It's Monday, November 30, 2020. Due to COVID-19, our museum, historical sites, and reference room are currently closed. But our work goes on.

In today's issue: Carnegie libraries; old gas station photos; restoring portraits; first airplane radios; holiday gift ideas; Leta Powell Drake 1980s celebrity interviews; was Darth Vader a Husker?

New lives for old Carnegie libraries
Does your hometown have a Carnegie library? Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie funded the construction of more than 2,500 libraries between 1883 and 1929. At the time, they were a great addition to the communities in which they were built, but over the years most local libraries have outgrown the buildings.

What can a community do with a landmark building that no longer serves its original purpose? That's what Historic Preservation is about.

Learn how these Nebraska communities have transformed their Carnegie libraries into:

- **Center for the arts (Alliance)**
- **Children’s museum (North Platte)**
- **Event center (Pierce)**

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**The old filling station**
When we think about landmark buildings, gas stations probably aren’t the first places that come to mind. But they’ve been part of life for more than a century and tell a story of social and technological change. These photos illustrate how automobile culture developed in Nebraska. Keep reading.

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*Here are some gift ideas that will please your loved ones and support the work of History Nebraska.*

**Nebraska History Museum curbside pickup special**

Our museum has unique gift items that you can only get from us. But what can you do now that the museum is closed due to Covid-19?
We’re offering curbside pickup for selected items. Need some gift ideas? Keep reading.

Our popular “Good Life” is now sold online

Nebraskans love “the good life.” History Nebraska offers metal replicas of the iconic highway sign (recently featured in the Lincoln Journal Star). They are made in the same factory and using the same process as the originals. Measuring about 2 feet by 1 foot, they’re small enough to fit in any room or garage, but tough enough for outdoor display (it’s a highway sign, after all!). Order yours here.
When Nebraska airmail pilots tested radios in airplanes

Aviation was dangerous business in the early 1920s. Pilots flew open-cockpit biplanes with balky engines and no navigational equipment. You carried a map and watched for landmarks.

In 1922 the Omaha airfield participated in an experimental flight to test new onboard radio equipment to allow pilots to communicate with ground control. Would equipment lightweight enough to carry have enough power for long-distance “radio phoning”? Keep reading.

Trending on YouTube: Leta Powell Drake
On November 12 we noticed a surge of traffic on our YouTube page. What in the Kalamity Kate was going on?

Soon it seemed like everybody was tweeting about Lincoln broadcaster Leta Powell Drake and her 1980s celebrity interviews. A *Newsweek* headline asked, "Who Is Leta Powell Drake? The Quirky Interviewer Is Being Compared to Zach Galifinakis and 'Between Two Ferns.'" Videos on our site got 127,000 views in a week.
Who is this legend?!?

John Frankenstein @JFrankenstein · Nov 11
Currently obsessed with Leta Powell Drake, the greatest interviewer of all time.

8:39 AM · Nov 12, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

119 Retweets 33 Quote Tweets 2.1K Likes

History Nebraska @HistoryNebraska · 17h
Replying to @MeghanMcCain
We have all her full interviews in our collection. If you like the snippet, we invite you to binge on the full collection. We've put them on Youtube for easy access!

Leta Powell Drake "Junket" Interviews
Leta Powell Drake, Lincoln television personality and member of the Nebraska Broadcasting Hall of Fame, ...

youtube.com
Somebody put together a compilation video of Drake’s bluntest and funniest moments, using clips from History Nebraska’s collection. Watch it here, then browse our Leta Powell Drake collection.

And yes, Drake was also the host of Kalamity Kate’s Cartoon Corral on KOLN/ KGIN.

If you grew up in the Lincoln broadcast area in the 1970s, do you remember this?

Also popular on our blog/social media

There was a German POW camp in downtown Grand Island. (Learn more in the forthcoming Spring 2021 issue of Nebraska History Magazine, available to History Nebraska members.)

