

Cottonmill Lake

Kearney Canal

Development

- First mentioned by homesteader in Elm Creek area in 1873
- First proposed to Co. Board of Supervisors by farmers in Jan 1876
- Kearney Board of Trade
 - Organized in April 1881
 - Considered Canal at second meeting –
- Joint Financing Effort – private & City
- Kearney Canal & Supply Co. \$100,000 capital @ \$20/share; 5,000 shares
 - Had to be 2/3 subscribed,
 - 25% paid to come into existence (\$25,000)

City of Kearney – \$30,000 bonds
authorized in city election

Building the Canal

- 1882 – Started in fall – 2 miles completed before winter
- 1883 – continued in Spring – 12 more miles
- 1884 – more work done, running out of money
 - Conflicting reports on -
 - how much had been spent
 - if it was done or not
- 1885 – George W. Frank bought 4/5 stock in Kearney Canal & Supply Co (\$80,000)
 - More work done on canal
- 1886 – Canal was finished in June but tailrace was not quite done yet

Method of Construction of the Canal

- Canal path dredged along side of hills rising from Platte River valley
- One bank made from dirt dredged out
- Lakes formed in draws
- Called Echo Lake

Cottonmill Lake

Use

- served as holding facility for cotton mill until it closed in 1901
- Just a lake on private property
- State recreation area
- City/County park

The Name

Echo Lake –

1888 - Name used when Canal was built

1898 – Name used in bankruptcy proceedings

Foreclosure by the Union Trust Company of New York

Kearney Canal and Water Supply Company was to be sold on May 24th

Cottonmill Lake –

Nov. 15, 1899 – A farmer in the area was thought to have committed suicide by drowning himself in cotton mill lake

Known as an eccentric, rough character, did not have many friends, so his disappearance did not cause a great stir

Jan. 8, 1900 - Hub story about Nelson murder near Cotton Mill Lake

NELSON WAS MURDERED

Remains of Missing an Found on His Own farm

The Story –

Time passed “the sea did not give up its dead”

Also generally believed that he had left home to return to Sweden

Sheriff Funk believed Nelson had met with foul play.

Organized a searching party 20 farmers after the holidays

Finding the body

In a straw barn attached to an old frame barn and built since the disappearance

Soft earth floor, began to dig, expecting to unearth the body.

2’ down found old hat with a long cut in the back and a large shell-shaped bone.

Quit search for the day

Funk took bone to a doctor, who at once pronounced it a portion of a human skull.

Next day search was renewed and the body found

In a ravine 200 yards southeast of barn beneath a pile of straw and dirt.

Head and one arm missing.

The youngest of Nelson’s 2 sons, Elmer, 9-10, said his brother Theodore, 19-21, did it
Theodore acknowledged that he did

Hit his father on the head with a pitchfork, one blow killing him. [hard hit]

Tied a rope around his feet

Hitched a horse to the body

Pulled it over the hill and down into the draw, where it was found.

Some believe crime was committed with an ax & the boy also cut off the head and arm.

A little about the man

At time of death –

Charles Nelson was 51 years old, born in Sweden
Second wife, Segrid E Frederickson, 22, born Sweden

Charles married Segrid in Dec, 1898

Divorced first wife, Christina, in 1895

He got custody of two boys, stayed on the farm

She got custody of three girls, moved to Kearney, did laundry, etc.

It is said that Nelson had violent temper and was very brutal in his treatment of his sons
The night he disappeared a neighbor saw him knock down his youngest son with a club and then start for the older one.

Theodore was arrested

His mother got him two of the leading best lawyers in town

(Nye & Norris Brown of Hamer & Hamer)

Plead “Not guilty”

Elmer arrested as accessory

Stepmother posted bond

Charge dismissed but he was to appear as a witness in brother’s trial

Theodore’s trial – April

Delayed because his lawyers had asked that 3 physicians examine him

For mental capacity –

It was said the boy was not mentally bright, not clear on right or wrong

They reported him to be sane but moved by suggestion rather than rationality

Recommended he be charged with manslaughter rather than murder.

He plead guilty to manslaughter and got 7 years.

He was released in Nov. 1906 and came back to Kearney to live with his mother.

The 2nd Mrs. Nelson went back to Sweden within a year after her husband was killed.

Back to the Lake – Next Question: Who owned it?

Kearney Canal and Water Supply Co.

