



## Stories of Nebraska Communities

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Editor’s note: These stories are the prize essays of the 1941 contest of the Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska.

# Stories of Nebraska Communities

## I. The History of Nehawka 1855 - 1941

RUTH ANN SHELDON, NEHAWKA \*

The history of Nebraska is largely the story of the development of its small towns and their surrounding communities. One of these towns is Nehawka, into which settlers came almost as soon as the territory was open for settlement. It has always been a small town, yet regardless of its size it has made a contribution to the development of the state.

Nehawka is located in the southeastern part of Cass County on the main branch of the Weeping Water Creek. Surrounding this village are rolling hills and fertile valleys, ideal for farming.

There is an Indian tradition about the origin of the Weeping Water. Somewhere near the source of the stream there once dwelt an Indian tribe. One day the chief's daughter was stolen from her home by the ruler of a rival tribe. Pursuit was made and the chase was dangerous and disastrous. All of the pursuers were killed in the fight that followed. When the warriors did not return, the women of the village started a search. Finding their husbands and lovers dead, they wept so long that their falling tears formed a stream that still exists, the Weeping Water.

The exploration of Cass County began as early as May 1739, when Pierre and Paul Mallet, in command of a small company of explorers, made a trip up the Missouri River.

The first rush of settlers into the county was in the period from 1854 to 1857. In June 1855 Samuel Kirkpatrick moved from Iowa to stake a claim along the Weeping Water, including what is now the village of Nehawka. In 1856 the settlement grew with the coming of John Knabe, John Hansen, Andrew Sturm, Sr., Lawson Sheldon, Isaac Pollard, and William Rose, all of whom staked claims near the Weeping Water. This makes a

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\* Winner of First Prize in 1941 Contest, Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska.

combined nationality of Yankee, English, German, and Swedish.

Favorite sites for towns were on a creek or a traveled trail. One of these was Waterville, located south of and adjacent to the land which includes the present village of Nehawka. This town was platted by Lawson Sheldon and Isaac Pollard, who came from Vermont, bringing with them considerable capital which they had accumulated in the gold fields of California. The speculative fever of town building struck them in the spring of 1857, when Pollard, an experienced surveyor, began to lay out the town of Waterville. There is no record of the sale of any lots and Waterville takes its place among the ghost towns of Cass County.

The settlers along the Weeping Water were subjected to the hardships and problems that pioneers in any new country inevitably encountered. They experienced difficulties presented by the Indians, inadequate housing and living conditions, insufficient food, poor transportation facilities, and adverse weather conditions.

The Indian menace in the locality was more imagined than real, for the settlers actually suffered little from the redskin. There is nothing on record to show that they ever attempted personal injury to anyone in the county. What Otoe and Omaha Indians remained were bereft of their warlike spirit. Beyond a few raids for stealing and begging for food, the Indians caused no serious depredation.

What roads existed were mere trails. The first trail was broken by Kirkpatrick when he brought a mill into the valley, by way of Plattsmouth. There was also a trail from the settlement to Nebraska City by June 1856.

After the townsite boom at Waterville failed to materialize, the settlement began to stress agricultural development. The first prairie sod was broken by John Knabe in 1856. The chief motive power was oxen, used for pulling farm implements and for travel on the trails. The principal crop was corn, although some small grain was raised. Many unfavorable growing conditions tended to reduce the yield of the farmers' fields. In the spring he was plagued with excessive rains, and the summers were hot and dry. Early frosts sometimes killed crops before they were matured. The almost inevitable grasshopper was a menace to the

crops. Nevertheless, the farmer continued to plant his fields, and over a period of years his efforts have been rewarded.

The settlement along the Weeping Water began to take the aspects of a town in 1875, when the United States Government granted a postoffice. Prior to this date, mail had been received through the postoffices of the neighboring settlements, Mount Pleasant and Factoryville. The establishment of the new postoffice was due largely to the efforts of Isaac Pollard. While on a trip back to his native state of Vermont, he stopped off at Washington and presented to the postal authorities a petition from the Waterville settlers. His efforts met with success and a fourth class postoffice was established in January 1875. It was located in the home of the postmaster, Levi Pollard, who kept the mail in a trunk under a bed until delivered. Later, he served the patrons from a desk in the corner of his kitchen.

After a postoffice was granted, a name had to be chosen. Pollard was prejudiced in favor of the name Weeping Water. This name, however, was out of the question for it already had been given to a settlement several miles up the stream. Isaac Pollard's brother, Levi, then suggested "Nehawka," the Indian name for "rustling water." This became the accepted name for the settlement.

It takes more than the establishment of a postoffice to make a town out of a rural settlement. It was not until the railroad came through that an incentive was given for town building. Railroads had entered the county, but none had been placed through Nehawka. The settlers along the lower Weeping Water valley anxiously awaited the day when a railroad would facilitate the marketing of farm products by giving their region connections with large towns.

Their hopes were finally realized in the spring of 1887, when surveyors for the Missouri Pacific began to survey a route through Nehawka. They encountered no difficulty in obtaining a right of way, for the settlers enthusiastically hailed the coming of the road.

After the completion of the railroad, the real activities in town building began, and a boom period followed. A grain elevator was erected by James Banning, and Lawson Sheldon erected the first general merchandise store, which was operated by his son Frank.

The growth of Nehawka continued until by 1893 it had a population of two hundred, and boasted of three general stores, two meat markets, a hardware and furniture store, a drug store, a bank, a barber shop, a millinery shop, two elevators, two livery stables, a billiard hall, a lumber yard, two hotels, two churches, a cold storage plant, a stone quarry, a new school building, and a newspaper. When the Sheldon store was built, the postoffice was moved into it. It was moved once into the drug store and then back into the Sheldon store. A separate postoffice building was erected in 1902.

In the days when radio was unknown and the daily papers were not available to the small isolated communities, an important part was played by the local newspaper. In 1892 a weekly newspaper called the *Nehawka Register* was started, and in the first eighteen years of its publication it had nine different editors.

In its editorial policy the *Register* stood for those things it considered beneficial to the welfare and improvement of the community. It took an active interest in civic matters, and constantly favored the incorporation of the town. Its political policy as a rule was independent, but at times it became party-conscious by favoring the Republican party. The paper was purchased in 1915 by Glen Rutledge, and in 1923 he changed the name to the *Nehawka Enterprise*.

