



# Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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## THE HOTELS OF KEARNEY — Part II

by Margaret Stines Nielsen

Some hotels in Kearney frequently changed proprietors and names, were moved to other locations or were used for other purposes. In 1877 the City Hotel was listed at Wyoming Avenue between 7th and 8th (near Central and 18th). "The finest wines and brandy, Old Kentucky whiskies, approved ale and beer on draught."

A later paper carried this ad, "Attention Farmers! B. Nelson has leased the O'Kane House and hereafter it will be known as the Farmer's House. Boarding and lodging by the week, day or month."

The *New Era* of January 3, 1887 stated:

Since the name of the U.S. Hotel has been changed to the Kelley Hotel several weddings have occurred in this popular house. Perhaps the reason is a characteristic of Mr. (Lewis M.) Kelley to make the most reticent talk and the most bashful feel at home.

The hotel was located at the corner of 21st and Avenue A. The U.S. and the Kelley



Hotel Fort Kearney, 21st Street and First Avenue, 1917-1973

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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 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, Alice Howell; Secretary, Colleen Parker; Treasurer, Philip S. Holmgren. Directors: Glen E. Wisch, Frances Link, Barb Avery, Merlin Burgland, Minnette Steinbrink, Edna Hehner, Robert Stubblefield, Viola Livingston and Chandler Lynch III. Publications Chairman: Alice Howell.

### WITH THE SOCIETY

There will not be an October meeting of the Historical Society because of the planned 2-day bus tour to Mitchell, South Dakota.

**Sunday, November 22**, at 2:00 p.m. the Historical Society will hold a meeting at Gibbon to visit and tour the Gibbon Heritage Center. Members and friends will meet at the Senior Center on Front Street at two o'clock before touring the Heritage Center. Mrs. Edith Johnston is in charge of this meeting.



Please note the 1988 membership dues changes: Basic membership is raised to \$10.00 for individual/family, and \$15.00 for institutional/business. Supporting and Life memberships remain the same.

Dues are payable January 1. Members are encouraged to upgrade their membership to help support the funding necessary for the work of the Society—which is preserving Buffalo County history.



Hours at the Trails & Rails Museum will be changed starting Monday, October 26. The museum will be open from 9:00 to 12:00 and 1:00 to 4:00 Monday through Friday. Closed weekends except by appointment.

#### From our President, Margaret Hohnholt:

Again, I want to thank all of those who helped to make the Rural School Days a success. Mardi and those who did the organizing did an excellent job and those who demonstrated and helped as hosts and hostesses all helped to make a smooth running program and they all made it happen four times! A special thanks to Doby Town Kiwanis Club for their excellent help.

Have you been to the Museum to see the work done on the grounds? The grass seed is growing and we hope it improves the looks of the area. Thanks goes to the Kearney Noon Kiwanis Club for their help in this project. So if you see any Kiwanian, be sure to express our thanks for their help.

### NEW MEMBERS

Dr. Joel T. Johnson .....Kearney    Kerry Jorgensen .....Kearney

would be forerunners of the Windsor, which was remodeled in the 90's and called the New Windsor.

Clifton House was used as a temporary court house following the move of county records from Gibbon to Kearney. It was a hotel in the early 90's, became the W.C.T.U. Hospital in 1896, and was converted to the Hazlett Dandelion Rake Factory in 1919. Other hotels listed in the 1891-92 city directory are the Brunswick, 2004 Central; Nebraska House at 2010 Central; National Hotel, 1818 Central, and Wyoming Hotel, 1901 Central. Rates were generally \$1.00, the Midway charged \$2.00 and \$3.00.

An article in the *Omaha World-Herald* in 1940 on famous hotels fifty years ago describes Kearney's California Wine House with its "gaudy decorations . . . The House's artist-owner had hung canvasses from his own palette on the walls, and the tile floor had two hundred silver dollars imbedded in it."

The frame building at 1802 First Avenue was a private home before it became a hospital. It was named St. Luke's Hospital when the Episcopal church took it over. After it closed in the 20's, the building was used as a hotel. It burned down this month (October 1987).

In 1897 W. S. Wenzell built a hotel at the corner of Railway and First Avenue. From the start the Wenzell was popular with railway workers and train passengers. In 1914 he built an addition at the rear, bringing the total of rooms to fifty. It was probably at this time that the name was changed to Union Pacific Hotel. For a number of years its dining room was popular with Kearney residents but it was discontinued in the early 20's. The Wenzell family operated the hotel until about 1924. Glen D. Spacht was the next proprietor, followed by Albert and Gela Griess. Mr. Griess's niece Helen and her husband Leonard Skold took over the hotel in the early 40's and ran it until it closed about 1964. Mrs. Skold was a teacher in Whittier School for a number of years. After Leonard's death in 1964 the hotel stood empty. Today it stands as the only physical evidence of the hotel era.

