

## Come Back Letters

*The first residents of Kearney arrived in May 1871 shortly after D. N. Smith had designated the spot where the Burlington & Missouri River Rail Road would form a junction with the Union Pacific. People began moving here immediately and on November 30, 1872 they incorporated as the Town of Kearney Junction. The population continued to expand and the following year the city fathers determined that the population had reached the point where they could reincorporate as Kearney, a city of the second class. This December 3, 1873 date has been used as the birth date for the city. So in 1923 Kearney celebrated its fiftieth anniversary.*

*A celebration was held from September 11 through 14, 1923. There was a parade on Central Avenue and an 1873 Pioneer Reunion scheduled for September 11-12. The Kearney Daily Hub and Chamber of Commerce worked together to send letters to former residents inviting them to come back to join in the celebration.*

*The letters received in response have been preserved and are now part of the Archives collection held by the Buffalo County Historical Society. Some excerpts are presented here. With each letter is some information about the author. If an explanation is needed about a person, place or event mentioned in a letter, it is footnoted at the end of the quote.*

*We begin with a copy of the letter that was sent out by the Chamber of Commerce to former residents on July 31, 1923.*

Dear Friend:

The Come Back Club has been organized by the Kearney Chamber of Commerce in co-operation with The Hub, to extend an invitation to former residents of Kearney and Buffalo County to come back home during the Fiftieth Anniversary celebration to be held the week of September 11th –14<sup>th</sup>.

A program vastly surpassing anything ever before attempted in Kearney has been arranged for each day by the citizens who have contributed handsomely for the purpose. It is believed, however, that the most enjoyable features of the week will be the reawakening of the old time memories and the renewal of early associations and affection through the return of hundreds of former Kearneyites. In behalf of all the people of Kearney, we urge you to endeavor to revisit your old home for as long a time as possible during the week.

We, of Kearney, are still warmly interested in the welfare of all who may at anytime have made their homes here.

Whether you can return to Kearney or not during the home coming week, won't you write a letter to the Chamber of Commerce or The Hub, showing that you still retain a place in your memory for the old town? Make it personal. Write about yourself, because our interest in you is a personal one.

We hope to print on Saturday, September 8th, a list of the names and addresses of as many former residents as we can secure and also as many letters from them as space will permit. Please write us at once and then prepare to visit Kearney during the week.

The latch string is on the outside, the welcome hearty and the entertainment abundant.

Yours fraternally,

THE COME BACK CLUB  
Kearney, Nebraska

C. E. Chambers wrote that 39 years ago [in 1884] “there were but few houses west of Central Avenue....The race track was West North of the railroad. They was several sod Houses in the country in 1884, the prairie was full of Rattlers & Bull snakes. What Kearney needs is a condensed milk factory it would increase the Dairy interest of the county.”

*[Charles E. Chambers was 63 years old when he wrote this letter. He and his brother, Frank, were both living in Gibbon. Some years earlier, Charles had been a farmer with his father but now he did general labor while Frank was a carpenter. Charles died in 1936 and is buried in the Gibbon cemetery with his parents and brother.]*

Mrs. S. A. Brown of Brady, NE wrote that she came to Kearney 37 years ago [1886] and lived here until a year ago. During that time she saw many changes.

“I have seen the one story shack on Central Ave replaced by the present handsome business blocks, the native mud by miles of paved streets, the bare fields by beautiful tree lined ~~streets~~ avenues those trees are a mute testimony of the work of J. L. Brown who labored twenty six years planting trees on the streets of Kearney. West 22<sup>nd</sup> St was planted by him also many homes in Kenwood and other parts of the city.

“J. L. Brown has been dead for eleven years but his trees still live and are admired and enjoyed by many people who never heard of the jolly old man who planted them and tended them with such love and care. I have the honor of being J. L. Browns wife.”

*[According to the 1892 and 1904 Kearney City Directories, Josiah L. Brown was a nurseryman who was the proprietor of the Midway Nursery located on Grand Avenue in the section of Kearney then called East Lawn. He died Aug. 12, 1921 and is buried in the Kearney Cemetery. His wife, Sarah Ann, died in October 1930 and is buried beside him.]*

Mrs. E. R. Griffins (Louise Wilson Griffin) thought this should be the 51<sup>st</sup> anniversary of Kearney's founding because her family came here in 1872. She wrote that “My father P. W. Wilson went to Kearney in September of 1872 and was on the ground to attend the first sale of town lots which is one of the lots where the Opera House now

stands. The family arrived Nov 2, 1872. Just as soon as my father and brother had a store building with living rooms back and above furnished. In fact were so anxious to get there that we did not wait for them to finish the house. Every one lived over their stores & offices. One reason was there was not workmen enough to put up houses and business places both. and Another reason was because we were afraid of the Indians. Altho I do not suppose there was any real danger. It was a wonderful winter as far as weather was concerned, with no real winter until the big three day snow storm commencing Apl 14<sup>th</sup> 1873. We went to school and sat on backless benches In the room under L. B. Cunningham newspaper office.”

