HIGHLIGHTING REGIONAL LIFESTYLE, BUSINESS & ARTS

NORTHWEST KANSAS TODAY

Winter 2022 | VOLUME 3, ISSUE 3

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Northwest Kansas Today is a publication of the Dane G. Hansen Foundation
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CONTACT US
Northwest Kansas Today is designed to share stories for and about the people and communities in the 26 most northwest counties in Kansas. If you have a story idea, please contact us at: NWKansasToday@danehansenfoundation.org.

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION
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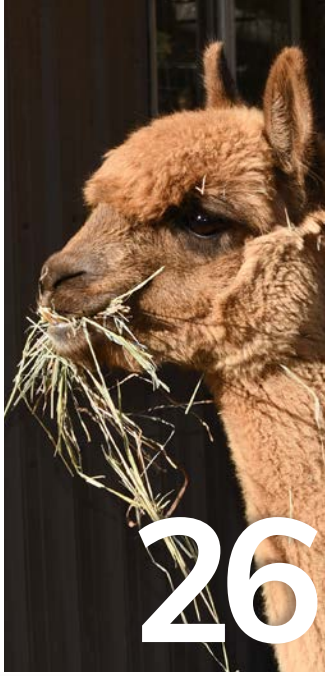
After enjoying *Northwest Kansas Today*, please help us preserve beautiful Northwest Kansas and recycle your copy.

Learn more about the Hansen Foundation at: www.danehansenfoundation.org.

ON THE COVER: Clair Schrock, of Colby, helped out on the set of a docudrama called *The Contested Plains* being filmed in Logan County, where the events depicted are believed to have occurred. Schrock drove a wagon and team of horses owned by Jake Bauer, of Oakley, that appear in the film.



Find more online!

Hoxie High School students interviewed six longtime residents of Hoxie and composed and performed songs about them at a school assembly in January. Learn more at danehansenfoundation.org.

Carol Bales in the Hansen Museum, wearing a sweater she knitted.

Where can you go to learn about antique farm toys, how to pole vault, high-tech computer jobs and the best methods for treating stroke and other healthcare concerns? Northwest Kansas, of course! Welcome to our winter edition of *Northwest Kansas Today*. I'm excited to introduce the wonderful stories in this issue.

In the following pages, you can read about a successful business celebrating its 100th anniversary under the direction of new owners. Brant's Meat Market is going strong! Enjoy reading about a Jamestown resident who is attracting people from all over the country to learn his approach to the high-flying sport of pole vaulting.

As a knitter, I particularly enjoyed the story about the funny but lovable alpacas whose wool was spun right here in Northwest Kansas to be made into fabulous sweaters, scarves and other items by professional artisans and home knitters alike.

Our magazine is shining a spotlight on these and other positive stories. It is also keeping us abreast of other important happenings.

There are concerns critical to the survival of all communities, such as good jobs and access to quality healthcare. In this issue, we share stories of how these important issues are being addressed in our area. Read how Goodland Tech is working with the Northwest Kansas Economic Innovation Center to fill new, well-paying tech jobs. And learn about an important Care Collaborative that provides our area physicians and medical personnel with significant support for treating the most critical health concerns.

I'm a Northwest Kansas girl through and through. I believe this is the best place to live, and as we continue to uncover more wonderful stories about businesses and people in our 26 counties, my belief just gets stronger. Take a peek. I think you'll agree!

Carol L. Bales

Carol Bales, Trustee

"What Goodland Tech does as a company is we help tech companies on the coast or in big cities be able to develop and train and create teams that are placed in Northwest Kansas." – BEN COUMERILH

Do people ask you to trouble-shoot their tech problems? Goodland Tech might be the place for you:

ADDRESS: 1202 Main, Goodland
EMAIL: hello@goodland.tech
WEBSITE: https://goodland.tech

FEATURE STORY

Goodland

New company provides tech jobs, bitcoin bonuses

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

[GOODLAND] Ben Coumerilh spent years ensuring that Goodland students had a sound technological education, only to watch them leave to pursue high-paying job opportunities elsewhere. Now he's brought tech jobs to downtown Goodland – with Christmas bonuses paid in bitcoin.


BEN COUMERILH

"The median individual income in Sherman County is $27,000 a year. The jobs these guys are getting offered pay between $45,000 and $90,000 a year," he said. "That's a good trajectory."

In October, 30 people were working in the Goodland Tech office. That's just the beginning, he said. The company has a system that works well and "some big deals in the hopper," he said.

"What Goodland Tech does as a company is we help tech companies on the coast or

goes High Tech

in big cities be able to develop and train and create teams that are placed in Northwest Kansas," he explained. "We've created a little magic back door into Northwest Kansas for companies to open up offices."

That's possible in part because Goodland Tech has partnered with the Northwest Kansas Economic Innovation Center Inc. (NWKEICI), which provides grant funding to cover most of the costs while new employees are trained, Coumerilh said.

Some of the people working at computers at 1202 Main are still in the apprenticeship phase, which lasts about six months. They are contracted by Goodland Tech. Others have completed the apprenticeship and have been offered full-time positions with CipherTrace, a company founded in 2015 that now has seven offices worldwide.

"It's fantastic. I literally doubled my income when I went from being a Goodland Tech contractor to CipherTrace," said Dallas Berndt, who was the second apprentice to sign on with Goodland Tech when he started in February 2019. "This whole thing here has been a huge blessing to Goodland and Northwest Kansas as far as I'm concerned. It's changed my life for sure."

