



# Buffalo Tales



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## THE KEARNEY MILITARY ACADEMY SERVING THE COMMUNITY 1892-1993

by Margaret Stines Nielsen

At the height of the Kearney boom, representatives of the United Brethren Church approached a group of businessmen about the possibility of establishing a low cost academy in the town. The committee was offered twenty-five acres in east Kearney and the money for one building. Apparently York made them a better proposition and acquired the school. The same offer was then made to Anson R. Graves, Bishop of the newly organized Diocese of Western Nebraska of the Episcopal Church. Bishop Graves was not in a position to accept the offer.

In 1891 when he made a trip East on behalf of missions, he told the story of the twelve-year-old boy who came to see him when he was in Broken Bow.

"When can the church take me and educate me for the ministry?" he asked.

At a meeting in Yonkers, New York, Mrs. Eva S. Cochran offered \$3,000 for a dormitory. With other smaller gifts, the Bishop returned with enough money to go ahead with the school

The Platte Valley Institute, a coeducational school, opened on September 6, 1892 with Professor Clarence A. Murch<sup>1</sup> as principal and teacher of English Literature. His wife, Marcia, taught art classes and acted as matron.

Professor Murch wrote that the school provided "Three years of hard work and



Platte Collegiate Institute — 1892  
Kearney Hall (center) and two dormitories

WITH THE SOCIETY

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT . . . . .

The new year has certainly begun with a roar from Old Man Winter. Some of you may look at this as a bad beginning — the worst in years. Or, you can look at winter's icy grip as a symbol of fortitude, tenacity, purposefulness and energy. This is how I not only see winter, but how I see our Society as well, strong and full of determination.

We have an exciting year ahead of us. The Boyd Ranche house will soon be on the grounds of the museum. Several events are on the burner. One such event you will sure want to attend is the Buffalo County Historical Society's Wagons West Celebration, June 4 and 5. We will be featuring our own contribution to the statewide celebration of the Oregon Trail. Come and join in.

In July, a special show of special collections is being planned. Dust off some of those treasures you have collected and get in touch with Margaret Hohnholt. More details will be available in the next few months.

Then in August, brought back by popular demand, Turtle Creek: A Bluegrass Band, and the Hoopin' High Country Cloggers will be returning to the stage on the museum grounds. This year will include more events, more exhibits and more entertainment. Tell your friends and come join the fun. More on this event later.

I've touched only briefly on some of the events that will make up the fun and the excitement of visiting the Trails and Rails Museum. As you all know, we, as the Buffalo County Historical Society, offer much more. If you have a topic of history you wish to have discussed further, please contact any of our Board members. We would be only too happy to speak at any function you may have in the future. Give us a call. Please contact Mrs. Alice Howell at 237-7858 for more information.

Looking forward to seeing you where the fun will be this year.

Susan C. Lynch



Memorials

In memory of Irvin and Bernice Urwiller, parents, given by Leola M. Schreurs.  
In memory of Marguerite Nickel McFarland, given by Gerald E. Silver.

NEW LIFE MEMBERS

- |                        |         |                                      |         |
|------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|---------|
| Dorothy Bond . . . . . | Kearney | Nancy Barney . . . . .               | Kearney |
| Clint Jones . . . . .  | Kearney | Bonnie Bernholtz . . . . .           | Kearney |
| Howard Kolbo . . . . . | Kearney | Duncan and Janice McGregor . . . . . | Gibbon  |

NEW 1993 SUPPORTING

- |                       |         |
|-----------------------|---------|
| Nancy Blume . . . . . | Kearney |
|-----------------------|---------|

NEW BASIC MEMBERS

- |                                  |            |                                |               |
|----------------------------------|------------|--------------------------------|---------------|
| Dave and Maris Bentley . . . . . | Mason City | Dick Boline . . . . .          | Kearney       |
| Wayne H. Urwiller . . . . .      | Ravenna    | Vivian E. Blomenkamp . . . . . | Palo Alto, CA |

poor pay but boundless experience.”

The school occupied what were described as three large and convenient buildings . . . one could specialize in any one of the nine departments which ranged from Collegiate preparatory, to Business, Art, or Military . . . Board, room, tuition and heat for one school year was . . . \$120 a year when . . . made in advance. The second year, 147 pupils were enrolled. Many were day students who rode to school on an electric street car.

