



# Buffalo Tales



Volume 16, No. 5    Buffalo County Historical Society    September-October, 1993

## BRICKMAKING IN KEARNEY

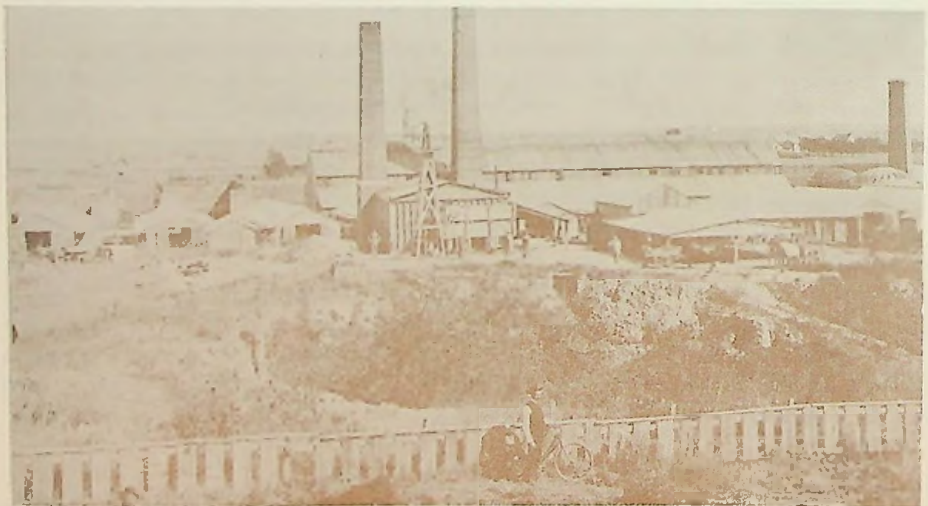
by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

For four and a half decades, from 1880 until 1924, Kearney brickmakers made a large contribution to the city's economy. From its beginnings in 1873, Kearney grew rapidly. There was a tremendous need for building materials, particularly for fireproof, permanent construction. Bricks were heavy, making shipping costs high. When it was discovered that clay in Kearney was suitable for the manufacture of bricks, five brickyards were established between 1880 and 1888. Their combined output, however, was not enough to meet the demand.

Richard Hibberd came to Kearney in July, 1880, and established the Hibberd Brickyard in north Kearney, between Avenues A and B, from 37th to 39th Streets, which soon became the largest brickyard in the city. He had contracted for the brick work of the first buildings at the State Reform School (present Youth Development Center), not only to furnish the brick, but to construct the buildings. Andreas, *History of Nebraska*, 1882 states that Mr. Hibberd's yard "comprises eight acres of ground. He employs from sixteen to fifty men in his manufacture of brick with a capacity of 40,000 handmade brick per day, and about twenty-five men in building . . . He has made and laid 2,500,000 brick since living in Kearney."

W. W. Mannix was also listed as a brick manufacturer, contractor and builder, offering "all kinds of brick and stone work done." His yard was in the block east of

(Continued on Page 3)



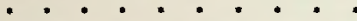
Hibberd Brickyard, 37th Street and Avenue A

WITH THE SOCIETY

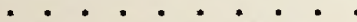
**A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT . . . . .**

I hope all of you are enjoying this Fall season as much as Chan and I are. We know that snow and cold are just around the corner, but there is just that special something in the air during Fall that makes it a joy to get up each morning. Perhaps it's the anticipation of a glowing, warm fire in the fireplace soon. Or, perhaps it's the thought of the holiday season soon to be here. Ah, the Holidays! For the Historical Society the Holidays mean the wonderful smell of hot apple cider in the Shelton Depot during the Christmas Tree Walk, December 4 through December 12, and trimming the train with traditional colors of Christmas. What a nice finish to a successful year for the Buffalo County Historical Society!

