



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

February 1983

EARLY DAYS IN ELM CREEK

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

Elm Creek, Elm Creek Station and the Village of Elm Creek all played a vital role in the early history of Buffalo County. Located at the western edge of the county, its importance in early history is sometimes overlooked because of the close tie between Fort Kearny and the development of eastern and central Buffalo County.

In William Clayton's published journal of the first Mormon trek through the Platte valley in the spring of 1847, he described the events leading up to the buffalo hunt of May 2 and 3. The emigrants had sighted three buffalo on the bluffs north of the river west of present day Kearney. Traveling on, more and more were seen and the teams moved slowly, frequently stopping to watch the shaggy animals. Clayton says: "Although they were at least eight miles from us, I distinctly counted 101 with my glass and amongst them many calves. This being the first day buffalo has been seen on our journey . . . it excited considerable interest and pleasure in the breasts of the brethren." In fact, President Brigham Young selected eleven men to go and give chase; "the chase lasted from soon after 1:00 until 4:00 p.m. . . . the total number killed that day was 1 bull, 3 cows and six calves."

Meanwhile the wagons moved slowly on and at a little past four o'clock camped beside "clear water near the banks of the Platte, about three rods wide and connects with the river." There they lingered all the following day to collect, clean and dry the buffalo meat, take care of wagons, do blacksmithing, washing, etc. History does not pinpoint the exact locations of the buffalo chase or the 2-day encampment, but it was in what is now western Buffalo County. Although Elm Creek is not named in his journal, William Clayton does name the stream in his **Emigrants Guide** published in 1848, thus making it a landmark for the thousands of Mormons to follow later.

This trail on the north side of the Platte was also used by the gold-seekers rushing



Front Street before the fire in 1906.

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Membership in the Buffalo County Historical Society is open to anyone who has an interest in Buffalo County and its people, or in the history of the area.

Annual dues, payable January 1:
Family membership\$ 7.50
Individual membership ... 5.00
Institutional membership . 10.00
Sustaining membership ... 25.00 +
Life membership..... 100.00

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Trails and Rails Museum Phone 234-3041 If no answer, call 236-5566 or 237-7858.

WITH THE SOCIETY

Tour to DeSoto Bend, March 20.

The Buffalo County Historical Society is sponsoring a tour on Sunday, March 20, to see the uncovered Steamboat **Bertrand** and its artifacts at DeSoto Bend on the Missouri River east of Blair. The **Bertrand** sunk on April 1, 1865 and her cargo was uncovered in 1968-69. All articles are on display at the Visitors Center at DeSoto Bend. In addition to the **Bertrand**, DeSoto Bend is a primary point of migration for thousands of waterfowl which may be seen in the spring of the year. Bring binoculars for wildlife viewing.

Cost of the tour is \$20.00 for members, \$25.00 for non-members. The bus holds 36 people, and reservations will be on a first come, first served basis. It will load at the City Parking Lot at 21st Street and Avenue A in Kearney and will leave at 7:00 a.m. Time of return is estimated at 7:00 p.m. A lunch stop will be made at Fremont (Lunch is not included in the tour cost). Please send your reservation and check by March 15 to the Buffalo County Historical Society, Box 523, Kearney, Nebraska 68847. In the event of a storm, the tour will be cancelled and money returned.

Meeting at Museum, February 27.

The regular meeting of the Historical Society will be held on Sunday, February 27, at the Trails and Rails Museum at 2:00 p.m. The program will focus on a look at the Buffalo County Historical Society and its programs—where we have been, where we are, and where we are going.

Is the Buffalo County Historical Society in your will?

to the fields in California and Montana. The Union Pacific follows the route, as does Highway 30.

The Union Pacific was completed through Buffalo County in 1866 and in 1869 D. C. Bond was appointed agent of Elm Creek Station. This station located one mile west of the present village—was an important point on the railroad because it was designated as the official eating place for passengers and trainmen on the two trains which daily ran on the new railroad, one going east and the other going west. Charles Davis and his wife Kate ran the eating house and trains scheduled a 20-minute stop for meals. He also kept a saloon. The following story is told by S. C. Bassett in his **History of Buffalo County, Vol. 1:**

Stations were few and far between on the railroad in the early days and travelers who indulged in strong drink embraced every opportunity offered to lay in a supply in bottles and jugs. The presence of liquors on the emigrant train made much trouble for the trainmen, and it is related that the following plan of lessening the evil was adopted at Elm Creek, in cooperation between the trainmen and Mr. Davis the saloonkeeper.

On the arrival of the emigrant train refusal was made to sell liquors in bottles and jugs on the plea that the trainmen objected, but the would-be purchasers were informed that if they would quietly wait until the train was due to leave and the trainmen elsewhere employed, they could have all the bottles and jugs of liquors they desired. Hence it was at the last moment those who wished loaded up with wet goods. After the train had left for the West it was discovered that the wet goods consisted of cold tea and for a mile or more west of the station the roadside was lined with broken jugs and bottles.

