



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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1890 IN KEARNEY

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

"Nebraska in the 1880's was a press-agent's dream, a Chamber of Commerce delight, a real estate man's joy. Everything was up, bigger and better and more promising today than yesterday, and who knew how much better it would be tomorrow!" Dorothy Weyer Creigh, *Nebraska, Where Dreams Grow*, 1980.

Kearney's prominence as one of the leading cities of Nebraska in 1890, and the city's reputation as a thriving, energetic and progressive center is well documented in a review in the *Kearney Daily Hub* of October 19, 1890: "No cause has contributed more to advertise our city than the fact that of all cities and towns included in a radius of many hundred miles, Kearney alone possesses a successful and abundant water power. If Kearney had nothing else to be proud of, she could justly brag of having created a river in what was once the Great American Desert." Previous articles in *Buffalo Tales* have recounted the fulfillment of some of the dreams of those early Kearney citizens who first promoted the canal in 1882—F. G. Keens, Nathan Campbell, W. A. and R. L. Downing, E. C. Calkins, J. J. Bartlett and C. D. Ayers. When George W. Frank was induced to take over the work in 1885 and carried it to a successful conclusion in mid-1886, the Kearney boom was on and the Kearney Gait never slackened.

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Home of J. S. Foote in West Kearney

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- Basic Membership\$10.00
- Institutional Membership\$15.00
- Supporting Membership\$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

Officers and Directors: President, Jim Cudaback; Vice-President, Philip S. Holmgren; Secretary, Alice Howell; Treasurer, Susan McFerrin. Directors: Frances Link, Barb Avery, Viola Livingston, Michael Stauffer, Glen Wisch, Chad Anderson, Merlin Burlgrund, Elmer Holzrichter, and past president Margaret Hohnholt. Publications Chairman: Alice Howell.

Trails & Rails Museum 706 West 11th Street (308) 234-3041

Mark your calendar: Sunday, January 27, 2:00 p.m. Monthly meeting of the Society in Elm Creek at the Community Center. "Blizzards" is the subject of the program. Those attending are asked to bring photos and/or reminiscences of blizzards you have experienced.

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Mrs. Edna Hehner of Pleasanton, whose death occurred at Good Samaritan Hospital on December 29, was a past member of the Board of Directors of the Society, having served from June 1984 to May 1990. Our sympathy is extended to her family.

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The Christmas Tree Walk was a big success. The committee, Margaret Hohnholt, Wilma Larsen, Gladys Henderson and Lois Rahmann, wishes to thank all the volunteers who were hosts and hostesses. It took many to staff each building for the nine days. Many of these volunteers, plus many others, brought food for the bake sale, making a good assortment each day. The last Sunday night found it all gone!

Winners of the best tree decoration were S.A.F.E. Center, 1st place; Gibbon Garden Gals, 2nd; and Soil Sisters Garden Club, 3rd. Also decorating trees were Fort Kearney Rock Club, Kearney Artist Guild, Amherst Community Group, Women Veterans, Kearney Woman's Club, Kearney Quilt Guild, Retired Teachers Association, ADK Pi Chapter, Elm Creek Garden Club, National Association of Retired Federal Employees, Crossroads Quilters, Kearney Garden Club, Naomi Rebekah Lodge, Buffalo County Extension Clubs and Brass & Jute Works.

On Thursday, December 20, a reception for the 1990 museum volunteers was hosted by Jackie Rundstrom, assisted by Wilma Larsen and Margaret Hohnholt. Thanks a lot to the Rundstroms. Also a big thanks to the Modern Woodmen of America for their matching funds.

NEW LIFE MEMBERS

- Jane A. Bish Miller Tim Lowe Kearney
- Clarence and Lois Rahmann Kearney Sue Holmes Hodder Edina, MN
- Wayne and Wilma Webb Kearney

NEW ANNUAL MEMBERS

Supporting

- Betty Beshore Kearney K. R. Berkheimer Sherman Oaks, CA

Business

- Jewelry Brokers Kearney

Basic

- Dennis and Virginia Lund Kearney Wm. C. Isaac Kearney
- A. W. Bendfeldt Kearney Wallis W. Wimberley Kearney
- Gary and Cosette Greer Kearney Pat and Rhonda O'Brien Shelton
- C. M. Gillespie Kearney Opal Loomis Goodland, KS
- Mr. and Mrs. John Morrissey Kearney Mrs. C. A. Lindly Laramie, WY

By 1890 addition after addition had been added to the map of Kearney. Where the most money, labor and energy had been expended, the results were the most apparent. Two miles west, the suburb of West Kearney had graded streets, a fine park, railroad station, twelve residences and two factory buildings, besides a large brickyard within its limits.