We have made many new friends this year and I look to the future with confidence that the best is yet to come. Susan C. Lynch



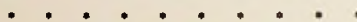
Buffalo County Historical Society and its Trails & Rails Museum will be a co-host at one of the events of the Nebraska Museums Association and the Nebraska History Network when they meet in Kearney October 21-23. Participants will visit four Kearney Museums on October 22: Trails & Rails, MONA, Frank House and Children's Museum. At each stop a course of a progressive dinner, "A Feast in the Midlands," will be served. We are happy to be involved in this special event for members of these state organizations.



A reminder to Buffalo County Historical Society members that an increase in annual dues was approved at the annual meeting on April 18. Dues for 1994 memberships, payable January 1, are:

- Basic membership . . . . . \$15.00
- Institutional membership . . . . . \$20.00
- Supporting membership . . . . . \$30.00

Life memberships, effective January 1, are \$150.00 for an individual; \$200.00 for husband and wife, jointly.



**MEMORIALS**

- In memory of Ethel Steinbrink, from Alice Howell
- In memory of Horace and Lucile Cary, H. Jackson Cary, Fred and Helen Barlow Nye, Lyman Cary family, from Margaret C. Tunks
- In memory of Alice Chramosta, from Dr. R. L. Link, Francis Link and Larry Musil
- In memory of Frances Link, from Alice Howell, Maurine Urwiller, Dr. and Mrs. Clark F. Hehner and Billy, Ruth L. Schini, Rodney Link, State Bank of Cairo, Raymond and Berdean Campbell, Rodney and Stephanie Karsten, Dorothy Wilke, Gary and Mildred Heusel, Stanley Urwiller, Barbara Cone, Adelaide Stubblefield, Jeannetta Bycroft, Lee Slater, Mr. and Mrs. Lester Ramsey, Arleen and Glenn Sigler, Lance and Sandra Hehner, Helen Tockey, Zola Maul, Doris and Don Urwiller and Ruth Sigler.



**NEW BASIC MEMBERS**

- Lyle and Marjorie Stubbs . . . . .Kearney Donald J. Urwiller . . . . . Tucson, AZ

the Hibberd yard between Avenues B and C.

Another of the early brickmakers was S. E. Coleman. His brickyard was located north of the Hibberd yard in 1886. The City Directory of 1889 lists Mr. Coleman as a brick mason, but no listing of a brickyard, and the 1892-93 City Directory does not list Coleman or his brickyard and there are no other records or newspaper stories as to when his plant started or when it ceased operation.

The brickmaking season was usually from April until late October of each year. Only the foremen continued on the payroll during the full year, taking care of brick sold locally or helping load railroad cars with brick to be shipped, as well as making necessary repairs to the kilns, run-ways, drying sheds and other buildings at the brickyard.

The operation of these early yards during the 1886 season is described in the *Kearney New Era* of January 29, 1887, under the heading, "Over Three Million Manufactured Last Season in Kearney—The Demand Constantly Increasing and the Supply Inexhaustible":

Parties visiting Kearney for the first time from other states are usually surprised to find so many of our business houses and dwellings built of brick. The natural inquiry is, "Where do they come from?" To answer this question one has only to go into the north part of town where the kilns are located. The next question asked is, "Why are they so close together?" . . . The reason given for the yards being so close together and situated where they are is that it is the only part of town where the clay does not contain small chunks of alkali, spoiling the brick while burning. The material used is not a regular clay, but a dark gray loam . . .

The number of brick burnt at a time varies from eighty (thousand) to one hundred and sixty thousand, according to the demand . . . Owing to the high price of wood, coal is used altogether for burning. Each thousand of brick requires half a ton of coal on an average. Fires are started under the brick in arched grates thirty-six inches apart. From the time the fire is kindled it must be kept up until the brick are all burned, which usually takes from six to eight days.

Each of the three manufacturers employ different methods. Mr. S. E. Coleman owns and operates the upper or north yard, and last season employed on an average eighteen hands and manufactured over a million and a half brick. He has four acres of ground covered by his drying yard, kilns and pit.

The process employed is the old pug mill method, and the brick made are called "rolled brick." They derive their name from the manner in which the moulder . . . rolls or kneads them before putting them into the moulds. As soon as moulded they are piled up in the yard and allowed to sun dry from three to six days, according to the weather. As soon as they have dried sufficiently, they are piled up in the kiln, ready for burning.