CipherTrace, which was recently acquired by Mastercard, provides forensic analysis of blockchain transactions for financial institutions and law enforcement. Unsure what that means? You aren't alone. Not many people applying for jobs walk in the door knowing much about cryptocurrency, Coumerilh said.

What is a blockchain?

A blockchain is a distributed database that is shared among the nodes of a computer network. As a database, a blockchain stores information electronically in digital format. Blockchains are best known for their crucial role in cryptocurrency systems, such as bitcoin, for maintaining a secure and decentralized record of transactions.

Source: *https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/blockchain.asp*

Cryptocurrency, or digital money, can be spent, traded or invested in online by people across the globe. It is unaffiliated with specific countries or governments, and decisions about various creative ways it can work are made by depositors.

At Goodland Tech, employees learn about the blockchain database that tracks each coin by storing a chain of time-stamped blocks of information about transactions in a worldwide computer network. They get opportunities to try a variety of work during a roughly six-month apprenticeship.

CipherTrace is the first of what Coumerilh hopes will soon be multiple clients who contract with Goodland Tech to create teams of employees that provide quality work at a competitive price. In the future, he hopes there are teams in Goodland working on software development.

"The idea is to build teams for companies out here at a cost that's competitive around the world," he said. "A lot of those companies tend to off-shore work to India or Eastern Europe. The value-add that we have is while we can be more competitive in price, we also don't have the language barriers, the culture issues nor the time zone challenges. Geographically speaking, being located in the central United States allows for companies across the country to be able to work with people who are awake."

Another significant advantage expected in Goodland is employee longevity.

"In the Silicon Valley, employee tenure is quite low as there is fierce competition for talent," Coumerilh said. "We really are looking for people who understand, appreciate and enjoy the rural lifestyle and community as they're the type of people who will be here a long time."

See **HIGH TECH**, page 6

HIGH TECH, from page 5

From tech education to tech jobs

Before becoming the chief operations officer and co-founder of Goodland Tech, Coumerilh grew up in St. Louis, Mo. His parents moved to Goodland in 1998, when his father became pastor of a nearby church. Coumerilh, who had been working for a civil engineering firm in St. Louis, followed with his family about 15 years ago.

"We thought it was valuable to raise our kids in a place where we know everybody," he said. "We'd fallen in love with the community and the lifestyle."

Before launching Goodland Tech in 2019 with partner Richard Sparrow, who lives in Puerto Rico, Coumerilh worked for a total of about 12 years as director of technology for Northwest Kansas Technical College and then for the school district. In both places, he started a one-to-one iPad initiative and coding initiatives.

"Goodland is currently one of the only communities in the nation where the entire education system has a one-to-one iPad initiative as well as a K-14 coding initiative that teaches kids coding from kindergarten through college," he said. Coumerilh said Goodland Tech gives those young people a good place to work if they want to stay in Goodland.

In October, Goodland Tech's original building was already full of people, many of them in the big room on the main floor sitting side by side at desks. Upstairs, smaller groups of employees either sat or stood at desks as they worked. Coumerilh said the business was about to expand into the building next door.

"Starting next week, we have people moving here from Texas and Florida that will start on Monday. We have people from Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Denver and Kansas City so far," he said. "Most of the people have found us via word of mouth. I think one of the reasons we haven't found it challenging to find people is we are offering extremely interesting work and opportunities."

Mostly, however, they have employees from Goodland – about 80 percent, Coumerilh said.

An onramp for training

NWKEICI funding that helps underwrite the cost of apprenticeships has been pivotal in training employees, Coumerilh said.

"The NWKEICI is very integral to what we're doing. We couldn't do this without them," Coumerilh said. "I tell people when they walk in the door for an interview, 'We have an organization that's generously giving a grant, and they're investing in you.' I'm looking for people who are wanting to invest in themselves as well."

Scott Sproul, executive director of NWKEICI, said the center is currently funding its third round of apprenticeships with Goodland Tech. The first round funded 10 apprenticeships, and the second round funded 15. This third round funds 30.

Coumerilh said at the conclusion of this round, $2.5 million in salaries will have come to the community.

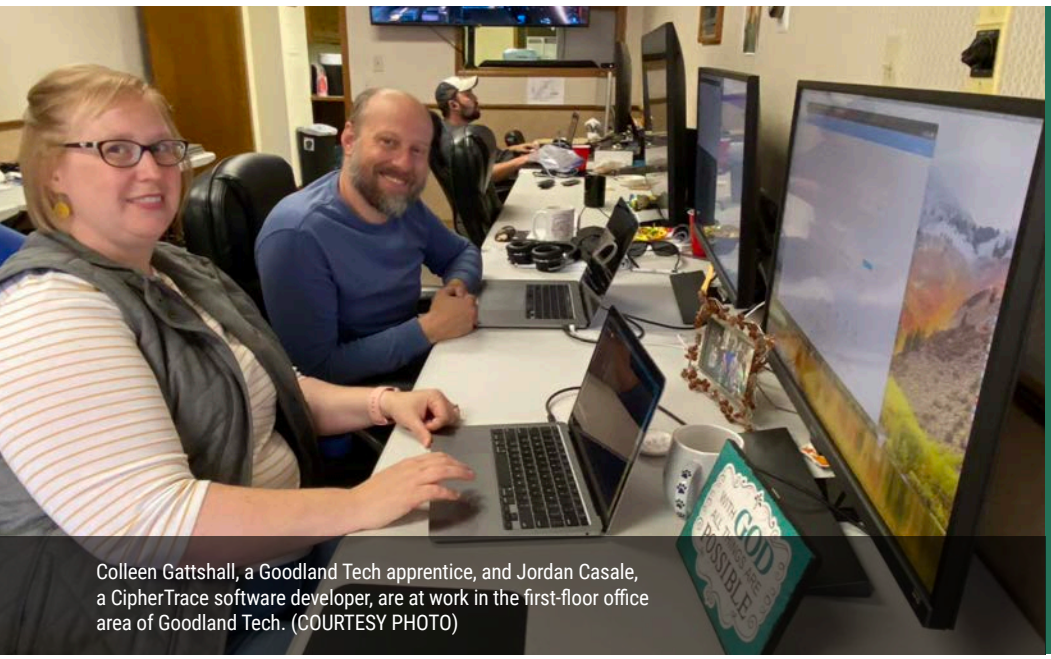
"Every dollar that comes into Goodland Tech has never been here before," he said. "It's bringing brand new money in."