*[Peter W. Wilson and his son, Frank, came from Mt. Ayre, Iowa where he had been a dry goods merchant. They built a grocery store three lots from the corner of 10<sup>th</sup> and Wyoming, later renamed 21<sup>st</sup> and Central. Frank was employed by the railroad and Peter was a grocer in Kearney for many years. Peter died in 1908 at age 88 and is buried in the Kearney Cemetery. His wife, Harriet, died of pneumonia at age 94 in 1918 probably as the aftermath of Spanish Influenza since this was an epidemic year.]*

A. B. Steele of Walla Walla, Washington wrote of his wish to “...walk the Streets of old Kearney again where I once was a Boy = ...and the Cow Boys used to Pull us on our Sleds behind there ponys down Central ave at break neck Speed.”

*[A. B. Steele apparently grew up here in Kearney and stayed through the 1890's. We find records of his paying poll taxes and personal taxes during the period of 1892-1896]*

Mr. & Mrs. D. C. Hostetter were living in the Soldiers Home at Burkett, NE northwest of Grand Island in 1923. Today it is the Veterans Home which that city has now grown out to surround. The Hostetters had the following memories of early Kearney.

“We came to Kearney 50 years ago 1873 in Sept. We seen the ups and downs We came late in the evening on the Burlington<sup>1</sup>. Pawnee Indians were lying on the platform wrapt in their blankets Several of them there camped on the Island south of Kearney – first day of April 1874 we had our first fire<sup>2</sup> a frame building I think third lot north of the Opera House<sup>3</sup> families roomed upstairs My sister Mrs H Achey lost a bright colored shawl an Indian had found it among there household goods things had been (tossed ? spilled?) out loose they took it from him she got it again that day. The building burned to the ground had only a bucket brigade pump and draw wells to get water. The cowboys were bad when under the influence of liquor and that was only time they came to town

“There was one Church it was not finished the first M.E.<sup>4</sup> Had several saloons Saw the cowboys ride in one door and out the back door on there ponies were Mr. Barth had his place of business now on railroad Street. there were 2 general stores and post office West 24 St one school house one room up Stairs and one down stairs on 21 and A. ave the building is there yet

“4<sup>th</sup> of July 1874 we held a celebration in the School house had Speaking and Singing all were glad we were there were like one family

“We took a homestead on the Island South of Alfalfa Center now. was called Stevenson then. We had no School nearer than Odessa or Kearney over 6 miles either

place We tried to get a School house at Stephenson one end got beat several times So the men decided they would take there wives along 9 of us ladies went & beat them 3 votes they chalenged [challenged] our votes and had no (---?) Sworn we all had children school age and we got the School house.”

“...I forgot the churchs last but not least belonged to the 1<sup>st</sup> M E since 1874 in Kearney....”

1 An immigrant train arrived in Kearney about 9:30 in the evening in those days.

2 In Louisa Collins’ diary she also mentions this fire. She wrote, “Apr 1st The first fire in our town today Smeads building burned to the ground three families lost nearly all their goods But there is sweet with the bitter the worst whisky & gambeling hole in town burned with it.”

3 The opera house referred to here was probably the Moore Opera House. A two-story building located just south of the UP tracks on the west side of Wyoming St, now Central Avenue, held a business downstairs and the opera house on the second floor.

4 The Methodists built the first church in Kearney, on the corner of what is now 18<sup>th</sup> and Central where Worley Monuments is currently located.

*[David C. Hostetter was born in Pennsylvania. After serving in the Civil War he went to Missouri where he worked as a “stove molder”. In 1873 he and his wife came to Kearney. He worked for S. A. Webb in his hardware and implement business until the mid 1880’s when he took the homestead described in the letter.]*

### **Sources**

Come Back Letters collection, 1923, BCHS Archives

*Bassett, History of Buffalo County*, Vol. I, p. 193

Biographical Souvenir of the Counties of Buffalo, Kearney, and Phelps in Nebraska, 1890, p. 496-7

“Kearney Junction, 1872 – Business and Businessmen – Part I” by Gene E. Hamaker, *Buffalo Tales*, Vol. VI, No. 8, Sept. 1983

*New Era Standard*, May 8, 1896, page 4

“Roots of Buffalo County – The Scandinavians – Part I” by Margaret Stines Nielsen, *Buffalo Tales*, Vol. VII, No. 1, Jan. 1984

1870 Federal Census, Kearney, Buffalo County

1880 Federal Census, Kearney, Buffalo County

1900 Federal Census, Kearney, Buffalo County

Diary, Louisa Collins

Kearney Cemetery records

---