

Buffalo Tales

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2009



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THE PIONEER PREACHER: REV. ASBURY COLLINS AND HIS FAMILY

Asbury Collins was born on October 25, 1823 in Ohio, and was converted and united with the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1841, an event that would mark the rest of his life. Collins was licensed to preach shortly afterward and was admitted on trial to the Iowa Conference in 1846. Collins itinerated for over 20 years before failing health due to "hemorrhage of the lungs" (likely Tuberculosis) forced him to retire from the ministry.

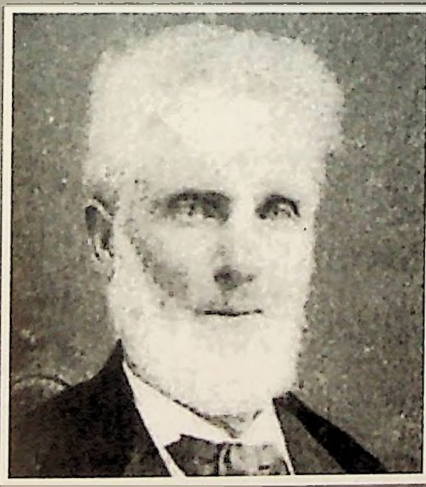
Louisa (Fletcher) Collins was born September 24, 1831, also in the state of Ohio. She moved with her family to Iowa City, Iowa in 1849 and married Asbury Collins a short time later. Together, they had two sons: Milton, born August 15, 1851, and D. Finley, born June 25, 1857. The couple also raised a niece, Lou Stover, who was commonly mistaken as their daughter.

Asbury and his family were living in Red Oak, Iowa when his failing health caused him to quit the ministry. It was at this time, through a friend and also a former Methodist minister, D.N. Smith, that Asbury first became aware of land available in Nebraska due to the federal Homestead Act. Smith was working for the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad, and was in charge of locating a junction with the Union Pacific. The stipulations for this junction were that it was to be east of the 100th meridian (located in modern-day Cozad, NE) and at the furthest south tip of the Union Pacific Railroad. These stipulations made Kearney Junction the only suitable place for a junction.

Asbury came to Kearney Junction on April 11, 1871. Moses Syndenham, commonly known as the "father of Kearney" and also Kearney Junction's first postmaster, was the guide across the Platte River for the two men. The expedition resulted in the junction of the two railroads to be located in Section 1, Township 8, Range 16. The April 11, 1921 edition of the Kearney Hub, which marked the 50th anniversary of the expedition, noted the accomplishments of these men by stating:

"These three pioneers, whose hardy courage and tireless efforts conquered the then most unexplored country, defying Indians and the elements in their effort to advance civilization, were the stuff from which heroes are made"

After viewing the land, Asbury decided that the Nebraska prairie was a great place to bring his family. Asbury and his two sons hauled the equipment out to Kearney Junction, followed by Louisa and Lou two weeks later in May of 1871. Letters and diary en-



D.N. Smith - Burlington and Missouri River Railroad agent, former Methodist minister, and friend of the Collins family.

tries from Louisa Collins show that she had deep reservations about life on the prairie. Mrs. Collins was sure her life with the church would be gone as very few other people lived in central Nebraska at the time.

When the family first arrived at Kearney Junction, temporary shelter was badly needed. For a brief period, the family lived in a house that was 16 feet square, made of wooden sheathing that leaked wind and water. They shared the house with two local bachelors, whom Louisa

Collins cooked for in exchange for their stay. To expand the living quarters, a second 16x16 room was added for the family, comprised of sod and wood, fashioned in a lean-to style. The newly expanded house also served as a post office, where he served as postmaster beginning February 9, 1872.

On October 18, 1871, Asbury Collins founded the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Kearney. Collins had written Reverend A.G. White of the Omaha District and told of "some sheep out here who need looking after." Rev. White presided at the first meeting, at which thirty people were present. White organized a five-member group and connected the new church to the Grand Island mission. The original members of this group were Asbury Collins, Louisa Collins, H.E. A. Sydenham (wife of Moses Sydenham), Alfred M. Gay, and Hannah Jay.

