



# Buffalo Tales



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## Ronald the “Farnam Flash” Lewis: A Beloved Athlete and Friend By Jordan Kuck

It was a terribly hot afternoon, the kind of sweltering heat that makes Nebraska the corn-growing capital of the world. The football team, not fazed by the late summer heat, had gathered for the opening practice of the 1934 season. As the boys kicked, punted, and threw the ball around in order to loosen up their bodies, the coaches noticed a ball that repeatedly seemed to be traveling a bit higher and a bit further than the rest. Following the arch of the ball, head coach Howard Hill discovered a scrawny, undersized boy who effortlessly booted the ball down the field. Coach Hill quickly ascertained that the newcomer was Ronald Lewis, a scrappy, athletic player from Farnam, Nebraska.

This is the story of how Ronald Lewis was discovered on his first day of practice at the Nebraska State Teachers College at Kearney. Coach Hill, and later Coach “Pop” Klein, was quick to realize Lewis’ talent, and after inserting him into the starting backfield as a freshman, Lewis went on to become a four-time All-Conference selection as a running back and punter. But Lewis was more than just a football player; he was also a star trackster – twice taking the conference crown in pole vault, along with being one of the school’s best high jumpers and discus throwers – and a leader, as he served as the president of the K-Club (those who earned varsity letters) in 1937-38.

Lewis began his athletic career at the local school in Farnam. “Flashing” onto the high school athletic scene and weighing less than one hundred pounds, Lewis often left people astonished by his speed and surprising strength. During his high school athletic days Lewis established himself as the best football player in the entire conference. In terms of track, Lewis was arguably even more successful, taking first place in pole vault at the 1934 Nebraska State High School Track Meet.

Lewis’ fame at Kearney really began during the 1935 season. After a solid

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### Director's Report

Hello to everyone from the Trails and Rails Museum! The Buffalo County Historical Society is happy to announce that we are starting 2007 off with a new partnership. We are joining forces with Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). I encourage you to contact their director, Tammy Jeffs at (308) 865-1354 ext. 128, because WE NEED YOU as we expand in so many different areas. Our special events are growing; inventory continues; maintenance and landscaping are also ongoing; office assistance is needed; our grant writing opportunities are unlimited; and we need help with greeting our guests on a daily basis! Please contact me or Tammy to see how we can connect your interests with our needs!!

Trails and Rails Museum is still collecting Sunmart receipts and the Our Family labels with bar codes. Please help us reach our goals by either dropping them off at our office (in the depot) or mailing them to our post office box 523.

The building committee is continuing their work on a strategic plan for our new property to the west. We hope you will join us at the Annual Meeting on Sunday, April 15, to hear about those plans. We are proud to announce this year's annual meeting speaker will be Michael Smith, the new director/CEO for the Nebraska State Historical Society. More information will be mailed out soon.

On June 21-24, Kearney will be the host for the Nebraska Humanities Council Chautauqua. The Buffalo County Historical Society is excited to be a part of the upcoming event! BCHS has signed up to help with three Chautauqua committees: Youth Chautauqua, Pre-Chautauqua Events, and the Workshops. Please contact me if you are interested in helping with any of these committees or if you would like further information.

Please let me know if you have any questions, concerns, or comments.

Sincerely, Jennifer Murrish, Executive Director, [www.bchs.us](http://www.bchs.us), (308) 234-3041

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freshman campaign, Lewis exploded during his sophomore year. In the much anticipated annual clash against bitter rival, Hastings College, Lewis was at the top of his game. Running hard off-tackle and around the ends, Lewis used his blazing speed, which earned him the moniker "The Farnam Flash," to score two of the teams three touchdowns that night. The 18-6 victory over Hastings was only the school's second victory over their archrival in fifteen years. Besides being a talented runner, Lewis was also an amazing punter, especially considering his wiry frame. Averaging over 40 yards a punt for his career, Lewis often over-kicked the awaiting returner, who was caught unaware of his powerful leg. One great example from that season was Lewis' 67-yard punt against Chadron, pinning the

opposing team deep inside their own 20 yard line.

