



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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THE HOTELS OF KEARNEY — Part I

by Margaret Sines Nielsen

The first building in Kearney also served as a hotel at various times. Located in the center of section two, with a room on each of the four quarters, it was occupied by homesteaders George and James Smith, Daniel Rowan and John W. Wright. Asbury Collins, his wife, Louisa, two sons and a daughter-in-law arrived at the Junction house on May 11, 1871.

Mrs. Collins described it as "16 by 16 and built of sheathing lumber" (the outside cut of logs). That evening the Collins family sat down with the claim holders "to tea served in tin cups and plates, with a box covered with newspapers serving as a table". With the addition of a lean-to it became the Collins home; they furnished board for the Smith brothers. The house was later moved to 18th and 1st Avenue; G. W. Bryant was proprietor in 1877.

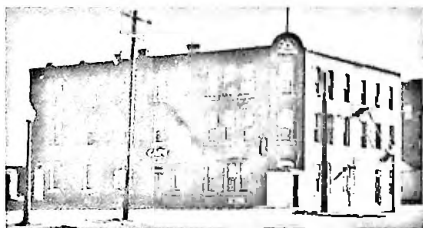
The first hotel structure was built by Simon and John Murphy in 1872. It was named Harrold House in honor of Simon's wife.¹ Later it was known as the Beckett House, which was still standing at 1810 Central in 1973.

The Depot House, E. E. Clark, prop., was listed in the first issue of the *Kearney Times* of 1872, but no further record is found. Also, in 1872 James and Antoinette Riley began construction of the Grand Central Hotel on Railroad and Nebraska² streets. By 1877 it was operated by J. H. Irvin, a broom maker who later studied law with Worthen and Ellsworth. The Pioneer Stage Lines was quartered at the hotel; stages left every day but Sunday for "the Republican Valley and all intermediate points." It also carried the mail.

The Commercial Hotel was built across the street³ in 1873. M. L. Tracy was the proprietor, in 1877, "Baggage taken to and from the depot free of charge"⁴ It is listed in the 1890 City Directory as "Windsor Hotel Annex—Servants."

Another hotel built in 1873 was the Metropolitan. "This house is new and newly

(Continued on Page 3)



Windsor Hotel

1. *Tales of Buffalo County*, Vol. II.
2. Avenue A, now the Chamber of Commerce building.
3. Now McCue's.
4. The Union depot, at Railroad and Ave. A.

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 \$ 7.50
- Institutional Membership \$10.00
- Supporting Membership \$25.00

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

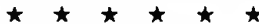
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WITH THE SOCIETY

On **Sunday, September 27**, at 2:00 p.m., the BCHS will have a meeting at the Ockinga Center on the west campus of Kearney State College. Cari Jorgensen of NPPD will give a slide program entitled, *A Century of Service*, covering one hundred years of electricity in Kearney.

Ockinga Center is on College Drive, a short distance east of the Frank House.

Tour, October 28-29. The BCHS is sponsoring a 2-day bus tour on Wednesday and Thursday, October 28-29, to Mitchell, South Dakota, to visit the Corn Palace, Middle Border Museum, and Doll Museum in Mitchell, and Nebraska points of interest enroute. Cost will be \$60.00 for members, \$70.00 for non-members, which will cover the cost of the bus, admissions, and motel. Meals are not included in the cost. Send reservation along with check for \$25.00 by October 10 to Buffalo County Historical Society, Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848. More details on this at the September meeting. Call Henry Hohnholt (237-7327) if you have questions.



The Lois C. Holmgren Memorial now totals \$220.00. We thank the family and friends of Lois who designated gifts to the Historical Society. These tax-deductible memorial gifts help us preserve Buffalo County history.



Countryland History on the new KRNy radio station (102.3 FM) features historical events in the Buffalo County area. The BCHS has furnished information for these minutes of history.

A Message from President Margaret Hohnholt:

Tourism is winding down although we are still having good visitor attendance at the Museum. We want to thank the volunteers who have helped at the Museum all summer. We will still be needing some help during September and October. If you are available let me or Mardi know.

Have you noticed the nicely painted carts and the newly planted areas around the buildings? We thank the Dobytown Kiwanis Club for the painting of the carts and the Noon Kiwanis Club for helping with the grounds beautification plus work of some of our own members.

NEW MEMBERS

- Chad Anderson Amherst
- Richard L. Larson Kearney
- Essam and Barbara Arram Kearney

furnished and is the largest and best arranged in the city." It was in the Riverside addition south of Kearney; Nichol, Hoagland and Co. were proprietors. At one time it housed the workers of a nearby slaughter house. It was later bought by Casper Cornelius and banker Charles O. Norton and moved to 1714 Central; Louis Koeppel bought it in the early 1900's and moved it to 20th and Ave. B. The two-story building had forty rooms, each with its own chimney. Mr. Koeppel operated a new and used furniture store there; it was later known as the Trading Post. Bob Campbell conducted auctions there for a number of years.

