



Buffalo Tales



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BISHOP GEORGE ALLAN BEECHER AND HIS MENTORS

Part I

by Margaret Stines Nielsen

George Allan Beecher, the second and last bishop of the Missionary District of Western Nebraska of the Episcopal Church was a boy in Kearney when he was first drawn to the church. The two men who influenced his career were Dr. Robert Oliver, first priest of what was then The Church of The Good Shepherd, and Anson R. Graves, first Bishop of the Diocese.

Born in Monmouth, Illinois on February 3, 1868, George came to Kearney in the spring of 1883 with his mother and sister to join his father, Benjamin Beecher.

The hotels were overrun by land seekers.

One courteous gentleman gave up his room to accommodate my mother and sister. I slept on the writing table in the hotel office with a Webster's dictionary for my pillow. A traveling troupe was playing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the Opera House¹ . . . I was awakened at three in the morning by a gun dual between two members of this troupe who had imbibed too freely and were evidently bent upon reproducing Shakespeare's grave scene.²



While a student at the University of Nebraska, 1886-1888, George Beecher played the drum in the University band. John J. Pershing, later General U.S.A., was Commandant of cadets at the time.

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WITH THE SOCIETY

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:

Happy 1996 to the Buffalo County Historical Society. This can be a special year at the Trails and Rails Museum.

We have received the grant from the Keno Fund to start the restoration on the Boyd House. We have contacted the State Historical Society for some guidance on this project.

Next I want to report the possibility of a new building at the museum to be used for displays and activities. At this time we are still waiting to hear from the Deyle family to see if a parcel of land adjacent to the museum may be purchased. If not, we must go ahead with plans to build on our present grounds. If we do have to build on the museum grounds we feel we have room for a building of approximately 8,000 sq. feet.

If all goes well, we should have some definite plans for each project and a starting date by early Spring. Larry K. Nansel, President



MARK YOUR CALENDARS:

Sunday, February 21 at 1:30 p.m. we will meet at the Museum and carpool to a visit to the Phelps County Museum.

Sunday, March 24, is the date set for a bus tour to the northwestern section of Buffalo County to visit ghost towns and other points of historical interest. This is a repeat of a tour to this area in the 1970's.

The tour bus will leave Trails & Rails Museum at 2:00 p.m. Members will be sent further details on price and reservations early in March. Merlin Burgland is tour chairman.



MEMORIAL GIFTS RECEIVED from Nancy Barney, Kearney, and K. E. Denton, Kearney, in memory of Lorand Bahnsen.



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- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
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He was a typical adolescent, hunting, playing in the band; he was on the track team and in 1888 he was a member of the Kearney Fire Department's World Championship Hook and Ladder Team. He was in and out of many of the fabulous homes of the boom period.

Mrs. W. C. Tillson³ with her six children was never too busy to welcome their playmates with that cordial smile which made everyone love her. Mrs. Juan Boyle⁴ was always exceedingly . . . hospitable to us lads. Many of us remember the military camp in '88 when three regimental bands in turn gave concerts on her lawn, and throngs of happy people enjoyed the music.

The Beechers belonged to the Baptist Church during the pastorate of William (Bill) Green who was later a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. In his autobiography George remembered "the crowds who gathered to hear his wonderful sermons and lectures." It's possible that hearing Reverend Green might have first stirred his interest in the ministry but the defining event of his life was when Alvin Sydenham took him to the Episcopal rectory to meet Dr. Robert W. Oliver. "I shall never forget how Dr. Oliver held out both hands to welcome us into the rectory . . ." His father was a liberal-minded man and encouraged his friendship with this "great and good man."

In 1886 Beecher enrolled in the University of Nebraska where he was a runner and jumper and "I usually pranced around as snare and bass drummer, business manager, etc. of the University Cadet Band."

Beecher's father died in 1888 and he was forced to drop out of college. He taught at Stone school and turned to Dr. Oliver for guidance. "This dear old man was a father to me when I was fatherless, and befriended me in a time of need . . . I owe all I am all that I hope to be to Dr. Oliver."

Dr. Robert W. Oliver

Born in Ayrshire, Scotland on October 9, 1815, he was trained in his boyhood for service in the British army, he was an officer in the First Royals when he was sent on a diplomatic mission to the United States at the age of twenty-three.

