



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

March-April, 1996

BISHOP GEORGE ALLAN BEECHER AND HIS MENTORS

Part II

by Margaret Stines Nielsen

BISHOP ANSON R. GRAVES

In 1899 the General Convention of the Episcopal Church had voted to split Nebraska, with the new district to be known as the Jurisdiction of the Platte. Anson R. Graves was elected the new Bishop.

He was born in Wells, Vermont on April 13, 1842. His father, Daniel, moved his wife and six sons to northern Illinois in 1847. The family barely made a living; the boys worked on the farm and also hired out to neighbors to help pay the debts. Because of this Anson had an average of about 2½ months of school a year. When he was sixteen he walked three miles to attend a Presbyterian academy where he was able to make up most of the schooling he had missed. His Uncle invited him to stay in his home and attend school at Rutland, Vermont. He was soon at the head of his class and began hoping for college. He spent a year at home, studying Latin, Greek and Algebra to complete the requirements he lacked.

After paying his fare to Geneva, New York he had \$28 for his first year at Hobart College. He bought one full meal a day, supplementing it with crackers and apples at three cents a meal. Later he found a job at a sanitarium. With the help of a benefactor

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Bishop George A. Beecher at the time of his consecration, November 30, 1910.

Notice of Annual Meeting — Page 2

WITH THE SOCIETY

Notice to Members of Buffalo County Historical Society ANNUAL MEETING

Sunday, April 21, 1996, 4:00 p.m.

at Apple Annie's
1010 Third Avenue
Kearney, Nebraska

The annual meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society will be held in the meeting room of Apple Annie's, 1010 Third Avenue, in Kearney, Nebraska, on Sunday, April 21, 1996.

The business meeting will start at 4:00 o'clock. On the agenda for the business meeting is the election of four directors. A report of the year's work will be given acknowledgements and recognitions made.

At 5:30 a dinner will be served, following which Marge Lauer, executive director of the Kearney Area Community Foundation, will speak to the group.

Cost of the dinner is \$7.00. Reservations must be made by April 15 and paid for in advance. Send check to cover the dinner cost to Buffalo County Historical Society, P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848. Checks should be payable to the Buffalo County Historical Society.

The bus tour of western Buffalo County will leave the Museum grounds at 1:30 p.m. on March 24.

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:

The Annual Meeting for our Historical Society is coming up on Sunday afternoon, April 21st. You will find more about the meeting in this issue of Buffalo Tales.

Merlin Burgland, our Program Chairman, has been able to bring us two fine programs for January and February and has a very fine trip lined up for March 24th. More about this may also be found in this Buffalo Tales.

I hope to see everyone at our Annual Meeting, April 21st.

Larry K. Nansel, President

NEW LIFE MEMBER

Marilyn Lindley, Rapid City, SD

NEW 1996 BASIC MEMBERS

Toby Tollefsen, Kearney

Mary Nell Price, Elm Creek

NEW 1996 SUPPORTING MEMBER

Jane Oldfather Light, Deerfield, IL

1996 SUPPORTING MEMBERS

Essam and Barbara Arram, Kearney

Nancy Blume

Ruth Denison, Kearney

Mr. and Mrs. Richard Nutter, Gibbon

Chandler III and Susan Lynch, Kearney

Dick and Barb O'Neill, Pleasanton

Delphine and Lee Sanks, Kearney

Chas. E. Oldfather, Lincoln

Walt and Lois Wilkin, Kearney

Kieth Buss, Gothenburg

and a succession of part time jobs he managed to scrape through the rest of the college years.

He taught for a while, then, feeling his real calling was the ministry, he entered an Episcopal seminary in New York.

In 1872 he received a call from a church in Plattsmouth, Nebraska. His Bishop in Brooklyn: "...thought it was my duty, being young and single, to go to Nebraska and help Bishop Clarkson who found it difficult to get clergymen".

He arrived in Plattsmouth in June filled with much enthusiasm, but in December he contracted typhoid fever. He also developed a "bone sore" on his right arm which was to last for two years. After thirteen months he wrote Bishop Clarkson that he was "worked out and preached out" and asked to be transferred. He received a call from North Platte but decided to go to Minnesota where he was offered a job as assistant priest.

In 1876 at his cousin's in Brattleboro, Vermont he met Mary Watrous. "Social intercourse and games of croquet led to respect and love". After he was offered a mission in Littleton, New Hampshire they were married on "Easter Tuesday". In 1883 he went back to Minneapolis to the Gethsemane Church where he had worked briefly ten years before.

