2010 Calendar of Events

Sunday, June 13th: 3rd Annual ½ Marathon: Buffalo County Stampede—Reg. @ 6 am, Race begins @ 7 am

Tuesday, June 15th from 6:30-9:30 pm: 4th Annual Trivia Contest & Soup Dinner

Saturday, July 3rd from 9-10:30 pm: Members Only Night (watch city fireworks)

Saturday, July 10: 25th Annual Wagons West Celebration—Music and Exhibitors from 10-6 pm
Includes fiddle contest and "What is it?" portion

Saturday, August 7th from 10:30-1:30 pm: Genealogy Open House with spotlight on One-Room School w/ a picnic!

Saturday, December 4th from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 23rd Annual Christmas Tree Walk

Saturday, December 4th-Sunday, December 12th from 1-5 pm daily: Open to the public: 23rd Annual Christmas Tree Walk

Volunteers and sponsors are still needed for these events. Please contact any staff member to help!

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.buffalotales@hotmail.com

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.buffalotales@hotmail.com or sending them to the post office box: BCHS, PO Box 523 Kearney NE 68848. **We appreciate your support!**

Director's Report

-Dan and I were invited by the County Supervisors to walk through the old jail and list what we wanted. The list will be going to the County for approval on Tuesday, May 18. According to state law, anything under $500 value can be given away and not taken to public auction. Thus we did ask for a few non-artifact items, such as filing cabinets, folding chairs and tables, etc., but mainly we asked for a lot of artifacts (a door, a cell, bedding, inmate clothing, keys, keyrings, documents, etc.).

-The Wild Science Thursdays are also creating a buzz. People love the Edgerton and are impressed that they can receive that experience closer to home.

-The press release sent out for the Ghost Hunting sessions on April 20, 2010 was picked up by the Omaha World Herald and the USA Today. The phone was literally ringing off the hook for about four days straight! Then, the Kearney Hub did another article just last weekend and it was picked up by the North Platte and Grand Island papers. There is a lot of buzz about this, but I haven't heard any negative comments. The most important thing is that people want to know the history about these buildings and the people connected to them, so they can enhance their 'hunting experience'.

-Applebees will be updating their décor and asked for some photos of our museum (displays and/or buildings). The photos are now located in the northeast corner of Kearney's Applebees.

Be sure to Join the Buffalo County Historical Society group or the Buffalo County Historical Society/Trails & Rails Museum fan page on Facebook!

Trails & Rails Museum
Buffalo County Historical Society
710 West 11th Street Box 523
Kearney, NE 68848-0523

Visit us at
www.bchs.us

Return Service Requested

BuffaloTales

MAY/JUNE 2010

Letter, Telephone, E-mail:
A Brief History of Long-Distance Communication

By Katherine Wielechowski

Instant communication is one of the most important tools of the modern world. We can send a full letter in seconds through the internet and we can have face-to-face conversations with people half-way around the world via video chat. The forms of long distance communication have changed quite drastically in the past 200 years.

The first form of long-distance communication was paid hand delivery. If you had a letter or message you needed to send to someone, you paid somebody to take it directly to the recipient. This was time consuming since your letter could only travel as quickly as someone on foot or horseback, and it was limiting how far you could send a letter.

When the first postal service, the United States Post Office Department, was started in 1775, you could send a letter that weighed less than an ounce less than 300 miles for five cents and you could pay ten cents to send a letter more than an ounce or more than 300 miles. The mail was transported by coach or horseback but there were many places in the new nation that there were no roads. To solve this problem, rivers and waterways were used to deliver mail by steamboat. If you needed to send a letter to California, your mail took a round-about route, from the east coast it would head south aboard ship to the land route across the Isthmus of Panama and from there, it would be put aboard another ship north to California.

As Americans started spreading west during expansion, mail traveled with them. Mail was carried in wagon trains and by stagecoach along the Oregon and Mormon Trails. As settlers put down roots and family members in the east wanted to visit, the stagecoach grew in popularity. It traveled the same trails as the wagon trains, it just did it faster. Stagecoaches were pulled by four horses and were run by one or two men and could seat up to nine people in addition to luggage and mail bags. It was not a comfortable way to travel but it could get you (or your mail) east to west in around 22 days.

