



# Buffalo Tales



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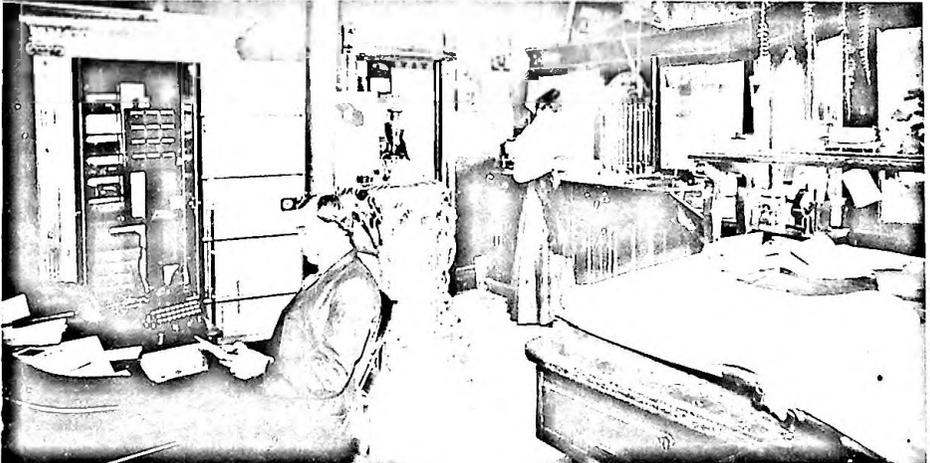
July-August 1982

## SOME PEOPLE AND EVENTS IN THE EARLY HISTORY OF AMHERST

by Margaret Ellen Nielsen

Amherst, like its neighbor to the west, Miller, has its origins in the decision of the Kearney and Black Hills Railroad to build up the Wood River valley via a route which did not pass through the existing towns of Stanley and Armada. New towns were platted in 1890 and the inhabitants of Stanley and Armada invited to move to the new location. As the majority of them did move, the old towns gradually disappeared.

Settlement had begun in this part of the Wood River valley at least as early as 1872 and enough people were there in March of 1873 to organize School District No. 13. Subsequently a post office was established there and given the name Huntsville after Miles B. Hunt. One of the first teachers recalled: "The first location of Huntsville, which was the school house, was picturesque; the building was white with green blinds. The river and its bridge and overhanging trees on its banks makes a pretty sylvan background." Huntsville also became a stopping point for the stage and mail route from Kearney to St. Helena. The first years were hard upon the settlers. Storms, drought, grasshoppers and national depression combined to test the mettle of the pioneers. Adah Seaman Basten, a teacher in District 13 wrote: "The people were near the border line of hunger. Bread and gravy were the great staple. Coffee was made from wheat and corn, browned, and then ground. In 1877, Huntsville was obliged to



Interior of First National Bank, Amherst, A. T. Reynolds seated at the desk.

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Trails and Rails Museum Phone . 234-3041 If no answer, call 236-5566 or 237-7858.

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## MUSEUM ACTIVITIES

Activities at the Trails and Rails Museum continue at a rapid pace. Attendance to date has more than doubled that of a year ago. New displays are set up every three weeks. A display of antique wooden kitchenware is on display at the present time. This will be followed by a display of antique and collectable dishes.

Glen and Roger Wisch and crew laid up the foundation for the first school structure erected in Buffalo County. Williams Brothers of Hastings loaded the schoolhouse onto a lowboy for the two-hour trip to the museum site in Kearney, where it is now resting neatly on its new foundation. Renovation is expected to begin in about two weeks.

The old tar-like coating on the steam locomotive is being removed. A sand and water blaster is being used to remove this coating, which is offering rather stubborn resistance. We hope to have the locomotive ready for an application of metal primer soon. This will be followed by a color coat consistent with that used when the locomotive was first manufactured. This is a difficult and time-consuming venture but is necessary for the proper restoration and preservation of this fine display item.