Kenwood in 1890 was considered one of the most desirable residential districts in the city with about one hundred houses, a fine park and nineteen miles of graded streets. Water mains and sewer mains were extended to accommodate households; electric arc lights furnished good light at night, and many Kenwood houses were also lighted by electricity. 10,000 feet of plank walks and 1200 feet of stone walks were laid in front of the homes. A contract was signed during the year to extend the electric streetcar road to run through this fine addition.

East Lawn, with twelve fine residences, was the newest addition to Kearney, a development of the Midway Land Company. City water mains had been extended through this section and twelve fire hydrants furnished protection to property. A mile and a half of electric road operated in East Lawn. One thousand trees had been set out, and twelve acres of land in the center was to be the location of a public park. Eighty-five acres of land in the northeast corner of the addition were donated for an Episcopal college capable of accommodating 200 students, to be opened by September 1891. In the southern portion of East Lawn a four-story oatmeal factory had been constructed and was in operation.

Another illustration of town building in 1890 was the G. W. Whiteacre Addition with four miles of graded streets, eighteen buildings and several hundred newly set out trees. This addition is located between Avenues I and N on both sides of East 25th Street.

The great mass of Kearney's population, however, was contained in the Original Town, Kearney Land & Investment Company's Addition, Perkins & Harford's, School Section, and Frank's Additions to the city. New homes were being built in those areas at a frenzied pace. Old-timers who had come five or ten years earlier were moving from their modest homes into new Victorian houses with turrets, towers, leaded windows and fancy lightning rods, and new arrivals were building similar houses of elegant Victorian design with ballrooms, libraries, music and game rooms.

Buffalo County's imposing new Court House was completed in 1890. Other public improvements made during the year to keep up with the growing city were the Kearney & Black Hills Railroad, Longfellow High School, the public library, five and one-half miles of the electric road, a system of sewerage, extension of water mains, grading of streets and laying of sidewalks.

Business buildings on Central Avenue in process of construction or completed in 1890 were the Kearney Opera House, the second Midway Hotel (after the fire destroyed the impressive first Midway in March, 1890), Journal newspaper office, Hecht packing house, Themanson's store, B. D. Smith's store, a new Union Pacific passenger depot, and the Downing Block. Two new church edifices were the Baptist Church at 22nd Street and 4th Avenue and the United Presbyterian at 24th Street and 1st Avenue.

Seven banks took care of the banking business, three more than the previous year: Kearney National, First National, Buffalo County National, City National, Farmers Bank, Commercial & Savings and Kearney Savings.

Excerpts from the *Hub* of October 19, 1890 note additional accomplishments of the townbuilders:

Kearney's four brick plants have a capacity of production in the neighborhood of 17 million brick a year.

Three hundred carloads of stone have been consumed in buildings in Kearney in the last two years. The Kearney Stone Works at Railroad and Avenue C employ 40 stone cutters in its yard here, and 75 at its quarries in Rawlins, Wyoming. 200,000 cubic ft. of this handsome gray stone was required for the Kearney Opera House, the Beatrice Courthouse, and the State Capitol building in Cheyenne.

68 miles of wire have been used for electric lights and the electric road serving Kearney. The electric road has revolutionized travel in the city. Under the old (horse-drawn) streetcar service, most people preferred to walk.

Since January, 1890, the Kearney Milling and Elevator Co. have made 22,970 barrels of superior flour, to produce which 114,870 bushels of wheat were required. . . Sixteen men are employed in this mill, the pay-roll amounting to \$1,000 per month. The company has three grain elevators and two grain houses, in different towns, and purchases grain at eight different points.

The Kearney Ice Company cut 9,500 tons of ice last season (at Kearney Lake.)

The registers of the old Midway Hotel showed that 20,000 guests registered there during the year previous to the fire.

As to social life in the city, there is no doubt that the first year of the Gay 90's found the social whirl in full swing. From the society columns it appears that social events were carried on at the same frenzied pace as action in the business world of the city. Maud Marston, writing in the *Kearney Enterprise* under the non de plume "Miss Muffet", (*Tales of Buffalo County*, Vol. I; *Buffalo Tales*, Feb. 1979) gave a glowing picture of the dinner and tea parties, musicals, masked balls, dancing, skating and sleighing parties which took place, sometimes with a description of the ladies' gowns, the menu, the musicians and a complete guest list. The home of the host might also be described in detail.

Social clubs, such as the Bachelors' Protective Union (B.P.U.) and the Owls for singles, the Benedicts and Silver Greys for married couples, met every week for some kind of activity. Tuesday evening meetings at the YMCA offered programs of music, book reviews and poetry by both the YM and its Ladies' Auxiliary. Churches opened their doors to plays, concerts and musicales.

