



# Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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## KEARNEY & BLACK HILLS RAILWAY

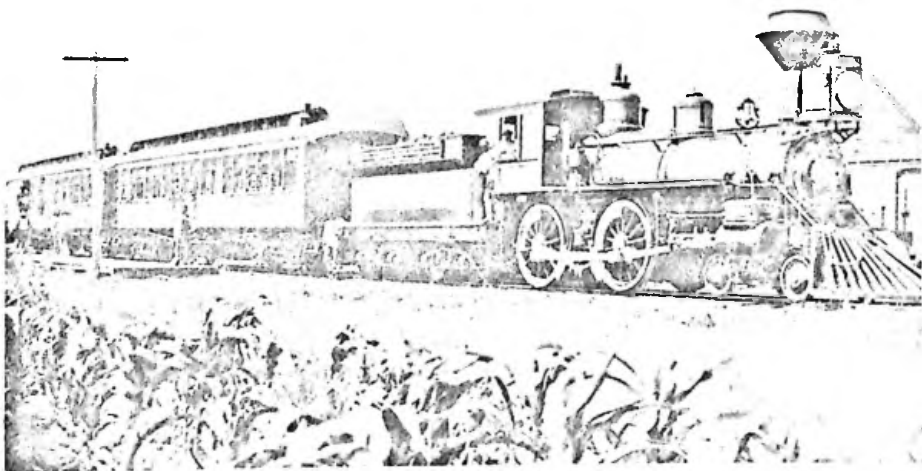
### A Backward Glance

by Philip S. Holmgren

Promoters in the late 19th century were very much interested in railroads. Visionaries, who saw their community as one that could grow into a large city, knew they had to have good rail transportation. If they had one railroad, two would be better. If they had two, certainly there was need for a third, or even a fourth or fifth railroad to assure the community a proper future.

In the late 1880's Kearney had entered a boom phase of its existence. Two railroads served the community and its growing industrial complex. Additional rail connections were sought by those interested in the continued growth of the city. Industry was good but railroads would assure a better future. Some of the railroads contacted by Kearney promoters were the Omaha and Kansas City Railway, the Santa Fe Railroad, and the Nebraska Southern Railway. The major interest was in a connection from the south and southeast by way of Minden. This connection was handicapped by the necessity of bridging the Platte River. There was also interest in a railroad to the northeast connecting with such points as Albion and eventually Sioux City. The feeling in the American west in the latter part of the 19th century was that wherever there was a stage or freight wagon route, there was a potential for a rail line. Since the discovery of gold in the Black Hills of South Dakota, Kearney had advertised its location as the

(Continued on Page 3)



**K & B.H. Steam Locomotive No. 1 stopped at Sumner with its eastbound, two-car train during the summer of 1894.**  
Photo, courtesy of George B. Abdill

**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 Burglund, Elmer Holzrichter, and past president Margaret Hohnholt. Publications Chairman: Alice Howell.

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

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**WITH THE SOCIETY**

**THANKS!!** We would like to thank all of our members and friends who supported the Museum this summer by volunteering to spend afternoons at the museum. With this kind of support we can continue to grow. You have truly been appreciated.

Also, thanks to those who loaned quilts for the summer quilt show. They were beautiful and we had many fine comments. These things happen with your help.

Margaret Hohnholt, Wilma Larsen and Barb Avery  
. . . . .

**CHRISTMAS TREE WALK**, December 1 through 9 this year. Your help will be appreciated. We will need volunteers to be in the buildings, and we also need goodies for the bake sale.

If you belong to an organization or know of a group that would like to furnish or decorate a tree, please let us know. We can add a few more trees this year. We would especially like to have all towns in Buffalo County represented. Can you help us?

The Steering Committee members this year are Margaret Hohnholt, 237-7327, Wilma Larsen, 237-2697, Gladys Henderson, 237-5495, and Lois Rahmann 237-3619. Your comments and ideas are appreciated.

