



# Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

April, 1981

## MOSES H. SYDENHAM

### *First of the Visionaries*

by Margaret Ellen Nielsen

Years before the full potentials of the Platte Valley were realized, Fort Kearny was established as an outpost on the Oregon Trail in 1848. To the fort in 1856 came a young English freighter, Moses Henry Sydenham, whose name would thereafter be closely associated with its history. Sydenham was born in the Jewish section of London on May 30, 1835 to Moses and Mary Ann Sydenham, Israelites who had adopted the Christian faith. The elder Sydenham was a disabled British Navy man who drew a small pension and worked as a cooper. His wife supplemented the family income by weaving silk and satin fabric on a loom in her home.

Their son received what schooling he had at the National Schools. By the age of nine he was making suspenders at seventy-five cents a week; at eleven he became an errand boy for a book-binding firm. Moses was fifteen when his father died. The boy worked in the printing offices of the East and West India Dock Company, later going to sea.

Landing in New York in 1856, he made his way to Georgia, and then to Missouri, where he landed a job on the **Kansas City Enterprise**. He was recovering from a bout of "bilious fever" when an agent for Russell, Majors and Waddell freighting company offered him a job. The agent persuaded Moses that he would feel better after a few days on the plains, and he signed on.

At Fort Leavenworth, a "half-train" of twelve wagons was made up to haul freight



Moses H. Sydenham

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.

Editor..... Gene E. Hamaker

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:
- Family membership.....\$ 5.00
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**WITH THE SOCIETY**

*Notice to Members of Buffalo County Historical Society*

**ANNUAL MEETING**

Sunday, April 26, 1981, 1:00 p.m.  
at the Nebraskan, on KSC Campus

The annual meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society will be held at the Nebraskan on the Kearney State College campus on Sunday, April 26, 1981. A buffet luncheon will be served at 1:00 p.m., followed by the business meeting at 1:45. Cost of the luncheon is \$3.75 and reservations must be made and paid for in advance.

On the agenda for the business meeting are the election of president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer, and three 3-year directors. A report of the years progress will be given and certificates of appreciation awarded.

The program will be given by Dr. Gary Zaruba, of the faculty of the Fine Arts Department of Kearney State College. His slide presentation will be on "The Artist who Traveled through the Platte Valley in the Nineteenth Century."

Please make your reservation by April 21. Send with check for the luncheon to Buffalo County Historical Society, Box 523, Kearney, Nebraska 68847. If you have any questions, call 237-7858.

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The Nebraska Museums Coalition meeting in Kearney has been changed from May 2 to June 19 and 20.

to Fort Laramie before winter set in. Traveling westward the freighters reached "the summit of the hills bordering the Platte....there in the distance my eyes first saw the grand valley of the Platte spread out as far as the eye could reach....the dense groves of trees on the islands making a fine relief to the scene.

The next day—it must have been October 20—the flag of Fort Kearny came in sight, and with it the Fort, looming up like an oasis on the desert....Fort Kearny! There....every man with the freighting outfit felt that he could rest, for a short season at least, in mind and body and get whatever supplies might be needful. There were two companies of Infantry there then, and two companies of dragoons....The fort buildings were built of....wood, adobe and prairie sod.

Reaching Fort Laramie, the teamsters parked their wagons for the winter and started back "with one light wagon to carry our provisions and bedding and six head of horses." At Ash Hollow they were snowed in by a blizzard. Ogallala Sioux Indians came by, taking them to their camp, where they all shared their food for about six weeks. Fort Kearny was another sixteen days down river on snow and ice. "I remember, when the wagon of provisions from the Fort met us a little west of Plum Creek, how joyful we were." Their meal that mornings had been the "shakings of the flour sack and the shakings of the gunny bag which held the dried buffalo meat....stirred up with some water....without salt, and burned by the cook withal." Drivers of a mail coach who had passed them on the way had told the Commander, Captain Wharton "of our needy condition" and he had sent supplies to meet them. It's possible that the steady diet of buffalo meat that winter made Sydenham a vegetarian, "living on fruits and farinacea".

