



Buffalo Tales



Volume 6, No. 10 Buffalo County Historical Society November-December 1983

KEARNEY VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT:

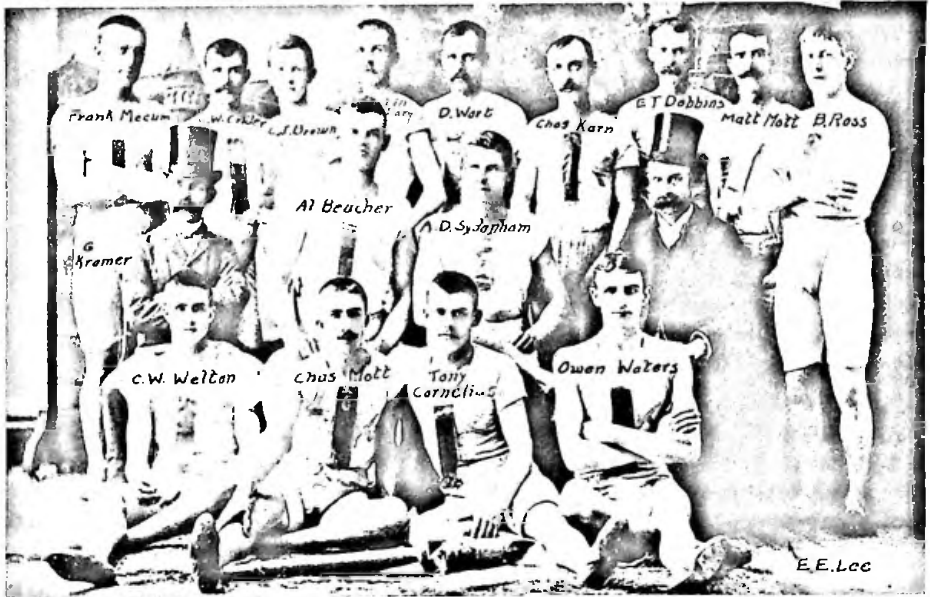
The First 100 Years

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

Fire, flood and insect plague were devastating factors to the first settlers, a fate from which it was often difficult or impossible to recover. The founders of Kearney recognized the danger of fire and enacted its first fire legislation in February 1873, the year of the founding of the city:

"BE IT ENACTED by the Board of Trustees that it shall be the duty of the marshall of the town of Kearney, as often as directed by the board of trustees, to enter any house or building, lot, yard or premises * * * to examine the fire flues, parts, chimneys, stoves and pipes thereto, ovens, boilers, and other apparatus likely to cause fire, and also where any gun-powder, hemp, coal oil, flax, tar, hay and straw, shavings and other combustible material may be logged, and the said marshall shall give such directions in regard to the foregoing matters as he shall deem expedient to guard against fire * * *"

In January 1874 the city engineer presented plans for a station house at a cost of \$1300, and in December of that year bids were advertised for the following fire equip-



G. Kramer's World Champion Running Team 1887

(Continued on Page 3)

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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\$ 7.50
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Trails and Rails Museum, Mardi Anderson, Director. Phone 234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

November 20 meeting at the Fire Hall in Kearney. Kearney veteran firemen will be honored for the Volunteer Department's 100th birthday. A "toast" will be given by Councilman Charles Pickens, a repeat rendition of one given by Dr. M. A. Hoover in 1912 before the state convention of volunteer firemen. The meeting will begin at 2:00.

Christmas at the Museum, December 3-4 and 10-11, from 1:00 to 5:00. Displays will feature Christmas trees, trains and dolls. Trees with old-fashioned ornaments may be donated for use during the opening, and will be returned for your own holiday use.

Christmas Walk at the Frank House is open to the public every day from 1:00-5:00 from November 30 through December 13.

Open House at the Rhamys on December 18, Henrietta Rhamy, our vice-president, invites members of the Historical Society to their home at 200 West Avenue in Gibbon anytime between 2:00 and 7:00 p.m. for a Christmas open house.

