



The Kearney Cotton Mill—A Bubble That Burst

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Photographs / Images: Kearney Cotton Mill; Kearney home of Walter Cumnock, manager of the cotton mill; Central Avenue, Kearney, about 1891

THE KEARNEY COTTON MILL— A BUBBLE THAT BURST

BY CHARLES JENKINS

THREE-quarters of a mile west of the State Industrial School grounds in Kearney, Nebraska, is the site of the Kearney Cotton Mill. All that remains of the glory which once existed is an occasional outcrop of a decayed foundation peering from the enveloping weeds. Bits of broken concrete and bricks litter the area while the cars and trucks of Highway 30 roar by, unaware of the few buildings and steel pipes marking what the *Kearney Enterprise* of 1889 called the one thing which "spread the fame of Kearney throughout the United States and fastened upon it the attention of capitalists and manufacturers as the coming industrial center of the New West."¹ The Kearney Cotton Mill was an ambitious but

¹ *The Kearney Enterprise*, December 22, 1889.

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unsuccessful attempt at an industrial growth in the agricultural West.

The story of the Kearney Cotton Mill begins with the Kearney Canal Company. Started in 1882 by the pioneers of Kearney, the company organized for the purpose of building a canal for irrigation and water power. The company soon met with reverses, however, and because of a lack of funds, was forced to terminate canal construction.² In 1885, George W. Frank of Corning, Iowa took over the company's stock, intending to complete the project.³ Wishing to protect his investment, Mr. Frank, in the years 1886 and 1887, negotiated with various persons and companies, hoping to interest them in the erection of factories in Kearney. But the negotiations halted, and the canal was once again without funds.⁴

In the summer of 1888, H. D. Watson, of Greenfield, Massachusetts, met with Mr. Frank at Kearney and purchased one-half interest in the Frank holdings, forming the G. W. Frank Improvement Company. This corporation took title to all the Frank buildings, holdings, and canal.⁵ Mr. Watson began anew negotiating with companies and manufacturing interests in New England and soon persuaded three trainloads of investors and manufacturers to visit and investigate Kearney. Among the group were the Cumnock brothers, who were interested in the manufacturing of cotton goods.⁶

"The Cumnocks were Eastern cotton manufacturers with a great amount of capital at their command."⁷ The five brothers, A. G., John, J. W., George W., and Walter, operated cotton mills at Lowell, Chicopee, and Holyoke,

² *Ibid.*, July, 1889, Cotton Mill Extra.