Limited space at this time does not permit listing names of all of the fine volunteers who have assisted in the daily operation within the museum, or for members of the crews working on special projects outside the museum. Their contribution in time and effort are greatly appreciated. We could not operate without them. Please let us know if you can help occasionally and would like to do so.

—Maynard Envick, Museum Board Chairman

change its name to avoid confusion with other post offices having similar names. The name Stanley was chosen but it was soon identified with a settlement two miles to the west. It was this latter village that grew to have a store, hotel, bank, blacksmith shop and church before the railroad by-passed it.

Ed Otto, interviewed June 7th, 1965 said: "They wouldn't move the depot to the town, so the town had to move to the depot. The people in Old Stanley weren't too happy, but the railroad offered a free lot to anyone who would move...(and)...gradually people moved up and started building homes and business places in the cornfields." An article in the *Kearney Hub* of October 1, 1890 stated: "Amherst is growing rapidly. The E.U.B. church is completed. Mr. Jakway of Kearney is building a neat cottage on Garfield Avenue. Peck's Hotel is to be moved from Stanley next week." An early citizen of Amherst was Jacob Schnoor,<sup>1</sup> who came to town in 1890 as manager of the Gilcrest lumber yard. Subsequently, Mr. Schnoor acquired farm land in the area where he, with his sons, raised cattle and horses. Eighty acres just south of town was planted to alfalfa; on this land he built a large two-story home.

School District 119, organized in 1893, purchased a small church for a school house with Herman Kapedsky as director. The *Amherst Times* of December 8, 1893 published a rhymed business directory which included: Wysocki Brothers, general store; Nye Brothers, hardware; Charley Graham, "with windmill and pump; "jolly Chris with summer drinks, tobacco and candy, And if it's lunch you want at that he is quite handy"; "long John Schnoor", harness shop; Bill Wagner, barber shop (shave and a hair cut, ten cents); Ben's butcher shop; Ed Haase's pool hall; Mills Hotel; Wagner's general store; and another establishment where, "If there is anything you want or anything you need...you'll get it from Bead". Others were the Otto smithy; John and Mart, livery barn; G. A. Munroe, banker; and a "clean shaven doctor".

Amherst incorporated on June 18, 1894 with the following officers: O. G. Cobleigh, John Schnoor, Frank Outson, J. Y. Jones, and Stanley Wysocki. Further growth, however, was slowed by the depression of the nineties. The "clean-shaven doctor" went on to greener pastures and was succeeded in 1897 by a man with a luxuriant handle-bar mustache.

Dr. Raymond L. Hart of Fairfield, Nebraska, fresh out of the medical school of the University of Iowa, had as his first patient a man with typhoid fever, pronounced as dying by a Miller doctor. When the patient lived, word was "shuttled back and forth at the Ladies Aid Society and also at the continuous poker game in the back of Daugherty's store". With the prospect of a successful practice, Dr. Hart moved from the bachelor farm home of his boyhood friends, the Jenkins brothers, to the "bowl and pitcher hotel". In time, along with his office, he opened a small dispensary in the hotel, "and became a banker, horse-trader and respected citizen". His daughter Helen (St. John—Kennedy), in her memoirs of "Papa and Mama", wrote that in spite of the fact that he could not read a note of music, he sang in the United Brethren choir, could "saw off a mean 'Turkey in the Straw'", played the mandolin and "cut a buck and wing...on a Saturday night".

His "ideal state of Man About Town might never have ended if a black-haired, crinkly-eyed girl named Lottie...hadn't arrived in Amherst to help her relatives" in the hotel. Lottie, the daughter of David Crable, who had homesteaded near Kearney Station, proved to be "the exclusive model" Dr. Hart had been waiting for, and they were

soon married.