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Remember the Historical Society in your holiday and end-of-year gifts. We are faced with some specific needs at our Trails and Rails Museum, the most important being full-time funding for our present part-time director in order to have a continuing museum program. Other needs are outdoor exhibits relating to the transportation theme, landscaping and upkeep of present buildings. All contributions are tax deductible.

1984 dues may be paid at any time, thus saving postage in mailing statements.

ment: 6 ladders, 3 hooks and 36 buckets "for the protection of the city."

A year later, on January 18, 1875, an ordinance was adopted providing that \$100 or as much thereof as is necessary be appropriated for the purpose of purchasing suitable ladders, buckets and hooks for the purpose of extinguishing fires in said city.

This first fire equipment was provided to a Fire Committee appointed by the mayor. However, without a water system, and relying on the well of the nearest inhabitant, the only way to combat a fire was by the bucket brigade—a line of men from the nearest pump to the fire, some taking turns pumping furiously, and the others swiftly passing the buckets of water from one to the other to throw on the blaze.

The plowing of firebreaks was an added precaution. In the **Kearney Times** of September 23, 1875, is a notice: "Farmers, don't forget to prepare for fires by plowing around your farms. If you haven't already done so, do it immediately. It may thus save you a large expense." And city council proceedings of November 27, 1876 state that City Engineer Simon Murphy made a report on firebreaks plowed around the City of Kearney for the protection against prairie fires, and on October 22, 1877, a bill was approved from T. E. Moore for plowing firebreaks around the City Cemetery in the amount of \$6.75.

The bucket brigade and plowing of firebreaks constituted the only fire protection for the city until the summer of 1883 when a city waterworks was installed. At the June council meeting the Finance Committee was instructed to negotiate * * * for a hook and ladder truck and for 3 dozen extra rubber buckets. And at the July meeting, a committee was instructed to obtain figures on a building "2 story high, 20x40, with cupola for firebell."

The **New Era** of August 4, 1883 reported the arrival of the hook and ladder truck:

The Hook and Ladder truck arrived over the B & M Railroad Thursday evening. Several hundred people assembled at the depot to see it and assist in taking it from the car. The Kearney Cornet Band volunteered their services and made very entertaining music at the depot and in advance of the hook and ladder boys on their way up Wyoming Avenue with the truck. The wagon and frame ladders are very substantially made.

Just for the fun of the thing, members of the company took a little run north on Wyoming Avenue, and although all were amateurs, good time was made. Three cheers and a Tiger were given to the Cornet Band for furnishing music. Work will be pushed rapidly on the City Hall and engine house, and by September 1 it is thought the truck will be housed in the new quarters.

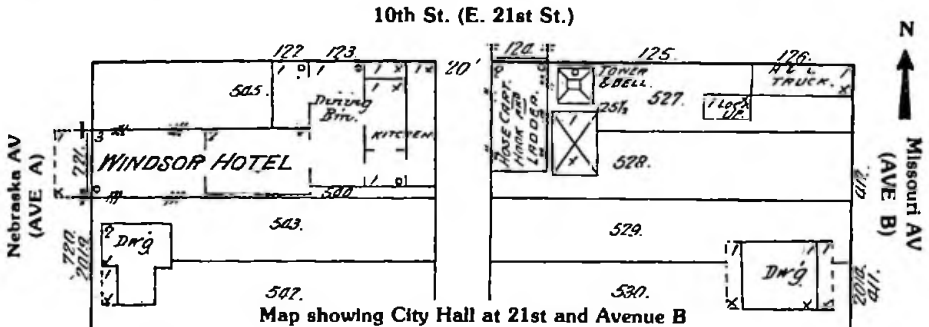
The fall of the year is a good time to practice, and no doubt many evenings will be devoted to "running with the machine".

