

# West Kearney

(Source: Tales of Buffalo County, Vols. 1-5)

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## Factories

The Kearney Paper Mill was built of brick and stone and was well equipped with the best machinery available. A large acreage of ground was reserved for storage of straw used in their production of strawboard. Farmers found a ready market for tons of straw which they had burned previously. Mill capacity was eight tons of paper a day. The West Kearney Woolen Mill Company was built in 1889 west of the paper mill and was a large frame two story building. These two firms along with the Hurley Brick Yard were built near the famous Kearney Cotton Mill...

## Houses

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House at 2221 Seventh Ave – built in West Kearney by Ralph L Spencer, general manager of the West Kearney Investment Company and associated with the Hancock Land and Investment Company. In the 1980s it was the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity house.

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During the boom period, a number of English people were drawn to Kearney by the promise of a wide variety of jobs. The George Jones family left their row house in West Ham Parish, London, because George, a gardener (or "forester"), wanted space for a garden and property was said to be cheap in Nebraska. The family first went to Orleans where Mrs. Jones's mother and sister lived. After four years George walked to Kearney where he found a job as caretaker of the parks in the new residential areas of East Lawn, Kenwood and West Kearney. Harriette Jones Nelson stated, "Father...loved every spear of grass and flower that grew there." He also planted many of the trees which lined the residential streets and was in charge of the crew which planted the double row of trees along Seedling Mile.

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The Keenan home was moved from West Kearney, a posh boom era development. Walter Comnock, one of the brothers who owned the Cotton Mill, was the original owner. E. R. Porterfield bought the house in 1900. To move it, the house was perched on large wood rollers and pulled by a team of horses. Gladys Smith told Phebe Keenan that her father took her to where a crowd had gathered, expecting that the contrivance would fall through the tail race bridge. The house is now at 2220 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The Killion family bought it in 1913, Mr. Killion was the owner of a men's store. They lost the house during the depression and it was used as a dormitory for W. P. A. workers. Harold and Phebe Keenan bought the house in 1939. Mike Keenan purchased it from his mother in 1994 and added many new features.

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### **Kearney Boomers in 1889**

From the Kearney Daily Hub, Aug. 3, 1889 – “Sixteen months ago... West Kearney was farming property.”

Sidetracks were laid to the West Kearney industries.

A coach ran from West Kearney to the Midway Hotel to bring workmen in to their jobs.

“By far the largest contributing factor to the accomplishments of 1889 was the formation of the West Kearney Improvement Company which immediately laid out the town of West Kearney, one mile square, two miles west of the Midway Hotel at 25<sup>th</sup> Street and Central Avenue. A beautiful park containing 10,000 shrubs and flowering plants was laid out in the center of the townsite. A New England style depot was erected on the Union Pacific line. Several stores sprung up on Central Boulevard, and some fine residences were built on Grand Avenue and more were planned. When West Kearney lots were offered for sale early in February 1889, twelve hundred lots were sold on the opening day.

“However, the key to the remarkable success of West Kearney was the securing of industries. The demand for brick brought about the enlargement of the Kearney Brick Company’s yard, plus three new brickyards by the end of the year. An electric railway one mile in length was built to haul clay from the banks of the canal to the brickworks to speed up the brick-making operations.

“Seven acres of ground along the Union Pacific in West Kearney was occupied by the Kearney Paper Mill. This factory made ordinary brown wrapping paper, such as used in hardware stores or butcher shops. Straw was the principal ingredient, twelve tons thereof making eight tons of paper. The main machine room was 125 feet long and one story high; the section containing the boilers was three stories. The whole building was of brick construction.

“Just west of the paper mill was the West Kearney Woolen Mill, three stories high, with four looms for weaving plain and striped flannel for woolen shirts. The wool was procured from farmers in the area. Soon after the factor started operating, the firm opened a shirt business in downtown Kearney on 19<sup>th</sup> Street near Central Avenue where eleven women were employed to use sewing machines and one man to cut out the shirts.

“Another establishment in West Kearney of large proportions was the Kearney Canning and Pickle Factory which used vegetable products grown in the Buffalo County area.

“The crowning triumph announced toward the end of the year was the signing of a contract that assured the location of a cotton mill at the northwest corner of West Kearney. The citizens of Kearney had raised \$250,000 toward acquiring this industry which would employ one thousand or more people. Manufacturers and capitalists of New England would build and operate the cotton mill.”

(description of a party at a home in West Kearney given on pages 54-55)

## **Hub**

Oct. 20, 1890 – Started less than 2 years ago 2 ½ miles west of Central Ave.

Graded streets, park, railroad station, 12 residences, 2 factory buildings, brick yard. Cotton mill to be built. 50 tenement houses to be built.