The meeting was held in the parlor of the Collins' home, also called the Junction House. The Junction House was used as a hotel, church, and meeting place. The House was located on Asbury Collins's homesteaded ground on Section 12, Township 8, Range 16. The house was built so that it sat on the junction of the four quarters of the section, thereby fulfilling the requirements of the Homestead Act by inhabiting all four sections at once. There are several early mentions of this house. The first comes from Rev. White's letters about the establishment of the Methodist church. In Moses Sydenham's February 2, 1872 report in *The Central Star*, he details a trip to the hotel for entertainment. On March 8, 1872, a meeting was held in this house to open a school in District 7 (Kearney) and Asbury Collins was named director of the school district. A letter from the Calhoun family of Kearney also mentions the Junction House in the spring of 1872, as their daughter stayed with the Collins family while going to school later that fall. Collins had already begun construction of a new house, which he likely finished and inhabited in October 1872, and the Junction House was likely moved into town.

The first couple to be married in the Junction House was Colonel W.W. Patterson (who was instrumental in Kearney's water-powered electrical system) and Maggie Giddings. The first funeral, for one Pleasant Rogers, who had been cared for in the home, also took place in the Junction House, with Louisa Collins lining the casket with her own freshly laundered curtains.

Never an idle man, Collins also served as County Judge in 1873, and served one year in the position. Ironically, this was not the last time the Collins family would have legal dealings, except the next event was one of tragic circumstances. During this time period, it was common for Texas cattle herders to drive their stock to the Fort Kearney Military Reservation, and promptly head to town to party and drink. Many times these groups would become uncontrollable and even shoot up the town. In September of 1875, a group of Texas cattlemen, who were herding a large group of horses, proceeded to celebrate in the local saloons when their stray herd wandered into and destroyed part of the cornfield of Milton Collins, Asbury and Louisa's oldest son. Milton corralled the loose herd and traveled to town to file a complaint against the herders. Jordan Smith, the leader of the herders, caught notice of Milton's complaint and rode out to meet him. The two men rode past one another and, after a brief discussion Smith followed Collins into his yard to negotiate the complaint. Milton's wife watched in horror from the front doorstep as Smith shot Collins as he was dismounting his horse, unarmed. Collins was killed instantly.

To avoid vigilantism, the trial of Jordan P. Smith was moved from Buffalo County to nearby Kearney County. Smith was convicted of Second Degree Murder and sentenced to thirty years in prison. This sentenced was overturned on a legal technicality and a second trial took place in Adams County, where Smith was convicted of Manslaughter and sentenced to ten years in prison. After attempts were made by friends of Smith to obtain a pardon from the state Governor, the Adams County treasurer wrote the following letter in protest to a pardon.

*Juniata, Nebraska
February 24, 1877*

*His Excellency, Silas Garber, Governor,
Lincoln, Nebraska*

Dear Sir,

Understanding that you would be applied to, for intervention in the case of J.P. Smith, just convicted and sentenced for manslaughter in Judge Gaslin's court in Adams County, I thought I would request you to delay action for a few days, if agreeable to yourself, on this case. I intend to be in Lincoln on Friday next and having

attended the trial would be highly gratified to have a few moments conversation with you with regard to it. I feel that the sentence is a just one and that the courts should be sustained in their efforts to put an end to this indiscriminant shooting. If they are not sustained there is danger that the people will take those cases in their own hands, and if they do, few of them will ever get into court. Let us prevent this state of things impossible by making the punishment of crime adequate to the crime and as certain as its commission.

Yours Truly,

W.B. Thorne,
County Treasurer of Adams County

Louisa Collins was heartbroken at the death of her son. Ms. Collins firmly believed that alcohol had caused Milton's murder. In 1878, she brought the Women's Christian Temperance Movement (W.C.T.U.) to Kearney. That same year, tragedy struck again as the Collins' niece passed away from diphtheria. However, Louisa remained steadfast to her cause and was elected the first president of Kearney's W.C.T.U. chapter in 1880, and would remain an active part of the temperance movement throughout her life.

