



Buffalo Tales



Volume 4, No. 5

Buffalo County Historical Society

May, 1981

KEARNEY'S PROPHET: COL. W. W. PATTERSON

by Marian Dettman Johnson

Following the trail of Col. William W. Patterson from Warsaw, New York in 1831 to Kearney Junction in 1871 has been an exciting experience for this writer. I have traveled to Omaha for an interview and journeyed to Washington state to aid in the dissemination of material about a man who played an important role in the development of Kearney. I believe Mr. Patterson was here in 1871 when it all began, already envisioning the area as an agricultural paradise based upon irrigation and water power. He backed up his faith in the future of the region by planting his own roots at this place.

I will share the information acquired about Col. Patterson as it came to me over a period of seven years. The material has been gathered through interviews, traveling, the reading of histories and newspapers and conducting tours at the Frank House.

Unknowningly, I started searching for Col. Patterson soon after moving into the Frank House early in 1974. James Denney of the **Omaha World-Herald** visited the Frank House in April and wanted to establish a link between the George W. Frank of Corning, Iowa and that of Kearney, Nebraska. In December, 1975 Mrs. Harold McClure donated two copies of the **Biographical Souvenir of Buffalo, Kearney & Phelps Counties of Nebraska**, 1890 to the Frank House archives. This publication contained a biography establishing Col. Patterson as an early resident and provided the answer to James Denney's query about C. W. Frank's ties to Kearney. Frank and Patterson were first cousins from Warsaw, New York who met once again in Corning, Iowa about 1870.



Col. W. W. Patterson

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
- Individual membership... 3.00
- Institutional membership. 5.00
- Sustaining membership... 25.00 +
- Life membership..... 100.00

Address:

Box 523, Kearney, Nebraska 68847

Officers

- President Alice Howell
- Vice-President Maxine Schroeder
- Secretary Edna Luce
- Treasurer..... Halvin S. Johnson
- Past President..... Philip S. Holmgren

Directors

Term expiring June 30, 1981

- Opal Reese, Pleasanton
- Carl Oran, Kearney
- Earle Webb, Odessa

Term expiring June 30, 1982

- Viola Mueller, Amherst
- Alvin E. Payne, Kearney
- Laverne McMullen, Gibbon

Term expiring June 30, 1983

- Leonard S. Silver, Kearney
- Maynard Envick, Kearney
- Glenn C. Stover, Poole

Trails & Rails Museum

Phone.....234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

New officers elected at the annual meeting on April 26 are Maxine Schroeder, president; Marian Johnson, vice-president; Edna Luce, secretary and Viola Mueller, treasurer. Board members elected are Barbara Saum, Elm Creek; Opal Reese, Pleasanton; Philip S. Holmgren, Kearney, all for 3-year terms, and Ruth Curd, Amherst, to fill the unexpired term of Viola Mueller. New officers and directors take office on June 1.

Outgoing board members are Earle G. Webb, Odessa; Carl Oran, Kearney and Halvin S. Johnson, Kearney, who served three years as treasurer.

.....

Mark your Calendar: On Saturday, **May 30**, the Trails and Rails Museum opens for the summer season. Hours will be from 1:00 to 5:00 each afternoon. Volunteers are badly needed. If you can help, call Alice Howell, 237-7858, or Viola Mueller, 234-4168.

On Sunday afternoon, **June 7**, at 2:00 o'clock, the Buffalo County Historical Society will meet at the Visitor's Center of Fort Kearny Historical Park. Kim Naden will give the program on "Walking the Oregon Trail," a project of his last two summers under a grant from the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities.

The Nebraska Museums Coalition will hold a state meeting in Kearney on **June 19-20**. A banquet will be held at the Nebraskan on Friday night, June 19. On Saturday, there will be a folk craft festival on the west campus of Kearney State College from 10:00 to 4:00. Craft demonstrations, workshops and a bus tour of historic houses in Kearney are among the activities of the day.

It is hoped that there will be a good representation from Kearney and Buffalo County at these events. Further details will be sent later.

The Frank House opened for tours in 1976 and, while presenting background material for the Frank involvement in Kearney, I often mentioned Col. W. W. Patterson and his part in the early development of this community. On the 25th of September 1978, Mrs. Paul Knecht of Wood River informed me after a tour that she was a descendant of Mrs. Patterson. Her grandfather, Van Orden Harris Giddings, was a brother of Mrs. Patterson. She suggested I get in touch with her uncle, Glen Giddings, of Omaha. I placed a telephone call to him immediately but was unable to arrange a personal visit until the 20th of April, 1979.