In 1899 the General Convention, meeting in New York, voted to split Nebraska, the western district to be called the Jurisdiction of the Platte. Pastor Graves was elected Bishop.

"It was no easy matter for me to leave a large and enthusiastic parish and...and take charge of a vast thinly-peopled country with less than four-hundred communicants... I had to take my growing family from congenial surroundings and the fine schools of Minneapolis to the pioneer life of a far western country... However, as the call...seemed to come from Providence, I thought it my duty to accept.

The people of Kearney were enthusiastic to have me make (it) my home. They promised to secure a Bishop's House for the district and eventually make the church here their cathedral. Inducements were also held out to me from Hastings, Grand Island and North Platte.

In early May he moved his family into a house at 1318 8th Avenue in Kearney. His jurisdiction included an area of fifty-thousand square miles with only six clergymen. When he visited Sydney he tried to allow enough time for hunting. He and Beecher had many adventures in what was then part of the "Wild West".

Because of his success as a missionary, Bishop Graves was given the added responsibility of western Wyoming when the Missionary District of Laramie was created. Neither state was happy with this "merger" but to mollify his communicants he kept his home in Kearney and made Laramie his Cathedral.

Arriving in Laramie in January of 1899 he found the Cathedral had no furnaces, it was \$20,000 in debt and only two of the churches in the district were solvent. He set out to visit his far flung missions and rid them of debt, which he accomplished in three years, with the help of eastern friends. But the long rides over rugged terrain in all kinds of weather had ruined his health. As time went by he was forced to spend more of his winters in warmer climates.

Bishop Graves' chief contribution to Kearney was the establishment in 1892 of an Academy which in 1898 became the Kearney Military Academy.¹ Through the thirty-three years of its existence it was largely dependent on the funds raised in the east by Bishops Graves and Beecher.

In 1907 Wyoming became a separate jurisdiction and western Nebraska was designated The Missionary District of Kearney. Although the Bishop's work was easier

he found it impossible to go on. In a letter of resignation, written in 1910, he cited his infirmities and advanced age (sixty-nine). After his resignation many tributes were written of his "untiring efforts" to establish a solid foundation for the western Nebraska district. "He was a devout and saintly gentleman who was a most fitting successor to the early Apostles".

Bishop Graves died on December 30, 1931.

In 1895 George Beecher accepted a call from the Church of Our Saviour in North Platte. Here they found a new church, an active congregation and a house that "seemed like a palace to us". Bishop Graves had appointed him editor of the district's publication "The Platte Missionary" but with a well-organized congregation his work was much easier. The Beechers were often invited to Scout's Rest Ranch where there was also an abundance of wild life. George went hunting with Cody's foster son, Johnny Foster, who was also manager of the Wild West Show.

Four children were born to the Beechers while they were in North Platte. One twin girl died in infancy.

A committee from Kearney called on George three times to invite him to St. Luke's. He finally accepted in 1902 although he may have sensed that "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country". Beecher says little of his time in Kearney except that he was now much in demand for missions, addresses, funerals, etc., which took more of his time and labor "than apparently was needed in my own parish. The psychology of such a situation does not need any explanation." On Sunday, June 5, 1904 in a meeting with vestry, "it was practically understood that our... pastoral relationships were to be discontinued."

Ironically he had little time to worry about his future. That night he took the train to Omaha to speak to the Masonic Grand Lodge. There he learned that a letter was in the mail inviting Beecher to fill in as Dean at Trinity Cathedral until a new man was chosen. The following January he was installed as Dean.

At the invitation of the judge he began visiting city court on Monday when juveniles



The Rt. Reverend Anson T. Graves. First Bishop of the Jurisdiction of the Platte.



The Bishop Graves home at 1318 8th Avenue.

were brought in for judgment. Over 200 children were paroled to him during the six years he spent in Omaha. The Dean was an imposing figure, standing six foot four, weighing almost 250 pounds, and was a man of great spiritual and physical strength. No doubt he put the fear of the Lord in these young people, many of whom became "pillars of the community".

On October 10, 1910, the House of Bishops chose Beecher to succeed Bishop Graves in the Kearney district. Writing to Bishop Graves in 1912 Beecher reminisces,

"I often think of the dry alkali drives that we used to have over those treeless prairies... Space and time are practically eliminated by the use of my '40 horsepower Oakland'".