After the reorganization of Buffalo County in 1870, a special election was held on January 20 and taxes were levied in July. It is related in Bassett's **History of Buffalo County** that "in the western part of the county there were a few settlers who boasted that they had never been assessed and would not be and they would make it warm for anyone who attempted to assess their property. On his official trip the assessor (James Oliver) was accompanied by his brother, John, the sheriff. When they arrived the few settlers at Elm Creek began making threats and firing their guns, but the Oliver brothers were not easily bluffed and replied that they had guns and could shoot if necessary, but that the assessment must be made and there was no use making a fuss about it. After a long parley the assessor was permitted to perform his official duty." At the regular election of October 11, 1870, Charles Davis of Elm Creek was elected to the office of county commissioner, thus giving the western part of the county official representation.

ST. VALENTINE'S BALL

AT THE SCHOOL HOUSE IN
ELM CREEK, NEBRASKA, FEB. 14, 1876.

Yourselves and Ladies are Respectfully Invited to Attend.

FLOOR MANAGERS: George Dillard, J. Schaefer, J. Clark.
COM. OF ARRANGEMENTS: J. V. Henshaw, J. Clark.

Music by Smith's String Band, of Kearney Junction.

TICKETS, \$1.00.--SUPPER EXTRA.

School District No. 9 was organized on June 10, 1872 and the first school house was built. Josephus Moore was the first teacher, and the school census showed that there were 40 children of school age in the district. The school house was always the center of social affairs in those first years of settlement before church buildings or opera houses.

A store was built at an early date, and a post office established June 19, 1872 with Lars Jensen serving as the first postmaster. Early church congregations were the Catholic, who met at the railroad section house, and the Methodist, who met in the school house. The Catholic people later built a small church. An early sketch of Elm Creek Station shows a store and a sod house on the south side of the railroad; a saloon, doby house and postoffice, school house, Catholic Church and a dwelling house on the north side.

The men about town of the early settlement were Charles Davis, operator of the railroad eating place and a saloon; D. C. Bond, the station agent; John P. Ahrents, who arrived in 1872, engaged in mercantile and lumber business, and laid out the present site of Elm Creek, platting 80 acres. Also, John Tyler, who was an early merchant, arriving in 1873. Later he took up farming and is said to have traded a homestead along the Platte River for a spotted coach dog.

In 1883 the Elm Creek settlement moved one mile east where the railroad had built its depot. The school house, the store and the Catholic Church were moved to the new village site. The Methodist congregation built their church in 1883 south of the railroad. The village at its new site was incorporated January 12, 1887, the members of the first village board being N. O. Calkins, H. D. Beecroft, E. O. Carpenter, H. Nantker and D. C. Bond.

A few months before its incorporation, the **Kearney New Era** of Saturday, August 21, 1886, carried a description of the new village written by their roving reporter who signed himself "Grand Curiosity."

On the 16th I made a brief call at Elm Creek. I placed my horse Button in charge of Mr. Potter, who is the owner of a very large livery barn, situated, I should think, in about the center of town.

I noticed that a beautiful building had been built on the west side of Main Street which is occupied and in full operation as a bank, bearing the name of Elm Creek Banking Company, J. J. Bartlett is president; D. C. Bond, vice-president; R. A. Lumley, cashier.

As I sat on the platform of Mr. Robert Mitchell's new hotel, which is 22x46, 2 stories, and furnished first-class throughout, I am able to bear witness that his table is bountifully supplied. . . . I learned that Elm Creek has a population of about 400 with only 2 lawyers; 2 churches, Methodist and Roman Catholic; 2 drug stores, 4 hotels, 2 hardware stores, 2 groceries, 1 school house; 1 flouring mill; 1 bank; 2 lumberyards and elevator; 1 furniture store; 2 butcher shops, 2 blacksmiths; 1 wagon maker, 1 harness maker who complains of hard times; 4 dry goods stores, 1 dentist; and the most handsome store of Mr. Wm. McNutt who has opened in the postoffice building with a full line of confectionery and bakery, ice-cold drinks, etc.

This beautiful town is situated 14 miles west of Kearney . . . on the flat land between the bluffs and Platte River. I noticed several new houses which were being neatly painted.