Now a retired postal employee, Mr. Giddings moved to Kearney with his parents in 1894 at the age of one year and lived here until 1910. He regretted being unable to graduate with his class. Mr. Giddings' father was a carpenter who lived in Corning, Iowa and moved to Kearney to participate in the "boom." He told me that his Aunt Margaret Pattie Giddings Patterson was a Lincoln seamstress when she met Col. Patterson. He recalled how difficult it was for Aunt Maggie after the Colonel's untimely death, for she was left with six children during the Panic of the 1890's. A Kearney judge arranged for her to draw a pension as the widow of a Civil War veteran. Mr. Giddings also remembered that Mrs. Patterson died at their home in Kenwood in 1901. He cleared up one question raised by Patterson's 1890 biography. The unknown author said Col. Patterson and his family were moving to New Mexico to establish another community. This venture never materialized, Mr. Giddings noted, for the family suffered financially during the depression of the 1890's and was forced to remain in Kearney. He suggested that I contact Mrs. Rupert Gleason of Seattle, Washington, who is Col. Patterson's granddaughter. It seemed impossible to find someone only two generations from this special person who was a forty year old adult in Kearney Junction 108 years ago.

Mr. Giddings also informed me that the family was interred at the Kearney Cemetery. Mr. and Mrs. Patterson are buried there along with three of their children: Barrett (Burd) a twin son, Wm. A. (Gus), and a daughter, Lois.

Last summer, while planning a trip to Idaho and Washington, I wrote to Mrs. Gleason requesting an interview. Nina Sears Gleason, a widow, lives near her son on Vashon Island near Seattle. She is a tall, attractive lady with a stately manner who warmly received us and was anxious to share recollections about her grandfather. Mrs. Gleason was born in Kearney November 23, 1893, five months after the death of her grandfather. Her father, William Sears, was a Moline, Ill. native who was born in 1865. He held various positions in Kearney such as bank employee, Watson ranch foreman and a postal employee. Wenona Patterson Sears, her mother, born June 4, 1873, at Kearney Junction was the first child of Colonel and Mrs. W. W. Patterson.

Mrs. Gleason said it was her understanding that "her grandfather, Col. Patterson, sent for George Frank to come to Kearney and get involved in the development of Kearney, Nebraska." Her mother said the family was very proud and kept up appearances despite financial setbacks. Her grandfather, formally attired, was always accompanied by a coachman. He was extravagant. The children had a private tutor. The following is Mrs. Gleason's account from my tape recording:

Grandpa...he did not have any use of public school. Well of course they were bad, but they were better than nothing and he hired this man, he was highly educated, but he drank...Grandfather hired him as a private tutor...and Mother said that their private schoolroom reeked with the smell of alcohol...she said you could have struck a match and it would blow up, he was so pickled and he'd go to sleep and the kids just did not learn much, you know, but he (Grandpa) kept him for I don't know how long. The loss of an infant son, Burd, was a blow to the Pattersons. Mrs. Gleason

recalled vividly the account of her grandfather's grief. The Colonel wrapped the baby in a white woolen blanket and 'laid him out' on the piano refusing his interment for some time.

In 1976 Mrs. M. H. Worlock shared a copy of **The Kearney Enterprise** dated December 22, 1889. This issue highlighted the "MEN OF KEARNEY," with photographs and brief histories, that concerning Col. W. W. Patterson read:

A prophet who always predicts great improvements for Kearney and never fails; the recognized founder of the present city; the originator of the great water power and hundreds of other similar advancements, are all found in Col. W. W. Patterson. He is the sage of Kearney, and his wide knowledge of the science in every branch makes him a veritable encyclopedia for the projection of Kearney's many schemes. Col. Patterson was born at Warsaw, N.Y. in 1831. He was one of the early settlers of Minneapolis, Minn., and came to Kearney in 1871 when the city did not have the dignity of the border settlement. From Minneapolis he enlisted in the 12th regiment, in 1861, serving in the Army of the Potomac until honorably discharged in 1864. Col. Patterson's history would fill volumes. He is universally respected wherever known, and is a leader in every practical improvement. The first duty of a stranger is to make the Colonel's acquaintance, and it is one that always is and always will be valued more than words can express.

Col. Patterson grew up in western New York state and was employed for a time by Hon. Augustus Frank, G. W. Frank, Sr.'s brother, at his dry goods store at Warsaw. His military career began with a New York state regiment. Upon moving to Minneapolis in 1856 he took the lead in the promotion of that city as a community utilizing water power for commercial growth. Thirty thousand circulars were distributed adver-



Nina Sears Gleason

tising the advantages of Minneapolis as a manufacturing city.

His career was interrupted by the Civil War. Enlisting as a first sergeant he ended his military service as a brevet lieutenant colonel. Due to injuries suffered at Gettysburg and Grant's Wilderness campaign he left the service in 1864. Returning to Minneapolis he sold real estate and served in the state legislature. Due to failing health he was advised to seek a warmer climate.