**DISPLAY OF SLEDS**, Barb Avery, Chairman of Displays, is asking for the loan of old sleds for additional decoration in the Trails & Rails buildings during the Walk.  
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**INPUT FROM MEMBERS**, Merlin Burglund is chairman of the committee to plan the use of the church building which was recently moved onto the museum grounds. He would like input from you as to suggestions for the use of this building. Please drop a note to Merlin at the Buffalo County Historical Society, P. O. Box 523, or telephone him evenings (237-3007). Other committee members are Chad Anderson, Barb Avery, Margaret Hohnholt, Chan Lynch, Loree Maddux, Colleen Parker and Glen Wisch.  
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**MEMBERSHIP BONUS**, Are you thinking of a gift membership, or do you know of potential members? Again this year, a 1991 membership at this time will include September, October and November/December 1990 issues of *Buffalo Tales* as a bonus. Membership categories and dues are listed above. Send to Buffalo County Historical Society, P. O. Box 523, Kearney, Nebraska 68848.  
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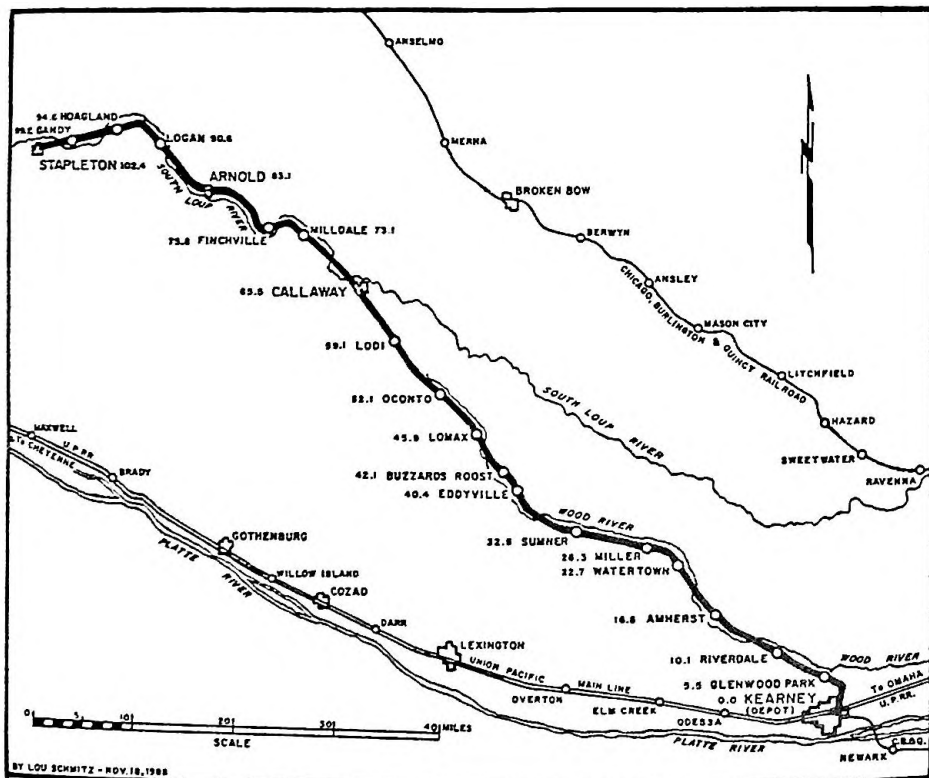
**KEARNEY - OUR TOWN**: Tune in Channels 10/11 at noon on Monday, October 1, when KOLN/KGIN-TV telecasts from the Trails & Rails Museum.

ideal point at which to leave the railroad for the gold fields of South Dakota. The stage and freight route out of Kearney to the north and northwest crossed some rough terrain before entering the Wood River valley.

By 1886, a 200-foot wide railroad right-of-way up the Wood River valley had been acquired by a subsidiary of the Union Pacific. Nothing more was done for several years toward the realization of a railroad to serve that growing area to the northwest of Kearney. Kearney area businessmen became impatient with the lack of interest by Union Pacific, or the Burlington, in the building of a branch line to serve the area. By May of 1889 the Kearney & Black Hills Railway Company was formed. The services of John H. Hamilton were secured to acquire the finances needed for the enterprise from "eastern business men". Hamilton's task was made more difficult because the annual reports of the railroad companies for 1888 came out showing very poor earnings for western railroads. The Union Pacific had indicated that it would not enter into a sale of the right-of-way until the new company had \$350,000 in cash subscriptions. This amount was obtained and the right-of-way was acquired by the new company.

The next move was to persuade the communities to be served by the new road to provide additional capital. In February 1890, Kearney voters approved the action taken by the city council to provide \$75,000 to aid in the construction of the railroad. The news of an affirmative vote was greeted with a celebration by crowds of people on Central Avenue extending from 21st Street to the Midway Hotel at 25th and Central. The crowds were entertained by a band and by speeches from many of the businessmen.

The townships of Riverdale, Grant, and Armada held bond elections in March for



Kearney Branch Route.

the support of the railroad. The elections were successful in Armada township but failed in the other two. When Mr. Hamilton announced that construction on the road would start at Armada and build northwest, people in Grant township had second thoughts and eventually voted to support the building of the railroad. The April 5, 1890 edition of the *Kearney Daily Hub* announced that "Wood and Bancroft of Omaha was awarded the contract and the train will be running by July 4."

When the community of Chadron, Nebraska heard that a railroad was to be built up the Wood River valley, they had a meeting with the businessmen of the city to discuss the possibility of organizing a railroad company to build a road southeast of their city whereby they might join forces with the Kearney & Black Hills Railway. Like so many other projected railroad developments in the American west, nothing came of this proposal.