The Kearney Volunteer Fire Department was officially organized on September 30, 1883. Its charter membership numbered 42 who were known as the Kearney Protection Hook and Ladder Company. The following week, on October 8, the city council asked its Finance Committee "to see what they can get a good hose cart and 500 feet of 1½" hose for." By November 3, the Wide Awake Hose Co., No. 1 was organized with 24 active members and eight honorary members.

By state law, firemen are formed into companies of 25 men each. A fireman may

serve on active duty as long as ten years, and is then put on inactive status. The law also provides that a city may not have any more companies than it has pieces of apparatus.

The city hall was completed on the south side of Tenth Street (21st St.) east of the alley between Nebraska Avenue (Ave. A) and Missouri Avenue (Ave. B). The first floor would house the hook and ladder truck, buckets and hose cart, and the second floor would be a council chamber and for meetings of the hook and ladder and the hose companies. (This is the present location of Jack Lederman & Co.)



From the time of its organization the companies of the Kearney Volunteer Fire Department became involved in community activities, and in competition with each other and with other companies in the state. In its first year they sponsored a Thanksgiving Ball, which the *New Era* reported was "among the finest ever held in Kearney," and a New Year's Eve Masquerade. Both were held at More's Hall.

When a fire was reported in the newspaper, mention was made of which company was first to arrive, with the other always "a close second." Awards for outstanding performance and service have been received since the earliest years. G. Kramer, who came from New York and was the owner of the New York Cheap Cash Store in Kearney, was coach of the coupling crew of the Wide Awake Hose Company which won many awards at state and national meets. At the July 1887 Annual Firemen's Tournament in Kearney the *New Era* reported that the city was brilliantly decorated with the magnificent arch at 10th Street and Wyoming Avenue. An electric starter "that would not fail" and telephone communication between the judge's stand and the starting point were installed, and the amphitheatre at the fairgrounds completed to seat 700. The reception committee and the Kearney Cornet Band welcomed incoming firemen at the depot, and a parade of the firemen in full uniform opened the tournament. Events other than the tournament included an exhibition of the city's new waterworks, which impressed the visitors greatly, and foot races by the boys of the Industrial School relieved the waiting between races. Music by the Cornet Band and Industrial School Band was played throughout each day.

Kearney's firemen outshone all competitors. In the state competition, G. Kramer's team made a perfect coupling in the unprecedented time of 39 $\frac{1}{4}$ seconds, beating the Thurstons of Omaha "Champions of the World" by two seconds. It so discouraged the Thurstons that they straightaway went home. At the "free-for-all" competition on the last afternoon, four entries had been made in the hook and ladder competition, but only the Kearney Protection ran, no others being willing to enter against them. In the hose coupling "free-for-all" G. Kramer's team made the finest run

on the tournament, followed by J. C. Stein's team (also Kearney) coming in second.

Twelve hose companies, including one from Amsterdam, New York, and eight hook and ladder companies competed. A year later in contests at Deadwood, Dakota, Tony Cornelius and Chas. Mott, members of G. Kramer's team were dubbed "Champion Hose Couplers of the World," a title they proved when they became national winners at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Other awards in those early years were won by the Kearney Cotton Pickers, Kearney Protection #2, and Wide Awake #2.

As the city grew, council minutes reflect the addition or replacement of hose carts and purchase of more hose, as well as the installation of more fire hydrants. By 1888 plans were made for a new city hall to include a place for the fire equipment. Completed in 1889, it stood at the site of the present city hall, a magnificent 2-story building of brick and red sandstone with clock tower. A map dated September 1889 contains the following description of Kearney and its Fire Department:

KEARNEY, population 8000

12 miles of water pipes, 97 hydrants

6 miles of water pipes, 60 hydrants to be put in during fall of 1889.

Fire Department: organized volunteer, 92 men; 3 independent hand hose carts, 2000 ft. of hose, 1 hook and ladder truck; fire alarm by telephone, streets not paved, grades level.