As a pair, they "attempted to do anything from being vaudeville entertainers to members of the school board". In addition to all his civic activities, Dr. Hart "had more work to do than any doctor should have been called upon" to do. When he left Amherst in 1921 to go into practice in Kearney, a large reception was held in the Opera House, at which J. E. Harris eulogized him as not only a good physician "but a good citizen, counsellor and friend".

The Black Hills Railroad only made it to Stapleton, and was taken over by the Union Pacific, but it was a vital force in the towns along its route. The Amherst **Fairplay**, successor to the **Times** and the **Mirror**, records the activities of a bustling little town with an active social life. In its first edition, of October 6, 1910, it reports the organization of the Amherst Dramatic Club at the home of Mr. and Mrs. G. E. Mansfield, with Editor M. P. McElroy as director. One play, "The Old District School", had already been presented at the Opera House to a \$47.55 house, and in Miller, with a \$36.85 house. The Business Men's Lecture Course announced five up-to-date numbers, the first of which was Sarah Waltham Brown and the Chicago Boys Choir.

The paper also carried a picture of the Amherst School, "erected in 1908 at a cost of \$4,200". The first tenth grade classes were held in January of 1909. For a number of years, it remained a tenth grade school; most of those wanting to graduate went to Miller or Kearney. Reba Schnoor Brown recalls boarding the motor, at 8:30 a.m. with other classmates, for the ride to classes in Miller. There she met Claire N. (Ted) Brown, son of Mr. and Mrs. George Brown of Miller, and the couple were married in 1923.

Many of the settlers in and around Amherst were German or Austrian immigrants. While those of Catholic faith could attend St. John Capistran in Amherst, the nearest church for Lutherans was Immanuel Lutheran, five miles northwest of town. This meant, for some people, a trip of as much as nine miles, over often impassable roads, to attend church. In 1907, a group of men asked for release from Immanuel to organize a church in Amherst. For many years, services were held in the Evangelical Church, which was rented for \$20 a year, until the parish bought the building. A new church was dedicated in 1968 and, in 1970, Immanuel Lutheran united with Trinity. The church celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary on July 11, 1982.



Amherst School Fire, March 17, 1928.

The First Farmers State Bank was established in Amherst with A. U. Dann of the Central National Bank of Kearney as President and Dr. Hart as Vice-President. Arthur Twiss Reynolds,<sup>2</sup> who had come from North Loup to help organize the bank, was cashier. The first crisis faced by the new institution was the Panic of 1907, but the bank issued scrip and continued operation as usual. In 1908 the bank was re-organized as the First National Bank of Amherst. Mr. Reynolds, who was active in many civic and fraternal organizations and once served as president of the school board, was to figure in one of the more exciting incidents in the history of the bank and the town—the day the school house burned down.

March 17, 1928—St. Patrick's Day—was just another Saturday in this predominantly German community, although a sudden minor crime wave in the county may have caused some discussion. Early on Friday the sixteenth, robbers broke into the hardware store of S. A. A. Walker of Gibbon, taking three Remington shot guns and an unknown quantity of shells. That night, at 10:15, a Buick was stolen from in front of the World Theatre in Kearney and was seen speeding down Central Avenue without lights. Early Saturday morning someone entered the Hill Brothers Store in Riverdale, taking several pairs of overalls, a red sweater, three brown sweaters, other articles of clothing, food, and \$6.30. The reason for all this activity was revealed about 3:00 p. m. on Saturday. Kenneth Parrish, 16, and Frank Fisher, 16, saw a mud-covered Buick parked behind the Amherst school. Fisher noticed that the south door was open and Frank Parrish, 14, noticed a window broken on the east side of the school. About 3:30 p. m., the fire alarm brought "practically every able-bodied man" to the schoolhouse, where a fire was burning out of control.

A. T. Reynolds and his employees had been among the few who hadn't rushed to the fire. It was almost closing time; about 3:50 p. m., when A. H. Czenkusch, assistant cashier, stood at his window, checking the money before putting it in the safe. He heard someone say, "Stick 'em up". A man in a red sweater and new overalls, with a silk stocking over his face, poked a Remington shotgun at him. Another man, similarly dressed, stood at the other window.