Last month we told you about a Nebraska History Magazine article investigating Kearney’s WWII casualties. This blog post tells the stories of a few of the men.

Is there a connection between Star Wars and Husker football? Luke, this guy says he’s your father.
Want to change how you receive these emails? You can update your preferences or unsubscribe from this list.

History Nebraska Newsletter, David Bristow, Editor, history.nebraska.gov
Complete articles:

An Old Carnegie Reimagined as a New Home for the Arts
It’s hard to imagine a world without free access to the unlimited knowledge offered by public libraries. But at the beginning of the twentieth century, this was not the reality but rather an audacious dream of the steel tycoon turned philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie. Before Carnegie started his grant program to build libraries all across the United States, easy access to books was largely restricted to those with enough money for a private collection or access to subscription services. People in different towns from all across Nebraska saw free access to books as an opportunity to make a lasting impact in their communities, so they set to work applying for grants to build Carnegie libraries. Of the 1,689 public libraries in the United States, 69 were in Nebraska. Towns who applied were responsible for providing the land, purchasing all of the books, and providing salaries for librarians. Women, especially ladies’ clubs, were oftentimes the driving force behind raising the necessary funds to match Carnegie’s grant. They found creative ways to raise money through events like box socials (box lunches would be auctioned off) that would bring the whole community together.

History Nebraska has been working hard to try and get as many of these 'Carnegies' listed on the National Register as we can. Today these buildings are not always suitable for continued use as libraries, but that does not mean that these treasures should be torn down. As we have traveled the state to see old 'Carnegies', we have been impressed by the creative new uses that communities have found for these buildings. It was a community-effort to construct these buildings and it oftentimes takes a community-effort to save them.
Carnegie libraries have always been a lot more than a place to store books. The communities who built these impressive little libraries were also concerned with providing people with access to culture. While the old Carnegie building in Alliance is no longer a library, it continues to provide people with opportunities for cultural enrichment. The Carnegie Arts Center has three galleries that attract outstanding artists from Nebraska and surrounding states. The group of Alliance artists and community members that rescued the building from demolition in 1980, took advantage of its open design to create a multi-functional space. The space has been used for yoga and groove classes, artist lectures, music performances, party rentals, weddings, and more.
The Alliance Carnegie Library is now the Carnegie Arts Center

Visitors to the Carnegie Arts Center oftentimes feel an instant connection with the building because it reminds them of the Carnegie library that they grew up visiting. Carnegie libraries from different communities oftentimes have a recognizable look because James Bertram, the secretary of Andrew Carnegie, reviewed the designs of proposed libraries and even offered guidance via a pamphlet, “Notes on the Erection of Libraries.” For those who grew up in Alliance, the building feels like an old friend. Before video games, television, and the internet, kids found all the entertainment they needed through the pages of books. It is oftentimes referred to as a gem of the community.
“The Arts People” by Dick Termes was commissioned by The Carnegie Arts Center and features several founding members inside the building.

Saving and then converting the building into an arts center has been a long and carefully thought-out process. After the Public Library moved to a new location in 1980, the old Carnegie sat vacant for seven years and started to deteriorate. It was purchased by the Carnegie Arts Center in 1987 and after extensive renovations, was opened to the public in 1993. To raise money for the renovations, community members, like their predecessors, found creative ways to bring the town together.
One of the founders of the Carnegie Arts Center fondly recalls a fundraising event that featured an exhibit of Reynold Brown’s movie posters. Patrons visited the gallery and then were transported to the old theater in classic cars to watch a vintage film. After, the patrons returned to the center for a gourmet meal. The evening gave the feel of a 1950s night out on the town.
This connection with the past while looking forward to the future is one of the many reasons the old Carnegie building is a gem for Alliance. By giving the arts a place to call home, the Carnegie Arts Center has continued to honor the vision of those who worked so hard to give their community access to culture. To learn more about the National Register of Historic Places, click here, or reach out to David Calease at 402-613-1591 or david.calease@nebraska.gov.
North Platte Transforms Carnegie Library into Children's Museum

