



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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KEARNEY HIGH SCHOOL *Glimpses from the Early Years, 1881 - 1901*

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

Graduation Day! For the girls, fine-sewn white dresses with ruffles and tucks, hair in curls and ribbons. For the boys, scratchy wool suits of brown or navy blue, white starched shirts, new haircuts. The stage for the ceremonies was lavishly decorated with flags and banks of fresh, bright flowers, crepe paper streamers, and always displayed in large letters for all to see, the Class Motto.

Finery for the girl graduate meant hours of sewing in the home; ready-made gowns were not available. If the mother or grandmother was not skilled in needlework, an itinerant seamstress would be hired to come into the home and live for a week or two, sewing the graduation garments and perhaps other needed summer sewing for the family.



Kearney High School Class of 1908

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Trails and Rails Museum, Mardi Anderson, Director. Phone 234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

Mrs. Marian Johnson of Kearney was reelected president of the Buffalo County Historical Society at its annual meeting on Sunday, April 29, at the First Presbyterian Church fellowship hall in Kearney. Other officers and directors elected are Mrs. Alice Howell, vice-president; Mrs. Margaret Hohnholt, secretary; Leo Henrickson, treasurer; Mrs. Henrietta Rhamy of Gibbon and Mrs. Edna Hehner of Pleasanton, new directors, and reelected as a director, Philip S. Holmgren of Kearney.

Remaining members of the Board of Directors are Mrs. Maxine Schroeder of Shelton, Miss Pauline Nichols of Gibbon, and Carl Oran, Glen Wisch, Minnett Steinbrink, Leonard Silver and Chan Lynch, all of Kearney. Opal Reese of Pleasanton and Barbara Saum of Elm Creek are retiring members of the Board of Directors; Viola Mueller is retiring as treasurer.

Museum Director Mardi Anderson reported that the schoolhouse complex on the museum grounds is now complete with pony barn, two outdoor toilets, a water pump and playground merry-go-round. The Loup River Freighters Hotel will be open for visitors this season even though interior decoration and furnishings have not been started. Temporary exhibit at the Trails and Rails museum will feature the centennial of Kearney High School. The museum opened on May 15.

Future services of the Society which were discussed included an educational program for school children, oral history, historical markers, tourism and fund raising. The importance of remembering the Buffalo County Historical Society through donations and legacies and for memorial gifts was stressed.

Kearney High's first graduation exercises were held on May 29, 1884, at the Presbyterian Church. There were five graduates, all girls. Each read an essay she had prepared as a part of the commencement program. The Valedictory was entitled, "I Slept and Dreamed that Life was Beauty, I Woke and Found that Life was Duty." The program also included musical numbers, the class prophecy, an address to the class by the Superintendent of Schools and the presentation of diplomas.

From 1881 to 1895 the Kearney High School course of study comprised three years work. Classes were known as the "junior class," the "middle class," and the "senior class." In 1895 the high school course was raised to four years and there was no graduating class that year. Many students left high school before graduating to teach in rural schools. One young woman who decided to try her ability as a rural school teacher concluded that "being a school teacher, encyclopedia, dictionary, janitor and Sunday School teacher combined, was not so pleasant as being just a school girl and she was glad to join her fellow students the following year." (Class History. 1891)

A scrapbook of clippings and graduation programs kept by the late Harriette Jones Nelson, Class of 1901, tells of early functions and activities of Kearney High School as reported in the local press. Graduation exercises were held at the Model Opera House on the west side of Avenue B between 21st and 22nd Streets in 1888, '89 and '90. In 1891 commencement was held in the new Kearney Opera House, and this became the place of commencement for many years following. The number graduating grew from four in 1884 to fourteen in 1890, and in those years the graduation program included essays or orations given by each graduate, interspersed with selections by the Midway Band or Orchestra and vocal or instrumental music by high school students. The subject matter of the essay and the manner of delivery by the student were noted in the press. Attendance at commencement was by ticket only, and admission charged to the public attending.