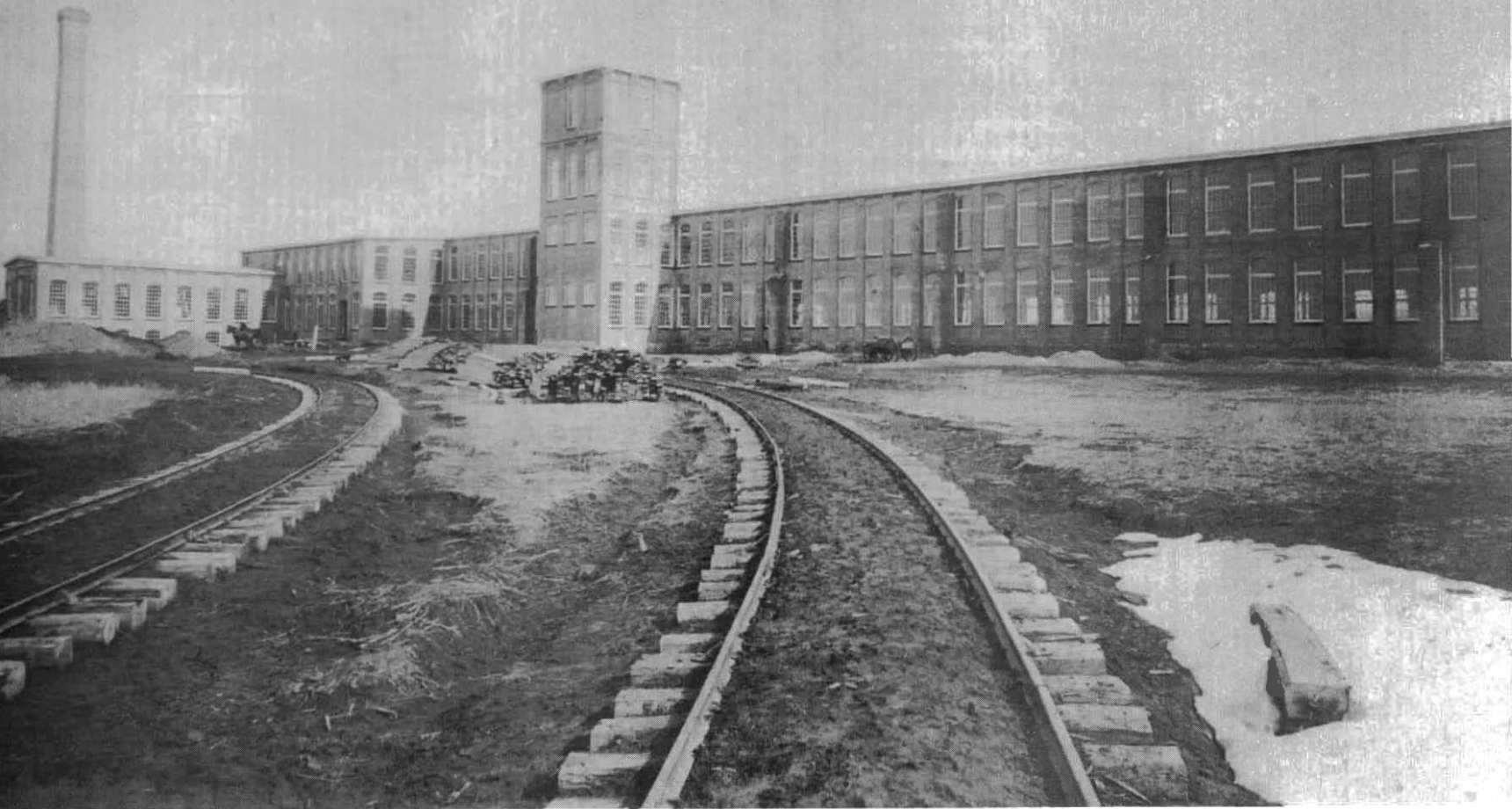
³ Lena Briggs, "The Kearney Boom" as quoted in Samuel Clay Bassett, *Buffalo County, Nebraska And Its People* (Chicago, 1916), I, 243.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, March 8, 1919.



The Kearney Cotton Mill



Above—Kearney home of Walter Cumnock, manager
of the cotton mill

Below— Central Avenue, Kearney, about 1891



Massachusetts, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, and Henderson, Kentucky, respectively.⁸ In the New England area they were known as the "Cotton Kings" and easily made each new mill which they managed a successful venture.

Appreciating the opportunities which Kearney appeared to offer, the Cumnocks returned in 1889 with an engineer, T. G. Jameson, who studied the possibilities with a practiced eye.⁹ Finally, at a mass meeting of the citizens of Kearney held June 10, 1889, the Cumnocks announced their plan of locating a cotton mill in the city. They set as their conditions:

Exemption from taxation from the city of Kearney for a period of ten years. Second, the free use of water, or 350 horse power, for a period of five years on the site yet to be chosen. At the expiration of the fifth year from date of signing contract, when the mill shall have to pay for its water power, it shall not pay more than \$20 per horse power per year, and at that period, if other users of water power shall be getting a less rate than the above mentioned sum, the cotton mill shall have a like reduction.