Andrew Carnegie

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these buildings. It was a community-effort this construct these buildings and it
oftentimes takes a community-effort to save them.
Over its 108 year history, the North Platte Carnegie Library has already lived many lives and served many different generations. Today the building is home to a children's museum. When grandparents visit the museum with their grandchildren, many can remember attending the trade school that used to operate in the building and some can even remember when it was a library. Throughout all of these generations and uses, the building has always been a center for learning. MenDi McCuiston, the current director of the North Platte Area Children’s Museum, calls the building inspirational, because “all the learning that has occurred inside these walls, leaves a strong mark on our North Platte history.”

The North Platte Carnegie Library is now the North Platte Area Children’s Museum

Part of this building’s legacy is as a beautiful and easily recognizable landmark in North Platte. McCuiston describes the building as timeless and welcoming in its appearance. When the library opened in 1912 The North Platte Tribune described it
as “a library of which we can feel justly proud” and for the “benefit of all citizens.” As a children’s museum, the building continues to be a space for everyone. Its open design perfectly accommodates the life-size exhibits like the tractor, pirate ship, and Construction World that invite youngsters to play, explore, and use their imagination.

Adapting the building into a children’s museum has been a creative and rewarding process.

The old building has its quirks, but the Museum’s caretakers have made creative adaptations. For example, the exposed pipes in the basement have been painted
with fun colors and faces. The adaptive reuse of old buildings sometimes requires imaginative thinking to turn problems into benefits. But preventing the loss of a Carnegie or any old community treasure is worth it. McCuiston says that it would be “a shame to demolish any Carnegie building” and recommends spending “time coming up with ideas on how to utilize the building before resorting to tearing it down.”

McCuiston has experienced firsthand the reward of keeping the North Platte Carnegie. Some of her favorite memories have happened in this building with her daughters and now her grandkids. While it may no longer house books, North Platte’s old Carnegie library building is still full of stories, and as long as it stands it will continue to be a place where people are invited to learn and create lasting memories.

The interior of the North Platte Carnegie Library, circa 1920-1930
Pierce Repurposes Carnegie Library into Event Center

Andrew Carnegie

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For Todd Wragge, finding a new life for the Pierce Carnegie Library has been an 18-year endeavor. The building was slated for demolition but Wragge along with a group of concerned community members intervened to stop the wrecking ball. The library was carefully moved (Wragge recalls that volunteers painstakingly moved the foundation stone by stone) and for several years he and the other members of the Pierce County Foundation struggled with what to do with the old building. They knew that they wanted it to continue to serve the community, but were not sure how. The idea to convert the space into an event venue struck after the Foundation members had enjoyed a lovely candlelit evening in the library drinking wine and eating appetizers.
After years of fundraising, applying for grants, and careful rehabilitation, the old Pierce Carnegie Library has been transformed into the Carnegie Event Center. Wragge describes the Center as an inviting space—its open design and delightful historic features, like the original windows and bookshelves, are perfect for intimate gatherings of all kinds. So far the venue has hosted a wedding several graduation parties, and a high school reunion. Local Boy and Girl Scout Troops are able to utilize the space for free. Wragge says that it was his dream to see future generations enjoy the building: “I rehabilitate old places for the next generation. Every old place that I have ever worked on, I view myself as its caretaker.”
The Carnegie Event Center is all set-up to host a wedding

Wragge’s advice for the 57 remaining Carnegie Libraries in Nebraska is to keep them, “There will never be another building like it and when it is gone, it's gone.” When a building has been around forever when it’s something we’ve walked by a million times and it’s a seemingly unremarkable part of our lives, it can be easy to lose sight of its greater significance. Just over 100 years ago, communities from all across Nebraska believed in a future where people from all walks of life would have the opportunity to better themselves through free access to books. We can see that those dreams are still alive in the grassroots efforts to find new ways for old Carnegie buildings to serve their people.
The Old Filling Station

By David L. Bristow, Editor

When we think about landmark buildings, gas stations probably aren’t the first places that come to mind. But they’ve been part of life for more than a century and tell a story of social and technological change. These photos illustrate how automobile culture developed in Nebraska.