J. D. Allison and his wife Etta moved in an addition to a large house on 26th and Central about 1920. It was chiefly a rooming house but Mrs. Allison's home-cooked meals were favorites with many Kearneyites. Several years ago H. L. Blackledge wrote a letter to the *Hub* telling of his first summer in Kearney in 1920 when he played trombone in the dance band at the Denison Amusement Park, replacing John Wolf who was recovering from surgery.

I . . . ate most of my meals family style at the old Allison Hotel . . . Walter Allison, son of the owners, later served on the Kearney police force in the late 30's and early 40's . . . The park closed . . . on Labor Day and I left to join a dance orchestra in Iowa, little dreaming that I would be returning to Kearney to enter the practice of law nine years later, but it was that slide trombone that made it possible for me to earn my way through law college. In 1938 week day dinners at the Allison were 25¢ and Sunday dinners 35¢. Myers Peterson bought the hotel during World War II. It is now an apartment building, owned by Ron Bennett.

On May 9, 1917, the *Kearney Daily Hub* carried a full page ad with a sketch of a 7-story hotel and the headline, "A Hotel Building fit to grace Omaha, Chicago, New York or Washington." Builder of the proposed hotel was the North American Hotel Corporation which would also put up large hotels in Grand Island, Scottsbluff, Holdrege, North Platte and Franklin. "A business proposition by Kearney business men who have

already invested over \$50,000," invited Kearneyites to buy stock in the proposed hotel, for which they would receive 6% semi-annually and a share of the profits. Fourteen investors were listed.

Construction began on July 11 at the corner of 21st and First Avenue on a lot formerly occupied by a livery stable and corral. The building was completed and plumbing<sup>1</sup> had been installed when World War I and the financial uncertainties of the time brought construction to a halt. The building stood vacant until 1927 when the Chamber of Commerce made its objective for the year the completion of the hotel. Lenore Construction Company of Cedar Rapids, Iowa agreed to complete the building if the Chamber would sell \$25,000 worth of stock. This was done, the building was completed and the Hotel Fort Kearney opened for business on October 11th with Dan Enos the first manager.

On October 1, 1928 the Arthur L. Roberts Co. of Minnesota bought out the Lenore Company. On December 11th John Henry, who had been managing a Roberts hotel in Bemidji, Minnesota, arrived to take over the Fort Kearney. The hotel had lost \$10,000 in its first year but this young man of Scottish heritage was equal to the task. Years later he told a *Hub* reporter that the secret to a successful operation was having good food and a management that appreciates the guest. "Indifference is the worst that can happen to a hotel"

John recalled that he worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week. "I thought when the 6-day week came along it would be my ruination." He thought the life "wasn't bad". He received \$175 per month salary, plus room and board and all club memberships.

His brother, Don Henry, who had been attending college in Winona, Minnesota, came in June of 1929 to work in the hotel. A former Kearneyite wrote of the excitement among the young women of Kearney when the Henrys arrived. "I'm sure these handsome young men were the reason for some women to frequent the coffee shop for lunch."

An area in the northwest corner of the main floor had been allotted for the Chamber of Commerce. Wallace Thornton, who had become Secretary in 1927, moved his office to the new hotel shortly after it opened. There was a large room for meetings of the Board of Directors and other committees, a small office for a stenographer with a half door where tourists could ask for information about the area. Thornton's daughter, Mary Elaine, wrote that to her and her brother Dick the hotel was wonderful. "It was so big, and Dad's office would be close to all those exotic things—a writing room, a coffee shop,



**Wenzell Hotel, later  
Union Pacific Hotel,  
2006 First Avenue**

1. Rumors had it that some of the finest homes in Kearney had plumbing from the Fort Kearney.

ballroom, newsstand (with candy and gum), a barber shop, and an elevator which we imagined we would ride often to the top."

Next to the Crystal ballroom on the 2nd floor (named for its two large chandeliers) was the Green Room, and on the first floor was the Italian Room for small meetings or parties. Many parties and banquets were held in the hotel over the years. It was the scene of junior high and high school proms, and parties of the sororities and fraternities of Kearney State. The hotel was well equipped to take care of the occasional convention, but the traveling men were the bread and butter of the hotel business in the 20's and 30's.