Sproul said the company has already created more new jobs than any single company NWKEICI has previously assisted.

"It's an innovative approach to solving population decline and creating economic opportunities for people who may not have had that opportunity to stay here in the region," Sproul said. "None of those people were there working in those buildings a year and a half ago, and now they're an economic driver for the downtown area of Goodland."

He credited S&T and other small area internet providers for making the investments in infrastructure that provide the high-speed internet connections necessary for such work.

"We're totally revamping and reimagining what you can do in Northwest Kansas with the opportunities and infrastructure we have with the fiber network," Sproul said. "I feel like we're finally being able to realize what the potential is."



Colleen Gattshall, a Goodland Tech apprentice, and Jordan Casale, a CipherTrace software developer, are at work in the first-floor office area of Goodland Tech. (COURTESY PHOTO)

"We're totally revamping and reimagining what you can do in Northwest Kansas with the opportunities and infrastructure we have with the fiber network."

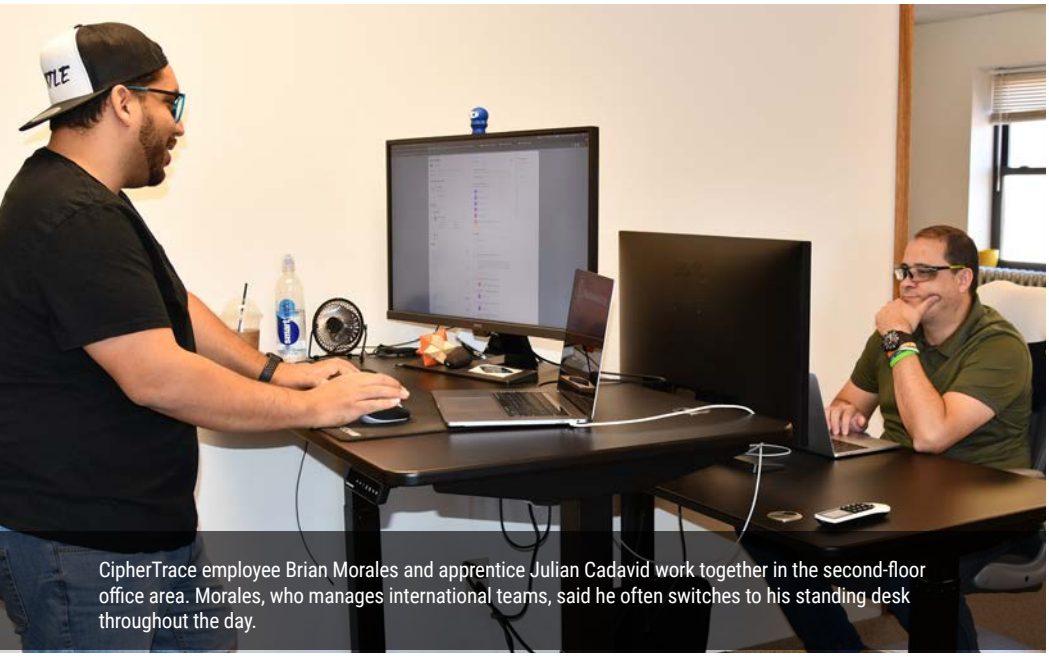
SCOTT SPROUL | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NWKEICI

Northwest Kansas Economic Innovation Center Inc. (NWKEICI) is currently funding its third round of apprenticeships with Goodland Tech.

'Even the town is named right.'

Coumerilh said CipherTrace representatives are pleased with the employees they've been able to find in Goodland. Because of the lower cost of living in Northwest Kansas, a paycheck goes further.

"They're super excited, super thrilled with the value they're getting out of the people here in Goodland and the teams that we're building for them," he said. "Because of our low cost of living, literally for every one person they can have in California, they can have two or three out here.



CipherTrace employee Brian Morales and apprentice Julian Cadavid work together in the second-floor office area. Morales, who manages international teams, said he often switches to his standing desk throughout the day.

"When CipherTrace representatives were out here last week, they were like, 'This is the best thing in the world. Even the town is named right.' Technology's been a double-edged sword for rural communities for such a long time. When it comes to agriculture, obviously it takes a lot less people to farm than it did 50 years ago. The decline of the population we see is directly attributed to technology. We're trying to take that technology and leverage it toward providing jobs."

At the request of law enforcement agencies, teams of employees working for CipherTrace in Goodland research individual cryptocurrency transactions associated with illegal activity. They also research and evaluate data to assign a risk score to various cryptocurrency companies so that banks can make recommendations to customers who want to invest in Bitcoin, Ethereum, Solana, Dogecoin or any of the 7,659 cryptocurrencies that were listed on CoinMarketCap.com on Nov. 23.

"Just recently we got an email, and one of the clients said, 'I want you to know that because of the work that you do we caught the bad guy in a sex trafficking case,' " Coumerilh said. "Because of the work that we do in this office, we're able to be involved in actually seeing good things happen. That's fulfilling."

