



# Buffalo Tales



---

Volume 1, No. 1 Buffalo County Historical Society January 1978

---

## THE OREGON TRAIL: THE RANDALL JOURNAL

Over one hundred years ago the first real "interstate highway" passing through the region which would become Nebraska developed along the course of the Platte River. Originating at several points on the Missouri River, the routes converged to form on the south side of the Platte the Oregon trail, and, on the north side, the Mormon trail. Fur traders, missionaries and gold seekers blazed the trails westward, but among the first white men to traverse the river valley came from the west.

Robert Stuart and his party of six men were returning from the fur post at Astoria in the northwest, when, in the spring of 1813, they encamped along the river at a point that is now the east edge of Kearney County. Stuart's journal for April 6, 1813 records the occasion:

26 miles east is the length of this day's walk. The body of timber has increased greatly and extends too far to the north for the eye to tell what is its width. We are nevertheless obliged to wade a narrow channel to procure fuel as well as food for our horse, for the grass on the main is totally consumed (by fire) and all the woods are on an island which from every appearance must be what we have so long looked for, the Big Island. If so, we are now about 140 miles from the Mouth of the Platte.

Stuart's journal identifies the Platte River by determining that the travelers had reached the Big Island, more often called the Grand Island, known back as far as the days of the French as "Le Grande Isle". One traveler's journal later describes it: "this island is about 52 miles long...it is well wooded, and has a fertile soil... There are many circumstances which unite to make this a suitable point for the establishment of a military post in the lower Nebraska..." Many years later Fort Kearny was established near this point.

Beginning in the 1840's, the prairie sod of Nebraska bore the burden of traffic incident to one of the great migrations in the settlement of the west, cutting deep ruts during periods of rain, and raising dense clouds of dust when it was dry. White-topped wagons were in sight at all points from early May to late June, and great trains of ox-drawn freight wagons and the rumble of stage coaches echoed across the plain. For its short-lived period, the staccato hoof-beat of the fine horses carrying mail for the Pony Express could also be heard.

As the emigration to the Oregon Territory began to increase considerable after 1842, Congress ordered a chain of forts and blockhouses to be constructed for the protection of the travelers against the Indians roaming the plains. Thus, in the spring of 1848 construction of Fort Kearny began. Discovery of gold in California increased travel on the trail, and according to an 1849 War Department report, 30,000 people passed through Fort Kearny during an 18-month period bound for California, Oregon, and Salt Lake. Overland Stages carrying mail and passengers, prospectors

(Continued on Page 3)

**BUFFALO TALES**

Buffalo Tales is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Membership in the Buffalo County Historical Society is open to anyone who has an interest in Buffalo County and its people, or in the history of the area.

Annual dues, payable January 1:

- Individual membership .. \$ 2.00
- Institutional membership . 5.00
- Sustaining membership .. 25.00+

Life membership ..... 100.00

Address:

Box 523, Kearney, Nebraska 68847

**Officers**

- President ..... Philip S. Holmgren
- Vice-President ..... Alice Howell
- Secretary ..... Phyllis Roberts
- Treasurer ..... Paul Farm

**Directors**

Term expiring June 30, 1978

- Leonard S. Silver, Kearney
- Will C. Mueller, Amherst
- Laverne McMullen, Gibbon
- Louis R. Koeppel, Kearney

Term expiring June 30, 1979

- Gloria Sutherland, Elm Creek
- Sam Spahr, Gibbon
- Wayne Reynolds, Kearney

Term expiring June 30, 1980

- John K. Hammer, Kearney
- Maxine Schroeder, Shelton

**WITH THE SOCIETY**

*Buffalo Tales.* As the new year begins, the Buffalo County Historical Society initiates the publication of *Buffalo Tales*, which will present historical articles of the county in an effort to gain a greater appreciation of our heritage. Activities of the Historical Society will also be included as a part of this publication. It is hoped that this will become a monthly publication.

on the funding

One of the primary functions of a historical society is to preserve the record which will help future historians interpret the past. Newspapers, photographs, letters, diaries, club records and church and school bulletins are some of the best source material for the story of our past. Many of these can be used in the historical articles of this publication; all will be filed for use as source material. The Buffalo County Historical Society will be pleased to accept originals or copies of such archival material.

*Old photographs copied while you wait.* Denny's Photography has generously offered to set aside three Tuesday afternoons, January 24 and 31, and February 7, from 1:30 to 5:30 o'clock, when they will make a copy for the Historical Society of old photographs relating to the development of transportation, agriculture or business in Buffalo County. The time required would be only a few minutes, and you may take your original photographs when you leave. Subjects included would be agricultural equipment, sodhouses, wagons, buggies, train and railroad yards, early photos of villages and settlements in the county. A member of the Board of the Historical Society will be on hand to make notes on the story of the picture, its location, date, etc., and to decide on its merits as archival material. If you are unable to come to Kearney on the dates mentioned, any Board member would be willing to bring in your pictures and return them to you. Remember those dates: January 24, January 31, February 7, from 1:30 to 5:30 p.m.

