans of the Great Plains. In his area of expertise, he wrote numerous book reviews for journals of history and presented papers at regional and national conventions. He made frequent presentations to historical societies, service clubs, veteran groups, and visiting tour groups on local and state history. He was author of the article, "The Loup River," which appeared in *An Encyclopedia of American Rivers*. When Kearney State College celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1980 Professor Holmgren was asked to write a history of the college. The result was his book of over two hundred pages with illustrations entitled, *Kearney State College, 1905-1980: A History of the First Seventy-Five Years*. The book is our most important source of information about the University's history.

In 1982 Professor Holmgren was named College Historian, a position he held until his death. In this capacity he provided much information to questioners, gave numerous informative talks about the history of the University, and wrote the notes found in the commencement programs. During the last several years of his life he collected documents and materials with the hope of preparing a new, updated edition of the history of the University.

He also revealed his commitment to history and education by accepting membership in about a dozen of the most prominent professional organizations. He was an officer and a board member of several and served as president of the Nebraska State Council for the Social Studies in 1955-56 and of the Nebraska State Education Association in 1963.

When the Elder Hostel Program was chartered in Kearney in 1978, Professor Holmgren taught classes to its participants. Each year, and sometimes twice a year, until his death he lectured to these nontraditional students on topics such as the History of Transportation, the Prairie Pioneer, and the Western Movement.

Professor Holmgren was the leading spirit in the Buffalo County Historical Society, of which he was a life member, for more than two decades. He worked extensively to promote and chronicle the history of Buffalo County. From 1972 to 1995 he served either as president, or other officer, or director of the Society. He spent countless hours working on the Society's museum and archives. He wrote and edited a number of articles



Philip and Lois Holmgren before her death in 1987.

which appeared in the *Buffalo Tales*, the quarterly newsletter and journal of the Society. He directed tours to sites of historic interest, of which he was very well informed, for the Society.

Professor Holmgren was very active in other community affairs and led Kearney's efforts in promoting historic preservation. For a number of years he was chairman of the Frank House Advisory Committee. In 1973 during Kearney's centennial celebration, he served as president and general chairman of the Centennial Commission, and, with the help of a committee, wrote the *Official Souvenir Booklet Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the City of Kearney*. In observance of Kearney's 125th anniversary in 1998 he again was the chief author of *Kearney 125: a Quasiquicentennial History*.

The University and the community acknowledged Professor Holmgren's significant contributions. In 1979 the Nebraska State Council for the Social Studies named him Educator of the Year and 1997 the Nebraska State Retired Teachers Association cited him as Nebraska's Retired Teacher of the Year. From the University he received the Pratt-Heins Foundation Service to Students Award and the Council of Deans Scholarship Award. In 1996 the University honored him with the prestigious Distinguished Service Award.

Community recognition included the Kiwanis Community Service Award, the D.A.R. Medal of Honor, the Sertoma Club Service to Mankind Award, the Rockwell Recognition Award, and the City of Kearney Distinguished Service Award.

Professor Holmgren's hobbies included the reading of history and the collecting of memorabilia dealing with history. He enjoyed singing and gardening. He often led in the singing of the alma mater at the University's annual homecoming banquet and at commencement exercises. From 1972, when the current chorus was chartered, until his death he was an enthusiastic tenor of the Kearney Area Barbershoppers. Until his health failed he always tended a large garden near the canal west of the campus. He grew all the conventional vegetables, but the sweet potato was his specialty. He gave most of his produce to friends, relatives, and acquaintances.

He attended Presbyterian Church services faithfully and taught the adult Bible Class for forty-two years. Both Professor and Lois Holmgren were goodhearted and compassionate, and routinely ministered to a large circle of shut-ins and elderly, calling on them and assisting them with their needs. They were generous with their resources, contributing regularly and liberally to the church, the University Foundation, and charitable organizations. They hosted Thanksgiving Day and Independence Day dinners at their home, inviting especially those who might be alone. After Lois Holmgren's untimely death, her husband continued these services and dinners.

In 1992 Professor Holmgren retired from his position at the University but continued his participation in community events and University affairs. In mid-1996 he learned that he suffered from multiple myeloma, but insisted on maintaining his active life-style despite a gradual reduction in energy. On November 27, 1998, after a valiant battle of two-and-a-half years, Professor Holmgren succumbed to the ravages of the disease. He lies interred beside his beloved Lois in the Prairie Rose Cemetery, Corning, Iowa. His loyalty to family, friends, and colleagues, and his dedicated service and contributions to the University and the community of Kearney will be sorely missed and long remembered. His record will remain a standard for many years to come.

#### REFERENCES

*A Continuing History of Naper, Nebraska 1892-1992*; Michael W. Schuyler, "Remembering Philip S. Holmgren, October 25, 1921-November 27, 1998," (unpublished manuscript); Professor Holmgren's Professional Vita; *The Kearney Hub*, July 13, 1992, November 30, 1998; *The Antelope*, December 10, 1998; *Nebraska State Retired Teachers Association Newsletter*, April, 1998; Interviews with Professor Holmgren's colleagues and friends; Personal remembrances.

**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 68848-0523.

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- Basic Membership ..... \$15.00
- Institutional Membership ..... \$20.00
- Supporting Membership ..... \$30.00 +

Life memberships are \$150.00 for an individual; \$200.00 husband and wife.

*Directors*

Term expiring June 1, 2000: Minnette Steinbrink, Susan Underhill, Pauline Wells, and Dora Day.

Term expiring June 1, 2001: Edward Anderson, Wilma Larsen, Janeen Vokoun, and Jack M. Horner.

Term expiring June 1, 2002: James R. Ganz, Sr., Larry Nansel, Bertha M. Scheetz, and Robert W. Goldenstein.

*Officers (1 year term)*

- President ..... Larry Nansel
- Vice-President ..... Jack M. Horner
- Secretary ..... Janeen Vokoun
- Treasurer ..... Mardi Anderson

**TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM**

The past three months have raced by and it is time to take stock of what has happened. We had three Special Days during the summer which were well attended. 3,000 guests visited the museum, 952 from out of state. We also had over 1,000 school children, parents and teachers in April and May, and already have reservations for next spring's school program.

Volunteers at the desk in the afternoons were greatly appreciated. Wilma Larsen said at least 137 members provided this help. Many other volunteers helped with the yard, the gardens, painting, and put finishing touches in the Boyd House. Work on refinishing and painting the train is now in progress. If I tried to name all the volunteers, I would forget someone, but you may say "Thank you" when you see them around.

The next project is the Christmas Extravaganza. Our theme is "The Magic of Christmas." If you know of anyone who would like to put up a tree, please get in touch with me, Wilma Larsen, Dora Day, Marian Wisch or Iola Fougeron.

The year 2000 will be the 25th year for Trails & Rails. Several special events are planned and any suggestions from you would be welcome.

—Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

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

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