By the middle of June of 1890, construction on the new railroad was moving ahead at a rapid pace. Bridge timbers, ties and rails for the road were arriving in Kearney at the rate of over twenty carloads a day. Nearly ten miles of ties had been laid and piles had been driven for nine bridges, one being twelve miles northwest of Kearney. The road as laid out left Kearney headed east, and then made a large curve around the east end of the high ground separating the Platte and Wood River valleys, thus avoiding



**Interior view of Passenger Car used on the Kearney Branch.  
Smithsonian Photo No. 1198**

the steep grade directly north of Kearney. Although the grade up the Wood River valley was a gentle one, the numerous crossings of the Wood and South Loup rivers and their tributaries resulted in nearly one bridge per mile of track. An item in the *Kearney Daily Hub* of June 19, 1890 stated that "Trains will run into Armada by July 15 so the inhabitants up that way should begin to train their horses not to scare at the engine."

As progress was made on the construction of the railroad and the No. 1 engine had arrived in Kearney, J. H. Hamilton arranged an evening excursion on the new road to the end of construction. Accounts of the trip indicate that the men making the excursion were concerned that the train might not stay on the track even though it traveled at a slow speed. The speed was judged in part by the observation that a half-grown hog on the track ran down the tracks ahead of the train, and only after it became tired did it jump off and let the train go on. The train moved on to a point about 100 yards from the end of the track and the men returned to Kearney pleased with the rapid progress being made, but also aware that much needed to be done to make the rails safe for train travel. By October of 1890, the tracks were completed to Callaway, a distance of just over sixty-five miles from Kearney. It would be another twenty-two years before the railroad would reach its greatest distance from Kearney when a thirty-seven mile extension was completed to Stapleton in 1912. Although some grading was done beyond Stapleton, that was as close as the road would get to its original goal, the Black Hills of South Dakota.

The first year was a difficult one for the new corporation. Receipts were less than the actual running expenses of the railroad. The second year was much better with earnings of over \$50,000.00. The departure December 17, 1892 of J. H. Hamilton, the chief fund-raiser and, for a short time, president of the corporation, seems to have been a harbinger of the dark days ahead for the railroad. The depression of 1893 plus the poor weather conditions for agriculture proved to be a big disappointment to the officers and management of the company. In August of 1898, under the order of foreclosure by the U.S. circuit court, the railroad was sold to the Union Pacific. The ambitious sounding name of the Kearney & Black Hills Railway now became known as the Kearney Branch.

The decision in 1890 to build a railroad up the Wood River valley to the northwest of Kearney had a major effect on the area. Small communities that were missed by the rail line in Buffalo County included Armada, Stanley and Green Dale, which were eventually abandoned. Others like Miller, Watertown, Amherst, Riverdale and Glenwood were the creatures of the road.

Through the years of its existence the railroad served the area with a number of different trains. A mixed train handling freight, passengers, mail and express was the first to serve people on the road. A gasoline-powered motor car served people along the line for fifty years, making its last run in 1955. The "motor" or "bug" was known to stop for people, both to pick up and to get off, at places other than the depots. People rode it to and from school, for a day of shopping in Kearney and for all the other reasons people needed to travel. At one time a steam-powered passenger train served patrons along the line, but most of the trains on the Kearney Branch were freight trains. Some diesel locomotives were used as early as 1953, and the very last steam locomotive on the line was used on a work train in March of 1956. Engine No. 481 on the Trails & Rails Museum grounds was the last steam locomotive in regular service, making its last run in mid-August of 1955.

Livestock on the tracks provided for more than the humorous incident mentioned earlier. Not only were animals killed when struck by the train, but as early as September 6, 1890, three employees of the railroad were killed when the train derailed after striking three cows while backing into Riverdale. In an attempt to keep livestock

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**Kearney, NE 68848**

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off the tracks fences were built along the right-of-way but on a number of occasions people would open the gates to let their cattle graze the right-of-way, increasing the dangers to the animals and the train.

As the automobile came into use and roads were improved, the branch line suffered a serious decline in business to the point that service was curtailed. By 1977 the Arnold to Stapleton portion of the line was abandoned, and by the fall of 1986 the eighty-three miles between Arnold and Riverdale was abandoned and the tracks removed.

One hundred years after the initial construction of the Kearney & Black Hills Railway, only the track from Kearney to Riverdale remains of the road to remind us of its colorful past.

#### SOURCES

*Kearney Daily Hub*, April 5, June 19, 1890; *Saga of the Seven Valleys*, (1967); *Buffalo Tales*, Vol. 1, Nos. 5, 10 (1978); *Railroads* by Irene Mollard; Buffalo County Historical Society Records. Photos: Gschwind, *Kearney & Black Hills*, 1990.

**EDITORIAL NOTE:** A comprehensive history of the Kearney & Black Hills Railway has recently been written by Francis G. Gschwind of Callaway, published by South Platte Press of David City, Nebraska. The 415 page book, with over 450 photos (many from Buffalo County) is available at the Trails & Rails Museum.

### CALL FOR PAINTERS

Paint Day at Trails & Rails Museum will be Saturday, October 6, 8:00 a.m. Anyone is welcome to join us. We need you. Bring exterior paint equipment. Social Hour will follow at 4:00 p.m. Cook-out, Pot Luck, Entertainment, Bingo Call Mike Stauffer at 237-7354 after 6:00 p.m.