. . . In return for building the cotton mill we require a mill site of twenty acres and \$250,000 divided as follows: One hundred thousand dollars in cash or notes running twelve or eight months, with interest from date of contract, said notes to be properly endorsed. The balance in lots and acreage at market value, according to the prices quoted in the price lists of the several companies as in force and used by them April 14, 1889.¹⁰

The reaction to the demands was mixed, but generally enthusiastic.¹¹ Mr. G. R. Sherwood remarked that he considered the mill Kearney's great chance; while he considered the bonus too high, he would consider it a great mistake not to make every effort to secure the mill.¹² Mr. R. L. Spencer was paralyzed at the amount asked but was willing to give a quarter of all he possessed to secure it.¹³ Generally, the sentiments expressed showed that the

⁸ *Ibid.*, December 21, 1890.

⁹ *Ibid.*, June 7, 1948, Diamond Jubilee Issue, Section B, p. 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, June 10, 1889.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, June 11, 1889.

¹² *Ibid.*, June 10, 1889.

¹³ *Ibid.*

city was ready to strain every effort to raise the amount and meet the demands.¹⁴

Plans for the subsidy drive were soon underway. The Chamber of Commerce appointed B. D. Smith, J. J. Bartlett, R. L. Spencer, and J. L. Keck, all prominent Kearneyites, to the cotton mill committee.¹⁵ The Cumnocks returned to New England and the drive was on. By June 12, \$112,000 had been raised, but the money was coming in slowly and the drive apparently was about to flounder. In an effort to renew enthusiasm, June 14 was proclaimed Cotton Mill Day and the committee toured the streets of Kearney in cotton-decorated carriages, wearing cotton boutonnieres. Over \$53,000 was raised, bringing the total as of June 15 to \$166,455.¹⁶

By June 20, however, the acquiring of the full amount looked doubtful. The majority of potential sources had been exhausted, and there was still almost \$58,000 to be collected.¹⁷ The drive received added impetus with the arrival of a telegram from the Cumnocks stating that the construction of a building would begin as soon as the subsidy was reached.¹⁸ The more cautious persons who had held back before began to donate and, with the announcement that the site had been chosen, the \$250,000 goal was reached at 6:00 p.m., Saturday, July 6. In the last two days of the drive, over \$60,000 was added to the fund.¹⁹

Kearney had done it; in four weeks the city, listed with a population of 5,000, had raised \$250,000, the equivalent of \$50 per capita.²⁰ ". . . rockets and Roman candles illuminated the night, and the noise of the bursting bombs was lost in the roar of the deafening cannon."²¹ A list of subscribers, printed in the *Kearney Enterprise*,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, June 11, 1889.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, December 2, 1889.

¹⁶ *The Kearney Enterprise*, July, 1889, Cotton Mill Extra.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, June 24, 1889.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, July 8, 1889.

²⁰ Briggs, *loc. cit.*

²¹ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, July 8, 1889.

shows 288 names donating property and cash. The largest contributors were the West Kearney Improvement Company, \$60,000; the G. W. Frank Improvement Company, \$50,000; and the Kearney Land Investment Company, \$25,000.²² Among the stockholders were General William Draper of Hopedale, Massachusetts, and William Whitin, of Whitinsville, Massachusetts, the manufacturer of cotton mill machinery.²³

About 1:30 p.m., September 2, 1889, the initial contract for the cotton mill was signed,²⁴ and the final contract, assuring Kearney of getting the mill, was completed by November 30, 1889;²⁵ and "the battle ended."²⁶ In an interview in the *Omaha Evening Dispatch*, November 14, Mr. Martin, a capitalist from the East and one of the negotiators of the mill, explained that "The amounts subscribed have all been made good with the exception of about \$2800, and of course that was promptly made up by others who were determined that the cotton mill should be secured."²⁷

Continuing the interview, Mr. Martin gave the following reasons for the selection of Kearney for the mill:

... we can lay the raw cotton down in Kearney cheaper than in Lowell, Massachusetts. And, when we have it manufactured, it is in the market; whereas from Lowell it has to be shipped half way across the continent to reach the western market. We shall ship the goods from the South across the short side of the triangle to Kearney. In shipping from the South to Massachusetts and then back to Omaha, Denver, and Kansas City and all over the West and Northwest, we have to ship across two very long sides of the triangle, that is the difference in a nutshell.²⁸

But this explanation alone was not the only factor entering into the location of the mill. Water power was a

²² *The Kearney Enterprise*, July, 1889, Cotton Mill Extra.