CipherTrace employee Dallas Berndt said its easier to trace cryptocurrency than cash.

"What we do is bring that transparency to the blockchain as far as understanding what wallets belong to what organization so that law enforcement agencies can subpoena the right place and get the individual records for the accounts," he said.

Goodbye recliners

Berndt, who grew up in Colby and moved to Goodland six years ago, had opened a furniture store before meeting Coumerilh, who started trying to recruit him for Goodland Tech. He used to have La-Z-Boys in his workspace, but he described his current office as "probably the most relaxed, enjoyable work environment I've ever been in."

Berndt started out part-time at Goodland Tech just to try it while continuing to work at the furniture store. Then he successfully applied for a team leadership position and decided to close the store.

"It turned out to be one of the best things I've ever done," he said.

As attribution manager for CipherTrace, his income went up and his stress level went down. Berndt said the $250 worth of bitcoin that he got as a Christmas bonus in 2020 was the catalyst that got him to start trading in crypto.

"It's been a huge learning curve, but those challenges excite me," he said. "I jumped on and wanted to learn."

Rachel Berkheiser, a research team apprentice, moved back to Goodland from Pennsylvania during the early days of COVID-19. A year later, she started her apprenticeship, after a hiring freeze caused by the pandemic came to an end. Berkheiser said her family had lived in Goodland from 2013 to 2016, when her husband worked for a trucking firm there, and they'd been wanting to return.

"We really like the small-town atmosphere and feel like there's a lot of potential here," she said.

She said she has had a lot to learn about crypto, but now she enjoys being able to talk to her brother, who had been a crypto enthusiast for a while.

"Everyone at work – both the Goodland Tech people and the CipherTrace side – are really helpful about educating and just explaining things and helping you feel like you have support there to help you understand. A lot of these concepts are totally new to all of us coming in," she said.

Julica Oharah, executive director of Sherman County Community Development, said she expects to see more people coming to Goodland for jobs at Goodland Tech.

"I think there's so much happening we're not even seeing the full effects on a community level yet," she said. "There's a lot of momentum and positivity. We just have a lot taking place, and I think it's a good time to be in Goodland." ▪

The Center of it

Colby's new Event Center is doing exactly what it was designed to do – expand opportunities for the community and the area.

STORY BY BETSY WEARING
PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

From Denver, it's two turns to the left and from Kansas City, it's two turns to the right. A few hundred interstate miles in between and you land in Colby, and Northwest Kansas' newest event space, a facility that is making a difference for this city on the Plains.


JAMES FARRIS

"This is the biggest city in a hundred miles in any direction," said James Farris, director of recreation and facilities for the City of Colby. "We want to be a hub. This facility is really a great opportunity for Colby. You can't beat our location. We are right off the interstate."

The process of designing, funding and constructing the new Event Center at 1200 Franklin Ave. wasn't quick. But once the doors opened, things really picked up speed.

"It really kind of started with a few people saying we needed to upgrade the old facility," Colby City Manager Tyson McGreer said in December. "It needed serious work — the roof leaked; the heating, air and ventilation system needed to be replaced, just a lot. When we started the renovation plan, it became clear that renovating the old facility would be harder and more expensive than building new. So that is how the whole thing kicked off."

Those conversations happened in 2017 and 2018, McGreer said. He estimated that it took about another year of planning and two years to build.

"It was a good five years in the making," he said.

The new, 60,000-plus-square-foot facility opened in July. The first big event was a concert that drew about 1,200 people.

"We hosted country singer Phil Vassar in July," Farris said. "We had local people, people from Wyoming, Nebraska – all around the area."

That kind of result is exactly what Farris is hoping for.

"This is not only a place for Colby, but for all the surrounding area," Farris said. "We want them to have an enjoyable experience and want to come back."

Farris started his role managing the Event Center in August of 2021. Originally from Lincoln, Kan., he graduated from Bethany College and got his master's at Kansas Wesleyan University. He worked at the YMCA in Salina and as sports supervisor for the Parks & Recreation Department in Blue Springs, Mo., before coming to Colby in 2020 as the recreation director. When the first event center director left, the building became Farris' responsibility, as well as the aquatic center, ball fields and other recreational activities.

"I came here looking for an opportunity to run my own department," Farris said. "I really like Colby. It's a good size. We have everything you need here."

Space, flexibility and opportunity

The Event Center has two large gymnasiums, both of which have two, full-size basketball courts. That comes in handy for tournaments and busy parks and recreation league games. The smaller, auxiliary gym is larger than the entire previous recreation center, Farris said.

Spacious locker rooms and a specified space for officials and coaches were also included.

Though the two gyms have traditional wood floors, the event center staff can roll out a floor covering that protects the wood when other events are happening. And there are a lot of other events.

In the first few months after opening, besides the Vassar concert, the facility hosted a gun and coin show, the Liberty League volleyball tournament, the Boo Bash Halloween event, and in December, Movie on the Court, where kids watched *The Polar Express* on the huge screens in the main gym while wearing their jammies and doing holiday crafts. The night before, the grownups gathered for the second annual Bells and Bags Cornhole tournament, complete with an ugly sweater contest. Earlier in the month, Christian singer Mark Schultz returned to his hometown and performed a Christmas concert for a near-capacity crowd.

A gymnastic tournament was scheduled for January, and, nearly a year in advance, the space was already booked for a large science fair hosted by Kansas State University for the summer of 2022.

"This gives the Recreation Department the opportunity to do so much cool stuff," Farris said.