In 1902, lighting facilities were improved through the establishment of an acetylene gas plant by Sheldon and Sturm. The plant exploded in 1912 but was rebuilt. Within a short time a direct-current lighting system, driven by a Diesel engine, was installed by Ernest Pollard. This served the town for lighting, cooking and power until the demands for power from the concrete mixer factory exceeded the full capacity of the Diesel plant, and in 1919 the Plattsmouth Gas and Electric Company was induced to extend its lines to Nehawka, bringing in alternating current, single- and three-phase, in sufficient quantity for all possible needs.

A Nehawka Commercial Club was organized in February, 1910, to direct civic affairs, and it sponsored such projects as road dragging, street grading, construction of sidewalks, upkeep of yards and dwellings, fire prevention, police protection, and street lights.

This club was the driving force behind the construction of a community auditorium. The idea originated in May 1914. It was received with enthusiasm by prominent citizens of the community, who gave liberally of their time and money. The cost of the auditorium when completed and furnished was \$19,034.

It was dedicated May 25, 1915. The principal speaker was Chancellor Samuel Avery of the University of Nebraska. He praised the people for their accomplishment. He spoke of the architectural beauty and gave his idea of what such a building should mean to the community. The Auditorium has served a definite need, for it is used as a meeting place for all organizations and occasions, such as banquets, dances, plays, parties, conventions, lodges, programs, commencement and baccalaureate exercises. During the basketball season it is used as the gymnasium.

There were three concentrated efforts to incorporate Nehawka. Twice petitions to the county commissioners for incorporation were nullified by petitions against it. However, incorporation finally became a reality in 1921, and many improvements have been made. The town now has graveled and paved streets, extensive sidewalks, municipal water works, electric lights, and dial telephones.

In 1916 the first volunteer fire department was organized, and its equipment consisted of two thirty-gallon chemical tanks mounted on a hand-drawn cart, paid for by popular subscription. When the town incorporated, it was remounted on a suitable truck and other fire-fighting equipment was added. When municipal water works were installed in 1934, the city remounted this equipment on a much larger truck which carries the chemical fire-fighting devices as well as hose lines and ladders. It is operated by an organized group of volunteer firemen. As a result of this equipment, fire insurance rates have been lowered.

At various times a night watchman has been employed, but his duties have been few, for there has been very little theft or breaking of the law.

The first doctor in Nehawka was Julian A. Pollard, who came in 1886, after finishing the medical course at Dartmouth. His first office was in his home. There has been a gradual increase and improvement in equipment, until the present health center, occupied by Dr. Anderson, includes dental and X-ray rooms,

operating facilities, a bedroom, a laboratory, office and reception room. Prescriptions may be filled at a modern drug store, operated by Charles Adams.

The growth and development of industry in a community depends on certain factors such as raw materials, labor supply, managerial ability, a close and ready market, capital, power, and satisfactory transportation facilities. Possessing some of these factors in a limited degree, Nehawka has engaged in some industrial activities.

Situated on the Weeping Water Creek which years ago furnished adequate water power, Nehawka first tried the milling industry when Kirkpatrick brought a sawmill into this region in 1855. He operated the mill only a short time until it was purchased and rebuilt by Sheldon and Pollard and operated for several years as a lumber and feed mill. Other attempts at milling were made; a fifty-barrel flour mill operated by steam power was erected in 1904, but it could not compete with the mills in larger cities. The mill burned in 1925.

The nearest Nehawka ever approached the status of a factory town was when the Sheldon Manufacturing Company began to manufacture concrete mixers. The inventor of the mixer, who was also the founder and president of the company, was George C. Sheldon. He began operation in 1913 in a small carpenter shop, and during the year manufactured six machines commanding a gross sales value of \$153. As the mixers began to be more generally known, sales increased. By 1916 the Sheldon factory had outgrown its original quarters and constructed a larger building near the railroad tracks.

To keep people informed and interested in the Sheldon factory product, extensive advertising was done. The quantity of literature sent through the mails by the company was largely responsible for the reclassification of the Nehawka postoffice to third class in 1916.

Sales continued to increase, and in April 1920 the Sheldon Manufacturing Company incorporated for \$250,000. The major portion of the stock was taken by local subscribers. Sales were made by the company in every state in the Union and in sixteen foreign countries, with a volume of nearly \$250,000 per year. The post-war financial crisis in 1920-22 ruined the Sheldon business,

but the company reorganized and the factory now operates as a machine shop and still manufactures the Sheldon mixer.

By 1900, the fruit industry operated by Isaac Pollard and his son was a large economic asset to the community. But untimely frosts and drouth put an end to large-scale fruit production in Nehawka.

The first flint mines in Nebraska were discovered by Isaac Pollard in the side of a limestone-bordered ravine on his farm, and in 1901 and 1902 representatives of the State Historical Society opened two burial mounds, finding remains of skeletons, flint spear heads, and other Indian stone work. The period in which these aboriginal mines were made undoubtedly goes back several centuries.

The limestone in the vicinity of Nehawka is of good quality and in sufficient quantity to make quarrying profitable. There were several quarries operating prior to 1900. The largest was the Van Court quarry of East Nehawka, opened in 1884 and operated continuously until 1914. The quarry gave added employment to the residents of Nehawka and a large number of mules were used in removing the surface soil from the stone. The purchase of hay and grain to feed these mules gave the farmers of the region an excellent local market for their farm products. About 1907 records show that \$5,000 per month was paid out in wages by the quarries.

After 1914 the quarries gradually declined, due to modern methods of dredging gravel from the Platte River to replace the crushed rock in road and construction work. The quarries were reopened in 1933 to supply rock for government work in the navigation control of the Missouri River. This required an increasing amount of rock. Today power shovels and trucks are used.

Several years ago everything was shipped into the community by freight or express. Now commercial trucks from the larger cities deliver general commodities every day. In 1937, Sheldon's Store promoted a venture—that of a grocery store and meat market on wheels, to give service to people many miles around. This was quite successful at first, but proved too expensive for small-town operation.

The first educational institution contemplated in the Ne-



hawka region was Western University, an institution of higher learning, to be located two miles north of the town of Nehawka. The requirements of the charter for organization could not be met, so the university never materialized.