*Museum Building Open.* Weather permitting, the Depot Museum building at 710

(Continued on Page 6)



and miners bound for the gold diggings, emigrants lured by free land in Oregon, and the huge freighting caravans all contributed to make Fort Kearny a bustling center of activity. The post continued to expand in size and importance. The Pony Express had a "home" station here. Fort Kearny was indeed an important factor in the westward expansion of our nation.

One of the travelers on this Trail in 1852 gives a vivid picture of his experiences. John D. Randall, a young man from Ohio, kept a daily journal of his trip from Cincinnati, Ohio, by boat to St. Louis, then up the Missouri River to Kansas (City), Missouri, where he joined a wagon train bound for California gold. The Wagon train followed the Oregon Trail through Nebraska, and his descriptions of coming upon the Platte River and of Fort Kearny are found in the following entries:

Sunday - May 30, 1852: This morning is fair and we are under the necessity of traveling to wood and water, we started at 7 A.M. and traveled until 9 A.M., where we found that Amos Hinshaw was dying. He has the cholera morbus and measles set (in) and took him right off. We feel that we have lost a friend who we highly prized. He died on Sunday at about 11 o'clock A.M. At about 4 P.M. the same day we buried him about 12 or 13 miles east of Fort Kearney on a little eminence in Platte River Bottom about 2 or 3 miles the foot of the Sandy Bluffs on the left of the road. The Epitaph on the walnut board at the head of his grave is "A Hinshaw of Clinton Co., Ohio, Died May 30, 1852, aged 32 years — Measles."

By turning directly towards Platte River when you leave the sandy bluffs, a distance of about 3 miles, you will find water and plenty of grass. but no wood except small willow bushes only one year's growth, killed yearly by the fire. As you come in sight of the sandy bluffs, they have the appearance of several high round knolls, and as you pass over them, you find yourself winding back and forth so as to pass down through this multitude of sandy hillocks. Here you discover a steak of timber all along

Platte River and you would suppose on this side (south) but will find it to be an island, which has disappointed many travelers; you will find wood very scarce on this bottom. This bottom is from 2 to 3 miles wide. The River bank is only about from 2 to 3 feet above the water. We camped this evening about 5 miles beyond the foot of the bluffs in the bottom near the river. No wood, but river water and good crops. Near here the road comes in from Fort Leavenworth on Missouri River. This is said to be a very good road most of the way through to this junction. The day has been fair.

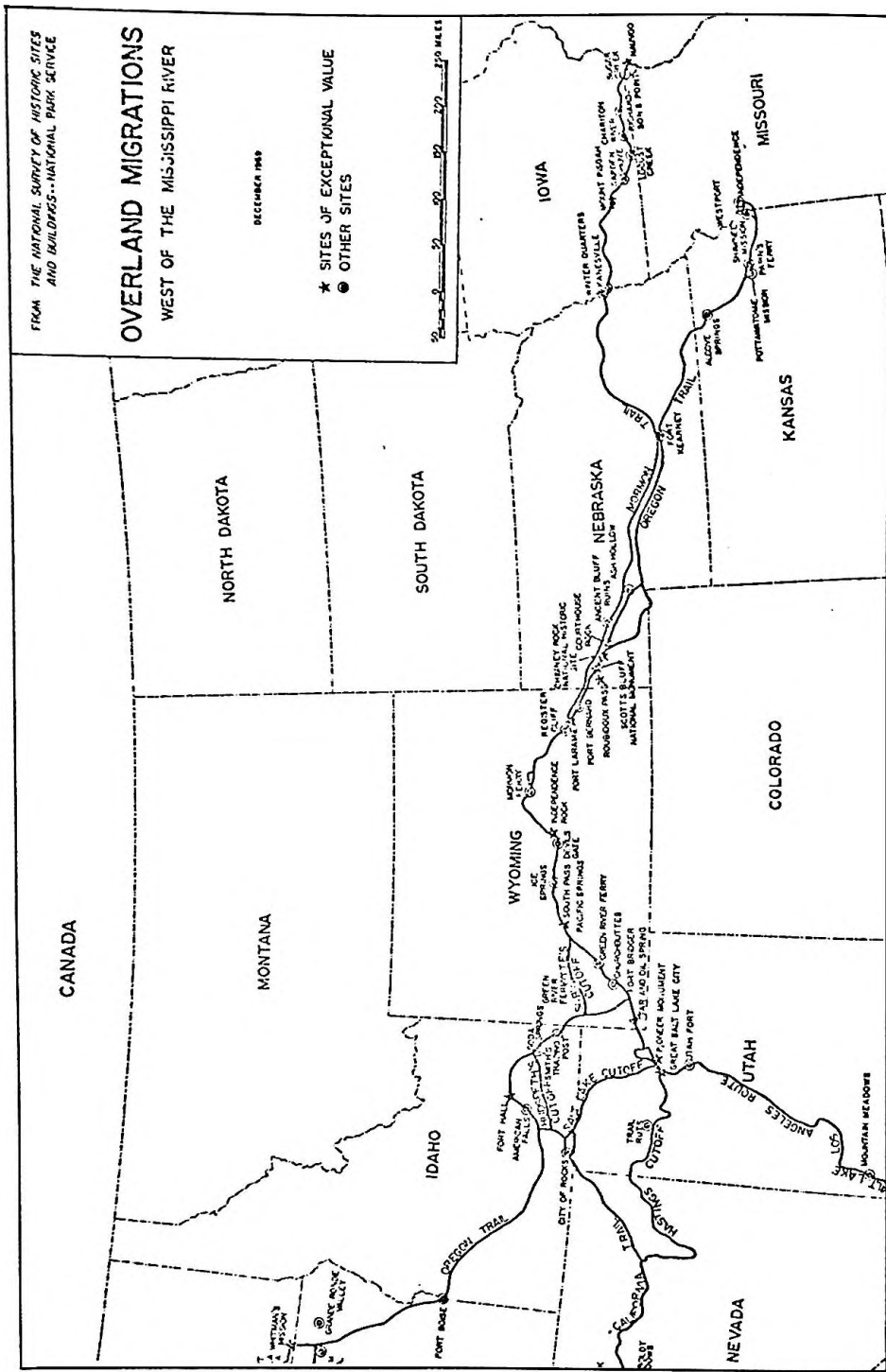
Monday - May 31, 1852. Started this day at  $\frac{1}{2}$  past 11 A.M. and then to Ft. Kearney 10 miles. The prairie is quite level in the bottom. Fort Kearney is on the south side of the Platte River about  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile from the river near the head of Grand Island. This island is something over fifty miles long. Fort Kearney is situated on the slight rise of ground. There are 3 large frame houses and 3 smaller frames, one of which is a store, and one large sod house and several smaller ones. There are several of these houses covered with sod. The wall is about 3 feet thick. These houses are quite a curiosity. There are now about 60 soldiers stationed at this Fort. This evening in camp about 5 miles above the Fort near the river, no wood, river water and good grass. This river can be forded at the foot very handy. I was told its width varies from about one to two miles wide and has a very rapid current. The water resembles that running off fresh plowed ground after a hard rain. The water always keeps riley. Pretty good water can be had any place along the river by digging a hole 2 or 3 feet deep along the shore. The water filterates through the sand and is quite clear and good drinking water. The day is fair.

