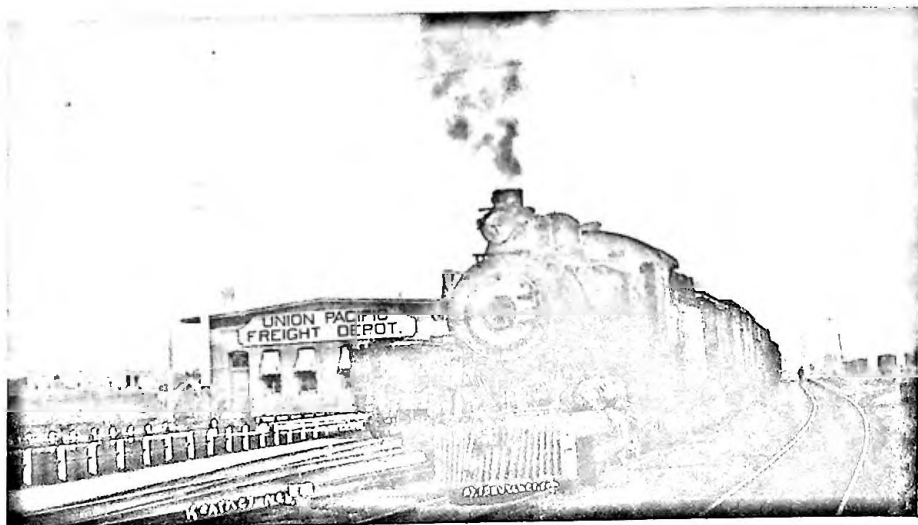# Buffalo Tales

RAILROADS IN BUFFALO COUNTY

by Alice Howell

The Pacific Railroad Act of 1862, signed by President Lincoln, authorized the building of the transcontinental Union Pacific Railroad. Construction started at Omaha on July 10, 1865, and the railroad arrived in Buffalo County in 1866. Thus travel to and from the western frontier began a great transformation.

The early stations on the Union Pacific route in Buffalo County were Shelton, Gibbon Switch, Kearney Station (near present day Buda, the least distant for passengers bound for Fort Kearny), Stevenson's Siding, Crowellton (present day Odessa), and Elm Creek.

Even before the Union Pacific reached Buffalo County, Congress in 1864 had authorized the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad to build an extension of its Iowa line from Plattsmouth through lands south of the Platte River, to a junction with the Union Pacific near the 100th meridian. The junction was fixed sixty miles east of the 100th meridian at a point which would become Kearney Junction, now Kearney. T. E. Calvert, former General Superintendent of the B & M.R., in a letter of May 22, 1898, recalled that "the fact that Fort Kearny was the only point west of the Big Blue River having a name and being shown on the maps in that vicinity had probably much to do with its selection."

WITH THE SOCIETY

The annual meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society was held on May 7 at the Depot Museum. President Philip S. Holmgren gave a report on the activities and accomplishments of the Society during the three years since the land and the Shelton depot were given to us. The depot building is completed and ready for exhibits relating to trails and rails. Future plans include outdoor exhibits of historic transportation pieces, such as a covered wagon, stagecoach, freighter's wagon, hand carts and rail cars.

Certificates of appreciation were presented for valuable contributions of services and materials to the Society. Recipients were Denny's Photography, Ron Blessing, Will E. Lantis, Richard Johnson, Margaret Wondra, Dr. Frank Raasch, Earl Hammans, Roy E. Wiles, George Davis, Charles Wiley, James and Sharon Knapp and the Kearney Volunteer Fire Department.

Outgoing Board members Will C. Mueller of Amherst, Laverne McMullen of Gibbon, and Paul Farm of Kearney were also presented certificates of appreciation for their years of service.

