



Buffalo Tales



Volume 3, No. 1

Buffalo County Historical Society

January 1980

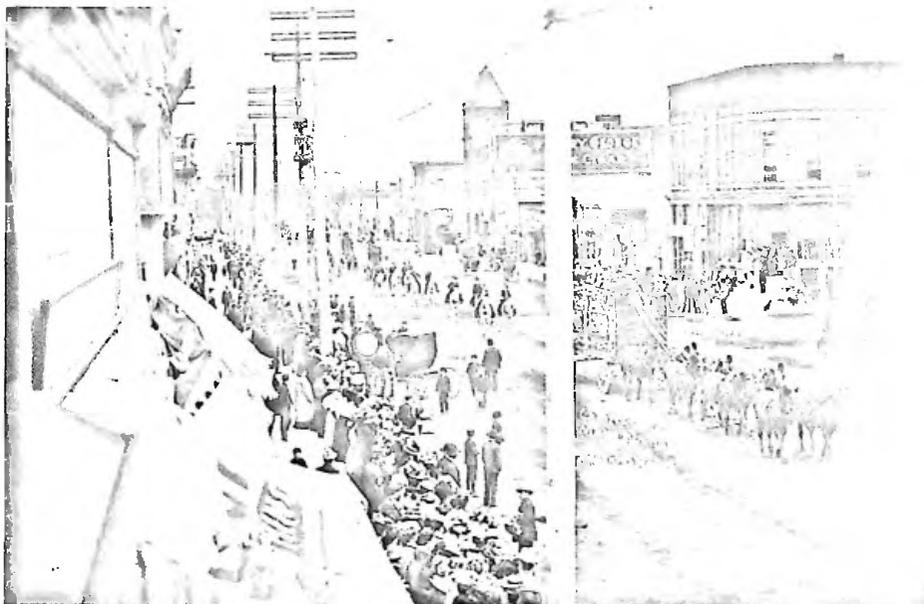
THEY LOVED A PARADE

by Margaret Ellen Nielsen

In the early days of Buffalo County, almost any unusual event was cause for celebration. It relieved the loneliness and drudgery of the settlers' lives to put on what finery they possessed and go to town for a day of visiting, eating and "whoopin' it up"

H. Hugh Sydenham wrote of his first Fourth of July celebration:

"June 14, 1872, I arrived at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Moses H. Sydenham, as their invited guest, and upon their urgent solicitation, I attended Kearney's first celebration the following year. It's true I wasn't very old at the time, but like most 'old settlers' my memory runs back to just a little before I happened. Kearney being on the north side of the Platte River, and Fort Kearney being on the south side...we had to ford the river...After ferrying the river in a one-horse wagon and covering the five miles over land I, and the rest of the family, arrived at the celebration. Kearney's population had all turned out, both families, the (Asbury) Collins and (D.N.) Smith



Circus parade on Central Avenue, Kearney, May 18, 1907. Photo from S. D. Butcher Collection of Nebraska State Historical Society.

Buffalo Tales is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Editor.....Gene E. Hamaker

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.....\$ 5.00
- Individual membership... 3.00
- Institutional membership. 5.00
- Sustaining membership... 25.00 +
- Life membership..... 100.00

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WITH THE SOCIETY

Sunday, January 27. The regular meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society will meet at Havens Chapel at 2:00 p.m. Andrew Howe, of Havens Chapel, and Neva Richter, of St. Mary's Parish, are in charge of a program on the early settlement of Prairie Center, which included both churches.

Meetings of the Historical Society are open to the public, and a special invitation is made to families and individuals with roots in the Prairie Center community.

Havens Chapel is nine miles north of Kearney on Highway 10, and two miles east. There is a Havens Chapel sign at the intersection of the turn east.

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Do you have a photograph of special interest relating to schools in Buffalo County? Denny's Photography will copy any historical picture on the subject of education in Buffalo County. These can be school houses, group pictures of classes or rural schools, special programs or celebrations. Photographs relating to Kearney State College are also desired.

Denny's Photography is located at 813 West 25th Street in Kearney and your picture will be copied while you wait.

This project will take place during one week of February. Details will be announced within a few days through the news media.

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A reminder that 1980 dues are payable in January.

families. The affair was very tame to me, there was no ice cream, neither family had learned to make it without ice, so we contented ourselves with...lemonade."

Mr. Sydenham's 'memory' was as faulty as might be expected of a one-year-old, the Kearney population was soaring over the two hundred mark by July, 1873, although the celebration at the Collins home was probably typical of the day.