There was no public school established until the children of the first settlers began to reach school age. In 1869, application was made to the county superintendent for the establishment of a grade school. A small frame schoolhouse was erected, and the school opened in the fall. Miss Julia Calkins was the first teacher.

School continued in this same building until 1892, when the structure was destroyed by fire. Plans were made at once for a new two-story brick building. It cost \$10,000, and through the liberality and public spirit of Lawson Sheldon, Isaac Pollard, and Andrew Sturm, it was not necessary to issue bonds for its construction. The brick was burned by Tom Mason in kilns opened by Lawson Sheldon for this purpose.

For many years the Nehawka school was a ten-grade school. The eleventh grade was added in 1912, and the twelfth grade in 1913. The first graduation exercises for the four-year high school were in 1914. In May 1917 three districts consolidated, built an addition to the building soon after, and in 1918 Smith-Hughes vocational agriculture and home economics were added to the curriculum.

Athletics and other extra-curricular activities have their place in school. The six-man football team gained national recognition in November 1937, when pictures of the team were published in *Life* magazine. The state university has been liberally patronized by the people of Nehawka and vicinity.

The early pioneers of the Weeping Water valley were also interested in promoting religious welfare. This could best be done through organized congregations. The first church in the settlement was located two miles north of the present site of Nehawka, near Mount Pleasant. This was one of the leading Methodist congregations in Nebraska, but when the railroad came through Nehawka the center of interest shifted to the new town, and Mount Pleasant church came to an end in 1896.

The first church in town was an organization of the United Brethren denomination. Later the Methodists built another church. The Christians had a congregation, but maintained no

building. For a while they held services alternately in the other two churches, but this was unsuccessful and eventually they disbanded.

Several fraternal and secret societies have been organized. The Modern Woodmen of America and the Odd Fellows Lodge were organized in 1893, Woodmen of the World and the Grand Orient in 1895, a Business Men's Fraternity in 1897, and a Court of Honor in 1898. The Nehawka Athletic Club was organized in 1897 for the purpose of providing training for the youth of the town. All of these have been disbanded except the Odd Fellows. The Masonic Lodge No. 246 was organized about 1900.

One of the most exciting events in the town's history was the "Cannon War" with Plattsmouth, which caused old and young to prepare to wage bloody war for the possession of an old worn-out United States twelve-pounder. Fortunately no blood was shed and the participants on both sides have made a "peace compact" and now enjoy hearty laughs in recalling the affair. The Nehawka Gun Club was organized at that time but has long since disbanded. The cannon in question is now mounted in cement on the bank lawn in Nehawka.

Nehawka has had its social fairs and bazaars, its oil well booms, its town bands—the first a brass band in 1892, and a young people's band in 1930. It has Boy Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, 4-H clubs, an American Legion and the Auxiliary, Daughters of the American Revolution, church societies, women's clubs, study, card, and extension clubs, Red Cross, and a Commercial Club which sponsors a weekly "community night" during the summer.

Throughout the history of Nehawka the people have evidenced a great deal of interest in things political. From the first, Nehawka has been a Republican stronghold and it has consistently remained so. Only once has a Democratic candidate for president carried the precinct. In 1932, Roosevelt received more votes than Hoover.

Nehawka has been well represented in public life. Samuel Kirkpatrick and Lawson Sheldon were in the Territorial Legislature and were prominent in forming our state constitution. In 1907 a native son, Ernest Pollard, served in the National Congress, and George L. Sheldon was the first native-born Nebraskan to be elected to the governorship.

With the governor and the congressman from their town, the pride of the people of Nehawka knew no bounds. The *Register* boastingly commented: "Nehawka has a right to feel proud. It is the only town of its size in the world that can boast of being the birthplace and home of a congressman and a governor, and we are proud of them and proud of our distinction."

Drouth and flood are the elements of nature which have done the most damage in Nehawka. Usually the Weeping Water is a shallow stream, but after excessive rain in August 1932 the creek overflowed its banks and covered the bridge and the main road leading into the town. Dr. Hansen, attempting to cross the swollen stream to reach a patient, was drowned. This is one of Nehawka's worst tragedies.

There is no racial problem in Nehawka. There is only one Negro family; they have lived in the community almost fifty years and are accepted by the people. The son is one of the rural mail carriers. When the quarries are running a few Negroes are employed, but they present no great problem.

Nehawka has its quota of poor people, but there is no "slum area." The WPA and the CCC have given employment and training to the needy men in the community.

It has often been said that if Nehawka wishes to make anything a success, no obstacle, however large, will prevent its consummation. When the Woman's Club voted to build a library, the community cooperated and built a log cabin in the fall of 1934. This was dedicated to the pioneers, and is indeed a fitting memorial. The dedication exercises took the form of a pageant, the history of the community from its beginning to the time of dedication.

Quoting from the closing paragraphs of the dedication service by Evelyn Wolph, a pioneer daughter:

We, the Nehawka Woman's Club, dedicate this log cabin, a library, in memory of the pioneers who caught the vision and made the barren prairies blossom as the rose. They have made this section beautiful and well known throughout the state. What finer tribute than a library as a memorial to those who knew the value of books and education! Not a statue of stone or marble, or colored paper and bronze, not something written upon perishable parchment, but a log cabin, enduring for the community.

It is our wish that this may be a growing institution — that those who enter its door may be benefited, that the coming genera-

tion may catch the vision of those pioneers who lived in deeds of visions they had, whose history was that of noble deeds well done.

Sometimes the turning of a stone turns back the pages of time a thousand or more years and then a new chapter is added to the history of a community. During excavations around Nehawka many Indian homes have been uncovered, and pottery and skeletons have been found.

We have reviewed the history of Nehawka and the activities of its people, a history that makes us richer and better by the example of their lives. Many changes have taken place since the beginning of the community. The future depends upon us, the descendants of those sturdy forefathers, those honest, self-reliant, persevering, sympathetic, and charitable pioneers.

They left us a worthy heritage — truly American. Bess Streeter Aldrich says in closing her book, *Song of Years*: "One gift remains, something typically and sturdily American, which has not yet been entirely extinguished, a bit of the old pioneers' independence, practical philosophy, ingenuity, and propensity to pull on through."