The commencement program of the class of 1889 was the climax of a round of school activities for the eleven members of the class. According to the **Kearney Enterprise** of June 9, a reception was given by the middle and junior classes in Miss Stewart's room on Friday evening, June 8. Every nook and corner of the room was decorated with wreaths and garlands of evergreen, and members of the senior class were presented with bouquets of white roses. After the literary and musical program rendered by the host students, refreshments were served to 100 invited guests, alumni and friends of the graduating seniors. Mayor Finch and several of the clergy of the city were also present.

A news item in the **Journal** describes a "royal banquet" given by Miss Stewart, the high school principal, assisted by Superintendent Morey, Professor Draper and Mr. Wolf, to the graduating class of 1889 at the Midway Hotel. "An excellent and bountiful repast was spread and the entire company had a right royal time," concludes the article.

Wednesday, June 12, Class Day Exercises were held at the high school with a program of music and orations, the class history and the class prophecy. The Valedictory address was given at this time. Invitations were extended to parents and friends and the high school room was filled, according to the **Kearney Daily Journal** of June 13.

Commencement was held at the Model Opera House on June 14. The

newspapers of the day gave detailed accounts of the event, even to a description of each young lady's gown and graduation gifts received. According to the **Kearney Daily Hub**, "the building was filled, and owing to the admission charge, the audience was more select and in a more appreciative mood than has sometimes been the case." The front of the stage and boxes were tastily trimmed with flags, while a rustic scene was shown from the back of the stage. The Midway Military Band played and a chorus of about 60 children under the direction of Prof. Draper sang. Then each of the eleven graduates delivered an essay on such varied subjects as "The Philosophy and Genius of Carlyle," "No Man can End with being Superior Who will not Begin with being Inferior," and "Life's Stepping Stones."

Following the essays, E. C. Calkins, president of the school board, addressed the graduates and presented the diplomas. "The class marched upon the stage in single file. each lady had a beautiful bouquet of flowers, which made a beautiful contrast with their white dresses." One of the newspapers estimated that "fully \$700 worth of flowers were presented" to the graduates from their friends.

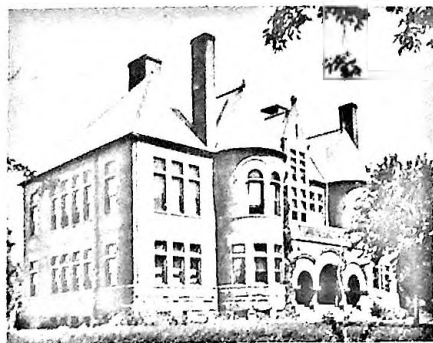
Miss M. I. Stewart was superintendent of schools when the first high school class was graduated in 1884. When Professor J. T. Morey became superintendent in 1888, Miss Stewart was made principal of the high school, a position she held until 1902. During his years as superintendent, Professor Morey also taught science in the high school, physics, chemistry and astronomy.

During his tenure as superintendent, the Kearney high school and elementary grades celebrated patriotic holidays as well as Christmas and Thanksgiving. Special programs of essays and music were given, and on Arbor Day tree planting ceremonies took place after a special program. Students planted trees and dedicated them to their teachers, or to state or national figures. One note in the **Kearney Daily Journal** after the Arbor Day tree planting on April 22, 1889, had this to say about the ladies of the high school taking part in the planting of a tree on the high school grounds: "Each took her turn to throw a shovelful of dirt around the tree. Some wore gloves and handled the shovel as they would a dust pan, while others wielded it like a poker; and one actually took a chew of gum before throwing on her share. But, strangest of all, not one spit on her hands or pressed the shovel into the ground with her foot." Indeed, no one in those early years was free from the eye of the reporter.