²³ *Ibid.*, December 22, 1889.

²⁴ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, September 2, 1889.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, November 20, 1889.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Omaha Evening Dispatch* as quoted in *ibid.*, November 14, 1889.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

chief factor; in fact, it was "primarily because of the power plant" that Kearney entered into this period of growth.²⁹ Labor, also, played a part. Mr. Cumnock did not anticipate any difficulty in getting experienced workers for the mill. He was certain the city would be able to supply the ordinary labor from its population.³⁰ The location of the cotton mill was also part of a scheme to build a railroad which connected the cotton-producing South with the industrial North.³¹

It was not until several years after the mill closed that another element appeared. The so-called secret was revealed by a workman in an eastern mill that the mill which pushed the erection of a cotton mill in Nebraska was trying to find a market for its old, obsolete machinery. The new mill would provide an outlet for the eastern mill's spindles, enabling them to buy new, modern equipment.³²

Whatever the reason for the mill's erection, Mr. Walter Cumnock, who was chosen to manage the mill, was determined to make it a success. "My reputation is at stake," he said, "and I don't care to hazard it by neglecting any detail that will contribute to the success of the mill."³³

In spite of all the talk and enthusiasm, however, the construction of the mill did not begin until the fall of 1890.³⁴ The final site selected for the mill was the northwest corner of section 4, township 8, range 16 west.³⁵ It was exactly three miles west of the Midway Hotel and in a direct line with the High School building.³⁶ West Kearney, a development on the west edge of the city proper, bordered upon the site, and the West Kearney Improvement Associa-

²⁹ John Lawrence McKinley, *The Influence of the Platte River upon the History of the Valley* (Minneapolis, 1938), p. 123.

³⁰ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, December 21, 1890.

³¹ McKinley, *loc. cit.*

³² From a personal interview with H. W. Kendall, November 18, 1956.

³³ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, December 7, 1890.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, December 13, 1890.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, December 2, 1889.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

tion played a principal role in the final site location.³⁷

M. C. Cummings of Holyoke, Massachusetts, a noted cotton mill builder, was given the contract to build the Kearney Cotton Mill building,³⁸ designed by C. R. Makepeace and Company of Providence, Rhode Island.³⁹ Kearney labor was given preference in the construction, so far as the home talent could supply the demand, and the excavation for the building was underway by December of 1890.⁴⁰

The mill stood at an angle, the ends facing northwest and southeast. It was a two-story structure, except for a three-story tower, and stretched 408 feet in length, with a width of 102 feet. The fan room was 92 by 27 feet, an L off the main structure. In addition there was a power house 59 by 48 feet, an engine room 70 by 80 feet, and a tower 33 feet by 27 feet. Above the tower were water tanks, with enough water to automatically sprinkle the entire building in case of fire.⁴¹ Rising 120 feet into the air, the smoke stack had a base 28 feet square,⁴² with a chimney flue 13 feet in diameter at the bottom.⁴³

³⁷ The West Kearney Improvement Association had capital stock of \$1,000,000 and was organized by prosperous citizens of Kearney with the idea of making West Kearney the manufacturing center of the Midwest. By 1890 the company had established a regular city in the West Kearney location. Directly in the center of the development was a depot, at which all regularly scheduled trains stopped, and a large ten acre park. The park was filled with floral decorations, fountains, vases, and 5000 flowering plants and shrubs. Plans were to plant 5000 trees. It was the only section of the city which had a complete sewer system and soft water. When the boom collapsed in 1893 the development ended and the houses built on the site were moved to the city proper. Nothing is left now but the railroad track; although still divided into lots, West Kearney is farm ground. (From the *Kearney Daily Hub*, June 1, 1889; *Historical and Descriptive Review of Nebraska* [Omaha, 1892], II, 104, and a personal interview with H. W. Kendall, November 18, 1956.)

