

Come Back Letters – Part 3

“I’m From Kearney”

*“When people ask me where I’m from
I sure use no blarney –
And in accent real loud
I say, I’m from Kearney.”*

Mrs. Gordon Davis of Omaha was proud of her hometown. She included this rhyme in her “Come Back” letter. Because we have no photographs of early Kearney, we must use written descriptions to help us imagine what it looked like. Here are more descriptions of Kearney’s early days taken from the “Come Back” letters written in 1923 at the time of Kearney’s 50th Anniversary celebration.

E. Rignell

Kearney was located at the site where the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad was to come from the south across the Platte River to form a junction with the Union Pacific Railroad. One of the men who helped build the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad was E. Rignell. He wrote that *“My first time into Kearney was during the Construction of the Burlington into Kearney in 1872 before Pass. Trains were first on into Kearney. So I have seen the wonderful groth of your town Since the first inhabatnc [inhabitants] lived in Tents and quickly constructed Board shacks.”*

Apparently the he and his wife came back to live in Kearney in the 1890’s because Mrs. Rignell’s mother, Mrs. Samuelson, came here from Sweden for a visit in 1896. The Rignells were living in Los Angeles, California, at the time of Kearney’s 50th Anniversary.

Harry Inman

Harry Innan [Inman?], living in Synary, Washington, wrote, *“I remember the Indian scares Grasshopper and Prairie fires in the seventies.”*

Susan A. More Simonson

Mrs. Susan A. More Simonson of New York wrote *“...my Uncle L. R. Moore, was the Pioneer settler at Kearney 1872. established. First Bank helped to found city of Kearney Member first City Council he established the first lumber yard built the first brick building the upper story being the only Opera house in town The first bank was known as More’s Bank owned the first hotel the Grand Central, furnished the lumber for the bridge across the Platte south of Kearney. He was considered a very able man.”*



Mrs. Simonson was rightfully proud of her uncle. When he came to Kearney there were only about three buildings here. Besides the firsts she listed, More also speculated in a broom factory and bought a grist mill which he developed into the Kearney Flouring Mill. He owned a considerable amount of real estate and was involved in some way with just about any enterprise that could be found here in those very early days.

Flora Dildine

Dr. Charles L. Dildine was also a prominent early citizen of Kearney. At the time of his death on July 13, 1886 he was in practice with Dr. Hoover, another prominent Kearney physician. His widow, Flora, and their children, Grace 7, and Harry 2, continued to live in Kearney. The doctor had owned some farmland which provided her and the children with a source of income. Flora was living in Los Angeles, Calif. at the time of this anniversary celebration. She wrote:

“It was the year 1874 my husband Dr. C. L. Dildine and myself landed in Kearney. At the time there were not more than fifty people all told. The only sidewalk was a platform in front of the Grand Central Hotel and the A. L. Webb hardware store. The first stood across from where the U P Freight depot now stands. The other at the NE corner of Central Ave and 21st Street. The fur [first] houses looked as though they had been just dropt down anywhere, as the so called streets, were merely winding paths. You can imagine how I felt coming home from New York state where at that time every home had its yard fenced in here Deer and Buffalo often came and rubbed themselves on the corner of the house.

This was the year the Last[?] at Fort Kearney was torn down. The Rail Road station [Kearney Station] being now called Buda. This same year the U. P. had finished a new depot four miles west of nothing called Kearney it stood where the freight depot now stands. The new depot did not have an agent as yet, Two men happened along having tramped if [in] frome some where in the East to Denver and back this far looking for work, one of them, Mr. Jay Keller knowing something of telegraphy, secured the position of agent. (As a comparison between then and now, there were only four a day for passenger and freight each way. The rate of speed being 20 miles for passenger trains 15 for freight.... I once asked a train man [why] they did not make better time on such a level road, he said they would get such a momentum they would turn over there not being curves enough to keep them balanced.[]) This other man no other than the Hon. Alexander Graham Bell, continued on East. You all know what happened since. This and the following year was the grasshopper years you have heard of.”