In 1883, grief came once again to the Collins family. On May 17 their youngest son, D. Finley, who had graduated from the Iowa University Law School, was hunting with a former high school professor when he was accidentally shot and killed. Collins was sitting in a buggy when Professor Brown got out of the buggy to hunt. In his absence, a neighbor attempted to climb in the buggy accidentally discharging a firearm in the process and killing Collins.

Through all his troubles, Asbury Collins continued to preach and spread the word of God. In 1885, Collins took over the Methodist Episcopal Church in Loup City, although he continued to preach in

Ord, North Loup, Chadron, Nonpareil, and Ogallala. Collins was also the man responsible for starting the churches in each of these towns. In 1889, Collins returned to Kearney to preach in the newly founded Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church. At the end of that year, he caught la grippe (influenza). In March 1890, Collins kidneys began to fail. The Pioneer Preacher passed away March 9, 1890, at age 66. Services were held at Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church, where Collins had briefly served, and the Masonic fraternity, of which Collins was a long-time member, was in charge of burial services. The March 12, 1890 edition of the Kearney Hub gives a description of the services:

"Long before the hour set for services to commence, Trinity M.E. church was filled to overflowing. At 2 p.m. Rev. Haight's deep and powerful voice was heard at the entrance, saying, 'I am the resurrection.' He was accompanied by six ministers. Then followed the Masonic fraternity, and the casket containing the remains of Rev. Collins."

County Probate records from 1890 include a handwritten copy of Mr. Collins' will. A heavy indication of the depth of Asbury's religious faith is shown in his last will and tes-



The "Pioneer Preacher" Asbury Collins. Collins was very involved in Kearney's early affairs, serving as a preacher, school district director, postmaster, and county judge in 1883.

tament.

"First- Believing firmly in the teachings of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and in the teachings of the Holy Bible as revealed to man I commend my soul to God who gave it."

Collins gave the rest of his property, after debts and funeral expenses were paid to his beloved wife.

Louisa Collins lived out the remainder of her life in Kearney, instilling a deep sense of respect for herself and her family in local citizens. The April 11, 1921 *Kearney Hub* described her as the "first white woman to enter the town...who has seen it spring from a scattered settlement to a throbbing town of 8,000 souls".

In 1908, a new building was built

for the First M.E. Church of Kearney, and two stained glass windows were commemorated to the Collins couple. Louisa continued her husband's legacy in the church, traveling many times to his various congregations. She is rumored to have even preached in his absence during his life and after his death. In September of 1921, Mrs. Collins gave an insightful recollection of early Kearney life at memorial services honoring her family and other early pioneers. Louisa Collins passed away in December 1922, and is buried next to her husband in Kearney Cemetery.

Louisa Collins' will shows her dedication to her husband's life work, as well as her own passion for the church. Ms. Collins had only one living heir, ten-year-old Milton Collins (the grandson of her murdered son), and gave all her worldly possessions to the Preacher's Aid Society of the Western Nebraska Conference of the Methodist Church, the Masonic fraternity, and the remainder to Nebraska Wesleyan University.

The accomplishments and contributions to Kearney by the Collins family cannot be measured. To achieve what they did, amongst all the traumatic events in their life, from leaving their friends and family for frontier life to losing both sons and a niece, is truly remarkable. The citizens of Kearney, and many other Ne-

braska towns, have the Collins family to thank, at least in part, for their local religious development.



Louisa Collins, "The Mother of Kearney"

Sources

Kearney Hub: Oct. 15, 1921; April 11, 1921; March 10, 1890; Oct. 15, 1913; Nov. 28, 1908; June 18, 1910; Mar. 12, 1890; Sept. 28, 1921; Oct. 15, 1921.

Buffalo Tales Feb. 1981 (vol. 4, no.2); May-June 1991 (vol. 14, no. 5); July-August 2003.