The centennial of George Washington's inauguration as the first President was the occasion for a great celebration in Kearney on April 30 1889. The **Kearney Daily**



Whittier High School



Longfellow High School

Journal of May 1, 1889 wrote this news story of the event:

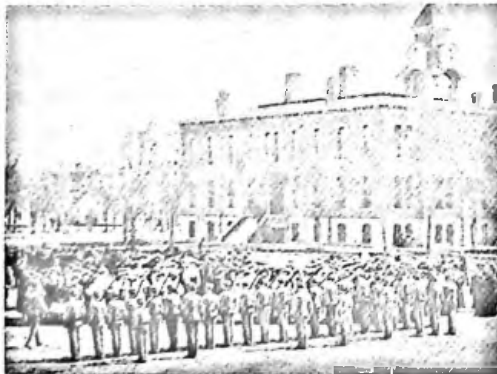
Yesterday was a truly legal holiday in Kearney. Business houses and banks were closed, as were also the government offices. Buildings were gayly decorated with the "emblem of peace," and streamers of bunting decorated many of the awnings and store fronts of the business houses.

In the afternoon large crowds gathered at street corners to witness the procession of schools at 2:30 p.m. The gay procession moved in a solid column, six blocks long, from the school ground in the following order:

The Midway Military Band, the clergy, board of education, high school, and the classes headed by their teachers.... The column moved down 23rd St. to Central Ave., thence south to 21st Street, thence east to the Opera house. The house was packed... In the front seats were forty-two girls dressed in white with red and blue draperies and a white sash, upon which was printed the name of the state the scholar represented. On the stage were the clergy and the Kearney Musical Society and the orator of the day, Mr. George E. Morris.

An item in the **Hub**, following its news story of the celebration of Washington Day, notes that "during the exercises at the opera house a great number of children could not procure seats. Messrs. Allen and Smith took compassion on the youngsters and marched them to Geo. See's ice cream parlors and 'saturated' them with lemonade. The thoughtful kindness of these gentlemen added another pleasing feature to yesterday's proceedings."

When Professor Morey was re-elected Superintendent of Schools in 1900, the **Omaha Daily Bee** of March 15 stated: "This makes the thirteenth consecutive time that Mr. Morey has been selected to fill this position and the selection always meets with universal favor. It is owing to his personal efforts and assisted by competent teachers that the Kearney schools are second to none in the state. Recently Mr. Morey has had two companies of cadets organized in the High School, one by the young women and one by the boys, guns were secured from the state by him and the companies, are now drilling three times a week out of doors when pleasant and at Company A's Nebraska National guard armory when stormy. The latest good for the school was the organization of a debating club and the launching of a bright and newsy High school paper called **The Quidest?**"



High School Cadet Company

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Superintendent Morey left in 1901 to become superintendent of the Nebraska School for the Blind. One of his last efforts for Kearney High School was to have the Kearney school join the newly organized Nebraska Interscholastic Athletic Association. The **Kearney Daily Hub** of February 19, 1900 reports on the plan: "The incentive will be an annual Track & Field Meet to be held at Lincoln in May In addition provision is made for baseball, football, basketball, tennis, etc.

"The placing of high school sports on a legitimate and semi-professional basis, the same as in the colleges, will prove to be a good thing for the young men in our public schools and the plan should have the most hearty encouragement of parents," concludes the **Hub** article.

All was not music and laughter and celebration in the early days of Kearney High School. Controversial subjects were covered by the local press in great detail. One of the first was the problem of the overcrowding of the schools at the beginning of Kearney's "boom" period. The fact was that Kearney was then growing faster than schools could be built. Longfellow High School was started in 1890 but not completed until 1892, so Whittier's basement rooms were put into full use as classrooms, and the United Presbyterian Church at 24th Street and First Avenue was also used to relieve the crowded conditions of the high school.

Also at this time editorials and letters from school patrons dealt with "the naughty truants, a growing problem of parents and school teachers." One patron's suggested solution in **The Daily Hub** of Sunday, November 9, was that "the truants are to be arrested and confined for a short time in the hope of frightening them into proper school attendance. Should this have no effect, the doors of the Industrial School yawn for more inmates."

Other matters for complaint brought out in editorial comment or letters to the editors were the hiring of non-resident teachers, required music for all students, methods of teaching penmanship, boys who smoke, an "INFIDEL" school board and our "God-less" teachers, and the superintendent's salary (it was \$1700.00 a year in 1894).

SOURCES

Where the Buffalo Roamed, 1967; **The Quickest?**, May 1900; Scrapbook of Harriette J. Nelson; **Historical News**, July 1981.