Traveling or sending mail by stagecoach was also a dangerous and risky option. Stagecoaches often broke down where there was no help, stranding the passengers in the middle of nowhere. A broken wheel or axle could quickly end your trip on a stagecoach and if the spare parts were not carried on board, there was little the driver or passengers could do until help arrived. There was also the threat of a stagecoach being attacked by Native Americans and outlaws. The drivers began arming themselves and the term "riding shotgun" came from this time. It was called this since the man who rode up with the driver carried a shotgun specifically to defend the coach from attacks.

As the United States grew, the need for a faster and more reliable trans-continental mail carrier was evident. William H. Russell, Alexander Majors, and William B. Waddell were the owners of the Leavenworth & Pike's Peak Express Company that transported freight over the mountains. These men wanted to develop a better system of delivering mail across the country in order to get a government contract and, two months later, the Pony Express was born. This year, we are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Pony Express. It was started in April, 1860 and would transport mail from St. Joseph, MO to Sacramento, CA. The men wanted to prove that they could deliver mail faster than the stagecoaches and set out to do just that. A letter could leave St. Joseph and arrive in Sacramento ten days later, but it had a cost. In the beginning, it cost $5.00 to send a letter that weighed a half an ounce. By the end of the Pony Express, the price dropped to $1.00 for a half an ounce but it was still an expensive way to send mail.

While the majority of letters could make the trip in ten days, the riders who carried President Lincoln's inaugural address broke the record for the fastest trip. The copies of his speech made it to California in seven days and 17 hours. An amazing feat for man and horse traveling over 1838 miles of some of the toughest terrain the United States has to offer.

The Pony Express had 184 stations set up about 10 miles apart, which was the approximate distance a horse could travel at a full gallop. The rider carried a horn to alert the station he was approaching to ready the next horse. Riders rode about 70-100 miles at a time before switching. The mail bag was the only thing that traveled the entire route without stopping.

The Pony Express route took the mail through Nebraska. It started in Missouri, traveled through Kansas and followed the Little Blue River to Ft. Kearny. It followed the Great Platte River Road (the same road that Interstate 80 follows today) past Chimney Rock, up to Scott's Bluff, and into Wyoming before it would pass through Salt Lake City, UT, and into California. Mail was also picked up in Sacramento, CA to begin the westward journey to St. Joseph, MO.
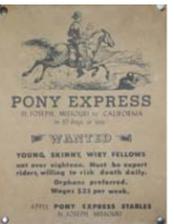
Replica Pony Express poster
Property of Buffalo County Historical Society

The trans-continental route of the Pony Express lasted only 11 months, ending in March of 1861, when the government contract, so coveted by the owners of the Pony Express, was awarded to a stagecoach line. The Pony Express continued to carry mail between Salt Lake City and Sacramento until October 1861, two days after telegraph lines connected Omaha, NE to Sacramento, CA. While it was a financial disaster for the owners, the Pony Express kept California connected to the rest of the United States which sat on the brink of the Civil War.

The first American telegraph was developed by Samuel F. B. Morse and Alfred Vale in 1837 and the first telegraph message was sent in 1838. Vale invented an alphabet using long and short sounds to stand for letters, enabling messages to be sent through telegraph cables. This alphabet was known as Morse Code. The telegraph allowed messages to be sent the fastest way possible for the time.

Almost all towns that sat along the rail road had access to the telegraph. Before the advent of radios and telephones, the Union Pacific Rail Road used the telegraph to send messages to the train depots so the ticket agent could deliver them to the trains, warning them of trouble ahead or additional stops they needed to make.

When rail roads were first being built on the east coast in the 1820s, they were used for local and specific jobs such as hauling coal from mines and transporting crops. As they grew into major freight carriers that carried goods up and down the eastern seaboard, the government saw many possibilities. One of which, was to carry mail much more quickly and efficiently than by horse, coach, or steamship. This same idea was carried through to 1868 when the golden spike was driven into the rails at Promontory Point, UT, connecting the first trans-continental rail road.

Almost immediately, the U.S. Postal Service was sending thousands of letters east and west by rail. The trains would pick up bags of mail at depots and towns along the route and would use specialized mail cars to sort it on the move. Each car contained racks to hold the mail bags open, counter tops and hundreds of "pigeon holes" labeled with the names of towns along their route. They would then drop the mail off to towns along the tracks and the local mail offices would deliver it to mail boxes in their territory.

While the rail road was a great way to carry letters across the country, the need for a fast form of communication was very strong. The telegraph filled this void but sending messages by telegraph had many limitations. First, patrons were charged per word/letter in their messages, so the average person could only afford to use it for brief and urgent messages. Second, unless a person lived in or near a town that had a telegraph operator and station, they would never get the message. Also, one did not want to send private messages via telegraph since both the sending and receiving operators would be reading it.