³⁸ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, December 13, 1890.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, December 21, 1890.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, December 13, 1890.

⁴¹ *Historical and Descriptive Review of Nebraska*, II, 93.

⁴² *The Kearney Daily Hub*, March 8, 1919.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, November 25, 1890.

The foundation walls extended into the ground 9 feet at the shallowest point and to 38 feet where the fly wheels were supported. Each wall was 5 feet 10 inches in width at the base and tapered up to 30 inches at the top. The bricks were set in cement to the second floor, 15 feet from the ground. The second floor was 20 feet deep. One hundred twenty-nine columns supported the floor, each column resting on brick piers 5 feet by 6 feet by 4 inches.⁴⁴ Ventilating shafts left the fan room, proceeded around the entire base of the building, and rose between the walls, which in turn supported 380 windows.⁴⁵ Seven million bricks⁴⁶ and 100 cars of stone were used in the construction.⁴⁷ The roof was of metal.⁴⁸ Total floor space of the mill was 89,587 square feet.⁴⁹

To power the 15,000 spindles and other machinery, 150 carloads in all, a turbine wheel generating 800 horsepower was turned with water from the Kearney Canal.⁵⁰ Echo Lake (now referred to as Cottonmill Lake) was used as a storage reservoir, dropping the water 50 feet to the mill.⁵¹ A deep cut in the land west of the mill served as the tailrace, handling the water after it turned the wheels of the mill.⁵² Total cost of the mill and the equipment was \$400,000.⁵³

Heading the board of directors at the opening of the mill in the spring of 1892 was Stephen A. Jenks of Providence, Rhode Island. Other members of the board were: D. Hale, secretary-treasurer, Springfield, Massachusetts; J. Marble, Worcester, Massachusetts; W. W. Cumnock, Hend-

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Historical and Descriptive Review of Nebraska, loc. cit.*

⁴⁷ Lyle E. Mantor, "History of Buffalo County," *Who's Who in Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1940), p. 75.

⁴⁸ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, November 25, 1890.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Historical and Descriptive Review of Nebraska, loc. cit.*

⁵¹ *The Kearney Gait*, March 15, 1891.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Historical and Descriptive Review of Nebraska, loc. cit.*

erson, Kentucky; G. W. Cumnock, Woonsocket, Rhode Island; J. H. McMullen, Saco, Maine; J. N. Murcock, Leicester, Massachusetts; Charles Brown, Kearney, Nebraska; and A. T. Allerton, Pawtucket, Rhode Island.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, provision had to be made for the mill workers. About fifty unpainted, four-room bungalows were built in the vicinity of the mill.⁵⁵ The three hundred either lived in these shacks or in the city of Kearney.

Crowded together in the low cramped company houses, close to the old mill, lived the mill workers, a race of people whose daily lives offered a startling contrast to the wholesale freedom of the agricultural pioneers. Mulattoes from the South, French-Canadians, Easterners descended from generations of mill workers, they formed an alien element. They were discontented, as alien elements are often, complained of the Nebraska zephyrs and of the scanty numbers of people of their own kind. Frequently a newly employed foreman brought a whole colony with him, and when he became dissatisfied and went elsewhere, the colony followed. . .⁵⁶

The collective weekly payroll of the mill was \$1600, most of it going to the city of Kearney through the purchases and business of the mill workers.⁵⁷ The work day was twelve hours long, with both women and children employed. Work started at 7:30 a.m. and the workers received only a three-quarter hour lunch period.⁵⁸ "The mill was subjected to a constant turnover of discontented, homesick help."⁵⁹

Finally the mill was in production. By September 22, 1892 the first shipment of cotton goods manufactured in Nebraska to be shipped out of the state left for Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri, 76,000 yards of it.⁶⁰ The mill was soon consuming 50,000 bales of cotton per year with an

⁵⁴ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, June 7, 1948, Diamond Jubilee Issue, Section B, p. 15.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, March 8, 1919.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, December 21, 1890.