And so, as Emerson says, "We must not stand as spectators of the pageant which the times exhibit." Our great grandparents blazed the trail, and we have a duty and a responsibility to carry on and keep faith with our fellowmen and with God.

This is the first line of defense in the ever-changing world.

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## II. The Story of Peru

HAZEL HAYWARD JIMERSON, PERU \*

This is the story of one of the first towns in Nebraska, founded by high-minded, God-fearing people who desired first of all a good home for their children; developed into a river port with much of the lawless, rough living which characterized pioneer river towns; later rose to the ideals of its founders by becoming a seat of learning, a city of active churches and comfortable homes. Since other accounts have been written of Peru, the establishment of its college and the persons prominent in its development, I wish only to relate some of the local happenings as they have been told me by pioneers still living, to picture the old town as it used to be, and to describe some of the changes which have taken place.

Among the early settlers who came from Peru, Illinois, and gave the town its name, was Mrs. Charles Neal (Illinois Tate), now eighty-nine years old, who came all the way by ox team in June 1855, when she was not quite three years old. She was one of the seven children of William Tate and Mary Ann Buffington Sage Tate, who came here about the time William Daily and Dr. J. F. Neal arrived. There were no houses here then, and her father erected a rail-pen shelter for his family until a home could be built. Deer often ran across their yard, while wolves and all kinds of game were plentiful. Their groceries were brought from Sonora, Missouri, a village long ago swept away by the river.

Mrs. Neal was a member of the first class to attend the Peru State Normal School. She remembers the steamboat era, before the railroads came, when steamboats were luxuriously furnished as passenger boats. She sometimes enjoyed an excursion up the river, with supper on board, and darkies providing music for dancing. Main Street ran eastward toward the river in those days, with a bridge at its foot, near the location of the Peru Lumber Company of today. Crossing this bridge, the road wound around the foot of the bluff northeast of town and led to the river, which was then within easy walking distance of the village.

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\*Winner of Second Prize in 1941 Contest, Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska.

T. E. Vance has lived in Peru since he came here from Mount Sterling, Illinois, in 1857, at the age of three weeks. He and Mrs. Vance, who was born in Peru, have been in the grocery business in the same spot a half-century—in their younger years supporting every worthwhile project for the advancement of the community. He organized the first Normal School band, and for years directed the town band.

Mr. Vance became well acquainted with the Indians who camped months at a time on the creeks near Peru, finding them true friends. He liked to play with the Indian boys of his own age, who taught him mastery of the river. He remembers when an Indian chief threw him into the Missouri River as a prank. Mr. and Mrs. Vance saw many Indians pass through the town in long, single files of five or six hundred on their way to northern reservations. G. E. N. Sanders states that he has seen an Indian squaw leave a march of this kind, disappear into the bushes for less than an hour, emerge with a papoose to which she had given birth, and take her place again with the procession.

Texas longhorns, as many as ten thousand in a herd, were brought up from the South, to swim across the river at the north. The drivers used a peculiar warbling trill to warn townspeople of their approach, thus enabling them to go indoors away from the dangerous cattle. At one time Mr. Vance and Mr. Brisbane (father-in-law of Rev. Hiram Burch) were at the foot of the bluffs, near the place where the cattle were always brought to swim the river, when they suddenly heard a driver's warbling call. It was too late to run away, but they managed to crawl back under a ledge in the bluffs while the herd thundered past. Great skill was needed to drive such a large herd. In order to prevent stampeding, an animal which made a break was instantly shot. Sometimes ten or twelve head would be killed during the trek through this vicinity, supplying the inhabitants with fresh meat.

This was a shipping center, and huge loads of corn and wheat were brought from around Tecumseh and farther west, to be sacked at the wharves for shipping. Captain Bill Moley was one of the freighters who had a freighter-depot near the river wharf, and hauled flour, bacon and other commodities as far west as Denver. When ready to hitch his eight oxen he would call them by name, and each would slowly rise and take its proper

Among the early settlers was also Daniel C. Cole, who came in 1858. He was postmaster at Mount Vernon after a townsite company plotted off a town on the bluffs where a fine World War memorial seat now stands. At that time a road led northward down the steep bluff to the river. Although this was a beautiful site for a town, with a view overlooking the river and far into the states of Iowa and Missouri, the pioneers preferred to settle below, west of the bluff. After a few years the post-office was moved down to Peru, and scenic Mount Vernon became a cemetery.

Between 1863 and 1865 no appointment was sent to the postmaster at Peru, probably because President Lincoln was concerned with the more urgent affairs of the Civil War. Mr. Cole continued to serve, without official appointment, in order that Peru might have mail service. However, it was necessary for him to transact all official business through the Nebraska City post-office, and he usually made this trip by steamboat.

Upon Mr. Cole's arrival here, he taught at Fairview district school, south of Peru, and was living at the home of Squire Kennedy when John Brown stopped over night there in January 1859. When Brown demanded breakfast for his covered-wagon load of Negroes, Squire Kennedy guessed the identity of his visitor and introduced young Professor Cole, a slave sympathizer, to Osawatimie Brown.

There were fervent anti-slavery workers in the community, but their labors were surrounded with such secrecy that little has been recorded. Martin Stowell was one of the most active, and the legend persists that he maintained an underground railway station here. A few doors north of the location of his store, near the present J. P. Clark shop, can still be seen the ruins of a cave which is said to have been used as a hide-out for slaves.

Mrs. Ina Cole Dallam, daughter of D. C. Cole, and now the oldest native-born Peruvian here, lives on a street which was once a trail through a dense oak and hickory forest, leading up "Normal Hill" to the college. She recalls when heavy timber, with thick hazel-brush, grew over the land where a paved boulevard now leads from the college to the stores. For many years a part of these woods, in the vicinity of the present Christian Church, was

place, ready to be yoked. With his whip, which had a weighted handle about twelve inches long and a tapered lash of fifteen or twenty feet, he could clip hair off the lead oxen with expert deftness.

It was in the days when blue-grass grew tall in the streets of Peru's business section that a deer, intent upon its grazing, wandered into Main Street and was shot by Postmaster George Alfred Brown. A deep ravine at the northwest corner of what is now Fifth and California streets was used for a corral, and was owned by the Shootman brothers.