With the depression of the nineties the enrollment dwindled rapidly and the school went through some lean years. Bishop Graves wrote, “Generous help came from the East and we survived.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1894, Harry N. Russell, a young rancher from near Chadron, approached Bishop Graves about a position in the Academy. At the Bishop’s suggestion he taught country school for a year, then enrolled as a pupil at the Academy for two months “to learn their methods.” When Professor Murch resigned Russell was offered a contract as headmaster. After three years fighting financial adversity he asked to be relieved of the business management but agreed to continue as a teacher.

The Reverend E. P Chittenden took charge in the fall of 1898. He changed the school to a military academy for boys, although a few girls remained for a time. During the Spanish-American War attendance increased.

Soon because of dissatisfaction with management Graves induced Chittenden to give up his contract for \$1,000. The buildings needed repairs and prospects were grim when the school received a legacy of \$36,000 from Felix R. Brunot, a Pittsburg philanthropist. In 1905 Russell again assumed full management. By this time the school was filled to capacity and applicants were turned away.

In November of 1905 F. G. Keens called Graves to his office to find out what the future needs of the school were. On learning that the most pressing need was for a new building Keens offered to contribute \$10,000 and help raise \$15,000 in Kearney if the Bishop could raise matching funds in the east. Graves again appealed to Mrs. Cochran, “the true mother of the school” who came through with the amount needed. Cochran Hall was dedicated on December 18, 1906 with Bishop Graves presiding and William Jennings Bryan as orator.

Over eighty cadets marching from East Lawn to the little Church of the Good Shepherd may have been a stirring sight but it represented a space problem for the Episcopalians. Some had been agitating for a larger church more suitable to be the Cathedral of the Kearney Diocese. In 1907, the vestry voted to build St. Lukes.



**Cochran Hall (right) now part of St. Lukes Good Samaritan Village**

Glimpses of life at the school came from a report by Bishop George A. Beecher<sup>4</sup> . . . Billiards, pool and cards are played openly . . . Garrison rations are served at the school . . . The boys of the upper school are organized as an infantry battalion of two companies and a band.

The smaller boys marched in the field band "and have regular instruction in the bugle, fife and drum."

The first Annual Officers Hop was held in April, 1901.

The ball opened with a grand march . . . followed by a most varied program, consisting of two-steps, waltzes, lancers, five-steps and three-steps . . . about sixty couples were present.

One boy, in need of spending money, wrote his father,

I am getting along wonderfully well in my studies . . . but . . . I received 100 demerits for smoking. Now after I have received them I can plainly perceive the error of my ways and will not repeat the performance . . . I am a little short on funds, would you please oblige me by sending \$10 at once, as I have a pressing engagement with a young lady in the near future.

He only got ten cents and his father wrote with advice about smoking, girls, being manly and choosing companions.

On September 11, 1992 St. Lukes celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the Military Academy. Father W. J. Barnds, historiographer of the Nebraska Diocese read a letter he had received from Vine V. Deloria, D.D.,<sup>4</sup> a former student at the school. He described the time from 1917 to 1921 as the "Academy's finest years."

We had the largest number of cadets . . . We had R.O.T.C. and received fatigue uniforms, rifles, ammunition, mess kits, pup tents. We were under . . . the "7th corps area" with headquarters at Ft. Crook. Col. Ira Smith came out and inspected us. We had excellent religious instruction every week under Father George St. George Tyner<sup>5</sup> . . . Chapel every day with retreat . . . just before dinner . . .

The flu of 1918 downed 87 of us and the rest sent home. We lost 5 boys through death.

I could tell some of the funniest stories . . . such as the comedy of errors committed by our firing squad at a military funeral. We had run out of blank shells . . . the bullets were pulled out of 30 calibre shells and . . . stuffed with some fine silk material. First volley, no gun went off . . . Second volley, the guns caught fire. I was in the rear rank. Spider Graham now in charge of the huge Zoological Gardens in Chicago, stood on my right. His gun caught fire . . . he whispered "Gee Whiz" and started to spit down the barrel . . . I kept from laughing until then.. After that it was agony . . . the third volley . . . all the guns went off and the silk packets blew out and unrolled and sailed like comets over the heads of the people. It was too much for Father Tyner . . . he picked up his prayer book . . . held it close to his face with one hand and with the other roughly massaged his face to keep laughter away.

*The Liasion*, Academy yearbook for 1921<sup>6</sup> describes the routine of the school. Classes were held six days of the week with half holidays on Tuesday and Friday afternoons. Each boy was required to keep a daily study report, to be signed by the instructors at the end of each class. "Boys should earn their schooling "by doing the work for which their parents sent them to school . . . if they do not do good work they do not earn special privileges and are not really entitled to anything above a bare existence."