In his autobiography Bishop Beecher says very little about this period in his life. In the mid 1900's the vestry voted to start work on a building more suitable to be the Cathedral. That seems to be about the last time they agreed on anything. Dissension became so bitter that F.G. Keens withdrew his pledge. The Bishop attended many of the meetings, and was often voted down on his proposals.

Other reasons the Beechers wanted to leave Kearney were summed up in the St. Luke's Centennial History; "his wife didn't like the Bishop's House and she did not please one of St. Luke's most prominent families."

In 1912 the communicants of St. Mark's in Hastings were trying to raise money for a new church "when who should come to town but our good Bishop who told of a much larger plan, Hastings to be a See city and a Cathedral to be built." The writer could find no record of the events of this time. In 1913 the General Convention changed the name of the Kearney District to the Missionary District of Western Nebraska. Beginning in 1913 the Bishop's letters were postmarked from Hastings.

The Barnds Centennial History gives as the Bishop's two greatest intangible monuments the building of St. Mark's Pro-Cathedral and his work with the Japanese-Americans in western Nebraska, especially through Father Hiram Cato, whom he recruited to the Episcopal ministry.

He was chaplain of the Episcopal Boys Camp at Fort Robinson during the twenties and thirties. It was renamed the Bishop Beecher Boys Camp in 1932.

Although his career was entirely within the state of Nebraska, his experiences went well beyond state lines: having tea in the White House with President Wilson's daughter; traveling with the Wild West Show in Europe one summer; telling his experiences to the Arch-Bishop of Canterbury while attending the Lambeth Conference in 1910.² He preached funerals for people in all walks of life, including one for Willa Cather at the little church in Red Cloud.

He resigned in 1941, although he continued as a supply clergyman during WWII. The two Nebraska jurisdictions were merged in 1946. Bishop Beecher died in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa on June 14, 1951 at the age of eighty-three.

Among the tributes to him: "Bishop Beecher was a missionary of apostolic stature and a delightful person as well"... "With Bishop Beecher's death the Episcopate of the Church loses its last link with the Old West."

FOOTNOTES

1. "Buffalo Tales", January-February, 1993.
2. A conference of Bishops of the Anglican Communion, held every ten years in London.

SOURCES

Beecher, *Bishop of the Great Plains: Kearney "Come-Back Letters"*; "The Western Nebraska Churchman" January 1927; Barnds *The Episcopal Church in Nebraska*; St. Luke's Parish "Scribblings" 1993; St. Luke's Centennial History, 1982; Graves, *The Farmer Boy Who Became A Bishop*; "Buffalo Tales", January-February, 1993; telephone conversations with Dean John P. Bartholomew, Hastings, March, 1996; Beecher papers in the Nebraska Historical Society archives.

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 68848-0523.

1995 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:
Basic Membership \$15.00
Institutional Membership \$20.00
Supporting Membership \$30.00 +
Life memberships are \$150.00 for an individual; \$200.00 husband and wife.

Directors

Term expiring June 1, 1996: Susan C. Lynch, Margaret Hohnholt, Wilma Harder, Helen Kinnaman.

Term expiring June 1, 1997: Mardi Anderson, Janet Eickmeier, Minnette Steinbrink, Susan Underhill.

Term expiring June 1, 1998: Merlin Burgland, Larry Nansel, Janeen Vokoun, Jack Cudaback.

Officers (1 year term)

President Larry Nansel
Vice-President Merlin Burgland
Secretary Susan Underhill
Treasurer Mardi Anderson

TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM

Although the Museum is closed, activities never cease. The wagon barn has been cleaned and the wagons have been put in out of the weather. They will be out for display after we again open. Shelving has been given to us by Jim Andersen of Andersen Wrecking Co. and we hope to begin making shelves in the Depot basement so that collections may be stored and organized more efficiently.

Requests are coming from the schools for field day tours and appointments are being made. As soon as these are firm, we will be calling volunteers for help.

I have worked with Lana Stickney of the Kearney Public Schools on a project with 4th Graders. Several of our members have volunteered their time and visited the classrooms. This has been a fun project for all concerned.

A couple of retired teachers have volunteered to do some organizing pictures and completing some of that work in the school house. Pictures of the rural schools are welcome. Be sure to identify them and date them.

Thanks to all of you who help in any way. This is a thriving museum and it takes all of us to make it go. —Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

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

Buffalo County Historical Society

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