Elwood E Forsythe

Elwood E Forsythe of Council Bluffs, Iowa, says, *“During my residence in Kearney from 1874 to 1878, law and order was an unknown quantity.”*

William G. Barker

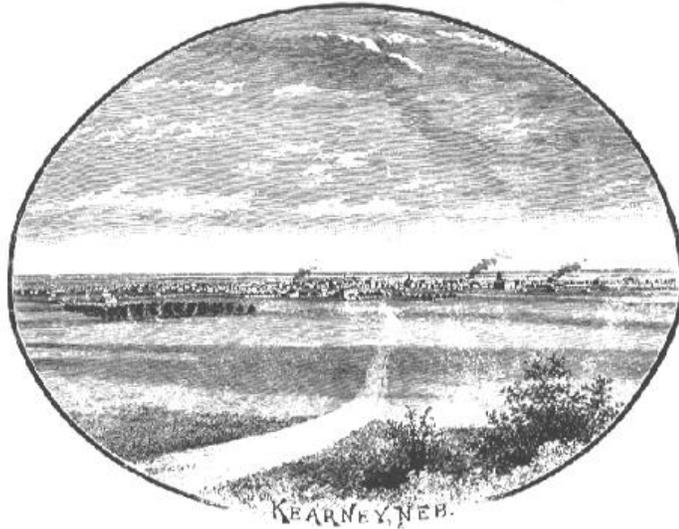
William G. Barker homesteaded on the southeast quarter of section 18-11-15 about 13 miles north of Kearney. In 1923 he was living in Racine, Wisconsin, and wrote back, *“My first acquaintance with Kearney was in February 1878 where I was there with a party of Racine Land Seekers and I think it was my Selection of Land north of Kearney that caused so many Wisconsin people to settle in Buffalo County – among them your fellow townsman, Emil Tollefsen. I would also add that my settling in Buffalo County proved one of the best Business Ventures ever made. The U. P. Building was the only Brick building in the Village. We stopped at the ‘Becket’ house about one block south of he U P track – and it is still there....”*

Mary Yourm

Mrs. Mary Yourm of Marble, Indiana tells us, *“I came out to Kearney in 1878 and lived there for five years....When I first came out there we often saw Indians on the*

street and when my brother-in-law – C. F. Bodinsen built his first home in the 200 block in Kearney it was considered out in the country.”

Carl Bodinsen was another leading businessman in early Kearney. He owned a grocery store from 1878 to 1889 when he bought a hardware store in Kearney. He built his home at 24th and A.



A view of early Kearney from what is now 39th St. and 2nd Ave.

Mrs. Price Sanders

Mrs. Price(?) Sanders says, *“I was born in Kearney on March 16, 1872. Received (sic) my education in the Kearney Public Schools, being a graduate at the Kearney High School in 1891, & was a resident of Kearney until 1893.”*

[Andreas’ *History of the State of Nebraska*, 1882, says the first child born in Kearney was a son, named Kearney, born to Mr. & Mrs. V. B. Clark in the fall of 1872.]

Homer D. Hoon

Homer D. Hoon was born in 1867 in Illinois. The family came to Kearney from Iowa. As an adult he worked as a clerk in a coal office in Kearney before moving to St. Louis. Mr. Hoon recalls, *“My first School, day were in a two story frame building on corner a. ave. and 11. st. or 12. st. I believe called now 24 st. then the first brick School building in K. was built in 1881. where I finished my Schooling.”*

That two story frame building was located on the southwest corner of 24th and A. The first brick school was Old Whittier, located in the center of the block, directly south of present day Central Elementary.

Elizabeth Looker Brown

Elizabeth Looker Brown of Council Bluffs, Iowa, wrote, *“I will say that my father Dave Looker came with his family of two little girls to Kearney in 1875 I was about 4 yrs old at the time and remember distinctly that Buffalo Bill and his Indians had just arrived in town, starting out with his first show coming direct from North Platte to Kearney. It was no uncommon thing to see Indians on the street every day. Kearny consisted at that time of two Hotels, the Grand Central and the Commercial – These sat across from the Depot between that and our home were a large Livery Stabel where we watched the stage coaches come and go.*

“...my father died nine years ago and is buried in the Riverdale Cemetery a corner that he donated from his farm.”

Frances Sumption

Albert O. Sumption began his railroad career in Indiana about 1880. From there he went to Salina, Kansas before coming to Kearney. While living here he worked for the Union Pacific Railroad as a traveling auditor from about 1910 to 1915 or later. Frances, apparently his second wife, wrote from Colorado Springs, Colorado, "*The M E Church was a place most dear and helpful to me as we would meet there from time to time with the ladies of that organization.*"

"The Nineteenth Century Club was always an inspiration to make and keep our homes in the best and nicest way. As well as to refresh our memories along the many wonderful things in art and Literature."

After the turn of the century the club changed its name to Kearney Women's Club. The organization still exists in 2006.