While on leave in the West Indies he met a group from Pittsburg, Pennsylvania who encouraged him to resign his commission in the Army and study for the ministry. After serving several years as minister of the Scotch Presbyterian Church in Pittsburg and Philadelphia he was ordained to the priesthood of the Episcopal Church in 1855.

After the outbreak of the Civil War President Lincoln summoned him to Washington and offered him a commission in the Army. He declined, but did accept an appointment as chaplain on the staff of General Ogilvie.

Before the close of the war he was sent on a "humane mission" to Lawrence, Kansas, and was later appointed Chancellor of the University of Kansas.

Shortly after that, Robert Harper Clarkson, who had been elected "Missionary Bishop of Nebraska and parts adjacent," asked Dr. Oliver to be financial agent and Archdeacon. He was also Dean of the Divinity School and College in Nebraska City in 1868.

In 1884 the Bishop asked him to visit the mission at Kearney: (I) found that an attempt had been previously made to establish a mission . . . I found a shell of a church, with a debt resting upon it, which . . . was worth more than the frame was worth, together with ten individuals and four communicants who earnestly desired the services of the Episcopal Church . . . and asked that I would obtain . . . a missionary who would be able to reside among them. Failing in my attempt to obtain a missionary, I concluded to adopt Kearney and her church as my own.

One of his first acts was to replace the roof on the Church of the Good Shepherd.

With the help of his eastern friends he installed stained glass windows; in February of 1888 he announced that he had used his vacation to contact friends in the east, securing enough funds to pay off the mortgage on the church. Bishop Clarkson consecrated the church on February 28, 1888, at which time the name of the church was changed to St. Luke's.

Dr. Oliver's decision to stay in Kearney was a fortunate one for the town and the church. Over 100 had joined the church, attracted by his sermons and his kindly manner. In a brief history of the church written in 1892 he stated the church wanted to be known as the poor man's church. "Each should give according to his means, with all treated alike . . . in the Kingdom of God there are no choice seats". Many young people were attracted to the church, and George Beecher was his star pupil.

By 1890 Dr. Oliver's health was beginning to fail, but the church was reluctant to let him go. In 1895, rather than accept his resignation, they granted him a year's leave of absence. When he returned in 1896 they hired an assistant pastor at \$250 a year.

Dr. Oliver died in 1899 in Philadelphia. At his request he was brought back to Kearney to be buried beside his wife, Agnes, who had died in 1893. The service was conducted by the Reverend A. S. Woodie, Rector of St. Luke's in Altoona, Pa., a church built by Dr. Oliver. The Reverend A. N. Abel, a brother of the Oliver's adopted daughter, assisted with the service.

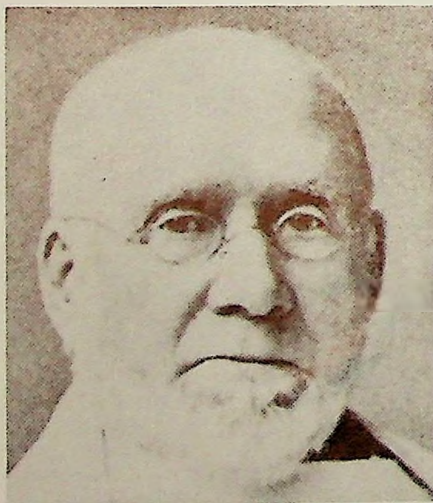
Bishop Anson R. Graves stated "We have known Dr. Oliver only in the decline of his life . . . He had been in closest communion with the greatest men of the country, but his heart was in Kearney . . . here he desired to be laid to rest among the people he had loved so dearly and had served so well."

M. A. Brown, publisher of the *Kearney Hub* wrote, He was an able and learned preacher, a prince in his generosity, devoted in his friendships, consistent in his words and works . . . withal a magnificent man the like of whom we shall not meet again.

Dr. Oliver tutored Beecher in Latin and Greek and prepared him to enter a seminary. He arranged for him to become a lay reader at a Diocesan meeting. The following Sunday



Florence George when she first met Beecher during his student days at the University.



**The Reverend Robert W. Oliver, D.D.
October 9, 1815-June 23, 1899
Rector, St. Luke's Church,
Kearney, Nebraska, 1884-1899.**

he was asked to read the lessons.