The first air strip in Kearney, Auxiliary Field was located on eighty acres just east

of the Academy. With the installation of a rotating beacon and border lighting in 1921 it was charted as an official landing for air mail pilots as well as an emergency landing. Through the cooperation of Headmaster Colonel Harry L. Drummond, pilots who made forced landings could be housed at the Academy until they could take off again.<sup>7</sup>

In 1919 the powerhouse was destroyed by fire. Later the gymnasium and an annex also burned. Financing difficulties and a dwindling enrollment presented a grim prospect. In addition, Colonel Drummond took a position at Shattuck School in Minnesota, which meant a new headmaster's first task would be to find adequate funding. By September of 1923 the enrollment was too low to meet expenses. An executive committee voted to close the school on September fifth. The principal of the Brunot fund was used to liquidate debts.

The property was abandoned for many years. Catharine Bahnsen recalls the times when she and Teresa Grantham took a net and went out to play tennis on the courts. (The only other courts were at Kearney Normal.) In time Cochran Hall was the only building remaining.

In 1940 an agreement was reached between officials of the Episcopal church and the City of Kearney whereby the building and thirty-one acres of ground would be deeded to the city with the provision that the property would be "for public use only."

The building was refurbished<sup>8</sup> and used for an NYA trades training center. During World War II it temporarily housed prisoners of war; and had also been used as housing for military and civilian personnel.

In 1948 the First Lutheran Church renovated the building, opening it as St. Lukes Hospital. By 1952 it was closed for financial reasons; in 1953 it was converted to St. Lukes Home for the elderly. Today the old building is part of the St. Lukes Good Samaritan Village, operated by the Evangelical Lutheran Good Samaritan Society. A day care center occupies the first floor of the building. Steve Chamley, Administrator, said that the building is structurally as sound as most of those in town but, without an elevator, they are not allowed to use the top floors.

The Nebraska Diocese also established a military academy east of Lincoln about 1892, named Worthington Academy in honor of George Worthington, first Bishop of the Nebraska Diocese. It was closed in 1898 when Worthington Hall burned to the ground. As far as is known there were no other military academies in Nebraska.<sup>9</sup>

The old building we know as St. Lukes has survived many changes. Today it stands as a symbol of one of the few Kearney boom enterprises which continued to serve the community.

#### NOTES

1. Professor Murch also ran a business school at two different periods. He was head of the Commercial Department at Kearney Normal from its opening until he died in 1910.
2. Murch's daughter, Ruth Hazlett Jordan, remembered the missionary barrels sent from eastern churches.
3. Bishop Beecher, who grew up in Kearney was rector of St. Lukes and chaplain at the academy from 1902 to 1905. He became Bishop of what was then known as the Kearney District in 1910.
4. Deloria, an Indian, graduated from the Academy in 1921. At the time he wrote the letter March 15, 1963 he was Archdeacon of the Missionary District of South Dakota.
5. Rector at St. Lukes.
6. *The Liaison* was given to St. Lukes by Mrs. Ed Denison. Art Denison was a student at the school in 1921.
7. *Tales of Buffalo County*, Vol. IV, page 60.
8. The south wing was probably removed at that time. The north wing was already gone.
9. Letter from Nebraska Historical Society, 1-8-92.

#### SOURCES

*Kearney Daily Hub*, anniversary editions; W. J. Barnds, *History of the Episcopal Church in Nebraska*, St. Lukes archives; *Where the Buffalo Roamed*; Oldfather papers; Letter from Vine Deloria, D.D.; *The Liaison*, 1921; and *Tales of Buffalo County*, Vol. IV.

**A great big THANKS** to all who helped to make the Christmas Tree Walk a success. It could not happen without so many good helpers — those who decorated trees; those who showed up to help get ready; those who walked in and said “How can I help?”; those who were hosts in the buildings (over 100); to Margaret and David Clark for their help on the Brochure and publicity; and last but not least, those who contributed food and all those who attended. Thanks to you all.

Many have already requested space for next year.

Plans are being made for the spring. We will be featuring the Oregon Trail's 150th year and the other trails through the area. Again — we can always use help.

Soon the schools will be visiting us and we are planning for their visits.

—Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Museum Director

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  - Supporting Membership . . . . . \$25.00
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- Term expiring June 1, 1993: Alice Howell, Emerit Holzrichter, Susan C. Lynch, all of Kearney; Viola Livingston of Gibbon.
- Term expiring June 1, 1994: Howard Kolbo, Mard Anderson, Lois Rahmann, all of Kearney; Jim Cudback of Riverdale.
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*Earl Rogan was here,  
 help at 3:00 p.m. 1/14/93*

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