About forty rods south of Mr. Coleman's place is the yard and kilns of Mr. R. Hibberd. He employs the same number of men and utilizes about as much ground as Mr. Coleman, but his process is entirely different for converting the clay into moulded brick. The method employed by him is called the wheel and crab process, and his brick go by the name of "slap

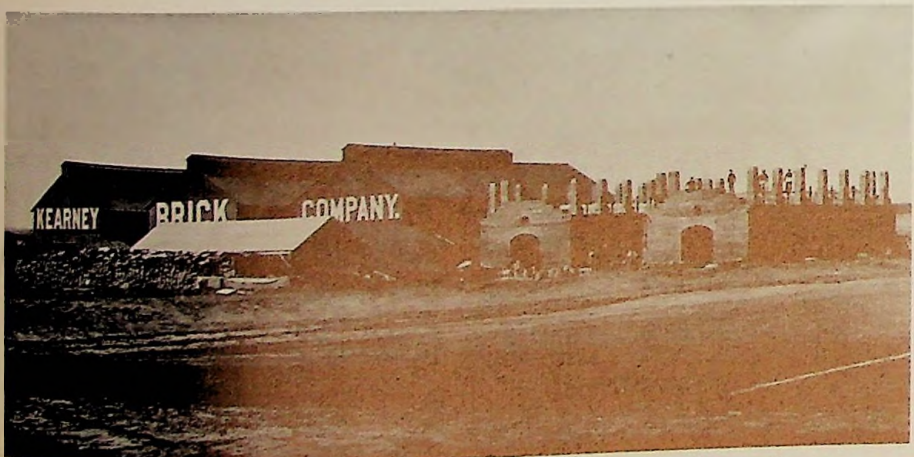
brick" on account of the mud being "slapped" or chucked into the moulds. In this yard the mud is hauled from the bank and dumped into a pit . . . water is then turned on and the clay is tempered by the wheel. Horses are hitched to one end of the crab and the other end is fastened to a pivot in the center of the pit. The wheel moves on this crab, moving automatically from the center to the circumference of the pit, thoroughly pulverizing the clay. The mud is ground or tempered for a couple of hours, then wheeled to the moulder.

Mr. Hibberd manufactured last season (1886) nearly 700,000 brick, supplying Kearney buildings with 600,000 and shipping 100,000 to Hastings. In addition to men employed at his yard, Mr. Hibberd employs a number of masons, and does his own contracting.

One block east of Mr. Hibberd's yard are the kilns of Mr. William Mannix. Last year this gentleman turned out over a million brick, his principal contract being 400,000 for the new hotel (first Midway). He gives employment to from sixteen to twenty men during the season. The brick manufactured in this yard are pressed brick, the 'Martin press' being employed. Mr. Mannix claims that on account of the mud being pressed into the moulds by horsepower, they are more uniform and square than they can be otherwise. Besides other smaller contracts, Mr. Mannix . . . shipped a great many to Plum Creek (present Lexington), Elm Creek, Grand Island and other points.

Mr. Hibberd, who came here six years ago, says that when he first made brick in Kearney, 100,000 supplied the demand for Buffalo County. Since then the number has steadily increased, and indications are that four million brick will be made and sold in Kearney next year (1887). The retail price is \$10 per thousand, consequently the brick industry alone is estimated at \$40,000.

When George W. Frank, Jr. moved to Kearney in 1885, one of his first business ventures was the establishment of the Kearney Brick Company west of the city, adjacent to the Union Pacific Railroad and just west of the Kearney Canal tailrace.



**Kearney Brick Co., 19th Street and 17th Avenue**

The *New Era* of July 28, 1887 noted that this company had fired their first kiln of brick "last week."