William J. Weaver

William J. Weaver was a Kearney native who lived in Roseburg, Oregon, where he was a hotel manager when Kearney had its celebration. He wrote back with these memories.

"I was born in Kearney June 19th 1884 and my people moved back to York State in 1890. Therefore my recollections of Kearney are rather hazy.



"If my memory served me correctly Central ave. is the main St. and runs North and South. Ex Mayor Nathan Campbell now long deceased, lived at the extreme North end of this street [on the present day site of Good Samaritan Hospital]. The court house which my father, H. S. Harding helped to build was at the South end of the Street and the Jail South of that.

"We lived two blocks East of the Jail not far from the horse and cattle corral of 'Cap' Black. And next door North of us lived Policeman Ketchum. Then right near lived Miss Mabel Pettis who married Will Osborn and he afterwards moved to Central City Nebr. I believe, where he ran a hardware store until his death.

"Near them as I remember lived a family named McKelvey who had a son named Clarence. He taught me a lot about Indian life and warfare, especially warfare with me on the receiving end of the string.

"My father built a planing mill about two blocks South of the Jail. This mill burned down in 1890. He also owned a ranch near Minden, Nebr....One of my strongest recollections is of the big fire that destroyed the Midway Hotel. One man was killed by jumping from a window as I remember. Another recollection is of the cyclone of 1889 that did so much damage to Kearney and wiped out a small village, which I think was called Cripple Creek. [??] That same winter there was a big three day blizzard and two prominent young men who had been out hunting were found frozen to death in a granary out on the Prairie.

"I also dimly remember Professor Wambaugh who was music teacher in the schools. and the building of the cotton mill on the shore of one of the Lakes."

(The cotton mill was built near Echo Lake, renamed Cottonmill Lake west of Kearney, but not on the shore.)

“Cap” Black was Joseph Black, a Captain in the Civil War. He and his family came to Buffalo County in 1875. He owned a ranch on the South Loup River and additional land on an island in the Platte south of Kearney and had business interests in Kearney. He was mayor of Kearney in 1884 and also served on the school board and the library board. He was county treasurer for two years and later served as a county commissioner. He superintended the construction of the county courthouse. From 1895-1898 he served in the state senate.

H. H. Harding

Harrison (Harry) Harding lived in Lockport, New York, when he wrote on stationery for H. H. Harding, Grocer, *“The only thing I regret in returning to Kearney is the fact that my old birth place was located on an island in the Platte River, and I was born in a sod house. Now the old sod house has been replaced with a beautiful new wooden one and I dislike that.”*

Asa B. Laughton

Asa B. Laughton apparently came to Kearney in 1893. He was a carpenter by trade but he was also a law enforcement officer. In 1910 he was a Buffalo County deputy sheriff and later he was the Chief of Police for the City of Kearney.

Asa was living in Grand Island when he responded to his “Come Back” letter, but that was apparently a temporary move. By 1926 he and his wife, Maud, were back in Kearney and he was again a policeman for the city. Then he apparently gave up his law enforcement duties and devoted his time exclusively to carpentry. He continued to work as a cabinet maker until a year or so before his death. Both Asa and Maud were residing in St. Luke’s Nursing Home when they died, Asa in 1957 at age 88, and Maud in 1966 at age 85.

In his letter, Asa recalled that *“30 years ago the public road left almost the hart of the now city, and run directly north west for Riverdale.*

“30 years ago Sun Flowers grew all a round where now stands the State Normal School....

“30 years ago has saw Central Av. Change from a hit and miss tumble down shack and a little better to almost a solid row of business blocks, with business buildings.

“30 years ago has seen the streets so wide, changed from a sea of mud and stalled teams, to paved Boulavard and swiftly moving Automobiles.”

W. F. Mills

W. F. Mills was the general manager for the city and county of Denver Water department and Secretary of the Board of Water Commissioners when he wrote his letter. He had past through this area on the Union Pacific train in 1867 and then in 1888 had come to Kearney to live with his small family. This family was enlarged by the birth of another child while the lived here. He wrote that *“During the last thirty years Kearney has grown substantially. It is a home city of real folks, surrounded by ideal agricultural country, its citizens progressive and forceful in taking advantage of all its possibilities and overcoming many of the natural obstacles incident to an inland, prairie location. All that any city has you possess. It is a fine place to live, with educated people, good schools, ample water power and a low tax rate.”*

The Commercial Club, the 1923 version of today’s Kearney Area Chamber of Commerce, probably really liked Mr. Mills letter.

Sources

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