The Kearney Enterprise of January 19, 1890 gives an account of Elm Creek and its progress. The Elm Creek Banking Company has now become the First National Bank, and a second bank, Farmers & Merchants Bank, has been organized. Early

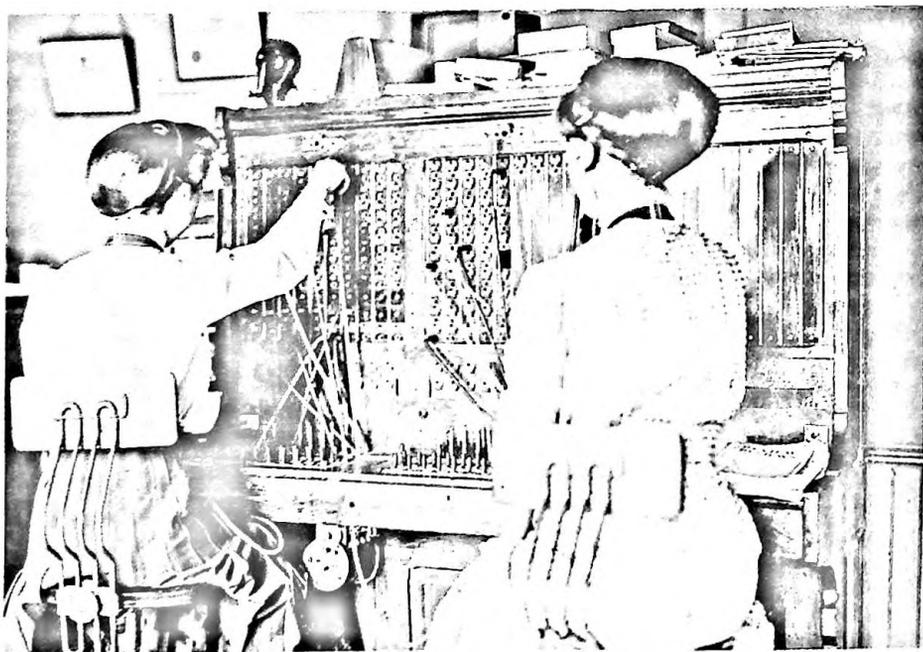
merchants and business men were:

Henry Nautcher, druggist
 McCoy & Edgerton, general store
 C. J. Carper, general store
 B. F. Reeve, general store
 C. W. Fisher, grocer
 S. Upton, furniture & undertaking
 Tom Baker, painter
 Orlie H. Reid, shoemaker
 Frank McCall, Grange store
 John Dermody, Pacific House
 W. G. Fisher, grocer
 Mrs. L. E. Mitchell, restaurant
 I. J. Holt, Elm Creek Hotel

E. W. Potter, druggist
 George Arendt, station agent
 McComb & Backus, saddlery
 R. K. Potter, banker, druggist
 H. D. Beecroft, general store
 Alden Ferris, Jr., hardware & implements
 D. McComb, grain elevator
 J. T. Harrison, lumber
 M. A. Lamson, hardware, stores
 Mrs. M. E. Volk, millinery
 C. F. Madsen, lumber, coal, grain

Streets in the new village were named for early settlers: Arendt, Bond, Calkins, Beecroft, Boyd, McComb, Potter and Tyler. Early newspapers were the **Elm Creek Sun** started in 1886, and the **Elm Creek Pilot**, around 1892. About 1900 E. C. Krewson purchased the **Buffalo County Beacon** published in Gibbon and moved the plant to Elm Creek, publishing under the name of **Elm Creek Beacon**, which continues today although publishers have changed. A flouring mill was build around 1897, the village donating the site.

The Fairview Telephone Company was organized February 20, 1904, its original operation fifteen phones extending about ten miles north of Elm Creek. By 1915 the company had a capital stock of \$10,000, 225 phones in use, and covered a territory of about 175 miles. It also operated a 30-mile toll line extending to Miller and Amherst.



Laura Robbins and Maud Ware at telephone switchboard 1910.

Buffalo County Historical Society
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On July 1, 1906 a fire destroyed 14 buildings of the main downtown street in Elm Creek. In the rebuilding, which was commenced immediately after the fire, the Front Street buildings were larger and of better construction, many of them brick.

In 1907 a waterworks system was put in, and in 1910 an electric light plant was constructed by John Nitchie.

When a new school house was built in 1890, the old school was renovated and became the Episcopal Church, the Catholic Church was enlarged, and in 1898 the Methodist Church was moved to its present location north of the railroad. The Christian Church was organized in February 1910.

The Elm Creek Women's Club launched a project for a public library which became a reality in August of 1922.

Elm Creek has had its share of fires, floods and blizzards, but it has survived and continues to be a thriving and vital community in western Buffalo County.

(This is the first of two articles on the history of Elm Creek.)

SOURCES

Biographical Souvenir of Buffalo, Kearney & Phelps Counties, 1890: Bassett, History of Buffalo County, 1916; Elm Creek Echoes; Kearney New Era, August 21, 1886; Kearney Enterprise, January 19, 1890; William Clayton's Journal; W. Clayton, Latter Day Saints Emigrants Guide, 1848. Pictures courtesy of Mrs. Ada Brodine.

NEW MEMBERS

Maxine Butcher Kearney Dale M. Parrish Sumner
Barb Friskopp Kearney Katherine Yawn Hemet, CA

LIFE MEMBERS

Rudolph Axmann Amherst Viola G. Livingston Gibbon
Chas. T. Eckles Marshalltown, IA Floyd Randall Gibbon