

Come Back Letters – Part 4

Mrs. Emory (Elizabeth) Barber of Alhambra, California, was 79 years old when she wrote her letter. Her husband was born in New York and Elizabeth came from England. She and Emory were married in 1865 and had two children. One died young, the other grew to adulthood. Emory was a carriage maker when they lived in Kearney and Elizabeth was a dressmaker. They stayed here until about 1920. Elizabeth wrote, *“We came to Kearney in the Spring of 1890, the day the Midway Hotel burned, and for about ten years there were many good Substantial improvements – such as the new Midway, the Baptist Church, the Canal, Cottonmill, Paper mill, Vinegar factory, and many other enterprises – Then we came to a standstill – “* [That should be two years, not ten years. Then the Boom Period ended and Kearney did indeed come to a “standstill.]

George Milbourn was a very early settler in the Elm Creek area where he homesteaded on the northwest quarter of section 20 in Elm Creek Township. D. T. Hood, who he mentions in his letter, was a neighbor who homesteaded on the northeast quarter of the same section. They were about two miles northwest of Elm Creek. The Washington and William Milbourn families also lived in the same area.

In Gene Hamaker’s Buffalo Tales article about the Kearney Canal he writes, *“When the idea of such a canal was first formed is unknown, some would say as early as 1873. There is no clear evidence, however, that a need for a canal was recognized until 1875. The hard times and grasshoppers of the mid-seventies may have inspired the appearance of supporters before the Buffalo County Commissioners in January of 1876.”*

Milbourn’s letter substantiates the 1875 date. At the time he wrote his letter, Milbourn was living in Fairland, Oklahoma.

“I passed thru there on the 25th day of October, 1872 on my way to my fathers homestead 2 1/2 miles north east of Elm Creek, where I lived until 1876 working on farm, railroad and carried mail.

“I carried the first mail from Kearney to Loup City and up the Middle Loup to New Helena, Custer County. Also did quite a little hunting of deer, antelope and elk among the gulches of the country north of Elm Creek to the South Loup river. On February 3rd, 1876 I captured a DEAR that has been my constant companion and advisor ever since.

“During the summer of 1876 I farmed but the heavy freeze on June the 5th and the dry weather and grass hoppers following, I failed to raise anything so had to go to work by the month. I moved to Kearney and worked for J. D. Seaman 6 months for \$25.00 per month, and the balance of 5 years for \$40.00 per month selling machinery and buying grain. During my 8 years residence in Kearney I served as Councilman, and city marshal under Mr. Nathan Campbell who was mayor at the time. I worked 2 ½ years at the Union Pacific as a messenger boy, freight clerk and baggage man.

“About 1875 Mr. D. T. Hood and myself went before the County Commissioners and advocated the building of an irrigation ditch to Kearney from West, and from that the project was finally put through. So you see I did my bit in helping to make Kearney what it is.

“...I was born in Stark County Ohio Nov 15th, 1852. My parents moved to Ill. In the spring of 1854 and settled in Woodford County. In the spring of 1872 we moved to Elm Creek in covered wagons.”

Mr. Milbourn tells of going to work for John D. Seaman when he moved to Kearney. Seaman had come to Kearney in 1873 and about a year later established a farm implement and grain business.

William Brady and his family were part of the Gibbon Homestead Colony. His death was the first in the newly established Gibbon community. He left a wife and four children. Mrs. Brady remained on the homestead and proved it up in her own name.