Christian singer Mark Schultz returned to his hometown to perform a Christmas concert before a near-capacity crowd in the Colby Event Center.

Colby Event Center

1200 Franklin Ave, Colby, KS 67701

For more information on events or to reserve a room, visit ***CityofColby.com/299/Community-Event-Center***. Follow them on Facebook: ***Colby Event Center***

The building also includes meeting rooms that Farris says are busy "nearly all of the time." Four separate meeting rooms can be combined to create one large space for events such as family reunions, or the department's daddy-daughter dance. There is a full commercial kitchen available for additional cost, and a concession area that can be converted to a serving space or bar.

A unique feature of the space is a large children's indoor play area just inside the front entrance. Similar to a play place in a commercial restaurant or gym, the spectacular multistory play space includes a variety of climbing apparatuses as well as a restroom and a breastfeeding area. Once fully installed, it will be available to be rented for private parties.

Location, location, location

The location of the event center is a big part of its early success. Just down the street from the high school and literally next door to the college campus, both schools use the facility for basketball and volleyball games and some practices. The college also uses it for wrestling.

"From September to March there are two to five teams rotating through all during the week, either practicing or playing games. We host two to three home games each week on average, including high school, junior high and college," Farris said.

For Colby Community College athletics, it has been a "game changer," said Athletic Director Mike Saddler.

"It helps us in a couple of different ways," he said. "With the location being right next to campus, it appears as if it is a college facility. Recruits are hard-pressed to know this is not a Colby Community College facility, and it's impressive.

"Also, having a second gym has been great. It allows our teams to practice more efficiently – men, women, volleyball, and basketball. We are not competing as much for space."

Farris said the location has helped increase the fan attendance for the basketball and volleyball games for high school and college.

"The college kids can literally walk over from the dorms, so we have more of them coming to the games," he said. The extra capacity – the large gym will seat 1,850 when all the

See **CENTER**, page 12

THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS HEALTH SYSTEM

Care Collaborative

KU Health System provides area medical professionals with training, support

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

You probably haven't heard of the University of Kansas Health System Care Collaborative, but your life may depend on it. When every second matters, the training and resources the collaborative provides for rural healthcare providers helps ensure that every second counts.

The collaborative was started in 2014 in an effort to improve outcomes for rural heart attack and stroke patients. It has since expanded into providing healthcare professionals with the most current evidence-based procedures for COVID-19, sepsis, trauma and other life-threatening conditions. It also supports its member hospitals, rural health care clinics and emergency medical services in other important ways.

"Do we have numbers that show more people surviving? We do," said Dr. Bob Moser, of Salina, medical director for the Care Collaborative. "Most of what we deal with are time-critical diagnoses. With the heart attack, one of the mottos is 'Time is muscle.' The longer it takes to get the obstructed vessel open, the more heart muscle dies off. Same thing with stroke. Time is brain tissue or neurons."

When the collaborative was launched in 2014 in 13 Northwest Kansas counties, it was called the Kansas Heart and Stroke Collaborative. It was funded through a $12.5 million Health Care Innovation Award from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. Participating hospitals were not charged a fee for services, but they did commit to making staff available for training, and to implementing protocols geared toward identifying heart attack and stroke victims earlier and providing effective, efficient care.

"We want patients to get the right care – the highest quality care – as close to home as possible," said Jodi Schmidt, executive director of the Care Collaborative.

JODI SCHMIDT

Dr. Craig Concannon, an internal medicine specialist in Beloit, said Beloit Medical Center was not among the original members of the collaborative. However, within a few years, Mitchell County healthcare facilities came on board. He's glad they did.

"It's grown to involve the majority of institutions in western Kansas, and we're moving eastward all the time because of the results that we're getting," said Concannon, who serves as chairman of the board. "This has been instrumental in allowing recognition of the quality of healthcare in rural America but also increasing it to another level that's also measurable and better."

Currently, there are 78 member facilities in 70 counties across the state. Northwest Kansas is the only region with 100 percent participation.

Driven by the data

The collaborative provides a wide array of services to its member organizations. As a patient safety organization, the

Robert Moser, MD, is Dean of the KU School of Medicine in Salina and Medical Director of the Kansas Health System Care Collaborative. Photo by Betsy Wearing

collaborative can collect data about patient outcomes from member facilities and share statistical information with other members.

"You can see how everybody else is functioning versus how you're functioning, and we share information across county lines," Concannon said. "That's important for all of us to see, so we know where we need to improve. We can talk to those people that are doing better and say, 'What can I learn from you to help us?'"

DR. CRAIG CONCANNON

Concannon said the area data is instructive and wasn't previously available.

"We only knew in our hearts what we were doing, but now that we have the data, we can communicate that," he said.

Because of documented improvements in health outcomes, and the cost savings those provide, 37 member facilities have benefited monetarily over the past four years through a Medicare shared-savings program. Those facilities formed an accountable care organization that covers the largest geographical area of any such organization in the country.

"If we achieve savings of more than 2 or 3 percent, it comes back to us and we in turn share it with our members," Schmidt said. "Just this fall we were able to send checks out worth $4.3 million to our members. They were very excited to have that level of shared savings."

Training improves outcomes

The collaborative provides an effective system to train medical professionals in newly developed guidelines, or offers a brush-up course for rural doctors who don't perform certain procedures often.

"It's these subtle changes in expectation and consistency in healthcare and recognition of disease processes that need more timely attention," Concannon said. "But it's undoubtedly saved more lives than we could count."

Before the collaborative was formed, patients in rural counties were more likely to have their life changed or ended by a heart attack or stroke. Hospitals participating in the collaborative that first year were able to both measurably improve outcomes and lower the total cost of care.