In the early days, motorists bought cans of gasoline from blacksmith shops and pharmacies. An Indiana inventor named Sylvanus Bowser invented a kerosene pump in 1885. Years later he adapted it as a gasoline pump, adding a hose attachment in 1905 so motorists could pump fuel directly into their automobile’s tank. These curbside pumps became known as “filling stations.” Usually you found them at blacksmith shops or general stores.

The nation’s first drive-in filling station opened in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1913. As the idea spread, station owners began to expand the range of products and services they offered. They promoted themselves with creative signage and distinctive buildings. Along Nebraska’s highways, some stations offered “auto camps” or became colorful tourist traps offering attractions and souvenirs.

Most of the colorful gas stations of the early- to mid-twentieth century are gone. Some remain in ruins, some have been documented by various photographers, and a few remain as functioning businesses luring travelers with nostalgia for an earlier era.
Having a women's restroom was an amenity worth bragging about. Arnold, Nebraska, circa 1930. Archive.org
As automobile tourism grew, some stations provided lodging as well as a fuel. Auto camps were a predecessor of motels (short for “motor hotel”). This one in Ogallala, shown circa 1930, boasted heated cabins and “free shower baths.” History Nebraska RG2105-3-71
This old Wadhams station in Pilger was dilapidated by the time this photo was taken in the mid-20th century, but the building was a landmark in its day. Between 1917 and 1930, Wadhams Oil and Grease Company of Milwaukee built more than 100 pagoda-roofed filling stations across the Midwest. The company had no Japanese ties; it was simply a marketing strategy at a time when Japanese culture was relatively popular in the US. History Nebraska RG2587-1-9
The Covered Wagon Gift Shop was already past its prime when photographer John Margolies took this picture in 1980. Located west of Kearney, the giant team and wagon lured Highway 30 tourists with a chance to fuel up and purchase souvenirs. Library of Congress
This 1960s postcard promotes Rasmus Oil Co. in West Point. Proudly displaying their fleet of service trucks, the station seems most interested in promoting its range of services for the local community. History Nebraska RG3334-3-29
This old clockface gas pump was still standing in Wauneta when photographer John Margolies noticed it in 1980. Library of Congress

This article first appeared in the December 2019 issue of NEBRASKAland Magazine.

Learn more about John Margolies' "Roadside America" photos at the Library of Congress.

(11/30/2020)
Nebraska History Museum
Curbside Pickup Special

Due to the severe spread of Covid-19, we've had to temporarily close the Nebraska History Museum. But, we know that our museum has unique gift items that you can only get from us.

So we are offering a special curbside pickup service for select items that you can only get at the Nebraska History Museum.

Check out the items below and call 402-471-3447 to place your order. We'll process your purchase over the phone, set your items aside, and schedule a day and time for you to stop by and we'll bring them to your vehicle.

Our curbside pickup is available Monday through Friday 10 am - 4 pm. Call 402-471-3447 to place your order and schedule your pick up!