Mr. Vance recalls many of the colorful characters of the "wild and woolly" era, when might made right and it was wise to mind one's own business. The three Shootman brothers (gunmen well named) were fine fellows to get along with, provided one spoke discreetly. Mr. Vance says there were also three cowboys named Lowry, and that Harrison Lowry met his death one winter night when he was placed under the ice in the river. No investigations were ever made, as citizens thought it safer not to discuss the matter.

Another interesting character was a tall young man of dominating personality named Moses Thompson, who, with a belt full of pearl-handled .45's and a rifle on his knees, dared to carry mail between Peru and Nebraska City. He drove a double team of wild ponies hitched to a buckboard. His route was a wild, rough river trail winding through grass ten feet high, and beset by "bushwhackers," who were desperadoes more feared than Indians. Just midway between the two settlements still stands an octagonal brick house, built in the early 60's by George F. Lee, and called "the Halfway House" because it was the stopping place on this dangerous road. Here a fresh team of ponies would be awaiting the intrepid Mose, who would change horses and set off at a gallop on the last ten miles of his difficult journey. From 1865 to 1875 Mose made this daily trip, often defying death, and one day coming back with a bullet hole in his large white hat. Before he married he lived with his mother, old "Granny" Thompson, just south of the old D. C. Cole place. Mrs. Ina Cole Dallam remembers him as a smiling young man, wearing a moustache and Van Dyke beard, and says he was liked by the children of the neighborhood as a story-teller.



called "the Town Park." Although no improvements were ever made, the huge oaks made it a place of beauty.

Among the girlhood friends of Mrs. Dallam was Dr. Capitola Reed Graves. Coming here in 1874 as a girl of fifteen, she attended the Normal, graduated from Woman's Hospital Medical college in Chicago, and later took a post-graduate course at Johns Hopkins University in 1894. She practiced for a time at Fort Worth, Texas, but was called home by the illness of her parents and practiced here until her death in 1929. One winter she was called to a confinement case on Evans Island, when the river was full of floating blocks of ice. At first "Dr. Cap" was unable to persuade anyone to risk taking a boat across, but Elmer Rhoades (now of Auburn) finally consented to make the trip, saying, "If you're not afraid to go, I guess I shouldn't be afraid to take you." The island was reached and the patient attended.

Dr. Mary M. MacVain of Nebraska City, who practiced with "Dr. Cap" from 1898 to 1901, speaks of the spinal meningitis epidemic during the terrible winter of 1888-89. The epidemic was worst at Julian, where the local doctor was ill. "Dr. Cap" would ride horseback through deep snowdrifts to reach Julian community, leaving here in the morning and returning the next evening. When mud or snow made the roads almost impassable she made her calls on horseback, riding side-saddle, wearing her long riding skirt. At other times she drove a "livery rig" over the bottomless gumbo roads. She served a wide territory, going from Nemaha City to Julian, and even to Watson in Missouri when that town was without a physician. This "lady doctor" is remembered by many, and was loved by all who knew her for her jovial personality and her willing service to rich and poor alike.

Another schoolmate of Mrs. Dallam was Nettie Chamberlain, an Indian girl who grew up in Peru among the white children. She had been found on a path near Buck Creek one winter, in the arms of a young Indian squaw who was dying, and was taken to live at the home of John W. Bliss and his daughter, Mrs. Chamberlain. Nettie went to school, married and moved away, but later wrote to D. C. Cole for an affidavit to prove she was Indian and entitled to allotments. It was never known why she and her mother had been abandoned by their tribe.

Mrs. Dallam recalls the church "sociables," particularly the spring strawberry festivals, as pioneer social functions. Literary societies, debates and spelling bees were popular with old and young. In 1882 she became a member of the Lodge of Good Templars, a temperance organization of both men and women. Many of these societies sprang up in those years, working toward prohibition while cannily providing social good times. Old settlers also speak of the weekly prayer meetings as social gatherings; these were held at the college as well as in the local churches. No dancing was permitted in the college until recent years. However, dances were held in the surrounding community which were sometimes riotous affairs, winding up in brawls, stabbing and shooting.

Dr. MacVain, another courageous woman who practiced medicine here at the turn of the century, thought Peru unique in the wide range of its standards of living, from the college campus to the river banks. As a river town often attracts an indolent, illiterate class of people who are looking for an easy living, Dr. MacVain was impressed with the primitive life she saw along the Missouri. She remembers homes built of the long, coarse slough grass, held fast by sticks driven into the ground. Driftwood provided fuel; fish and game were plentiful for food. Many of these people were "squatters" who made their homes on unclaimed land deposited by the river.

Three modern homes stand on the ground which was Peru's first cemetery, in the eastern half of the block north of Eliza Morgan Hall.\* When the village was yet new, Robert W. Frame gave permission to bury on his land, but he did not deed it to the town for that purpose. After thirty or forty graves had been made, and the town had grown up all around, Mr. and Mrs. Ellis Good bought the land from his heirs for their home. This was about 1896. They wrote to the families who had buried their dead there, offering to provide for reburials in Mount Vernon cemetery. Eight replies were received, and the Goods arranged improvements have been made in this half-block, in grading streets

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\* The story of Miss Eliza Morgan, beloved preceptress of Peru State Normal, was written for this Magazine by the sympathetic pen of one of her pupils, Miss Louise W. Mears, at that time on the faculty of State Teachers' College of Wisconsin. (See Vol. XVIII, No. 2.)

for eight new graves. The rest of the headstones were taken down and houses built over the graves. Whenever extensive improvement or installing water systems, human bones have been exhumed.

J. E. Vance, who helped in the work of transferring bodies to the new cemetery, tells of opening the grave of Captain John Denman, well known army officer. There he saw a handsome man with hair long and wavy according to the prevailing mode, with a fine army blanket folded across his chest, and wearing a beautiful ring. In one moment, when air touched the body, the whole fell to dust—except the ring, which was placed in the new grave.

A story that Mrs. R. W. Frame had been buried in a metal coffin in the north end of the block led to a thorough search with a drill, but her grave has never been located. Questioned as to the desirability of living in an old graveyard, residents reply, "Best neighbors we ever had!"