The invention of the telephone in 1876 by Alexander Graham Bell came after his failed attempts to improve the telegraph. He was frustrated by the telegraphs limited abilities of being able to send only one message at a time. He tried to invent a "harmonic telegraph" that could send multiple messages at a time, each at a different pitch. His great success came when he realized he could hear a sound through the wire, and brought about the birth of the telephone. Americans would soon be able to hear each other speak over long distances through the telephone wires.

The Farmers Home Telephone Company of Shelton was started on March 8, 1902 by five men from Shelton. The incorporators were W.J. Smith, Albert Allen, Jacob Stearley, W.H. Maurer, and Joseph Buck, Jr. Many people of Shelton sold their party lines to the company and phone service went through the switchboard in Shelton. The earliest switchboards were located in rented rooms of businesses or private homes in Shelton and operated by people from the area. The first lines for the Farmers Home Telephone Company were run on old telegraph poles that the company purchased from the Union Pacific Rail Road for 40 cents each.

Early in the company's existence, everyone who owned a telephone had to buy stock in the company to help pay for the telephone wires and the new poles that connected them with the switchboards. Eventually, there were so many people in town who wanted private or two-party lines, it was necessary to improvise with the large number of wires. They used thin copper wires wrapped in paper that were then were bundled inside of a lead pipe. Management of the Farmers Home Telephone Company changed many times until 1923. Duncan Earl "Mac" McGregor took over managing the Farmers Home Telephone Company and, in 1928, merged it with the phone companies in Ansley and Arcadia. The merger formed the Nebraska Central Telephone Company.

By 1946, the large number of telephone lines coming into the switchboard required the Nebraska Central Telephone Company to update the switchboard that they had been using since 1907. By June of 1961, all of the company's exchanges, located in Arcadia, Ansley, Comstock, Sargent, Gibbon, and Shelton, had all been converted to the new Dial telephone system and the

Area towns received mail that was sorted in this mail car, Cody Park, North Platte, NE Photo taken June 25, 2010

Mail car Cody Park, North Platte, NE Photo taken June 25, 2010

Photo from an unknown newspaper article hanging in the mail car at Cody Park, North Platte, NE Photo taken June 25, 2010 (caption reads: "When the trains carried railway post office cars, the workers carried guns they were ready to use if necessary")

GUN PLAY AT THE MAIL CAR

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business office in Gibbon was transferred out of the Exchange Bank Building (where it had been since 1922) to its present location.

In 1963, D.E. McGregor's son, Duncan McGregor, took over as manager of the Nebraska Central Telephone Company and he and his wife Janice McGregor have been busy replacing overhead telephone lines with underground cable. Buildings at three of the six exchanges have been added to in order to make room for new equipment and the long distance lines for Gibbon, Shelton, and Ansley were connected to the Bell Company's underground system. The underground cable system provides a more dependable long distance service for Nebraska Central's customers than overhead wires.

The mid 1990s brought the beginning stages of the most advanced form of communication there is. The Internet was first developed in the 1960s as an advanced connected computer network for the U.S. military. Its potential was very quickly recognized as a great information source and communication medium. As the internet grew in popularity, so did the diversity of its uses, allowing different kinds of communication to develop and information to be found. The first and most popular way to communicate via internet was electronic mail or e-mail. It was used mostly to send inter-company messages, correspondence in universities, and messages in government agencies. The general public did not use e-mail on a large scale until the very end of the 20th century.

E-mail of 2010 looks very different than it did in the first years. It is a much broader used and accepted way to correspond with others, from people sitting in the next room to people around the world. Most Americans have at least one e-mail account and use it regularly. Almost every university in the U.S. assigns every student an e-mail account to use to communicate with teachers and to receive news about everything on campus from events, to class closings, and natural disasters. Many large businesses and companies also allot each employee an e-mail account to use for memos, meetings, and updates.

E-mail is the fastest way to send an entire letter to another person but it is not the fastest way to "talk" to someone on the internet. The late 1990s brought instant messaging to the masses. Instant messages, or IM's, are a way to carry on a conversation almost instantly with another person. IM's allowed the birth of shorthand messaging language that would shape the next generation of messaging.

The internet also made talking "face-to-face" to someone who was thousands of miles away possible. This feat was accomplished by video chat. One would connect a special video camera and microphone to their computer and they could use the internet to transmit the video and audio feed to someone across the country. If the other person had the same capabilities, you would be able to see and hear them also.