By the fall of 1873, this upstart new village had forced three bond elections to win approval of \$25,000 toward the building of a bridge across the Platte, despite the opposition of the thriving county seat town of Gibbon. The driving of the first pile for the bridge in 1873 brought out "most of the male inhabitants", according to the **Kearney Times**. "Everyone felt glorious and even the appearance of Sheriff Thompson with his pocket full of injunctions did not affect...matters the least, for our folks have become so used to these little documents that they consider them part of the program on all important occasions." After a "neat little speech" by Judge (N.) Hemiup, Judge (A.H.) Connor denounced "enemies of the bridge in strong language...amid loud cheers from the assembly." Then the spectators left to continue the celebration in town, to the dismay of "an old gentleman from Boston" who had bought bridge bonds. H. H. Achey wrote:

"He was dressed in a white vest and a Prince Albert coat and a high silk hat...there were quite a few cowboys in town and as he went along Railroad street, a bunch of them spied him and took a shot at his high silk hat as he ran around Jim Kelley's saloon to get to the Commercial Hotel.

"He finally ran into the hotel through the kitchen and asked the clerk when the next train was due east, and said, 'If I can only get away alive I do not care what the h--- becomes of the interest or the bonds.' "

On July 4, 1874, a celebration was held "in the schoolhouse", according to Mrs. D. C. Hostetter, which "had speaking and singing and all were glad we were there...were like a family."

The **Daily Press** reported "The Fourth of July in Kearney was very quiet and had it not been for a slight display of fireworks might have been mistaken for Sunday." Most of the citizens, "on leisure bent...accompanied the Kearney Cornet band on the 6 A.M. train for Hastings." The band gave impromptu performances at Lowell and Juniata before arriving in Hastings. The reporter complained "Hastings ought to do one of two things—have smaller celebrations or better accommodations...a great many were compelled to skirmish around the stores and restaurants and finally satisfy the cravings of hunger with crackers and cheese."

The nation's Centennial in 1876 offered many opportunities for celebrations. In addition to a large civic observance, July 4th was also the day on which the government opened the Fort Kearny military reservation for settlement.

In December the **Kearney Times** announced "The Centennial Christmas Jollification Supper...all are to be charged 10¢ except children who are Sunday school scholars, proceeds to go toward purchasing apples, nuts, candies, etc. for the juveniles. It will be worth a quarter to see the children enjoy themselves, half a dollar to hear the music and speeches, but you can have it all for 10¢."

Hugh Sydenman had vivid recollections of the July 4, 1880 celebration, when

Charlie Swan was drum major and "blew the big horn. He was so tall and skinny I wondered where he got all the wind to make the noise with." Homer Green, "a dapper young fellow in an immaculate uniform," played cornet and was the leader. Also "the band consisted of Tom Hull and his bass drum. Another lesser feature was the firing of the National salute, which was accomplished with a pair of anvils. Somebody got hurt in this act but it wasn't me and I soon forgot who the person was."



The mock Monitor at left was one of the participants in the sea battle staged on Kearney Lake in August of 1888 at the state encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic.

Political rallies were highlighted by torch light parades, culminating in long speeches by aspiring candidates. During the political campaign of 1890, the Farmer's Alliance announced they would have a parade and political picnic in Kearney, which was then "the real Metropolis of the Big Third district." Will M. Maupin, who later gained considerable recognition as writer and politician, wrote about it:

"On a certain date in that awful August, when everything was burned to a crisp and times were so hard that the present day (1923) seems like unbounded prosperity...us town fellers thought it was a joke... We knew what kind of a parade it would be. A few farm wagons, some few people on horseback and some wild-eyed ranters to do the talking...

"Will any one of us who saw that parade ever forget it? ...there were hundreds (of wagons), yes, thousands. About every tenth wagon was covered with cottonwood boughs and party mottoes, and aboard a cottage organ and a bunch of vocalists singing, 'Good-by, old party, goodbye.' Long after the first wagon had reached the picnic grounds, those durned wagons were still coming over the top

of the hill on Central Avenue.

"Mighty good thing that Kearney barbers did not charge by the yard for shaving in those days. Norris Brown's face was so long a month after that parade that at prevailing rates it would have cost \$6.70 for a shave... Dorsey (Republican candidate) never reached the distance flag, and (Democrat) Thompson went to the stables before making the second turn at the track."

Needless to say, "Omar Kem, the red-headed farmer candidate," won the congressional election.