After the teamsters arrived at Fort Kearny on February 9, 1857, a blizzard struck during the night "the like of which I have not seen since." The wind blew over the Indian lodge where Moses and another man were sleeping. They were buried under snow until a path could be scooped the next day. "One young man, a German who was clerking for Dyer, Heath and Company, the sutlers, in going from the officers mess to a building....where he was going to sleep, missed the way in broad daylight, and perished....the Pawnee Indians finding his remains the following April some five or six miles out in the hills." Moses was offered the man's job, and he clerked at the store until he was appointed postmaster in 1858.

At the fort were officers "who would afterwards face each other's shot and shell on opposing battlefields....I can see some of these men now as they sat silent and thoughtful in the private room of my post office, listening to the reading of the telegrams just fresh from the stilus of Mr. Ellsworth". The news of the firing on Fort Sumter went out of the fort by Pony Express to Denver and on to San Francisco, and life at the fort was forever changed.

Sydenham visited London in 1858 and brought back his brother, Richard. A year later his mother, three other brothers, and two sisters accompanied him to Nebraska. To help support his family, he established a road ranch, known as Hopeville, at "Seventeen White Point" on the Overland mail route. In addition to the sod residence and other buildings, he built a store and a half store "made of hewn logs from the islands."

He first published the **Kearney Herald**, in 1862 "to herald the advent of Christian civilization....in the Great American Desert." In 1865, Leigh Freeman, the telegrapher, took over the paper and changed its name to **The Frontier Index**. When the Union Pacific came through, Freeman loaded the hand press on a flat car and followed the railroad, publishing a paper as free-wheeling as the railroad camps themselves. In Bear River, Wyoming, a mob stormed the office and destroyed the

press.

Moses also had taken to giving lectures for the soldiers. The first, in April 1866, was on "The Saviors of Our Country". Others, on such subjects as the evils of liquor, were given in communities in Nebraska and Iowa. Governor Alvin Saunders appointed him to the Immigration Commission. Through him, Moses met Electra Atwood, whom he married in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa on September 17, 1866. In 1868, he was a delegate from Kearney and Buffalo Counties at the State Republican Convention at Lone Tree (Central City). He was nominated as State Senator but was defeated "because of a flood of illegal votes from the west edge of the state."

With the closing of Ft. Kearny, in 1871, Sydenham set up a store and post office in Kearney City (Dobytown). He changed the name of the settlement to Centoria, possibly in a desire to improve its image. In April of 1871, Asbury Collins accompanied D. N. Smith, a locator for the Burlington and Missouri Railroad, on a trip to Nebraska. Louisa Collins wrote that the two drove from Grand Island to "the old Fort where they encountered an April storm. They were cared for under the hospitable roof of Mr. and Mrs. Sydenham. Then Mr. Sydenham helped them across the river thick with cakes of ice. Mr. Smith said he had not intended to locate Kearney Jnct. then but thought it just as well....and my husband took his claim."

The Collins and Sydenham families became good friends as a result of this. Under the leadership of Reverend Collins a Methodist society was organized in the fall of 1871 in Kearney Junction, with Mrs. H. E. A. Sydenham as one of the charter members. The Sydenhams also were active in community affairs and their sons, Alvin Humphrey, A. Dallas, and H. Hugh, attended Kearney schools.

About 1870, Sydenham started publishing the **Central Star** in which, among other things, he advertised the products of his store: "Dry goods, groceries....Queensware, hardware, books, guns, perfumeries...." Hugh Sydenham



Sod building at Centoria, 1864.

Nebraska State Historical Society Photo

the **Star** in 1923:  
 t that time the population consisted of a few soldiers, some  
 boys and many Indians and while illiteracy was prevalent among  
 l, the latter could not understand our language and....had no use  
 for the **Central Star**. Being an editor my father was very set in h

ways; he had made up his mind that every one should read the **Central Star**....instead of changing his mind, I'm d---d if he didn't start to teach the Indians to read....The Indians were soon after taken to reservations so the result of his efforts was never recorded.