"You give them an opportunity, give them some information, and these folks take it and run with it," Moser said of the rural medical providers. "They've been amazing and innovative themselves, and they've given us some great ideas to share back with other communities."

Life-saving protocols based on the latest research were implemented far more quickly than they would have been if a few doctors had come home with the information from a medical conference, Moser said.

"Some research says less than 10 percent of the time does that actually lead to change," Schmidt said. "With what we're doing, we're demonstrating more than 90 percent likelihood of change."

"With what we're doing, we're demonstrating more than 90 percent likelihood of change."

JODI SCHMIDT | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE CARE COLLABORATIVE

Moser said on average it takes 11 to 17 years for new evidence-based guidelines to become the standard of care. Collaborative members were making needed changes in months. In 2016, when new recommendations were made concerning patients with blood clots in large blood vessels, the information was presented and within three to six months records showed that the changes were being implemented.

The "secret sauce"

Schmidt said the "secret sauce" was Moser and the clinical team, who would go to each location and provide onsite education. Moser and his team traveled extensively – in the early days 40,000 to 50,000 miles a year. Moser, the former secretary and state health officer of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, has served as dean of the KU School of Medicine-Salina campus since 2019.

"We seek to gather as many providers at one time on the same day to hear the same evidence and research and review the same protocols," Schmidt said. "We believe that's why we're able to see such improvement."

Ways to overcome impediments that may be slowing response times in a specific hospital can also be discussed. In Moser, who spent much of his career as a doctor in Tribune, area hospital personnel find a person who understands that the resources available to critical access hospitals are often stretched thin.

"Taking on something new and having to start from ground zero is really challenging, but if we can provide that broader support, we can increase the likelihood that the protocols will be adopted and the best practices will be implemented, and we can really see improvement when we go back and look at their baseline," Moser said.

Taking on new challenges

After heart attack and stroke, the collaborative branched out in 2015 to tackle worsening symptoms in heart failure patients and

See **COLLABORATIVE**, page 12

The Colby Event Center hosts a variety of activities, from sports to craft shows to concerts.

Top: Colby Trojans defeated the Northwest Kansas Technical College team 62-54 in a Dec. 4 matchup.

Center: Elly Schlageck, 7, of Colby, watches as her brother, Huntley, 11, decorates a sugar cookie at a craft show at the Colby Event Center.

Bottom: High school choir students from Atwood and Colby joined Colby native Mark Schultz for a performance of *Jingle Bell Rock*.

CENTER, from page 9

bleachers are pulled out – will increase the decibel level for the home teams, Farris predicts.

"When the high school plays rivalry teams like Goodland, it's going to be really loud," he said. "I'm looking forward to that."

Saddler agreed. "Our students literally walk 100 yards, and they are there. Makes it simple on them."

In September, Farris was busy managing the scheduling and working with various contractors to finish the details, such as a mural for the lobby, completion of the children's indoor play area and placement of the high school and college sports memorabilia.

"We are working on where to put trophy cases and those kinds of things," he said. "We want it to both feel like the home court for those teams, but also feel like a traditional event space for concerts and other events."

The flexibility of the space is also the biggest challenge for Farris and his staff of six.

More than people expect

"It's been fun to see it all come together. The toughest part is communication – working with the various schedules for the college and the schools," Farris said in September. "Also, flipping the space when events are back-to-back. Cleaning the bleachers, rolling out floor protection if needed, putting out the goals or nets — it's a challenge, but it's enjoyable.

"Sometimes the college teams help. When we went from a volleyball game to the coin show the next morning, the college softball team helped us out."

The total cost of the event center was $16,925,000. It was funded through the renewal of a three-quarter cent sales tax originally passed to build the aquatic center and fire station, make improvements to the ball fields, and do some street work. Other sources of revenue included support from Talent Initiative, Inc. and the City of Colby, and a grant from the Dane G. Hansen Foundation.

"The community voted to extend the sales tax for this project," McGreer said. "So far, I think it is going really, really well.

"It has really done exactly what we wanted – make the functions we already had in the community even better and consistently attract new events. It is still early in its life but is already bringing new things to the area."

Saddler said the new facility has improved recruiting, practices and attendance.

"The reaction when people walk in universally is 'Wow!' " he said. "It's fantastic and a great place to call home."

McGreer said the facility should serve the community's needs well into the future, "It's way more than people expect in Colby, America," he said. "We are very excited about the possibilities of it all." ▪

COLLABORATIVE, from page 11

another time-critical, life-threatening challenge – sepsis. The collaborative expanded into training on protocols for sepsis that have resulted in quicker diagnosis and life-saving antibiotic treatment of bacterial infections. It was about that time the name was changed to Care Collaborative to reflect the broader scope of work.

"We looked at the data as to where the sepsis patients were coming into the small hospitals. In many cases over half of those patients were coming from the long-term care center," Moser said. "As we looked at the severity, too many of them were coming in in septic shock. It wasn't being identified early enough."

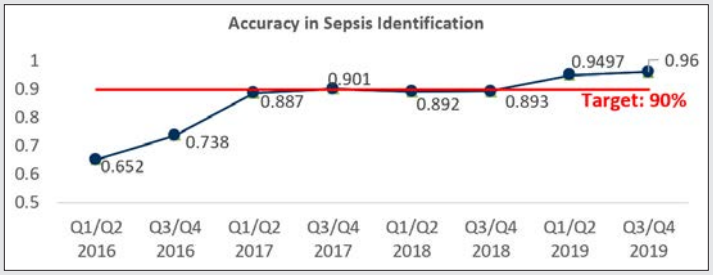
Moser went to long-term care facilities and conducted 90 training sessions over a six-month period to ensure that the body's extreme response to infection was identified and treatment started sooner.