Historians tell of the discovery, in 1855, of a cedar cross on the river bluffs five miles north of Brownville. Inscribed in French, it read, "Ourian, Died April 1812." Three years later a rough-hewn coffin was found buried sixty feet distant, with the skeleton of a man wearing a silver cross. This was believed to have been one of Lewis and Clark's men who perhaps had died on the river and was brought to this high spot for burial. Mrs. Ellis Good (Ida Church) recently found a reference to Ourian while she was studying Dickinson County records in Iowa. She found an account of Lake Okoboji "by Lewis and Clark, as told to them by their interpreter, Ourian." Mrs. Good believes this reference establishes Ourian as one of the Lewis and Clark expedition. As the cross is now gone the location of the grave has been disputed, but Mrs. Ina Dallam definitely places it on the highest point of the H. D. Bugbee fruit farm, two miles east of Peru. She states that she and other Normal School students often walked out to see the cross, in the early 80's. As this site is five miles above Brownville, it tallies with early historical accounts of the grave.

When this thirty-two acre fruit farm, site of the cedar cross, was purchased by H. D. Bugbee ten years ago, an interesting coincidence was discovered. Mrs. Bugbee found in the abstract of

title that it had been homesteaded in 1857 by her great-great-grandmother, Martha Swan, one of the first settlers. Relatives say that Mrs. Swan was an elderly woman, but insisted on taking land when the rest of her family filed on homesteads. The next year, according to the abstract, she sold the acreage (now valued at \$4,500) for \$63. It was one of the first orchards in Nemaha County, planted by Willis Carter sixty years ago.

Since the days of these first orchards, the region has been found exceptionally suitable for the fruit industry, and thousands of acres have been planted to fruit trees, vineyards and berry bushes. The first inhabitants may have selected this as a beautiful spot in which to live, but it is not probable that they thought of its steep hillsides as valuable for fruit-growing.

The pioneers' desire and prayer for an uplifting environment for their children and grandchildren is answered in the growth of the Peru State Teachers' College, which began so humbly. Its first sessions were held in a small building still standing in Peru's business section. No liquor license has been issued here since 1865, according to historians. The old stipulation that liquor must not be sold within three miles of the school, which is said to have been made by the donors of the land for the school, is still respected.

As the school began in 1865 as a Methodist seminary, it is perhaps worthy of note that the first handful of settlers included four Methodist ministers, listed as Reddick Horn, William S. Horn, John W. Hall, and Hugh Doyle.

It was Rev. Hiram Burch, another Methodist minister, who began agitation for a school when Major William Daily refused to subscribe for a church building, but offered \$500 toward a school. It has recently been learned that Major Daily, who made this first subscription, did not have that amount of money when he made the pledge, but had to borrow it—from a man in Nebraska City. This information was given by a long-time friend of the family when the Major's daughter, Mrs. Fay Hoadley of Auburn, remarked, "I wonder how Father ever managed to give \$500 at that time?"

Many of the sacrifices and efforts which contributed to the upbuilding of the school went unrecorded. Some have said that

it could not have been founded without the small donors, who not only gave all the financial help they could but spent hour upon hour in back-breaking labor, in digging, hauling, and building.

In the early days of the school students came by stage coach or lumber wagon, bringing their own furniture, cutting wood for fuel, cooking meals — even baking bread — in their crudely furnished rooms. Their grandchildren now arrive by bus or streamlined car, to live in dormitories modern and beautiful.

For thirty-eight years Peru was the only normal school in the state, with students coming long distances to attend. Thousands have gone out from this "Campus of the Thousand Oaks" into all the walks of life. With the names of many of its graduates becoming prominent in the state and nation, its influence has extended far.

Changes in this community have not been confined to the town and school. Seventy years ago the Missouri carved its channel near the location of the present Burlington station, following eastward along the foot of the Mount Vernon bluffs. Much later, in almost one night it took a short cut, leaving the bluffs a long way in the distance. Old-timers say that huge logs and an enormous amount of machinery are buried ten or fifteen feet beneath the surface of the old river bed — mills which have been swept into the river on its rampages, and parts of boats not salvaged.

This vast flood plain, where the river used to flow, has become the property of the town by accretion rights. Last year (1940) four hundred acres of this fertile farming land were leased to an oil company desiring to probe for riches beneath the old river bed.

After the railroads came, steamboats made fewer stops and finally ceased coming altogether. But recent river development, making the Missouri again navigable, has meant the daily passing of boats, barges and oil transports. The low tones of steamboat whistles are again heard in the village as huge steamers pass, several miles away.

Peru's important project of 1941 is one which would have been farthest from the expectations of her first residents. One hundred acres of the former river bottom have been surveyed

and are being made into an airport, with a fine hangar, to be all ready for the pilot training course when the college opens in September for its seventy-fifth year. Dedication of the airfield this fall will bring dozens of airplanes zooming over the wooded hills which the settlers attained so slowly and laboriously with their ox teams.

### III. Boom Town

RICHARD THORNTON, KEARNEY \*

#### Introduction

Slightly over fifteen years after its founding, Kearney Junction became the City of Kearney, a center of trade and manufacturing, a city displaying metropolitan influence in every way.

The boom which created Kearney's rapid growth was started by men of wealth who invested their fortunes in the construction of factories and business institutions, by men who provided the town with electricity for light and power.

For three years Kearney remained a flourishing city. Hundreds of settlers moved in to invest their money or to obtain employment. Large homes were built by the wealthy citizens. Money was spent freely in improving the city. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the boom collapsed, leaving residents poor and unemployed.

Landmarks serve as the single evidence of this period to the majority of Kearney people today. Behind these landmarks, however, lies a fascinating history of "the midway city of the nation, the electric city of the West."

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On April 11, 1871, D. N. Smith, agent for the townsites department of the Burlington Railway, Moses Sydenham, and Rev. Asbury Collins visited Buffalo County and located the junction point of the Burlington and Union Pacific railroads. During the

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\*Winner of Third Prize in 1941 Contest, Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska.

summer of 1871 the original townsite of Kearney Junction was surveyed and the plat filed for record.

Nearly a hundred persons had arrived in Kearney within three months, some by covered wagon, others by train. These pioneers were confident that at the junction of the two great railroads there would develop one of the largest cities on the plains west of the Missouri River.

The legal requirements to incorporate the town were met, and on November 30, 1872, an area of more than eighteen sections of land was incorporated and named the *Town of Kearney Junction*. This was approximately three times as large as the area of Lincoln in 1910.