Hugh continued that not only did the paper take the butter off the family's bread, "but many times some of the bread stuck to the butter. In those days the life of an editor was....great....if he didn't weaken—my father didn't."

In the late sixties, a move was made to move the national capital to a more central location. When Fort Kearny was closed, Moses felt the military reservation, with another "ten thousand auxiliary acres", would be the ideal spot. Through the pages of **The Central Star** he advanced his proposition that the government give him the "Special Agency to dispose of the land for the United States". He would build all the public buildings, establish public parks, bridges, roads "and other public improvements". He would "REDEEM THE NATIONAL DEBT within ten years" and in return for his services he was "to receive....ONE PERCENT above the first hundred million dollars received from the sale of the land". He was appointed by Governor Furnas as a delegate to the National Removal Convention held in St. Louis. But, according to Roy T. Bang, "there were too many representatives there from too many places, all of them wanting the prize for themselves, and there it quietly died."

According to one account he had proposed that Kearney be the capital. "Thirty-ninth Street and Second Avenue in Kearney was named Capitol Hill." Since Kearney had no connection with the military reservation, this may have been a later attempt to enlist the support of local people.

Mr. Sydenham became a mail agent and postal clerk for the Union Pacific in 1878, retiring in 1894 when his health began to fail. Due to the drouth of the nineties, "and other adverse circumstances," he lost his ranch in 1894. Another blow to the Sydenhams was the death of their oldest son, Alvin, on September 10, 1893. He had graduated from West Point in 1889, and was serving with the Fifth Artillery at the time of his death.



Fort Kearny Cottonwood Parade Grounds 1864-65.  
Moses H. Sydenham sitting on log.

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For many years Moses had conducted church services and organized Sunday Schools in the settlements of Kearney and Buffalo Counties. In 1895, he took on "special Missionary Work" at Cottonville, a cluster of tenant houses near the Cotton Mill. Among the three hundred people in this settlement "some were desecrating the Sabbath by 'tearing around' like a lot of heathen." Mr. Sydenham offered to conduct a mission service and take a Sunday School class. The Sunday School which had averaged twenty-five, when "a Mrs. Hutchason" had tried to run it alone, increased to eighty-three. When attendance began to dwindle among the younger members, they called in Reverend Gill, a "Revivalist" preacher from Odessa. The evangelist "shouted and sweated to good effect". An evangelical church of sixty members was established and an old building moved from Kearney was to serve as a church. Mr. Sydenham began to write his autobiography in 1906, although accounts of his personal experiences had already appeared in the **Central Star**, and other publications. He was an imaginative story-teller, describing a number of his hairbreadth escapes from death in his published accounts. In the **Star** he had designated himself as "The First Pioneer Settler of Nebraska's Plains of the 'Great American Desert'".

According to Kenneth Dryden, Moses Sydenham was on his way to church when he died on February 3, 1907. "The little bouquet he never failed to bring each Sunday was picked up by a passerby from the place where he had fallen, and taken to church for him. There was not a dry eye in the church when the pastor placed the little geranium blossom in its accustomed vase and told of his passing."

### SOURCES

Edmunds, *Pen Sketches of Nebraskans*, 1871; *Where the Buffalo Roamed*, 1967; Sydenham, "Freighting Across the Plains in 1856", *Nebraska State Historical Society Proceedings*, 1894-5; Roy T. Bang, *Heroes Without Medals*; Sydenham, "My First, Last and Only Buffalo Hunt," *History of Seward County*, 1905; D. Ray Wilson, *Fort Kearney on the Platte*; Letter from Louisa Collins to S. C. Bassett, March 4, 1909, Bassett Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society; "Autobiography of Lucy Sizer Hull", Frank House scrap book; Kearney Come Back Letters, 1923; *First United Methodist Church of Kearney, Nebraska*. an historical outline, 1872-1972; *The Central Star*, February 2, 1872; *Kearney Daily Hub*.

(This is the third of a series on the first inhabitants of Kearney Junction.)