In 1931 Mr. Henry and his associates bought the Roberts Company stock, and in 1936 bought the building. "It was the worst time in the world to buy," he said later. Nebraska was beginning to feel the full effect of the depression which started in the east in late 1929. But with a timely loan from an Omaha bank and help from the Roberts Company, the Henrys were able to keep up payments on the debt.

In 1930 John had married Jane Gibbons, daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Charles K. Gibbons. The couple lived in a seventh floor apartment in the hotel with bars on the windows to keep their first-born, Jill, from climbing out. In 1934 they moved into the first of three homes on 21st Street, the last move to the Gibbons family home at 201 West 21st Street. In addition to Jill (Allen), the Henrys had three other children: Maren (Henderson), Nancy (Boyle) and Charles. Three of the four children worked in the hotel under Esther Juhl or Bud Arnold, as waitresses, room clerks or in maintenance.

In 1934 the Henry management company leased the Midway Hotel, with Don Henry as manager. He was also assistant manager at the Fort Kearney until going into the army in 1942. During World War II they bought the Clarke Hotel in Hastings where Don became manager after returning from the service.

One of the institutions of the Fort Kearney Hotel was the Coffee Dunker's Association, with Bert Wallace as "president" and Wally Thornton as secretary and keeper of the scrapbook and membership list. Other charter members were Howard Nims, John Henry, "Doc" Erickson and Dick Daugherty. Initiation was "\$50.00 cash or paying all checks at one breakfast." The Fort Kearney Round Table offered

Expert Opinions on Big Business, Little Business, and Monkey Business, also National Affairs, Foreign Affairs and Private Affairs and All the Latest Scandal from the Wife's Bridge Club.

Between 1942 and 1971, 1052 signatures appeared in the membership roster. Among those signing were presidential candidates and other politicians, visiting artists, and sports figures. President Harry Truman signed the book on the train which carried him on his whistle-stop campaign during 1948. The book, with appropriate cartoons by Fred Kempf, is now in the Kearney Public Library.



Cartoons by Fred Kempf, from the Coffee Dunkers scrapbook

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Also in the library is the registry containing autographs of famous people who were guests in the hotel. They include former President Herbert Hoover and Mr. and Mrs. Allen Hoover, Dick Nix (Nixon), historian Will Durant, Gutzon Borglum, sculptor of Mount Rushmore, Cornelius Vanderbilt (My favorite hotel in Nebraska), Max Baer (Esther's body guard, a great hotel), Jimmy Dorsey, Igor Piatigorsky, Rubinoff and his violin, and others from the sports and entertainment field, as well as Reinhold O. Schmidt, who created a one-day sensation by claiming he had seen a space ship land south of Kearney. During World War II the book was appropriated by the Bomb Shelter, the officers club for those stationed at the Kearney Air Base. Some of the pilots who signed would never return from their duty with the "fighting 49th".

The coffee shop was remodeled in 1942 and decorated with tracery murals on the walls. The Henry insistence on good food was ably carried out by Mrs. Pat Gallagher in the kitchen, and Esther Juhl, and later Allyn Gleason, in charge of the dining rooms. Mr. Gleason was a former Roberts Company manager who came to Kearney to manage the Midway Hotel in 1951, and later moved to the Fort Kearney.

On June 1, 1965, Mr. Henry sold the hotel to John P. Helleberg, Jr. "with a handshake, over a cup of coffee." Delores and Joe Gallagher became managers in 1968. In 1970 Madge and Gordon Lane took over as the new owners. However, the tastes of the traveling public had changed and the days of the large hotel in Nebraska towns were coming to an end. The hotel was closed in 1971 in a flurry of lawsuits. It was bought by a group of Kearney business men, and later resold when a new First National Bank was to be built on the site. The hotel was torn down in the fall of 1973<sup>2</sup> to the deep regret of most Kearneyites, long familiar with the phrase "Meet me at the Fort Kearney."

2. Of the eagles which graced the second floor, one is built into the foundation of the George Fairfield house, a Kansas man bought one, the wrecker kept one, and the other is at the Trails and Rails Museum.

### SOURCES

A. T. Andreas, *History of Buffalo County; Where the Buffalo Roamed; Kearney Times; New Era; Enterprise; Hub; City Directories* and maps, *Come Back Letters*. Interviews with Mr. and Mrs. Ed Denison, Ward Minor, Mr. and Mrs. Don Henry of Hastings. Letters from Mary Elaine Wallace House, Jill Henry Allen. Others providing information: Larry Rice, Mardi Anderson, Paul Beshore, Catharine Bahnsen, Dorothy Farrar. Fort Kearney Hotel Registry and the Coffee Dunkers scrapbook.