I was getting along splendidly when a small cat came in the vestry door . . . where Dr. Oliver was seated listening most reverently. As soon as he spotted the cat he made a lunge and missed it. The cat jumped over the altar rail into the choir . . . The entire scene . . . was changed from order to confusion. Lossie Cone finally grabbed the cat and disappeared . . . I have no recollection of having finished the lesson. The choir were too convulsed to sing the anthem properly, and I think the doctor finally asked for a responsive reading of it.

Another event of 1888 was also to change his life. At a picnic in Dobytown he met Florence George who had come from Racine, Wisconsin to teach in the Kearney schools. They became engaged shortly after that. In spite of predictions that it wouldn't last, Florence waited five years until George could support her.

Following his graduation from the Philadelphia Divinity School in 1892 he was ordained a Deacon on July 3rd at St. Luke's, with Bishop Anson R. Graves officiating. The Bishop "sent me up to Fort Sidney to see whether I could be trusted with . . . larger responsibilities." He held his first service on July 24th at Christ Church. On June 18, 1893 he was ordained to the priesthood at St. Luke's. "The service was beautiful and the church was packed."

On June 22nd he was married in Racine to Miss Florence Idella George, "one of Racine's most charming and estimable daughters." The ceremony was performed by Bishop Graves; a sixty-five voice choir provided the music.

General Brook had given the Beechers permission to occupy a nine-room house at the Fort. Into this they moved "all my worldly goods"—a piano, bed and a few wedding presents. George's salary was fifty dollars a month, half of which he was to collect from the local congregation. "Scarcely a day passed that some useful and helpful gift was not brought . . . to us for fitting up our home . . . The davenport in the front room was an object of envy on the post. "It was made of an old wash bench . . . and when covered with a mattress and with wonderful pillows and a curtain, it was attractive."

The Beechers were given full privileges on the Post and were soon involved in the life of the Fort and the town. The church was "the most attractive building in town" with shade trees, blue-grass lawn and a white picket fence. The Fort was "a veritable oasis" with water from Lodgepole Creek providing irrigation for trees, lawns and gardens. A fountain ran continuously in front of the officers' quarters.

An Indian company occupied the old band quarters, and many were communicants of the church. He gave them regular instruction on weekdays in English, reading and writing. He was concerned for the welfare of the Indians and felt the church should be instrumental in helping them to be assimilated into the white man's culture.

Since Christ Church was the only Episcopal church west of North Platte, Beecher was responsible for missionary activities throughout this vast area. He tried to visit as many of the little towns as he could once a month, driving a horse and buggy with Mrs. Beecher by his side. The monthly journey took from eight to ten days, a distance of about 250 miles.

(To be continued)

FOOTNOTES

1. Probably More's Hall, now the Century Lumber Co. at 1920 Central.
2. This is from a letter written at the time of Kearney's 100th anniversary.
3. Mr. Tillson was a banker. Their home was used for many years as the Kearney Country Club.
4. Mr. Boyle developed Kearney Lake, building an ice house and a pavilion.

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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.

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Term expiring June 1, 1997: Mardi Anderson, Janet Eickmeier, Minnette Steinbrink, Susan Underhill.

Term expiring June 1, 1998: Merlin Burgland, Larry Nansel, Janeen Vokoun, Jack Cudaback.

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- President Larry Nansel
- Vice-President Merlin Burgland
- Secretary Susan Underhill
- Treasurer Mardi Anderson

TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM

The Christmas Tree Walk seems like a long time ago. It was again a success with more trees than ever and they were so pretty this year. (Every year they seem to get better because every one has a new idea.) Clubs are already planning for next year. I want to especially thank those who helped decorate the outside buildings and the train—Howard Kolbo, Myron and Lola Fougeron, Henry Hohnholt and Harland Pankratz. Floretta Sulliwold and her daughter decorated the gate. The committee worked all of the week before and all during the Walk as did many others. Henry, Myron and Lola took down the lights and outside decorations. (I was inside hunting information for Ralph Wall.) Many sitters, decorators, good cooks furnishing food for the food sale were all appreciated and it couldn't happen without all of you! Someone who hadn't been there before made the comment one day when we were getting ready—"Where do all of these people come from?" We appreciate you all.

Trails & Rails is officially closed for the season but lots of things are happening. Plans are being made for next year, books and gifts and supplies are being ordered, the past year is being evaluated, plans for the area schools to visit this spring, exhibits prepared, etc. We are looking for a good 1996 and waiting for the snow and cold winds to go away.

—Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

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

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