



# Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

February 1985

## FREIGHTING IN BUFFALO COUNTY

by Mardi Anderson

*Part I - "A Flash in the Pan" - Freighting from Kearney to the Black Hills in 1877*

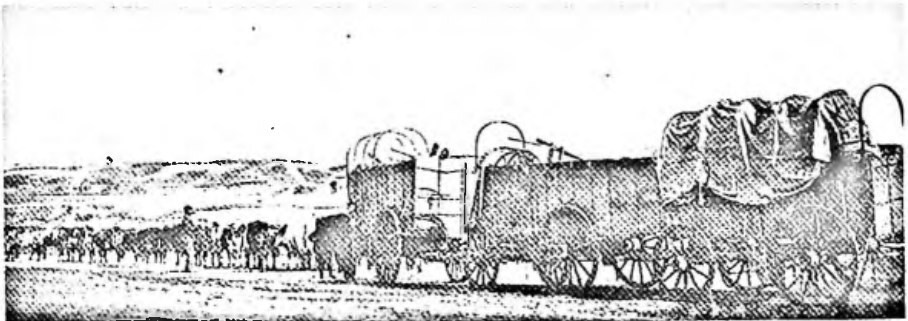
The completion of the Union Pacific Railroad in 1869 marked the end of organized freighting as a big business. Railroads moved supplies west and brought back products from the developing frontier. Freighting continued on a limited basis in those areas where railroads had not yet been constructed.

The Burlington and Missouri River Railroad was extended to join the Union Pacific in Buffalo County in 1872, resulting in the establishment of Kearney Junction. Kearney was not the first settlement in Buffalo County. People were already living at Elm Creek, a Union Pacific station, at Shelton, formerly Wood River Center, and a settlement had just been established at Gibbon. Kearney was the first of these settlements to become an incorporated city in the county.

By early spring, 1877, Kearney was 4 years old and had a population of about 1,000 people. The Union Pacific Railroad passed through it east-west and the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad came in from Hastings and points southeast. There was a mail route and stagecoach line north to Loup City. The Pioneer stage company ran stages daily, except Sundays, south to towns in the Republican River Valley where connections could be made to towns in northern Kansas.

Times were hard. For three years drouth and grasshoppers had ruined crops in Buffalo County. The whole nation was suffering from an economic depression. But up in the Black Hills, 330 miles northwest of Kearney, there was GOLD!

For several years rumors of gold in the Black Hills had circulated. No serious attempts had been made to mine the area because the territory was included in the Sioux reservation. Late in the summer of 1874, the rumors of gold were verified by an



Freight wagons such as these left Kearney almost daily in the spring and summer of 1877 carrying supplies to mining towns in the Black Hills. —Nebraska State Historical Society photo

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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

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WITH THE SOCIETY

February Meeting

The February meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society will be held at the Miller Community Hall at 2 p.m., Sunday, February 24. Dr. Philip Holmgren will be in charge of the slide presentation and discussion about "The Freighting Experience in Buffalo County, 1876-1886". This program is funded in part by the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities. Refreshments will be served by the Miller Senior Citizens.

AT THE MUSEUM

The committee from the Fort Kearny Genealogical Society continues to meet faithfully every Monday afternoon at Trails and Rails Museum. Their current project is the indexing of school records from the 1880's. If you think handwriting today is difficult to read, talk to these ladies about penmanship a hundred years ago!

Reminder: The March meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society will be a joint meeting with the Fort Kearny Genealogical Society at the Freighters' Hotel on the museum grounds. This meeting will provide an opportunity for members of both organizations to learn about the records which are being indexed and preserved at Trails and Rails.

Holmes Photos

Charles Holmes was a farmer north of Elm Creek in the late 1880's through 1908. His hobby was photography. Hundreds of his glass negatives have been preserved by his family. They have granted permission to the Buffalo County Historical Society to make prints from these negatives. Ada Brodine of Elm Creek, daughter of Charles Holmes, is providing assistance in identifying the people and farmsteads in these pictures. So far 171 negatives have been indexed and 102 prints made.

Army expedition into the Black Hills led by Lt. Col. George Custer. Winter delayed prospecting, and during the following year the U.S. Army had the difficult task of attempting to keep prospectors out of this Indian territory while negotiating with the Sioux.