William's son, James A. Brady, wrote, *“We landed in Gibbon in '71 with the Homestead Colony and my father, Wm Brady, was successful in drawing choice one in the homestead sites. The county seat was located at Gibbon and had it not been for the strong-heartedness of some of the colony promoters the terminal of the C. B. & Q. would have been at Gibbon instead of Kearney. My father lost his life in a brick kiln [kiln] accident in building the county court house, and my mother homesteaded the farm now located at Gibbon, Neb., which we still retain in the family.”*

Frank Bills, general yard master for the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad in San Bernardino, California, wrote, *“I was born in Shelton Nebraska Oct. 30, 1879 and some of the old pioneers will recall as that as being the day General Grant passed through Shelton on his memorable trip around the World My grandfather escorted the General from North Platte to Omaha the Grandfather being the late Patrick Walsh of Shelton.”*

Patrick Walsh had been stationed at Ft Kearny. In 1869 he homesteaded on a quarter of land which included the site of Shelton. Walsh was one of the organizers of the county in 1870 and was appointed postmaster of Wood River Center. He informed the Postmaster General that because of confusion with other post offices with similar names, this post office would be named Shelton and “you will please govern yourself accordingly.”

Solomon D. Butcher, the photographer of sod house fame had a photography business here in Kearney with his son for a while. He was living in Franklin, Nebraska, in 1923 when his invitation arrived. Part of his response includes the dates he was in business here, *“...I lived in your city for over twelve years from 1902 till about 1924....”*

Mrs. Roy M. Harrop of Omaha wrote, *“I was born in Buffalo County, am a graduate of the Kearney State Normal School, and my father, W. S. Dow, was an early pioneer, coming there at the age of seventeen, with his father, a veteran of the Civil War, when Kearney was termed a ‘clapboard’ town.”*

[In 1880 William S. Dow, 18, was living in Schneider Township with his father, Charles, and family.]

George Allen Beecher was Bishop of the Missionary District of Western Nebraska headquartered in Hastings, NE. He lived in Kearney from the time he was a

small boy until he had completed his university courses. Here are some excerpts from his letter.

“I arrived from Illinois with my mother and sister on a stormy night in the Spring of ’83, when we found it exceedingly difficult to secure lodging. The old Grand Central Hotel and Atkin House, just opposite the old Union Pacific Depot, were overrun with land seekers. One courteous gentleman surrendered his room to accomodate my mother and sister. I slept on the writing table in the hotel office with a Webster’s Dictionary for my pillow. A traveling troupe was playing Shakespeare’s ‘Hamlet’ in the Opera House over what is now Gilcrest Lumber Yard office. I was awakened at three in the morning by a gun duel between two of the members of this troupe, who had imbibed too freely and were evidently bent upon reproducing the grave scene....”

“When John Low came out from England and went on his first hunting expedition on the Platte with Alvin Siddenham, he mistook a long-eared borrow [burro] near the old wooden bridge for a jack rabbit, and only the sudden with holding of his evil intentions by the strong arm of Siddenham prevented the poor donkey from paying the penalty. John was carrying messages for his uncle, Henry Gibbons, the Union Pacific, agent at the time....”

“Among the ancient and historical remembrances of Kearney might be mentioned the electric street cars, two in number, during the days of the ‘boom’, when on the arrival of every passenger train one car would stand on the south side and the other on the north side of the tracks. In this connection I might mention the fact that long before other towns in the State knew anything about publicity, Kearney was laying the foundations of her future greatness by various methods of advertising. In spite of the passing of the street cars with the ruins of the ‘boom days’, she has recovered a thousand times strong and proven herself worthy of leadership among the cities of the great and growing empire of Nebraska.”

A. W. Smith of Van Nuys, California, wrote, *“I first saw Kearney 53 years ago [1870]. I was one that witnessed that great and memorable Blizzard of April 1871. I was permitted by the family wher I staid to bring our four horses in the Sod house of one room. We thus saved their lives.”*

“When I get back to the Home Coming I expect to mingle with other old timers and recall a few things to memory. F’rinstance: The strenuous campaign for the sewer bonds; the cotton mill campaign; the burning of the Midway hotel; the time we printers on the old Journal went out on strike; the co-operative daily we printers conducted for a few weeks, until our business manager lost all our cash reserve in a poker game; and the famous political campaign of 1890....”

Sources (for all the Come Back Letters articles)

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