A. T., working at his desk, with his back to the window believed it was a joke until an angry, nervous voice demanded, "Stick 'em up! This bank is being robbed". La Vaughn (Moranville) Czenkusch, thought she recognized the voice of a former pupil, and also suspected a joke, until she saw the guns.

The taller robber came behind the counter and the staff was ordered to lie on the floor. He put the bills on the counter in the bib of his overalls and shoved the silver through the window to his confederate. Going into the vault, he took what money he saw, missing \$3,200 in currency in the safe. In his nervousness and haste he spilled money on the floor but didn't stop to pick it up. The robbers ordered the staff into the vault, threatening to "fill 'em full of lead" if they came out.

Mrs. Gertrude Vermeulen, owner of a confectionary store two doors north of the bank, and Mrs. Fred Belschner, who had just come out of her husband's store, both saw the men when they ran out of the bank and escaped in a Buick which had been parked near the alley with its motor running. Mrs. Belschner entered the bank and called to Mr. Reynolds, who, with the others came out. A later check showed \$2,654.50 was taken.

The identity of the men (all known in the area) was tentatively established by the next day. Their actions in Amherst and Kearney had aroused suspicion; they were

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under surveillance by the Kearney police. Three of the four men suspected were brought to trial and each was sentenced to twenty-two years in the penitentiary.

The school building was destroyed, but classes were held in Amherst churches until the new brick school could be built.<sup>3</sup> The depression of the thirties threatened the future of the town, but the bank continued to operate for many years. Mr. Reynolds died unexpectedly on September 23, 1942. The bank was liquidated, after which, Mrs. Reynolds moved to Kearney, where she lived until her death on October 9, 1971.

Today Amherst remains a close-knit community, with its schools and churches serving the descendants of many of the early settlers.

1. Jacob Schnoor was born in Schleswig-Holstein January 12, 1867 and came to this country when he was sixteen. He worked in a lumber yard at Denison, Iowa before coming to Amherst in 1890. In 1891 he married Betty Kenney, a native of Austria but reared in this country. The couple had eight children. One daughter, Mayme Patterson, died and her three children, aged one, two and three were also reared in the Schnoor home. Mr. Schnoor was a stockholder of the Amherst National Bank and served on the school board. The Schnoors are survived by two daughters, Reba (Brown) and Neta (Plischke), both of Kearney.
2. Born February 8, 1877 in Madison County, Nebraska, Reynolds received his primary training in a school house before graduating from Madison high school. He also attended Fremont Normal and Peru State Teachers College. After teaching near Leigh for two years, he traveled in Colorado, Nebraska, Montana, and Wyoming as an organizer of insurance and fraternal lodges for the American Order of Protection, based in Lincoln. He worked for a bank in North Loup before coming to Amherst. Mr. Reynolds married Emma Walther on April 27, 1916 and the couple had two daughters, Norma (Ahrendts) now of Kearney and Betty (Coover) of Littleton, Colorado. Mrs. Reynold's niece, Ruth Schini, also made her home with the family for many years.
3. Since the school records were destroyed, Clara Curd, in 1965, compiled a list of the high school students and teachers from 1908 to 1928 which is on file at the Trails and Rails Museum.

SOURCES

S. C. Bassett, *History of Buffalo County*, 1916; *Kearney Daily Hub*; Archives, Trails and Rails Museum; Interview with Reba Schnoor Brown, June 8, 1982; *Where the Buffalo Roamed*, 1967; Report of "C.F.F.", Investigator for the Nebraska Bankers Association, 3-17-28 to 3-22-28 and other information provided by Norma Reynolds Ahrendts.

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- |                            |         |                               |                |
|----------------------------|---------|-------------------------------|----------------|
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