Considerable business activity had been carried on in the town previous to its incorporation. A lumber and coal shed had been started. Two banks, two grocery stores, a hardware store, a drug store and a printing office had been constructed. *The Kearney Junction Times*, the town's first newspaper, was started on October 12, 1872. Since there was no building in the town suitable for a newspaper office, it was published for two months at Albia, Iowa, and circulated in Kearney Junction.

Kearney's growth was normal for ten years. Determined that the town would eventually become of great importance, the early settlers suffered uncomplainingly the hardships of frontier life. Their hopes began to be realized in 1881, when the earliest vibrations of the boom were felt.

On April 2, 1881, a delegation of Kearney men organized the first business men's association, the Kearney Board of Trade. Committees were appointed to secure data covering the cost of creating a canal to provide irrigation and power for the area, a project which had been suggested as early as 1873. The board was not perfected at that time, and it was not until 1887, when the second Kearney Board of Trade was organized, that extensive work was done.

At the time of the second organization, Kearney was in a transitory period. Eastern capital, flowing into the town, led to expansion. With these conditions the newly organized board found much to do. The business men on its directorate planned methods to attract capital and to advertise the city. Alluring



literature telling of "Kearney's Gait" was prepared and mailed to cities throughout the nation.\*

Plans for the canal were renewed, a survey being made by a competent engineer. The canal was to start at a point sixteen miles west on the Platte River and extend to the northwest part of Kearney. The project was too great to be financed by Kearney citizens alone. Colonel Patterson, a member of the board, suggested that George W. Frank, a wealthy resident of Corning, Iowa, might be induced to finance the project. After looking over the plan, Mr. Frank was so enthusiastic that he decided to make his home in the town. It was not long until Kearney's great dream began to materialize.

As the work progressed, advertising attracted many people who were eager to share in the get-rich-quick proposal. A pamphlet advertising Kearney, issued in 1889, stated:

Probably there is no better place in the United States for pushing, energetic young men than Kearney, and now is the time to come. Almost every day brings new additions to the ranks of our young men, and they are very seldom here a week without employment. . . There is plenty of room and work for all who come.

Eastern visitors are surprised to find such a genial, hospitable, cultivated people in the heart of the "Great American Desert." Here are graduates from Yale, Harvard, and most of our eastern colleges, and young women from eastern seminaries. A great many of the people are from New England.\*\*

Residents saw Kearney as a prominent railroad center, and anticipated that eight major railroads would meet at that junction. They dreamed that with its manufacturing and agricultural advantages it would become one of the greatest cities of the West.

One of the largest enterprises was the building of the Kearney cotton mill. Kearney was nearer to New Orleans, Mobile, and Northern Texas than any of New England's cotton milling cities, and for this reason it was believed that such a mill would be profitable. \$250,000 was secured from Kearneyites to finance it, and the remainder, \$150,000, was furnished by the investors. The mill was 408 feet long, 200 feet wide, and two

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\* Bassett, History of Buffalo County, page 208.

\*\* The City of Kearney, 1889, page 3.

stories high, and was filled with the most modern cotton manufacturing equipment.

Since the clay in Kearney was well adapted to the manufacturing of brick, three brick yards were constructed. The demand for brick was so great during the period that the product of these yards was insufficient.

Four national banks had been established by 1889 with a combined capital of \$550,000. Industries secured during the year included the Metcalf Milling and Cracker Company, capital, \$50,000; the Kearney Paper Manufacturing Company, capital, \$50,000; Crystal Starch Works, \$50,000; Electric Railroad Company, \$100,000; Kearney Construction Company, \$100,000; and the Western Engineering Company, \$100,000.

The electric street railway, a \$39,000 project, was one of the first of its kind in the country. The line extended north on Central Avenue with branches west to the present State Tuberculosis Hospital and east to the Kearney Military Academy.

Kearney was given wide circulation by three daily publications, *The Daily Journal*, *The Kearney Daily Hub*, and *The Kearney Enterprise*. Outstanding of the three was the *Enterprise*, established by William E. Smythe and Will Hall Poore in 1889. The two greatest "scoops" of the paper were the Nellie Bly edition of ten thousand copies, and the graphic edition covering the fire which destroyed the first Midway Hotel. The Nellie Bly edition contained the only exclusive interview of Miss Bly granted a United States newspaper. Maud Marston, a reporter for *The Enterprise*, traveled over a thousand miles to interview that nationally known character.

The *Omaha Bee* praised Kearney's growth.

The city of Kearney strikingly illustrates what enterprise, perseverance and indomitable pluck can accomplish. From a straggling village, Kearney has, within less than ten years, grown to a bustling, flourishing city with all the modern improvements possessed by any metropolis. Her broad business thoroughfares are compactly built, her public buildings, hotels, and theaters are substantially constructed and impressive in appearance, and her business houses and private residences are handsome and tasteful. . . . Nebraska can justly feel proud of what may truthfully be called the gem of the Platte Valley.\*

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\* *Omaha Bee*, January 24, 1892.

In 1888, contracts for a court house and a city hall were let, and over seven hundred new buildings, comprising business blocks and substantial residences, were constructed. A large canning factory and a packing house were among the industries started. Two additions to the city were promoted by real estate companies. They were the Kenwood addition, southwest of town, and East Lawn.

Religion played a prominent role in the lives of the people. Nine churches, with their missionary societies and other groups, had been organized by 1889.

The large homes built throughout the city were the centers of hospitality where Kearneyites danced and played cards. An article in the *Kearney Enterprise* describing a reception given for a daughter of one of the elite families indicates both the type of parties held and the type of reporting done.

The floors were smooth and the music fine, and polka, waltz, York, and schottische followed one another in rapid succession until supper was announced. In the large dining room was a long table, on which was spread an elegant lunch. Full justice was done these festive duties by the tired dancers. After supper they again indulged in dancing and in the 'wee sma' hous ayant the tiral' the carriages began rolling toward the city, conveying to their homes the delighted guests of the evening.\*

Formal balls and dinner parties were held at the Hotel Midway, which was built in 1888. In 1890, the building was destroyed by fire, and afterwards replaced by the present hotel.

"The Assembly," a club formed by the social group, had its own tennis and croquet courts. Riding and dancing were popular pastimes of its members. Another club called the "High Five" was a prominent dancing group.