Balls and dancing parties were the choice of the younger crowd. Dancing was followed by a late night supper, followed by more dancing until the "wee, sma' hours".



Baptist Church, 22nd Street and 4th Avenue

The german was the popular fad of the dance crowd, but there was also the waltz, polka, lancers, schottische, berlin and york. For those who did not dance there were card games, whist being the first choice of many. "Kearney is peculiarly a whist city, by no means in the slang sense, however," reports the society editor. "In other western towns they play high five, cinch and poker, but Kearney stands alone as the champion of the superior game. This proves beyond contention the intellectual superiority of the Kearney young people," concludes the column.

Before the fire the first Midway Hotel was the scene of many gatherings, especially those of the B.P.U. and the Owls. However, most of the social happenings were held in the new, spacious homes of the leaders in society. Mr. and Mrs. J. L. Keck, owners of the Midway, were noted for their large dinner parties with fabulous menus. Others who opened their homes to dancing, card playing and dining were Mr. and Mrs. W. C. Tillson of Tower Hill, Mr. and Mrs. J. S. Foote of West Kearney, Mr. and Mrs. B. H. Goodell of Kenwood, Judge and Mrs. A. H. Connor and daughter, Sadie, Mr. and Mrs. Geo. W. Frank, Jr., and Mr. and Mrs. J. C. Currie, to name a few. Typical of the social events was a reception at West Kearney, described in the *Kearney Enterprise* of April 13, 1890:

The first of a series of parties to be given by Mrs. Foote at her new home in West Kearney was on Wednesday evening. The invitations were "from 8 to 10," but on the cards of the young people, "dancing at 10" appeared in one corner.

The interior of Mrs. Foote's house is exceedingly pretty . . . Upstairs and downstairs and in my lady's chamber everything is in the best taste, and there are few homes in Kearney so attractive. The arrangement, too, is excellent, and though there was a large company present Wednesday evening, there was not the least discomfort from overcrowding.

From the time the first carriage rolled up to the door shortly after 8, until nearly 10, new arrivals were being constantly received. The reception party stood in the west parlor . . . Prof. Benesch's fine orchestra was stationed at the end of the veranda, and the music, somewhat softened by the distance, mingled sweetly with the low tones of voices through the house.

A supper, probably the most elaborate ever prepared in Kearney, was served during the entire evening and elicited many compliments from the



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appreciative guests. The menu was in part as follows: Roast turkey, roast duck, boiled salmon, French glace, chicken croquettes, veal loaf, olives, potatoes in milk, mashed potatoes, French peas, giblett patties, French roils, orange jelly, wine jelly, ice cream, ices, chocolate cake, nut cake, orange cake, fruit.

The veranda was enclosed for dancing, but it was found too cool. After 10 o'clock the rugs were removed from the parlors, the orchestra moved into the hall and the young people entered into one of the most enjoyable dances of the season . . . All now anticipate with added impatience the masquerade of April 24th.

Mrs. Foote received in an elegant reception dress of wine colored velvet with a front of gold and salmon brocade and trimmed with duchess point lace, en train . . . Among other ornaments worn by Mrs. Foote was a bracelet with jewels, 3000 years old, taken from an Egyptian mummy—an heirloom.

There followed a description of most of the ladies' gowns, and a listing of the 61 guests.

Not all of the activities related to fun and games. A movement for a new public hospital was led by Miss Marston and other young women. Some of the social concerns expressed were the plight of the unfortunate girls at the State Industrial School, the trashy literature of the day and women's rights.

A drive to secure the United Brethren college for Kearney met with everybody's favor. The Chamber of Commerce, along with prominent citizens of the city, "thought the college proposition one of the most important ever submitted to Kearney," according to the *Hub* of July 11, 1890. "Cotton mills, railroads, motor lines, municipal improvements, etc. have all successfully attracted our attention. But these things alone do not make the truly great city. Churches and schools must be fostered; libraries, hospitals endowed, and all those things . . . which make a city harmonious in all its elements. Just now it is the college!" Despite the effort, Kearney was disappointed. The college went to York.

The end of 1890 found the city looking ahead to the completion of the 5-story Kearney Opera House, the building of the Kearney Cotton Mill which would employ hundreds of workers, more construction, more factories, more business—everything bigger, better and more promising tomorrow.

SOURCES

Creigh, *Nebraska, Where Dreams Grow*, 1980; *Kearney Daily Hub*, July 11, October 19, 1890; Maud Marston's scrapbook with clippings from the *Kearney Enterprise*, 1889-1890; *Tales of Buffalo County*, Vol. I, pp. 38-42; 56-60.