Moving to Iowa, he took a position with the C. B. & Q. railroad and founded the city of Creston, near Corning where the G. W. Frank family had been residing since 1869. In the interest of the same company he laid out Lowell, a few miles east of Fort Kearny, Nebraska and assisted in selecting the site for the present city of Kearney.

In the winter of 1871 D. N. Smith, the town lot and land agent for the C. B. & Q. for the state of Nebraska, sent me to Fort Kearny with a number of teams and men amply provided with instruments for topographical and geological surveys determining for the C. B. & Q. railroad company if the country between Lincoln and Fort Kearny could ever be made habitable and be developed into an agricultural country. Although laughed at by the people of the state and by the officers at Fort Kearny, I analyzed the soil, studied out the geological formation, discovered the great underflow in this whole Platte valley by which the water rushes through the sand and gravel below the bed of the Platte River so that this whole valley of the Platte could be irrigated from Denver to Omaha, and that it would furnish at least 5,000 horsepower in the center of every township for manufacturing purposes, for generating electricity to furnish power, light and heat, and to build up one of the finest sections of the Union...

Having lived in Minneapolis and having studied hydraulics and hydrostatics under the United States officers in charge of the Mississippi River, and being conversant with every feature of the grand water power at Minneapolis, I at first readily saw what could be done to make this the grandest water power on earth.

The preceding was taken from an interview with Col. Patterson shortly before his death and appeared in **The Kearney Daily Hub** June 30, 1893. The Colonel's vision, of course, was partly realized in the development of the Kearney canal and water power plant.

The record of W. W. Patterson's contributions to Kearney's growth is obscured by time, if well recognized during his life. We know that he played the violin and acted as host at a gathering at the Junction House in January, 1872 and was married at the



Mrs. W. W. Patterson (Pattie M. Giddings) and children, McClellan Custer, Hourli, Fred, Lols, Wenona (Mrs. Gleason's mother) and Mary Arvilla.

Buffalo County Historical Society
 Box 523
 Kearney, NE 68847

Non-Profit Organization Bulk Rate <hr/> U.S. Postage PAID Postal Permit No. 7 Kearney, Nebraska
--

same place to Miss Maggie Giddings, August 29, 1872 with Rev. Asbury Collins officiating. They were to have seven children, four girls and three boys. It was here also that the Union Sabbath School was organized with Patterson as superintendent. We know that he committed himself to Kearney's future from the first years, sustained always by his dream of irrigation and water power in the Platte Valley. Practically, it is probable that he supported his family through his real estate interests. Patterson sold real estate for the railroad companies as well as Perkins and Harford and he invested in town lots, an addition to the city, and in farm land. There is no question that he was always active in community affairs and among the foremost of those promoting Kearney during its boom years. As noted earlier, the collapse of the boom and the onset of hard times in the 1890's left him nearly broke and obliged to give up his last venture, the new community in New Mexico. These set backs may have contributed to his declining health.

After a year's illness, Col. W. W. Patterson died on June 29, 1893. He was 62.
 "COLONEL PATTERSON is DEAD"

It is with sadness deep and unalloyed that the Hub this afternoon conveys to its readers the intelligence of the death of Col. W. W. Patterson, Kearney's prophet, and one of her wisest and truest friends. A genuine sorrow will pervade and entire community at the loss of this staunch, true man and friend, whose every thought was of the future greatness of Kearney and the great Valley of the Platte.

The Daily Hub announced the above on its editorial page on June 29, 1892, and the Kearney Board of Trade that same evening drafted and unanimously adopted the following resolution:

Resolved, that the Kearney board of trade learns with deep regret of the death of Col. W. W. Patterson, a pioneer of Kearney, a citizen foremost in the advancement of great public enterprises, and an enthusiastic believer in the great destiny of this city, whose ideas were in advance of the progress of the times and whose efforts were untiring along all lines of material development.

A single news item about the passing of Col. Patterson in the same issue contains this statement: "Col. Patterson located the city of Kearney in 1871 while in the employ of the C. B. & Q. railroad company and has been a prominent character in Kearney's history ever since."

The story of Kearney will continue to unfold as more research is done and individuals generously supply information. Col. Patterson and his family indeed left their imprint on the city and the community is a finer place because of their efforts.

SOURCES

Sources not cited in the text: *The Central Star*, February 2, 1872; *The Kearney Times*, July 20, 1876; S. C. Bassett, *Buffalo County History*, 2 vols.; *Souvenir Booklet of the City of Kearney, Nebraska*, 1973; Kearney Cemetery Records, Kearney City Hall; and the Frank House Archives.

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