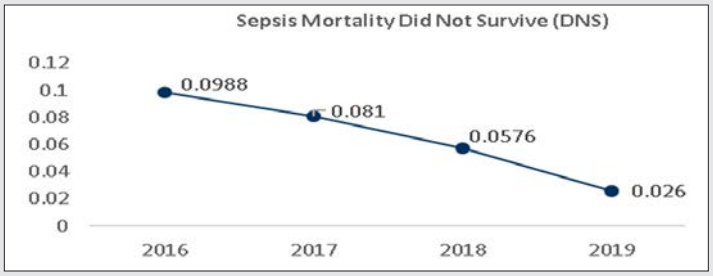
Schmidt said before training, only about 62 percent of sepsis patients were being diagnosed in early stages. Now it's consistently at about 96 percent when data is analyzed each quarter.

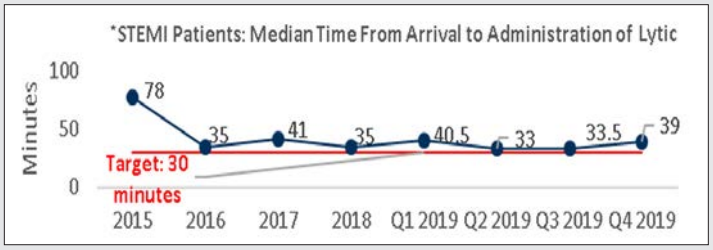
The collaborative also hires nurses as health coaches to provide care management for patients with chronic conditions. They check in with patients by telephone monthly to ensure that they are taking medications, making it to doctor's appointments and not experiencing new symptoms. By November, more than 62,000 chronic care management calls had been made, providing cost savings estimated at about 22 percent.

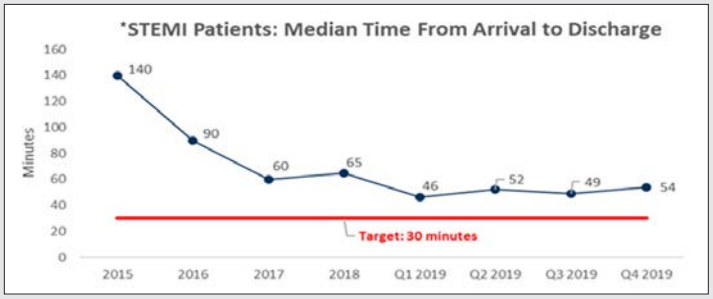
"Patients maintain a

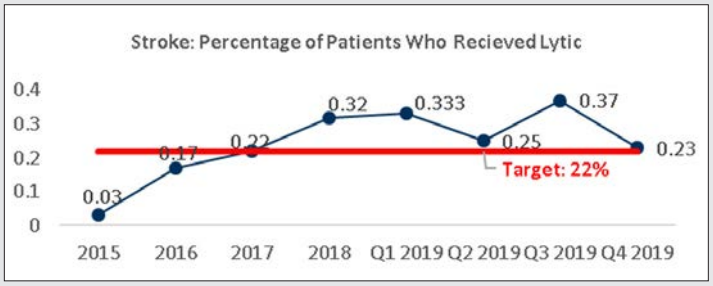
Care Collaborative Quality Performance Measures











*An ST-elevation myocardial infarction (STEMI) is a type of heart attack that mainly affects the heart's lower chambers. STEMIs tend to be more severe and dangerous compared to other types of heart attacks. (Source: Cleveland Clinic)

connection for years with their health coach," Schmidt said. "They will tell them things they might be embarrassed to tell their doctor."

A request for training came from member hospitals that were the first point of care for infrequent, but sometimes critically injured patients after car crashes or farm accidents.

"It's very hard to keep comfortable on what's the first step – how do I begin the process of caring for them? – and manage the anxiety of what's happening in front of you often times with people you know," Moser said. "That's added stress that the big city doesn't always recognize."

As asked, the collaborative was about to roll out best practices for response to trauma to get patients stabilized and on to the next level of care within the first hour. But then came the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 changes everything

Suddenly, traveling to hospitals was out of the question, but the need for training on protocol to deal with the highly infectious virus was great. Training went virtual, as the collaborative shared the findings of doctors at the KU Medical Center who contributed to research and evaluated information as it came in.

"We were able to pull together more than 150 different specific resources to share with our members during the pandemic, in terms of the latest medication recommendations, the protective equipment that was recommended," Schmidt said. "That information was fast and furious, and we have a whole team of people who could sort through that and provide guidance and support."

During COVID, health coaches have helped patients in a variety of new ways, including identifying senior meal sites, prescription assistance, COVID housing supports and other services.

"It was good to have the infrastructure we already had coming into the pandemic," Schmidt said. "It has proven beneficial, and the team stepped up and moved as quickly as we could to provide support to our members."

She said the collaborative is "deeply concerned about the stress our teams are feeling."

Moser said during the pandemic rural hospitals have found it challenging to find a hospital to transfer any type of patient, and the staff has had to learn to keep patients locally longer.

Concannon said the collaborative has provided key support to member physicians during a very challenging time.

"If the Care Collaborative hadn't been established the way it had when COVID hit, it would have changed our response to that in a very negative way," he said.

Rural medicine goes remote

Grants helped fund additional infrastructure needed to make patient monitoring and other services possible remotely. The collaborative wrote a grant that funds telehealth behavioral counseling in 11 communities and a grant that provides broadband support in 27 communities to enable remote patient monitoring.