Canal Co went bankrupt in 1898

Sold in Sheriff’s sale to the mortgage holder

Union Trust Company of New York

Zada Lancaster (and husband Charles)

Zada Stoddard (C. Hanson house, purchased by Stoddard in 1891)

Stoddards were celery farmers,

Zada married Charles Lancaster in 1896
They lived with her parents at least 4 years

Charles worked on celery farm & raised sheep at Newark until 1910
March 1910 – moved to farm near Empire Ranch, in Odessa Township

1912-1915 or so – A manager at Watson Ranch

Acquired the property from the Union Trust Co. of New York [don't know exact date]

1919 (atlas)

Zada & Charles now living on “Lancaster Ranch”

South half (280 acres) of Section 32, Riverdale (now Collins) Township
except 40 acres in southwest corner

Includes Cottonmill Lake except for two north fingers extending into the north half of the
section which was owned by the Nebraska Land and Livestock Co.

Then came several years of financial difficulties

Oct 8, 1924 – 2nd mortgage American State Bank of Kearney in the amount of \$10,000.
Already had a 1st mortgage with the United States Trust Company.

March 29, 1929 – Both mortgages were in process of foreclosure.

The collateral on these mortgages included land, farm equipment and livestock.

Lancasters agreed to continue to operate the farm until Sept. 1, 1929

Then there would be a sale of farm equipment and livestock with proceeds applied
toward their debt.

Dec. 30, 1929 – Property was sold at a Sheriff's sale.

Purchased by 1st mortgage holder United States Trust Company for the amount of their
note, \$9,830.00.

January 13, 1930 – A Sheriff's Deed of Record deeded the land to the United States Trust
Company

State of Nebraska

May 19, 1930 – The United States Trust Company transferred ownership by Warranty
Deed for \$4,000.00

Developed into a state recreation area with camping

Stone Lodge – Built about 1940

Hub picture – 1952 Annual Hub carriers picnic at stone lodge at Cottonmill State Park

Hub – undated – Pictures of the stone lodge in 1940 when it was built and the present
[1974?]

Originally had stone chimneys at each end

Big one at north end for fireplace

Smaller one at east end. [Was there a fireplace there also?]

Stone retaining wall across the front by the road was originally even with the top step and extended clear across the front of the lodge.

Second picture shows remnants left.

City/County Ownership

1971 Legislative session –

Bill to transfer some State properties to local governments was first introduced
Attached as a rider to another bill which was vetoed.

1973 Legislative session –

New bill on its own approved by 46-0 vote
with emergency clause to take affect as soon as the governor signed the bill.

Sponsored by Sen. Gerald Stromer, Kearney

Sen. Maurice Kramer, Aurora

Sen. Dennis Rasmussen, Scotia.

State Recreation Areas transferred from State Game Commission to local governments

Stolley Park to Grand Island

Arnold Recreation Area to Custer County

Long Bridge Special Use Area to Merrick County

Cottonmill Lake to Kearney and Buffalo County - **107 acres**

Locally

Dean Canon was chairman of the County Board of supervisors

Ray Lundy was Kearney City Manager

A separate Advisory Board was to be created.

Apply for federal and state funds to help with reconstruction.

Plan to hard surface roads and parking areas

put in domestic water system [irrigation type well for swimming area]

restrooms

playground equipment

lighting

caretakers home

mechanical shop and equipment storage.

No plans to dredge the lake.

May 1, 1973 – County Board approved the Cooperative Agreement with the city.

Vote was 6-1 with Ray Johnson voting against

he thought we have enough parks in the Kearney area.

[Since then Kearney has added 4 parks – Baldwin, Harvey, West Lincoln Way, Yanney]

City Council had already voted on the agreement.

Kearney liked it for the camping and outdoor cooking opportunities not available
in other city parks

Advisory Cottonmill Lake City and County Recreation Park Board was established

2 Kearney residents appointed by the mayor

2 County residents appointed by the County Board
1 person chosen by the other 4

[At some point between then and now (2008) a change was made to put Cottonmill Park under the responsibility of the city parks advisory board.]

July 20, 1973 – Kearney budgeted \$143,000 for Parks & Recreation.

Most was to be used for development of Cottonmill Lake.

City and County to take over the 98.4 acre lake area from the State on Jan. 1

[what happened to the 8.6 acres?]

Dec. 23, 1974 – Picture of work on shelter at north 4end of lake at the city-county park.

House plans went to Planning Commission