⁵⁸ From a personal interview with Emma Yotty, former mill worker, November 18, 1956.

⁵⁹ Maud Marston Burrows, "The Kearney Boom," *The Kearney Daily Hub*, October 23, 1938.

⁶⁰ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, September 22, 1892.

annual output of white sheetings valued at \$3,400,000.⁶¹ It had a capacity of 26,000 yards of unbleached muslin daily⁶² and produced a quality of sheeting equal to that of the Fruit of the Loom.⁶³

Perhaps Mr. Cumnock's insistence on making the mill a success was a factor in getting it started, but enthusiasm and money began to disappear as the mill began to operate. With the national depression and the dry year of 1893, the boom suddenly collapsed and with it the infant industries of Kearney. The cotton mill, like the paper mill, woolen mill, oatmeal mill, plow factory, canning factory, cracker factory, and pressed brick works all succumbed to the inevitable.⁶⁴

The cotton mill, although it had run the first year at a loss, was purchased by Stephen A. Jenks and others for \$114,000. Mr. Jenks organized a new company and optimistically started running at full capacity. He remarked, "There is no money in running it on half time and the new company will not be content to run it at a loss."⁶⁵

The company was content, however, for the mill continued to run at a loss until it closed eight years later in spite of all efforts. In 1895 a drive was begun by the management to increase the demand for Kearney cottons. Samples of cotton sheeting were sent to newspapers of the area and many of them supported the mill, urging the state's citizens to support local industries. By this time the mill had 15,360 spindles and 350 looms, producing 36-inch unbleached muslin, four pounds to the yard. A good portion of the goods produced by the mill was sent to Omaha where it was turned into sacks.⁶⁶

By the end of the century the company was financially

⁶¹ Mantor, *loc. cit.*

⁶² *Historical and Descriptive Review of Nebraska*, *loc. cit.*

⁶³ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, March 8, 1919.

⁶⁴ Briggs, *loc. cit.*

⁶⁵ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, December 13, 1893.

⁶⁶ Brochure, *Kearney Cotton Mills*, distributed by the Kearney Cotton Mill Company, 1895.

exhausted. A good portion of its products had been sent to Chinese markets by Putman-Hooker, cotton wholesalers at Cincinnati, but with the Boxer Rebellion this trade stopped. Increased prices in raw cotton and increased freight rates added further to the economic squeeze which the Cotton Mill Company of 1900 faced.⁶⁷ In its final year of operation the mill could not afford coal, so it was without heat in the winter of 1900 and 1901. At the end the mill could only run when the wind was in the south, blowing the little water in the Platte to the north side of the channel and into the canal feeding the mill turbines.⁶⁸

A mortgage of \$70,000, incurred by the company for paying obligations and supplying capital, was in default by the fall of 1901 and suit was commenced in the United States court for foreclosure.⁶⁹ On September 9, 1901 the cotton mill with all its lands, buildings, and water rights was sold to the Union Savings Bank and Trust Company of Cincinnati, who held the mortgage for \$70,000, the amount of the loan.⁷⁰ The city, however, had generally recovered from the drought, and the stopping of the mill had little effect on its business. Rumors circulated for some time that the mill would reopen, especially when John Barbach of Denver came to Kearney with instructions to fit up a house and wait for forty Russian families of the Denver cotton mills to move into the city.⁷¹ Nothing came of the rumor, and the equipment was moved to a mill in Evansville, Indiana, where, in 1919, it was still in operation.⁷²

For nine years the mill had run, each year at a tremendous loss. The ultimate failure of the mill, however, was not "the distance from the cotton (brought from Texas), nor the necessity for importing coal a large part

⁶⁷ *The Semi-Weekly Hub*, October 11, 1900.