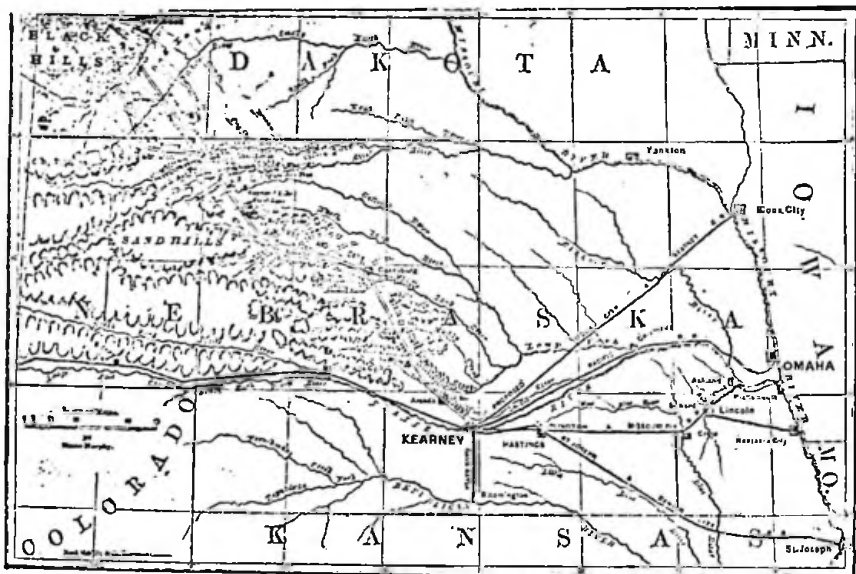
Negotiations were unsuccessful and the result was the Sioux War of 1876. While prospectors flocked to the Black Hills that summer, General Custer lost the battle at Little Big Horn. In October the Sioux signed away their rights to the Black Hills.

Prospectors could now legally enter the Hills and look for gold. They needed food, clothing, tools, and mining equipment. The Union Pacific could bring these supplies into Nebraska but freight wagons had to carry them from the railroad to the Hills. Cheyenne and Sidney were the nearest to the Black Hills, but other towns along the Union Pacific thought they had just as good, if not better, reasons for being the supply points.

Kearney entered the competition with vigor. A route was laid out from Kearney to Deadwood for stage coaches, freight wagons, and prospectors. Road ranches were set up and all major rivers were bridged. Local banker, C. W. Dake, was instrumental in establishing this route and the stage line which would use the road. He was joined by R. S. Downing from nearby Lowell at about the same time as John Campbell left Kearney with the first concord stage to Deadwood.

The advantages of the Kearney to Deadwood route were loudly proclaimed in local newspapers. According to the **Central Nebraska Press**,

"The route from this city to Custer City and Deadwood, is with little exception over a...fertile, and gently rooling (sic) country, well watered with numerous streams, most of which are skirted with an abundance of



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growing timber. Grasses abound in the greatest profusion and luxuriance...

"...Good ranches have been established outside the limits of permanent settlements where the traveler can find excellent accommodations both for himself and beast and at prices that do not imply robbery. To all persons contemplating a trip to the Hills, either by stage or with freight, we unhesitatingly say by all means take the Kearney route..."

The **Weekly Kearney Times** argued,

"...We will not dispute but that Sidney is nearer, on an air line, to the Hills, but owing to impenetrable sandhills the route is a circuitous one making the distance from Sidney to Deadwood but 20 miles nearer than from Kearney, while the greater portion of that route is over sand beds through which their teams toil for days. That route too is greatly destitute of wood and water, while there is but a scanty supply of grass..."

The Kearney route to the Black Hills went north out of Kearney through the draw which was later dammed to form Kearney Lake. From there the road went west and then turned north over the hills to the Wood River Valley. Then it turned northwest to follow the Wood River to Armada, about a mile north of present-day Miller. From Armada, the route turned more northerly away from the Wood River into the South Loup Valley in Custer County. This description by the **Central Nebraska Press** makes the route sound quite attractive to freighters and other travelers with animals to care for:

"From Kearney to Armada in Buffalo County, on Wood River, a distance of twenty-one miles, will be found the most uneven portion of the whole route winding through the rolling country, but the grades are light and the surface smooth and hard."

April and May must have been exciting in Kearney. Kearney had been awarded the mail contract and delivery to the Black Hills was to begin May 1. Eighty mules were purchased and brought in from Missouri for use on the mail route. Local harness-maker W. A. Downing got the contract for making the harness. Prospectors began arriving daily, some by train, many by wagon. They stopped in Kearney to rest, purchase supplies, or to wait for more favorable weather before continuing on their way up the Kearney-Black Hills Trail. Wagons were leaving Kearney daily. According to newspaper accounts, as many as 10 or 20 wagons a day started up the Trail. Business was booming for the merchants selling mining supplies. T. C. Roberts was doing such a brisk general merchandise business he had to add a warehouse to the back of his store. Merchants were receiving goods by the train car load to stock their stores. Other train car loads of supplies arrived to be freighted by wagon to the Black Hills.

While there was no organized freighting outfit in Kearney, several individuals were involved in the business. Real estate agent H. M. Hatch advertised that "(a)ll persons wishing to send any kind of freight to the Hills, also persons wishing to haul freight to the Hills will find it to their advantage to call at this office."