Officers were elected as follows: Alice Howell, president; Leonard Silver, vice-president; Phyllis Roberts, secretary; and Halvin S. Johnson, treasurer. Louis R. Koeppe of Kearney was elected director to complete the term of Jeffrey Jorgenson. 3-year directors elected were Opal Reese of Pleasanton, Carl Oran of Kearney, and Earl Webb of Odessa. Holdover directors are Gloria Sutherland of Elm Creek, Sam Spahr of Gibbon, Maxine Schroeder of Shelton, Wayne Reynolds and Jack Hammer, both of Kearney. Dr. Holmgren, immediate past president, remains on the Board of Directors. New officers assume their duties on June 1.

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On Thursday, May 25, at 7:30 p.m. at the Kearney Public Library, the Society will hold its third meeting on the development of agriculture and industry as a result of the trails, rails and highways in the county. Louis R. Koeppe will give the program on railroads in the county, their significance historically and their role in industry and agriculture.

The road was completed from Plattsmouth, and the junction was made with the Union Pacific on September 1, 1872. But problems developed. D. N. Smith, the Burlington agent for the townsite, had purchased all the land in and around the proposed townsite, 993 acres of which had been acquired from the Union Pacific. The Burlington had built a union station at the junction, but the Union Pacific refused to stop its trains there until it received an interest in the townsite. Passengers were discharged at Kearney Station, six miles east, and mail was delivered at Junction House, one mile west. However, the problem was solved in short order when half of the city lots were deeded to the Union Pacific, and by September 18, 1872, when the Burlington & Missouri River's first train arrived, both railroads were stopping their trains at the new town of Kearney Junction.

It is of interest to note that travelers from Iowa over the B & M.R. line had to be ferried across the Missouri River to continue their journey westward by train from Plattsmouth. However, such inconveniences were taken in stride as a part of the luxury of early train travel into an unsettled land until a bridge across the Missouri could be built.

With two rail lines now in operation at Kearney Junction, several other railroad companies made plans to build to the junction and have a part in the prospective business that was sure to open up and develop. It was generally recognized that all branch lines would funnel into this roadway along the Platte to the new territory of the West. The Pacific Nebraska Railroad, later Missouri Pacific, built as far as Prosser in Adams County and stopped. The Sioux City and Nebraska Railway shows a projected line on a Kearney map of 1876, but it was never built.

The St. Joseph & Denver City Railroad land grant provided that it build to Kearney Junction from Hastings. The route had been surveyed and certain officials had given assurances to Moses Sydenham that this route would be south of Kearney Junction, on the other side of the Platte. Acting upon this, Sydenham, who had been one of the original planners of the Kearney Junction townsite, entered a claim on a tract of government land and laid out a town in 1872 which he called Centoria. He opened a store and newspaper office, publishing the Central Star in which he encouraged the settlement of western Nebraska, advocated removal of the state capitol here, and not only this, but the national capitol as well, locating it on the already government-owned military reservation. The St. Joseph & Denver City, however, made its terminus in Hastings. It did build on to Grand Island in 1879 to join the Union Pacific, and the prospects of Centoria were forever ruined.

Branch lines of the Burlington and the Union Pacific were being built all over the state including Buffalo County. A county directory of 1892 states: "The railroads traverse the county over—not a spot in the entire county ten miles distant from railroad or telegraph station. We have over 107 miles of railroad, 21 stations with telegraph, express and shipping facilities."

In 1886 the Burlington's Grand Island & Wyoming Central branch was built across the northeast corner of the county, and Ravenna was founded and became a railroad and commercial center. Although a post office had been established there as early as 1878 with the name of Beaver Creek, it was not until the railroad came that a townsite was laid out. The new town was named Ravenna, which was incorporated on October 12, 1886. It has been a division point of the Burlington and railroading has been a principal industry of the city. Other stations on this branch line in Buffalo

County are St. Michael and Sweetwater.

Not to be left out of this developing territory, the Union Pacific built a branch line known as the Omaha and Republican Valley Railway from Boelus to Ravenna to Pleasanton. Trains started arriving in Pleasanton in 1890; although a grade was built for a short distance westward, Pleasanton became the terminus. The settlement dated from 1874 and the first postoffice had been known as River View, but with the arrival of the railroad a townsite was surveyed and platted in 1890, and the Village of Pleasanton grew as a business and community center. Situated on the South Loup River, the village was plagued by floods; when the flood of 1947 washed away the railroad track, this Union Pacific branch line was officially abandoned in 1948.