Kearney's first motorized unit, and first in the state, was a 1912 Kissell, a solid-tire, chain-drive truck, used until 1928. Next a 1922 American LeFrance, a 1000 gallon pumper which lasted until 1955. While the firemen tested the pumping power of the new LeFrance, the superintendent of the water department also wanted to test the city's water pressure, which was increased to a point where it is said that plumbing at every place in town was blown out.

Major fires during the last 100 years include the Midway Hotel in 1891, the first major fire; Pickering Bldg., Golden Rule Store, Empress Theatre, Coddington Block, and the Court House fires, all on Central Avenue; First Methodist Church in 1969; Elevator on East Railroad, Nelson Motors in the city, Baldwin's plant and a large hanger at the Air Base after World War II. The fire loss record is a source of pride to the firemen and to the city. The losses have been so small and the record so good that Kearney's property owners have enjoyed through the years one of the lowest fire insurance rates in the state.

Many hours by many dedicated men make up the history of the men of the Volunteer Fire Department. For some it was their life interest. Dr. M. A. Hoover was a charter member, a dedicated fireman and officer for all his life. At his death on March 9, 1940, a special Resolution was adopted by the department recognizing his many years of service.

Another charter member, Edwin R. Finch, who died September 29, 1939, had made arrangements for his body to be cremated and the ashes carried to the cemetery on the fire truck, with a band in the funeral procession, and a banquet after the funeral for the firemen. True to his wishes, as reported on the front page of the **Kearney Daily Hub** of October 2, "Last Ride for Ed Finch on Fire Truck," the ashes were carried amid beautiful flowers to the cemetery, with the Fire Department drum corps following and the firemen transported in National Guard trucks, after which a luncheon was served to all the firemen.

Many others besides these charter members could be mentioned for their dedica-

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tion and service. One most recently honored was Clarence Alcorn, who is "the" veteran member of the present Volunteer Firemen. Alcorn joined the Department in 1927, was a fireman and an officer of their organization for over 50 years.

The first dinner party of each year, to which all firemen of Buffalo County are invited, is the "Bernard Harden Stag" in honor of Harden's longtime service and dedication before his death in 1982.

For most of its 100 years, the Kearney Volunteer Fire Department has consisted of two companies of 25 men each. Presently, No. 1 is the Ed Finch Company; No. 2 is the Pard Porter Company, named for the only member who lost his life as a result of fire-fighting, not in the fire itself, but from exposure and a bout of pneumonia from which he died a short time later. During this past year a third company has been formed, which will be named the Bernard E. Harden Company No. 3. This brings the total active Volunteer Firemen in Kearney to 75 men. They are in their own fine Fire Hall, and all respond when the alarm sounds. Three rural fire protection trucks are also housed in the Fire Hall and manned by the Kearney department.

An emergency unit added in 1938 was the second such unit in the state. All kinds of rescue equipment, including the Jaws of Life and scuba-diving equipment, are a part of the Fire Department today. Due to the leadership and efforts of Dr. Kenneth F. Kimball and Dr. Joel Johnson, Kearney's Emergency Medical Service under the direction of the Fire Department is second to none.

The citizens of Kearney are indeed fortunate to have equipment for all emergencies available at the Volunteer Fire Department. For the Volunteer and for the citizen, it's a matter of pride and dedication. For their 100 years of service, let's all give **THREE CHEERS AND A TIGER** for the Kearney Volunteer Fire Department.

SOURCES

Records of the Fire Department; Toast of Dr. M. A. Hoover, Jan. 1912; Bassett's **History of Buffalo County**; **Kearney Times**, Sept. 23, 1875; **Kearney New Era**, June 23, 1883 to July 28, 1887; **Kearney Daily Hub**, Oct. 2-6, 1939, June 1, 1973; interviews with Clarence Alcorn, LaMoyné Fern, Gordon Turner and A. J. Haynes Sept.-Oct., 1983; Letters from Eva Jane Kinney.