⁶⁸ From the Yotty interview.

⁶⁹ *Semi-Weekly Hub*, June 20, 1901.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, September 12, 1901.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, November 25, 1901.

⁷² *The Kearney Daily Hub*, March 8, 1919.

of the year (for the canal and the lake both froze of course—a contingency that seemed to have been overlooked and certainly disregarded); nor even to the sparsely settled distributing territory; but to the want of cheap labor.”⁷³ Nebraskans were unskilled and preferred the freedom of the farm to the confinement of the mill, leaving the company faced with the necessity of shipping in help as well as cotton.⁷⁴

And so the old building was left, a chance legacy to the winds that shatter, to the rains that wash off the paint and cause floors to rot, and to the small boys who shy stones at tempting, tiny, marksmanship-deciding, wholesale window panes. And finally it reached a state of dilapidation and general ruin and decay seldom equalled at such a great distance from the Hunhowitzer. But what it lost in personal appearance, it gained in romantic flavor. What fairy-story loving child could fail to be thrilled by a gigantic building in a state of decay almost medieval, with a sure-enough tower, and a sure-enough underground passage ending in a really-truly walled-in-well-like concern with no visible means of exit, and besides all this a spooky underground chamber thru which an enclosed stream of water gurgles and an atmosphere of chilling damp prevails on the hottest summer day? Not to mention tumbled in staircases, rotted floors, smoke-blackened walls, and all the rest of it.⁷⁵

Thus the building was left vacant for eighteen years, a place for children to play and for students to take their dates on a Sunday afternoon.

L. A. Denison, proprietor of the Midway Hotel and the Midway Amusement Company, purchased the property before 1920 for \$12,000, planning to build an amusement park on the area. He began the razing of the mill building,⁷⁶ using the floor joists, after cutting them into workable sizes, for woodwork in the dance pavilion and for portions of the half-mile long roller-coaster. Part of the basement was used as a swimming pool and the rest of the main building turned into a dance hall.⁷⁷ The second

⁷³ Burrows, *loc. cit.*

⁷⁴ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, March 8, 1919.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ From an interview with Mr. Denison, November 18, 1956.

story of the mill building, the smoke stack, and other buildings were torn down.

After a very successful season the operators of the park planned several additions, a merry-go-round, a ferris wheel, and numerous concessions, calling it "The joy spot of Kearney."⁷⁸ These plans literally went up in smoke. On March 23, 1922, the Midway Amusement Park was burned to the ground. The city had been paralyzed by a late winter blizzard, and the fire trucks were unable to reach the park. "All that remained of the building was a smoldering ruin of crumbling brick walls and steel."⁷⁹

Once more the site went through bankruptcy proceedings, and H. W. Kendall bought the remaining building and the site for \$3500.⁸⁰ During the five years following, Mr. Kendall sold over a million bricks from the building. He employed squads of high school boys to retrieve and clean the bricks, which he sold for one cent apiece. The house which presently stands on the site was built from the mill brick, as were numerous houses in the city.⁸¹ The remaining parts of the building which could still be utilized were changed into a chicken hatchery which operated until 1945, when Mr. Kendall sold the site for \$10,000 to the present owner.⁸²

All that remains of the Kearney Cotton Mill is an occasional wall in the barns and a corner of an apartment building by the house standing on the mill site. In a pasture one can still see the foundation and a far corner of the building. The tailrace is still in operation, and a large steel pipe emerges from the ground and dips to the former fly wheel location. Below the house is the entrance to the tailrace, a concrete receptacle still operating. The area is littered with bricks and concrete, remnants of a past glory, a bubble that burst.

⁷⁸ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, March 13, 1922.

⁷⁹ *The Weekly Hub*, March 23, 1922.

⁸⁰ From the Kendall interview.

⁸¹ *The Kearney Daily Hub*, June 7, 1948, Diamond Jubilee Issue, Section B, p. 15.

⁸² From the Kendall interview.