Nantasket, South Ravenna, and Pool's Siding, later incorporated as Poole, were stations on this branch line within the county.

Meanwhile, a group of Kearney businessmen decided that the two major railroads were not providing all the service necessary in the county, specifically up the Wood River valley to the northwest. Several settlements had sprung up along the stage route—Greendale, Stanley and Armada, the latter being a thriving village with a population of 250. Since neither the Union Pacific nor the Burlington could be interested in building such a branch line, the local group initiated plans for a new railroad up the Wood River valley from Kearney, with a goal of running it all the way to the Black Hills. In February 1890, bonds were voted through and construction of the Kearney & Black Hills Railroad was begun; it was initially built as far as Callaway. The first run between Kearney and Callaway, a distance of 65 miles, was made on October 4, 1890. In 1898 this branch line was taken over by the Union Pacific. While it never did reach the Black Hills, the line was extended to Stapleton in 1912 but was never built further.

Stations located in the county as a result of this branch line were Glenwood, Riverdale, Amherst, Watertown and Miller, but the new railroad resulted in the death of the early settlements of Greendale and Stanley, and the moving of the town of Armada one mile south to the new townsite of Miller on the railroad.

In 1905 the Kearney-Callaway branch line inaugurated Union Pacific's first McKeen gasoline-powered motor car. Called the Potato Bug and other various names, these passenger motor cars were used for half a century on this branch line, the final run being completed in 1955.

Locomotive 481, now on the Buffalo County Historical Museum grounds, made its last trip on the Kearney-Callaway-Stapleton run, also in 1955.

In 1913 another Union Pacific subsidiary, the Hastings & Northwestern Railroad, built a branch line from Hastings to Gibbon known as the Gibbon cutoff. The village of Denman in the extreme southeast corner of Buffalo County is served by this branch. Mixed trains and motor cars were once operated on this road, but it has now become a very busy and important freight route of the Union Pacific and includes many shipments of coal bound for Kansas City.

In contrast, the original Burlington line into Kearney in 1872 has been abandoned. This railroad, which played a key role in the creation of the city of Kearney, actually played a rather minor role in the business life of the city.

Passenger service has now been curtailed or dropped entirely in most parts of the nation, but all who remember the thrill of the ride on a train with the countryside flashing by outside the window will always have a touch of nostalgia for the great iron horse, belching smoke and steam, that was of such great importance in the building of our county, our state and our nation.

Early Ravenna Burling-ton Station.

Railroad tracks at Pleasanton after the flood of 1912.

Buffalo County Historical Society
Box 523
Kearney, NE 68847

The annual spring meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society will be held in Kearney on Saturday, June 10.

Registration at the Frank House on the West Campus of Kearney State College will begin at 9:30 a.m. Tours of the house and of the Kearney Power House will be conducted during the morning. At 11:30 at the Nebraskan, State Archivist Jim Potter will tell about the branch of the Nebraska Archives that will be housed in the KSC Library.

The luncheon will be served at 12:15 at the Nebraskan. Speaker for the noon program will be Professor David A. Dary of the University of Kansas. Professor Dary spent 16 years as a broadcast journalist before returning to his native Kansas to enter teaching and to research and write about the American West.

The afternoon will be devoted to tours of the Buffalo County Historical Society's depot museum, Fort Kearny Historical Park, and the Lowell, Boot Hill and Lone Grave areas along the old Oregon Trail.
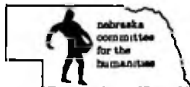
Reservations for the luncheon are necessary and must be in by June 3.

Please reserve _____ tickets at $3.75 each for the annual meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society to be held in Kearney on June 10. Price includes the luncheon and tours.

Name _____

Address _____

Checks may be made payable to Nebraska State Historical Society. Mail to Buffalo County Historical Society, Box 523, Kearney, NE 68847.