One of the persons to answer that advertisement was Charles Larsen. Mr. Larsen, a native of Norway, had come to Kearney, via Chicago and Omaha, in 1875. He homesteaded northwest of town, and, shortly after his arrival, married a widow with four children. This family doubled in size over the following years. According to his youngest daughter, Martha, "The homestead provided most of the food for the

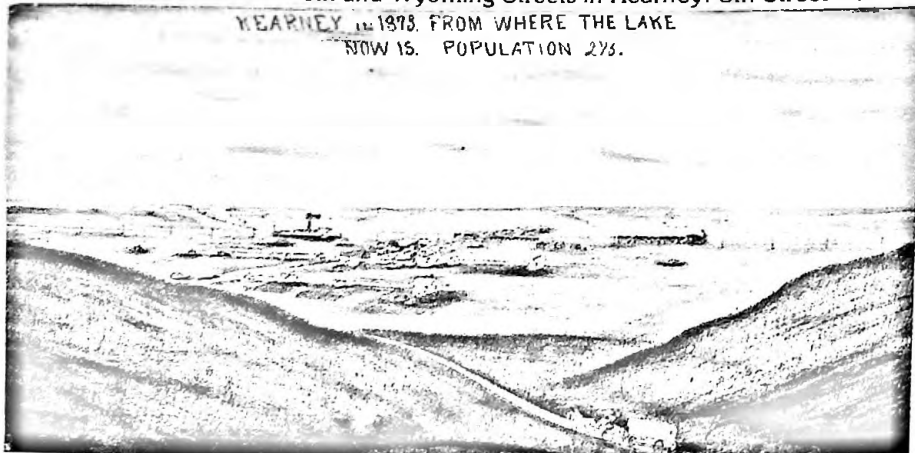
family. To provide the necessary cash papa dug wells for the neighbors. He also freighted some to Deadwood over the Black Hills stage route."

The Kearney-Black Hills Trail passed about 80 rods east of the Larsen house. Mr. Larsen "...needed fence posts. There were cedar trees on the Dismal river 150 miles northwest. He made...two, possibly three trips to the Black Hills over the Kearney-Black Hills Trail, hauling freight out, and (on the return trip he stopped) at the Plumber Hill Ford on the Dismal to cut cedar for his fence posts."

J. Altaffer, Nathan Campbell, and D. N. Wells were three other Kearney residents who took loads of freight to the Black Hills during the spring and summer. Mr. Altaffer took a total of 13 men and 10 wagons loaded with flour and meal in his train which left Kearney in mid-April. Nathan Campbell, who had served as Kearney's first mayor three years previously, apparently went alone to the Hills with his 7,000 pound load of freight pulled by five yoke of oxen. He stayed in the Black Hills all summer, returning to Kearney in mid-October. The newspaper account of his return does not indicate his success or failure in selling his freight, or in prospecting if he tried any during the summer. In July D. N. Wells built a four-decked chicken coop on his wagon which he filled with chickens (both spring chickens and "matronly" were accepted) and took to the Black Hills.

Most of the freight leaving Kearney was hauled to the gold fields. Some, however, was hauled to ranches which had been set up along the trail to accommodate those traveling to the Black Hills. James Van Sickle, who was also the Buffalo County Treasurer, and J. E. Chidester, one of the county commissioners, both started ranches along the Kearney-Black Hills Trail. They took wagon loads of feed and produce to supply their ranches so that the traveler would "find all things necessary to his comfort, nearly level to what he would find in the best kept hotels, including wines, liquors, and cigars." Billie Wilson and George Clark, both from Kearney, started a road ranch at Antelope Crossing, that point where the Kearney-Black Hills Trail crossed the Niobrara River.

Wagon maker, August Anderson, whose son was to become a prominent photographer in Kearney, ran advertisements in a local newspaper announcing he would make carriages and freight wagons." His blacksmith and wagonmaking shop was located on the corner of 8th and Wyoming Streets in Kearney. 8th Street was the



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first street south of the railroad tracks and Wyoming is now Central Avenue. According to the **Central Nebraska Press** in mid-April, "Anderson & Co. are turning out an unusual number of very fine jobs this spring, and are working all the hands the building can accommodate. They are making a large number of freight wagons for the Black Hills trade." By November Mr. Anderson was adding another 8 to 10 feet to the west end of his shop.

Not only did Mr. Anderson construct new wagons, but he also adapted existing wagons for hauling freight. According to his granddaughter, Miriam Anderson Worlock, he changed the size of axles on wagons going to the Black Hills. With the stronger axles these wagons were better equipped to carry the heavy loads of flour, meal, food supplies, mining tools and machinery over the trail.

By the end of the summer it was over. The Sidney-Black Hills Trail was recognized as the established route. Nothing more was heard about the wagons coming through Kearney or freight being shipped. Kearney's brief role in the saga of the Black Hills Gold Rush was finished.

SOURCES

Interviews with Miriam Worlock and A. Lauritz Larsen: **Larsen Genealogy** compiled by A. L. Larsen: **Where The Buffalo Roamed. From The Missouri To The Great Salt Lake: An Account Of Overland Freighting** by Wm. Lass: **History Of Buffalo County** by Bassett; **Central Nebraska Press** April-November, 1877. **Weekly Kearney Times** April and July, 1877.



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