The Kearney Brick Company had the second largest brickyard during the "boom" years from 1887 to 1893, and enlarged their yard as the demand increased. Because electricity was available for power with the completion of the Kearney Canal in 1886 (*Buffalo Tales*, January 1987), the Kearney Brick Company advertised itself as the "first brickyard in the world operated by electricity." A news article in the *Kearney Enterprise* of December 22, 1889 describes this company and the growth of the brick industry in the city:

The extent of building operations in Kearney during the past year has made the further development of brickmaking a necessity. The Kearney Brick Company have put \$25,000 into additions to their plant, principally in the latest style of kilns and an electric tramway to the clay pits. These improvements make this one of the best equipped brickmaking establishments in the country and greatly add to the industrial aspect of Kearney.

In the *Kearney Enterprise*, supra, the operations of the Midway Brick Company are also described:

This company commenced operations in April 1889. The officers are J. J. Bartlett, president; George Gray, treasurer; R. L. Downing and W. W. Mannix, stockholders. From the opening of the works, this business has steadily increased. Last summer the output was 2,500,000 brick. The average number of men employed daily during the season was 35, but for a short time the company had 79 men employed every day.

The brickyard is situated in the north part of the city and covers four acres of ground. The works are equipped with every modern facility for the manufacture of first-class stock brick.

This brick company was undoubtedly the successor to the W. W. Mannix operation at 3407 Avenue B. Mr. Mannix was one of the stockholders and the Mannix brickyard is not listed in the city directory of 1892-93.

Another early yard was that of Albert S. Hurley, a brick manufacturer of Hastings, who decided to open an operation in Kearney. Here, again, the record is cloudy. The brickyard is listed in the *Kearney City Directory* of 1892-93 at East 34th Street and Avenue B, and also at 3801 Avenue A. The Avenue A location seems to be at the same address as S. E. Coleman's brickyard, so perhaps Hurley took over the Coleman operation. Mr. Hurley is also mentioned as a brick manufacturer in West Kearney, but no information is available as to where his yard was located.

Eventually all of the brickyards were operated by electricity and the operations mechanized, giving brick manufacturers the capacity to supply the demand. However, during the early years and through the "boom" period of the city, the brick sold far ahead of the supply on hand.

(This is the first of two stories on brickmaking. The second will appear in the November-December issue of *Buffalo Tales*.)

#### SOURCES

Bassett, *History of Buffalo County*, 1916, Vol. I, p. 255; Vol. II, pp. 187-189; Andreas, *History of Nebraska*, 1882, p. 433; *Buffalo Tales*, Sept. 1978, Jan. 1987, 1989, 1990; *Kearney City Directories*, 1888, 1889, 1892-93; *Kearney New Era*, Jan. 29, July 28, 1887; *Kearney Enterprise*, Dec. 22, 1889.

### TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM

We are officially closed after a very successful summer season. Our daily average attendance was the best ever. We are now open by appointment for groups. If you know of such groups who perhaps could not come during the summer, please have them call me.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE WALK, scheduled for December 4th through 12th, is our next big event. We will need volunteers during this time. If you would like to schedule ahead, you may call either Wilma Larsen, 237-2697 or me at 237-7327. Baked goods are needed for the Bake Sale. We like to have fresh things every day. We will need more on the weekends. We already have more trees than last year so it should be bigger and better than last year.

We will be decorating the buildings early so as to avoid the cold. If you can help with this decoration, or can assist during the Christmas Tree Walk, or can assist with tour groups (sometimes on short notice), please let me know.

With no paid help except the guides during the summer, volunteers are our backbone. Thanks to all of you for your dedication.

Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

**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.

*Directors*

Term expiring June 1, 1994: Howard Kolbo, Mardi Anderson, Lois Rahmann, all of Kearney; Jim Cudaback of Riverdale.

Term expiring June 1, 1995: Glen Wisch, Philip Holmgren, Larry Nansel, all of Kearney; Floretta Sullwold of Elm Creek.

Term expiring June 1, 1996: Susan C. Lynch, Margaret Hohnholt of Kearney; Wilma Harder of Gibbon; Helen Kinnaman of Amherst.

*Officers (1 year term)*

President ..... Susan C. Lynch  
 Vice-President ..... Larry Nansel  
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