Lake Kearney had its place in the amusement life of the community. A large pavilion extending out into the lake, with a dance floor on the second story and a refreshment stand and boat dock on the ground floor, provided facilities for entertainment. Beyond the pavilion there was a toboggan slide with a 200-foot runway.

On May 1, 1891, the social set attended the opening of the largest theater between the Missouri River and Denver, the

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\* *Kearney Enterprise*, November 24, 1889.

Kearney Opera House. James E. Boyd, Governor of Nebraska, James E. Allen, Secretary of State; George Humphrey, State Commissioner; and John E. Hill, State Treasurer, were present. In a review of the "first nighters" the *Daily Hub* said:

One can't describe the audience. It was large, it was brilliant, and best of all, it was full of rejoicing over the completion of the beautiful theater. It showed Kearney's wealth and Kearney's worth; Kearney's beauty, and Kearney's manhood. There were all classes and ages in the different parts of the house. It was an expression of pride all Kearney feels in her most beautiful building.\*

Educational facilities increased in the city during the period. The Bryant, Emerson, and Kenwood grade schools were built in 1885, and the Longfellow school (the present Kearney High School) was erected in 1890. Hand-carved arches and round tower rooms were characteristic of the architecture of the buildings.

The Platte Collegiate Institute, a co-educational school, was opened in September 1892. It remained a school for both girls and boys until the outbreak of the Spanish War in 1898, when it was changed to the Kearney Military Academy.

With the opening of the schools, a library was also established. It was known as the Kearney Public Library, and had as its headquarters a room in the city hall. The library board purchased 1,400 volumes previously used by a private circulating library.

Living costs in Kearney were less than in regions around eastern cities, and by offering metropolitan conveniences her population greatly increased. The United States Census showed an increase of 4,754 persons in the city between the years 1885 and 1890.

At the head of activities financially was George W. Frank's Improvement Company. Almost every transaction by the company was on a part-payment plan, leaving the buyer a debt on his property. When the boom collapsed, payments could not be met, taxes accumulated, and investment and property were lost.

Dozens of young men, and not all of them, unfortunately, young men, brought and invested their patrimony, great and small,

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\* Kearney Daily Hub, May 2, 1891, page 1.

and left Kearney with hardly enough for railroad fare to some other place where they could make a start in business, with only a discouraging experience as capital.\*

The whole population was affected by the catastrophe. Every bank failed; business was halted; real estate values declined to almost nothing. The pressed-brick factory was closed. The electric railroad was discontinued and all employees of the railroad were left without jobs.

At the time of the local collapse, Kearney was also affected by the national panic of 1893. In 1894, one of the most severe drouths in Nebraska history added to Kearney's financial decline.

The city's dreams of "a new Chicago" had faded; her population of ten thousand had slumped to five thousand. The boom had left Kearney's name on a "black list," and it was to take her years to erase it.

By 1915 the population was still small, having increased only a thousand in over fifteen years. But today it has reached nearly ten thousand again—not by a boom, but through a steady and solid growth. Her splendid climate, her schools and churches, homes and recreational facilities are factors in this steady progress.

Kearney has excellent schools. Seven modern buildings house the public school system. There are two church schools, an NYA vocational school and a training school operated by the State Teachers' College. The college itself, started in 1905, is the largest of the state's teachers' colleges. An administration building, gymnasium, training school, three dormitories, and an athletic field are included on the campus. A fund for a student union building has been started, promising continued growth of the institution.

The early planning of the city during the nineties is evident in her wide paved streets and boulevards. With a record of sixty-five per cent home ownership, her homes are attractive and well kept.

An outstanding feature of the city is its recreation facilities.

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\* Burrows, The Great Kearney Real Estate Boom, Nebraska History Magazine, Vol. XVIII, No. 2.

Kearney has one of the most beautiful and useful park systems in the entire nation. Harmon Field offers lighted tennis and croquet courts, lighted baseball and softball facilities, archery courts, a new \$55,000 swimming pool, an open-air theater, rock garden, and picnic and playground space. The park covers nearly ten square blocks. Kearney also has three other city parks — a state recreation park at Cottonmill Lake; the Kearney Country Club, offering an eighteen-hole golf course; and Lake Kearney, used for fishing, boating, and ice skating.

Seven miles southeast of Kearney is Fort Kearny State Park, located on the site of old Fort Kearny. The fort was a government outpost established in 1848 for the protection of immigrants traveling the Oregon Trail. It is one of the most historic spots in the state.

Kearney has good shipping facilities. In 1940, retail store business totaled over \$5,000,000.

While the city offers many industrial and business opportunities, it depends primarily on agriculture. It insures its crops, not with ordinary insurance, but with irrigation. Alfalfa, sugar beets and potatoes are grown in addition to the usual farm products. For several weeks each summer the region near the city is one of the largest potato-shipping sections in the country.

Two additional factors for Kearney's security are the State Industrial School for boys, housing over two hundred, and the State Tuberculosis Hospital with over one hundred eighty-five patients. An administration building, heating plant, and men's wing were added to the hospital in 1940.

The pioneer-made Union Pacific Railroad serves Kearney with a double-track main line over which pass twenty-five passenger trains daily. Kearney also has a branch line of the Burlington Railroad, and is located on Lincoln Highway, U. S. 30.

The midway-city is often host to conventions, being able to accommodate three hundred in modern hotel rooms. The seven-story Fort Kearny Hotel is the center for the activities of conventions, as well as the Chamber of Commerce, Kiwanis, Rotary, Cosmopolitan, and Lions clubs. Also offering convention facilities are the new National Guard Armory, the city school and college auditoriums.

On Monday evenings the city council convenes in Kearney's city hall, completed in 1940. The mayor-council plan has been used in Kearney almost exclusively since its incorporation. The fire and police departments are also housed in the new city hall.

The *Kearney Daily Hub*, established in 1888, and the *Kearney Daily News*, in 1939, serve the readers of the community with the latest news. The *News*, a tabloid, is issued in the morning, the *Hub* in the evening. Radio station KGFW is also located in Kearney.

Behind this progressive city is a morale and character built by the members of Kearney's twenty-one churches, which represent nearly every denomination. Civic, patriotic, and fraternal organizations are also active.

Today, Kearney has the security that makes a city. Her future is assured; her present status commanded. Kearney is no longer "a boom town."

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