Many of the celebrations of the early years were quiet affairs, related to school and church. From 1888 to 1901, Mrs. George Jones kept a scrapbook of these occasions. Arbor Day was an important occasion in which the whole town participated, marked by recitations and music, as well as the planting of trees and shrubs. School programs and graduation exercises were often held in the Opera House to accommodate the crowds.

The Centennial of George Washington's inauguration, May 1, 1889, was occasion for a community-wide celebration. Religious services were held in the morning, in the afternoon all the school children marched through flag decorated streets to the Opera House for a program by the Midway Military band and the Kearney Musical Society, under the direction of Amanda Swenson. The younger children were mercifully excused before the oration by George E. Morris, who spoke "with pathos and patriotism in every phrase."

In the evening the Bachelors Protective Union held "a grand ball at the Midway Hotel to which two hundred fifty to three hundred invitations were issued."

Every thing was done on a grand scale during Kearney's boom, and each sign of advancement was likely to be met with a celebration, from the opening of the street railway to the announcement that Kearney had met its subscription goal of \$250,000 for the cottonmill. On that evening "rockets and Roman candles illuminated the night, and the noise of the bursting bombs was lost in the deafening roar of cannon," according to Charles Jenkins.

Topping all these festivities was the Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic, held in Kearney in 1888. Three parades marched down Wyoming (Central) Avenue, the largest of which featured 3,000 regular army troops, 3,000 men of military and civic organizations and twenty-two bands.

A grandstand seating 6,000 people was built on a plateau back of Kearney Lake where sham battles, military drills, and riding competitions were held. The grand climax was a mock battle of the Monitor and Merrimac on Kearney Lake.

Social events were on a comparable scale. The late George A. Beecher, Bishop of the Western Diocese of the Episcopal church, recalls Mrs. Juan Boyle's hospitality, "when three regimental bands in turn gave concerts on her lawn and throngs of happy people enjoyed the music."

The arrival of a circus was exciting for "children of all ages." One of the first was the Forepaugh Brothers, which advertised in the *Kearney Times* of August 1877, "more than 1,000 men and horses, eight center pole tents, hippo, 6 trained elephants... 1,500 rare wild animals...luxurious dining room chairs."

All of the major circuses have visited Kearney through the years. Among the finest was the Campbell Brothers circus, with winter quarters in Fairbury. Nora Kline

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(her real name was Kelly) had a singing act with the circus until called to fill in for one of the clowns. After her marriage to Earl Ramsey, the two toured the vaudeville circuit as Ramsey and Kline until their retirement in Kearney.

Dr. Frank O. Raasch, a lifelong circus buff, described the arrival of the circus, when small boys scurried for jobs carrying water or helping with the tents. Often the man who hired them disappeared before they could collect their free passes. Still, the show had begun long before the gates were opened, from the unloading of the cars to the hoopla and pageantry of the parade down Central Avenue, with the steam calliope bringing up the rear. As Dr. Raasch explained, "It was at the end of the parade because after it had passed everyone was full of smoke and cinders."

Elizabeth Looker Brown, who came to Kearney with her family in 1875, wrote of another show, "I was about 4 years old at the time and remember distinctly that Buffalo Bill and his Indians had just arrived in Kearney, coming direct from North Platte." Her memory was distinct about everything but the date, the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show hit the road in 1883. For years, as press agent Moxie Hanley told Dr. Raasch, "Twice a day we shot Indians and robbed the stage." There were other performances in Kearney, including the last which ended in Denver when the show was foreclosed. The day of the traveling wild west show was over, but its traditions were carried on in western movies dear to generations of small children.

SOURCES

Unless otherwise stated, the quotations in this article are from the "Kearney Come Back Letters"—written by former Kearney residents at the time of the Fiftieth Anniversary. Before the Fort Kearney Hotel was torn down, Sue and John Morrissey rescued the bound volume of 298 letters, and other Chamber of Commerce records, from the basement. After reposing in the Morrissey garage for several years, this material eventually reached the Buffalo County Historical Society by way of Leonard Silver.

The scrapbook of Mrs. George Jones was among the effects of Harriette Jones Nelson, and was given to the society by Eleanor Nelson Horner of College Station, Texas and Robert Nelson of Minden.

Other sources: **Kearney Times**; **Kearney Daily Hub**; **Where Buffalo Roamed**; Dr. Frank O. Raasch collection; Charles Jenkins, "The Kearney Cotton Mill. A Bubble That Burst", **Nebraska History**, XXXVIII, September 1957.