A. E. Aitken, who came to Kearney in 1872 built a number of houses, operated the Commercial Hotel for two years and was later Kearney agent for the Black Hills Stage and Bridge Co. In 1881 he began construction of the Aitken House on the corner of Railroad and First. Rhone brothers, publishers of the *New Era* were the proprietors in 1883. By 1890 it was the Kenmore Hotel. Mr. Aitken later became a realtor.

By 1877 the *Kearney Press* summed up the situation: "The hotels in Kearney (six in all) have been crowded to their utmost capacity for the last few days. One of the greatest demands of the present is for a large first class hotel."

The situation was no better in 1883 when George A. Beecher⁵ arrived from Illinois.

The Aitken House and the Grand Central were overrun by land-seekers . . . One courteous gentleman surrendered his room to my mother and sister. I slept on a writing table in the hotel office with a Webster's Dictionary for my pillow.

The *New Era* of March 6, 1886 told of a fire in the American Hotel. It started at 5:00 A.M. in the hotel office while the clerk went to the kitchen to build a fire. The guests, in their night clothes were evacuated. "The fire boys with their inadequate means of subduing a conflagration came gallantly to the rescue" but one after another the buildings next to the hotel caught fire. Among the buildings lost were Peck's Feed Store, Lambert Brothers gun shop, and the J. W. Small general store. Mrs. A. B. Cherry's millinery, next to Small's was saved. Damage was estimated at \$10,000. The location of the fire was not indicated but it appears that the American Hotel was the old Junction House which was destroyed by fire in the 1880's.

The Windsor Hotel was built about this time at the corner of 21st and Avenue A. A. St. Julian was proprietor in 1889. During the nineties it was operated by W. W. Mannix who owned the brickyard which furnished the materials for the Midway Hotel. P. J. Moran was the proprietor in 1909. The Windsor was a fine hotel in its day but it deteriorated with age and became notorious for the clientele attracted by its residents. It is said the hotel had an arrangement with the police at one time. They would call the Madame and suggest she close up for a few days, after which business went on as usual. However, there were a few raids, which caught at least one professional man who was there on legitimate business. During World War II the hotel was remodeled into apartments for the families of air base personnel. Nebraska Public Power now stands on the site.

On February 20, 1886 the *New Era* announced, "after six months of endeavors to procure a first class hotel . . . a proposition was received, accompanied by drawings . . . A meeting in the law office of Moore and Jones was called with a large number of

5. Bishop of the Western Diocese of the Episcopal Church.

businessmen present." George W. Frank acted as chairman. A Mr. Isenhardt offered to build a \$50,000 hotel and furnish it if \$10,000 was pledged by Kearneyites. Over \$5,000 was pledged at the meeting on Tuesday, by Friday the amount was \$10,075. A financial committee to conduct business with Isenhardt consisted of John H. Roe, W. L. Downing and R. A. Moore.

By November 27 the foundation was nearing completion. The first floor was to be red Colorado sandstone, the upper three floors would be brick with shingled gables. J. L. Keck of Cincinnati was to be the owner; Dr. O. S. Marden, the manager, would buy the furnishings. Architect was E. Des Jardins of Cincinnati, George W. Frank, Jr. was in charge of construction.

An "informal opening" was held on February 18, 1888.

The *New Era* reported,

As we pass through the main entrance we are in a large and commodious office (lobby) paved with tile of variegated colors . . . Extending the length of the building east and west is a large billiard room and bar . . . Ascending the main staircase, which is lit by a heavy plate glass skylight . . . a commodious corridor leads to the bridal chambers and other large chambers."

The second floor dining-room, in the northeast corner would easily seat one hundred. Next to the dining room was an "ordinary" for late diners. The hotel was steam-heated, lights were gas, with wiring in place for electric lights and bell pulls. Each room on the first three floors had a bathroom and closet. There were eighty rooms in all.

A formal opening was to be held on the twenty-second with a leap year party on the twenty-fourth, given by the young ladies of Kearney. They were the first of many elaborate social functions, described in detail by Maud Marston, society editor of the *Enterprise*.

On March 24, 1890, sparks from the smoke stack ignited the roof of the Midway and the fire spread rapidly. The fire alarm was sounded at 7:40 a.m.; the 125 employees



First Midway Hotel, 1886 - 1890

and guests escaped, many still in their night clothes. Harry Deming, property manager of a theatrical company staying at the hotel, jumped from a window on an upper floor, hit his head and was killed.⁶

By 9:00 A.M. the whole town was threatened by a strong north wind. "The fire laddies and citizens responded with hoses and bucket brigades" and nearby buildings were saved. By 10:30 A.M. the Grand Island fire department had arrived with 75 men and their fire carts. But the hotel and its contents were destroyed. The Kecks, who lived in the hotel, lost all their fine furnishings and personal belongings, and guests were left with the clothes on their backs. They were housed at Green Terrace and in private homes. The next day Mayor C. B. Finch called a meeting, declaring "We must have another hotel." The Chamber of Commerce pledged \$6,000 "while the ruins were still smoking."