Without a doubt, Lewis' legacy at Kearney was cemented by his performance in the Kearney-Peru game in 1936. Through the first half-cen-



*Pictured here is the K-Club, an organization comprised of athletes who earned varsity letters. Ronald Lewis, sitting second from left in the bottom row, served as president of the club in 1937-38.*

tury of the school's history, Kearney's two most important rivalries were with Hastings and Peru. And whereas the Hastings rivalry was satiated with all-out hatred, the Peru rivalry was more congenial and was based on bragging rights between the sister teacher colleges. But that's not to say that the teams didn't want to win, and especially on the part of Kearney, since they had not beaten Peru since WWI. Having lost every game for nearly two decades, the team had a large proverbial monkey to fling off their back—which they did by beating Peru by the lopsided score of 59-0.

Lewis went into the mid-season fray with Peru having scored five touchdowns and two extra points, making him the team's leading scorer, and his play that day was no exception, as Lewis' talents led his team to a resounding victory. Taking the ball during the first quarter, Lewis skipped through threatening arms, broke several tackles, and sprinted 86 yards, waltzing into the end-zone with ease. A few possessions later, following a Peru fumble, Lewis broke another long run and scored his second touchdown. On top of his brilliant running and punting that day, Lewis also

set up another score after he intercepted a Peru pass and pitched it to a teammate who ran 40 yards before being tackled. Those who witnessed the game claimed that Lewis and his backfield mate, John Parilek, put on one of the best displays of open-field running in school history. Indeed, Kearney fans were enamored by Lewis' performance that night. One such fan was "Soup" Campbell, a former Kearney football player whose son was born on the night of the Peru game. Ecstatic that Kearney finally beat Peru, Campbell named his first-born son Ronald, in honor of Kearney's outstanding halfback who helped break the Peru jinx.

Following his collegiate successes, Lewis accepted a contract with the Chicago Cardinals, a professional football team. But just weeks after graduation, Lewis' life came to a tragic end. This is what makes Lewis' story so sad and endearing, as the tragedy of his sudden death in the summer of 1938 greatly impacted the lives of others. It seems that Lewis and his backfield friend John Parilek had embarked on a summer vacation together. En route to Washington state, Lewis and Parilek had hitched a ride on a railroad car loaded with steel pipes. But as the train neared Pocatello, Idaho the cargo suddenly shifted, engulfing and trapping the two men. Parilek suffered only minor injuries but Lewis was not so lucky, as he was fatally injured in the accident.

Mere days after what would have been his twenty-second birthday, Lewis' body was returned to his family in Farnam, where services and a burial took place. The funeral was a simple service held on the front lawn of the Lewis home and it was well attended by his Kearney friends, including Coach "Pop" Klein and College President Herbert Cushing. His fellow members of the football team and K-Club were also present, with his friends on the K-Club serving as pall bearers. In early June, Lewis was laid to rest in the family's plot at the town cemetery, on the south edge of town.

Still shocked and stricken with grief, the following autumn the football team decided to honor their fallen comrade with a monument that was to be placed next to his grave. In order to raise the money needed to purchase the monument, the team organized a number of inter-squad scrimmages that took place prior to the opening of the regular season. The games were well attended and the team was successful in raising the requisite money. No one could have been happier with this development than Lewis' friend John Parilek, who dedicated his senior season to his fallen friend. The monument, which still stands in the Farnam cemetery, is about three and a half to four feet tall, is made of gray stone, and reads, "In Memory of President Ronald W. Lewis, Kearney State Teachers College 1937-1938



*Pictured here is the memorial to Ronald Lewis.  
It was donated by fellow members of the K-Club.*

K-Club.” At the bottom of the monument are the fitting words, “his friends rise up and honor him.”

Lewis, “The Farnam Flash” was indeed just that. Like a brilliant star shooting across the sky, Lewis’ life was fleetingly magical. Yet, even though his life was tragically cut short, his legacy continues to live on, as the monument suggests, because he was a man of high character, a good

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\*\*We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family' \*\*

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leader with strong discipline, a wonderful friend, and a divinely blessed athlete. Considering his legacy at Kearney, the loyalty his friends felt towards him, and keeping in mind the fact that President Cushing himself attended his funeral, it becomes evident that Ronald Lewis was one of the most beloved personalities and gifted athletes to take the field for the Antelopes.

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