Tuesday - June 1, 1852. Started this morning at  $\frac{1}{2}$  past 5 A.M. and traveled 25 miles up the river, nearly due west, and camped near the river. No wood but plenty of good buffalo chips. River water, Grass plenty. The land is about the same. The day is fair.

John D. Randall continued on to California but did not prospect for gold as planned. He worked as a carpenter for two years, then returned to Cincinnati by boat. He was impressed with the Nebraska territory in the Fort Kearny area, and over twenty years later moved to Buffalo County with his wife and family, settling in the Gibbon area. Many of his descendants still live in the county.

Activity along the Trail began to drop when the railroad was constructed in 1866. As the Indian Wars shifted to the west and north, Fort Kearny became less essential to the military. Its last important function was to provide protection for the railroad construction crews, and in 1871 it was discontinued as a military post. During the 30 years that the Oregon Trail was a living, pulsing artery to the West, people were learning that they could live in this "desert" land along the "Coast of Nebraska", as early explorers had described this land along the Platte.

A copy of the incomplete John D. Randall Journal is in the possession of the Buffalo County Historical Society. If the proper permission can be obtained and necessary funding becomes available publication of the entire journal will be undertaken.



Non-Profit Organization  
Bulk Rate

U.S. Postage  
PAID

Postal Permit No. 7  
Kearney, Nebraska

West 11th Street in Kearney will be open for your inspection on Sunday, January 29, from 2:00 to 6:00 p.m. The building is now ready for preparation of exhibits and displays, and it is planned to have such displays put together in the next few weeks so that the museum can be open on a regular schedule later in the spring.

All members and friends of the Historical Society are invited to come for this preliminary opening on January 29.

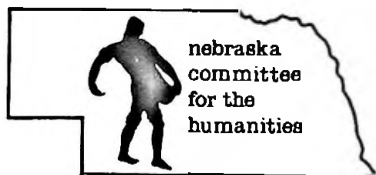
*Nebraska State Historical  
Society Spring Meeting  
in Kearney.*

The Buffalo County Historical Society will host the spring meeting of the State Historical Society in Kearney, tentatively set for June 10.

*Call for Volunteers.* Volunteers are needed for office work, preparation of exhibits, and to be on hand when the museum is open on regular schedule. If you can devote some time to this service, please contact one of the officers or directors.

*1978 Dues.* Annual Dues are payable now. Please consider this reminder in lieu of a regular statement of dues, and send your check to the Society at Box 523, Kearney, Nebraska 68847.

We need new members. Urge your friends to join.



nebraska  
committee  
for the  
humanities

A State-Based Program of  
The National Endowment for the Humanities

This publication is made possible in part by a grant from the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities, a State-Based Program of the National Endowment for the Humanities.