**Nebraska Good Life Sign**

$29.00

This 12"x24" replica is made of the same material using the same process as the iconic highway signs seen across the state. Built to withstand Nebraska's harsh weather, but the perfect size for any garage, man cave, or anywhere else you want to display your Nebraska pride.
Limited Covid-19 Posters

$35.00

Earlier this year, History Nebraska worked with the Nebraska Arts Council to commission ten artists to re-imagine historic WWI and WWII posters for 2020. A portion of each sale goes back to the artists. Click here or the image to see each poster.
2020 Capitol Ornament

$21.95

Collect the next ornament in the series of Nebraska State Capitol ornaments, only at the Nebraska History Museum. Learn more about this year's design here.
Major: A Soldier Dog

$18.95

Written by History Nebraska's Director and CEO, this children's picture book tells the story of a brave dog named Major and his experiences at Fort Robinson training to be a soldier in World War II.
MAJOR
A SOLDIER DOG

TREVOR JONES
ILLUSTRATED BY
MING HAI
Omaha Airfield Challenging Radios in Planes

As an emerging invention in the early 1920s, radios became popular as entertainment and as a means of communication. The potential use of radios in airplanes intrigued engineers and scientists, but they had concerns about the effects of distance, speed, and noise inference. As the US Post Office expanded its airmail operations, the needed to improve pilot safety became more urgent. Determined to solve this issue and break an international “radio phone” record, in 1922 the Omaha Airmail Field took up the challenge.
Why Omaha? According to official statements, “The Omaha field [was] the only radio ground station in the United States equipped for transmitting to airplanes.” Airfield staff began preliminary tests in November 1922. With knowledge of prior experimental radio usage in war aircraft, they began to devise a plan to test long-distance radio communication from planes. A year later, they finalized a full test.

The plan involved equipping an airmail plane with a radio receiving and transmitting set for a flight from Omaha to Cheyenne. A 1,000-watt radio transmitter was specially designed to send messages between ground control and the plane. Throughout the duration of the trip, reports would be frequently exchanged regarding weather, messages, and orders from the field, as though it were an actual airmail flight. The question was whether or not the messages would be successfully carried and audible.
On December 14, 1923, the day before the official test flight, final preliminary tests were done to ensure the safety and function of the plane and radio. The next day, a young pilot and his passenger departed from Omaha. The passenger, Eugene Sibley, was radio traffic supervisor of the airmail service. The pilot, Jack Knight, hoped to break his own 100-mile distance record for “radio phoning.”

There were many unknowns during the early period of radio development. One of them was how an airplane's high speed might affect radio reception. When the plane made its first stop in North Platte, NE, Knight and Sibley confirmed that messages had been clearly delivered over 250 miles, breaking Knight’s earlier record. They noted that during the three-hour trip to North Platte, messages had been received even while the plane was flying 100 mph.
The problem of sound interference had also been eliminated. Communication about the plane’s location, landing, departure, and conditions was effective between Omaha and the airplane. The success of the trip was credited to the willingness of Jack Knight and Eugene Sibley, efforts made by the men who installed the radio sets, the Western Division Superintendent, and the radio engineer.

As a result, the Westinghouse set and the transmitter used during the test were installed at the Omaha Airfield and later at other locations. With the discovery that messages could be carried from 300 to 500 miles during the day, and 1,000 miles at night, the 1923 flight demonstrated efficient radio communication over a long-distance flight. While it was not the first use of radio in airmail service planes, it helped pave the way to expanded use of the new technology.

Photos:

Top: Jack Knight, as pictured in an Omaha World Herald newspaper from December 27th, 1923, holding the apparatus that enabled communication to ground control.

Middle: (As appeared left to right) 1. One of Omaha’s Aerial Mail planes, similar to the one Knight operated. 2. Photographed is the US airmail transmitter equipment, like the ones used during Knight's flight.

Bottom: Pictured, as shown in an Omaha World Herald featured articled from December 27th, 1923, is the equipment used in the plane’s cockpit. (Labeled in image): 1. Printed instructions that Knight used. 2. An apparatus that “the pilot [needed to learn] to tune properly as he [clipped] the air at a hundred-an-hour pace." 3. An antenna reel (200 feet of copper wire with a five pound weight on the end that was reeled out and hung below the plane after reaching a "proper altitude.")

Categories:

Omaha, airmail, radios, planes,