Construction on the new Midway began in the fall of 1891, it was completed in 1893 with J. L. Keck again the owner of the building and Dr. Marden the furnishings. But the Kearney boom had fizzled and the nation was in the midst of a severe depression. Dr. Marden sold his interest to Keck and moved to Chicago where he established a magazine called *Success*.

In the early 1900's, H. D. Watson, on a business trip to Chicago became acquainted with Lincoln Arthur Denison, owner of a resort hotel in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. He persuaded Denison to take over the Midway and in 1903, the Denisons and their son, Arthur, moved into the hotel.

Two more sons, Edward and Louis J. (Jim), were born in the Midway where the family lived for a number of years. From their rooms on the southeast corner of the second floor, they had ringside seats for parades and other events of the town. As they grew older they had jobs at the desk or in the dining room.

The Midway was again the center of social activity, with much of the activity centering around the long mahogany bar, the billiard room and the Rose Room extending along the north side of the building. The Rose Room was a beautifully decorated room with large chairs where "overstuffed gentlemen . . . formed a circle around the east and south walls to soak up the morning sun" coming through the large east windows.

In 1901, when Carrie Nation came to Kearney for a series of lectures, George Anderson,⁷ then in high school, was on hand at the Midway to take her picture,

she kept roaming from room to room, looking for a bar . . . while she was lecturing the bartender on the iniquities of liquor . . . I stood waiting . . . to obtain a picture . . . she turned around and saw me standing in the barroom. She lectured me for being in a saloon . . . shaking her finger in my face as I backed out of the barroom and into the poolroom. She lectured me for being caught in the poolroom . . . she finally subsided and I got my picture of her along, with Alf Nye who was along with me.

With prohibition the long bar was given to shop students at the college and the Rose room became an ice cream parlor. It was later a private dining room and the main dining room at the rear of the hotel was moved to the southeast corner.

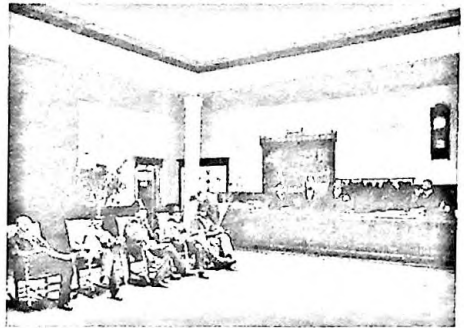
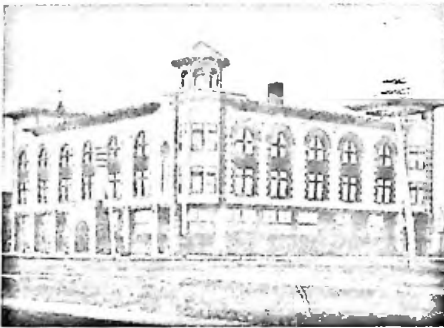
Among the notables who stayed at the hotel were former President Taft, Buffalo

6. His family later sued the owners for \$5,000 on the basis of a little-known state law requiring a rope in every room.

7. Son of Sheriff David Anderson.

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Second Midway Hotel and Lobby, 1893 - 1967

Bill and Madame Schumann-Heink. Many Kearneyites stayed at the hotel on a permanent or temporary basis. In the winter the "rich people on 8th Avenue" closed their large hard-to-heat homes and moved to the Midway until spring.

The corner west of the hotel was originally the Midway stables, with a corral to the east. It later became a garage and a small building in the corral area was built for the Jewett-Paige automobile showroom. Business had increased enough by 1921 that two stories were added to the annex on the west side of the hotel.

In 1915, Mr. Denison was in the hospital recovering from an emergency appendectomy when the boiler at the Midway blew up in the middle of a cold winter night. A steam threshing machine was moved against the building on the north side to supply power for heat. Denison had acquired the Cottonmill, and the boiler was moved into the hotel, where it continued in operation until the building was sold. Mr. Denison built an amusement park on the site of the Cottonmill in 1919.

The Arthur L. Roberts company of Minneapolis leased the Midway in 1930 just a year before Denison's death at age 70. John Henry took over the lease in 1934. Ed and Jim Denison assumed management of the hotel in 1956, they were later joined by their brother Art.

In 1967 the hotel was sold. The proud old Midway which, with its predecessor, dominated the corner of 25th and Central for 80 years, was torn down to make way for a Safeway store. The stained glass in the dining room now sparkles in the windows of the Ed Denison home at 214 East 39th Street.

(Part II will appear in the October issue, along with sources.)