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Other information through Mardi Anderson, Buffalo County Historian

Photographs courtesy Buffalo County Historical Society

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Dr. Mark R. Ellis, Editor

2009 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- Individual\$35.00
- Family\$40.00
- Institutional Membership\$50.00
- Supporting Membership\$75.00

We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.

Directors

- Term expiring June 1, 2009: Janice Martin, Lee Sanks, Mary Kenney, Gary Straatmann
- Term expiring June 1, 2010: Jim Cudaback, Janice McGregor, Sharon Mason, Jolene Ward
- Term expiring June 1, 2011: Dr. Mark Ellis, Sharon Martin, Duane Muhlbach, Barb Riege

Officers (1 year term)

- PresidentSharon Mason
- Vice-President Barb Riege
- SecretaryJanice McGregor
- Treasurer Jim Cudaback

2009 BUFFALO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY CALENDAR OF EVENTS

April 19, Sunday (from 1-3 pm): BCHS Annual Meeting

May (Date/Time TBA): Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Mrs. David Anderson born May 11, 1849 (2009=160th)

May 30, Saturday: 24th Annual Wagons West Celebration
Music from 10-7 pm and Exhibitors from 10-6 pm

June 14, Sunday: 2nd Annual 1/2 Marathon: Buffalo County Stampede
reg is at 6 am-race begins at 7

June (Date/Time TBA): Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Mrs. William Nutter born June 16, 1835 (2009=174th)

July 3, Friday, (from 9-10:30): Members Only Night (watch city's fireworks)

July 23, Thursday (from 6:30-9 pm): 3rd Annual Trivia Contest

July 30- August 29: Smithsonian Harmonies

August (Date/Time TBA): Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Ms. Fannie Graves born August 1885 (2009=124th)

August 15, Saturday, (from 10-3 pm): 5th Annual Genealogy
Open House with spotlight on One-Room School w/ a picnic!

October (Date/Time TBA): Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Maud Marston Burrows in 1864 (2009=145th)

December 4, Friday (from 6-8 pm): Member's Only Night: 22nd Annual
Christmas Tree Walk

Dec. 5 through Dec. 13 (from 1-5 pm daily): 2nd Annual Christmas Tree Walk, Open to the Public

***Special Night: Friday Dec. 11 from 1-7 pm: Public Official Lighting at 6:30 pm

December (Date/Time TBA): Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Sarah Oliver born Dec. 1, 1832 (2009=177th)

Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

PO Box 523, 710 W. 11th St., Kearney, NE 68845
(308) 234-3041 www.bchs.us bchs@bchs.us

We hope you enjoy these stories about Buffalo County. We would love to have a stock pile of Buffalo Tales ready, so they can go out in a more timely manner. Please submit your memories and stories to us by e-mailing them to bchs.us@hotmail.com or sending them to our post office box: BCHS, PO Box 523 Kearney NE 68848.

We appreciate your support!

Director's Report

Happy New Year!!!

We had a nice surprise to start off 2009: An anonymous donor gave us enough money to hire an Education Coordinator for one year. We are allowed to use those funds as matching funds for grants. Stay tuned for more details!

The Girl Scout Cookie Train was held here on Friday, Jan. 2 from 2-3 pm and we had 182 people in (70 adults and 112 kids). These are great numbers for our slow time of the year! If you missed it, watch for it again next year. The creativity of these girls was absolutely amazing!

The Christmas Tree Walk was very successful. 46 members enjoyed the Member's Only night. For the first time, we offered to waive the admission fees if guests brought in Sunmart receipts or Our Family labels. (BCHS can submit the receipts and Our Family labels for education funds)

Bob Lucas is a new member of BCHS and a former PI and detective from Orange County, California. He loves to do research and I signed him on as a volunteer researcher for BCHS inquiries. He is excited to jump in and help us out. Please help us welcome him!

I look forward to seeing you on Sunday, April 19th, from 1-3 pm for the BCHS Annual Meeting!

Stay warm! Sincerely, Jennifer



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www.bchs.us

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