Around the same time that the internet was becoming the number one place for information and communication, the next form of audio communication was evolving. The telephone was one of the greatest leaps for communicating over long distances and it would evolve from the home/switch board systems to coast-to-coast and eventually to cordless. Mobile phones first came about in the early 1950s but they were not the true cellular phones of today. They used radio waves to transmit messages from the phone to a base station. Cell phones as we know them first were developed in the 1970s but they were larger, heavier, and far more expensive than today. Very few people had contact to them until the 1990s. Today, one would be hard pressed to find somebody over the age of fourteen who does not have a cell phone.

With the cell phone revolution, came the popularity of SMS text messaging. The first text message that was sent from one person to another was sent in Finland in 1993. In a few short years, text messaging became the preferred mode of communication across the globe. The same people, who made IM-ing so popular, were the first to take to text messaging and they brought many of the same abbreviations into the text messaging world. Very quickly, using abbreviations such as "u" instead of spelling out "you" and "c" instead of "see" moved out of text messaging into everyday typing and jargon like "lol" (laugh out loud) and "brb" (be right back) were seen and heard everywhere.

It seems as if everyday, a newer and better cell phone has hit the market. Smart phones are everywhere and have internet capabilities built into their standard operating systems. Now, one's internet usage is not limited to a phone jack, a wireless network signal, or even a computer. Accessing the internet from a cell phone has also led to being able video chat with someone no matter where you are. It combined a video camera, microphone, and internet access into a package that fits in the palm of your hand.

The evolution of communication has made leaps and bounds in the last 200 years, and even more so in the past 50 years. We have moved from having to hand-deliver all letters to being able to send electronic messages around the world in a few seconds. One cannot possibly imagine what long distance communication will look like in the next 50 years but it will probably make the growth of the past 200 years look like baby steps.

Photo of the Kearney Telephone Operators Station Property of Buffalo County Historical Society

Sources:
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Vohland, Mabel. Trail Dust to Star Dust: Centennial 1871-1971, Gibbon, Nebr. Zimmerman Printing and Lithographers, Kearney, NE, 1971.
Wikipedia.com
Photos used with permission by Katherine Wielechowski
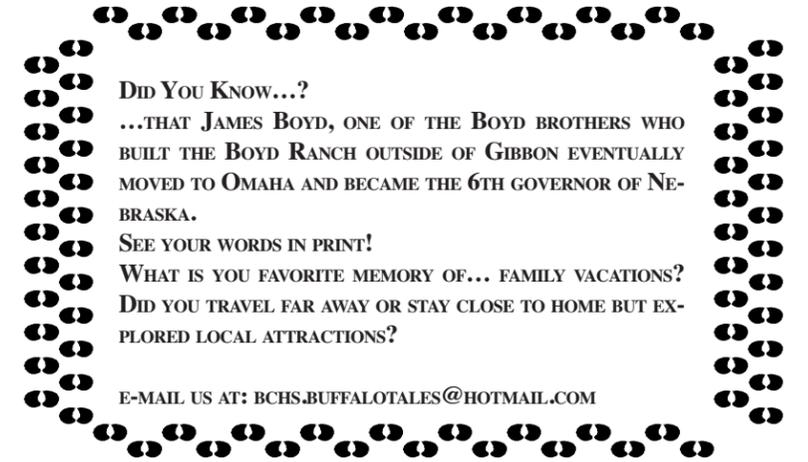
Fiddlin' Round the Trails & Rails
The 4th Annual Fiddlin' Round the Trails & Rails Contest will be on July 10th during our 25th Annual Wagons West Celebration! Registration for the contest will begin at 10:00 and the contest will begin at 10:30. Contact Katherine at bchs.buffalotales@hotmail.com or the Trails & Rails Museum at (308) 234-3041 for information and pre-registration.

Ghost Hunting
The ghost hunting classes will run through the spring and summer on the last Friday of the month until September. The next sessions are on May 28th and June 25th. Bill Sinnard and Jacob Sikes, the founding members of Midwest Paranormal Investigators (MPI), will be teaching a 1-1 ½ hour class followed by 4-5 hours of supervised ghost hunting in the buildings at the Trails & Rails museum. Volunteers from the community and other members of MPI will be escorting each group of beginner ghost hunters. The classes are $50 per person. Contact Jen or Lyn at Trails & Rails (308) 234-3041 or by e-mail bchs.us@hotmail.com for more information and registration.