Currently, 250 patients participating in a pilot program are connected via a tablet with blood pressure cuffs and other pieces of equipment. Many of the patients being monitored are post-COVID and are at risk for complications.

Moser said he believes they've only scratched the surface of what will become possible for remote health services.

"We've learned a lot, but I think we've got so much more to learn about how healthcare can be delivered in the rural setting going forward," Moser said. ■

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

Lights! Camera! Action!

A group of cast members pose for a photo on set. L to R: Cassandra Gonzalez, Chris Yellow Eagle, Zola Greene, Phil Caldwell, Mary McDonough, Goodwarrior Deer, Kyle Birdshead, and Wambli Greene. Kneeling: Nate Denny.

Docudrama filmed at scene of attack in Logan County

[LOGAN COUNTY] The brilliant sun shining down on rippling waves of brown and gold grass in northeast Logan County looked much the same as it would have to John and Lydia German and their family on the morning of Sept. 11, 1874. It was a deceptively peaceful scene.

The family was heading toward a new life in Colorado. Hidden behind a nearby ridge was a raiding party of Cheyenne. Their cries filled the air as the German family came under attack. John, Lydia, daughters Rebecca Jane and Joanna, and son Stephen did not survive.

A list of names in the family Bible found at the gruesome scene informed Fort Wallace soldiers that four other daughters – Catherine, Sophia, Julia and Addie – had likely been captured, and a months-long effort to find them ensued.

In October, historians and documentary producers Ken Spurgeon and Deb Goodrich spent three days overseeing a film crew near the site where the attack on the German family is believed to have taken place. Today, the land is part of the Smoky Y Ranch owned by Randall and Donella Younkin.

Telling the whole story

The Contested Plains, a docudrama that Spurgeon and Goodrich plan to finish this summer, will help viewers understand why John led his family west from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Georgia, but also the experiences of American Indians whose lives

The crew prepares for another take of actress Zola Greene, as Mochi, giving a fatal hatchet blow to the cloth dummy that represents John German.

were changed by the brutal encounter.

"It's the Germans' story, but we're trying to gather all the context for why things happened the way they did," said Spurgeon, assistant professor of history at Friends University in Wichita. "I don't think anybody's dug into the sources like we have."


KEN SPURGEON

American Indians involved in the attack had previously clashed with the military. Women and children in their families were killed and injured by soldiers. The buffalo the tribes hunted were being slaughtered for their hides. Interviews with Cheyenne historian Gordon Yellowman and nine other historians will be interspersed with the video footage shot in Logan County and elsewhere to give context to the events portrayed.

"This is a fair approach on both sides," said Marla Matkin, of Hill City, who portrays John German's aunt, Ruth Brown. "This isn't to condemn one and favor the other. It's a balanced approach with the hope that healing will take place."

"This is a fair approach on both sides. This isn't to condemn one and favor the other. It's a balanced approach with the hope that healing will take place."

MARLA MATKIN, HILL CITY | ACTRESS

Goodrich said she believes the docudrama format reaches audiences in a way that reading books or just hearing someone describe an event does not. She said understanding such historical events is important because today's world is the result of past decisions and actions.


DEB GOODRICH

"It puts our lives in context," she said. "We're part of a continuum. It gives us, hopefully, gratitude and a sense of responsibility to make good decisions. If we don't know what happened, how can we feel any of that?"

Goodrich, who serves as historian for the Fort Wallace Museum, said she felt strongly that the project should be shot on location. She said the High Plains, where the family was attacked and where the missing girls had to figure out how to survive, was as much a character in the story as any the actors portrayed.

"This was being reported nationally and internationally," she said. "Significant things that are so important in the story of our nation were happening right here."

Shooting is expected to conclude in the coming months at a location near Pampa, Texas. It was there that 5-year-old Addie and 7-year-old Julia were found near starvation after they'd been abandoned by their captors. The girls spent about 45 days alone on the prairie. The release of 17-year-old Catherine and 12-year-old Sophia, who were held by a different band, was negotiated in March 1875. Despite the trauma they experienced, the German sisters were able to live full lives.

Spurgeon said the sisters never blamed all Cheyenne. Catherine German credited Cheyenne Chief Stone Calf, Little Woman, and others with trying to prevent bloodshed. However, ultimately 75 Cheyenne were imprisoned for the murders and abductions, including Stone Calf, Little Woman and many others who were not responsible.

"They were challenging times, and the Plains were very contested," Spurgeon said. "It was a rough place to live, but it's part of who we were, so it's worth telling."

Facing starvation, wolves

Books written by descendants of the surviving daughters – *Girl Captives of the Cheyennes* and *The Moccasin Speaks* – describe their ordeal.

Jayne Pearce, president of the Fort Wallace Museum Association, said the youngest girls were abandoned because their captors were constantly on the run from soldiers, and it became too difficult to keep them.

"They survived on hackberries and grains. They found an abandoned campsite

See **ACTION**, page 18

Actor Darby Hinton, who portrays John German, is one of the faces viewers may recognize in *The Contested Plains*. Watch for announcements about public screenings of the docudrama later this summer.

Living ICONS

PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING AND ERIN MATHEWS

Did you know?

Vast herds of bison, the state's official animal, roamed Northwest Kansas when the state joined the Union 161 years ago, and today can still be found across Northwest Kansas. They can weigh up to 2,000 pounds and stand 5-6 feet tall. Don't let their size fool you. Bison can run at speeds approaching 35 mph – which is as fast as a horse. They are also extremely agile, able to turn quickly and jump high fences.

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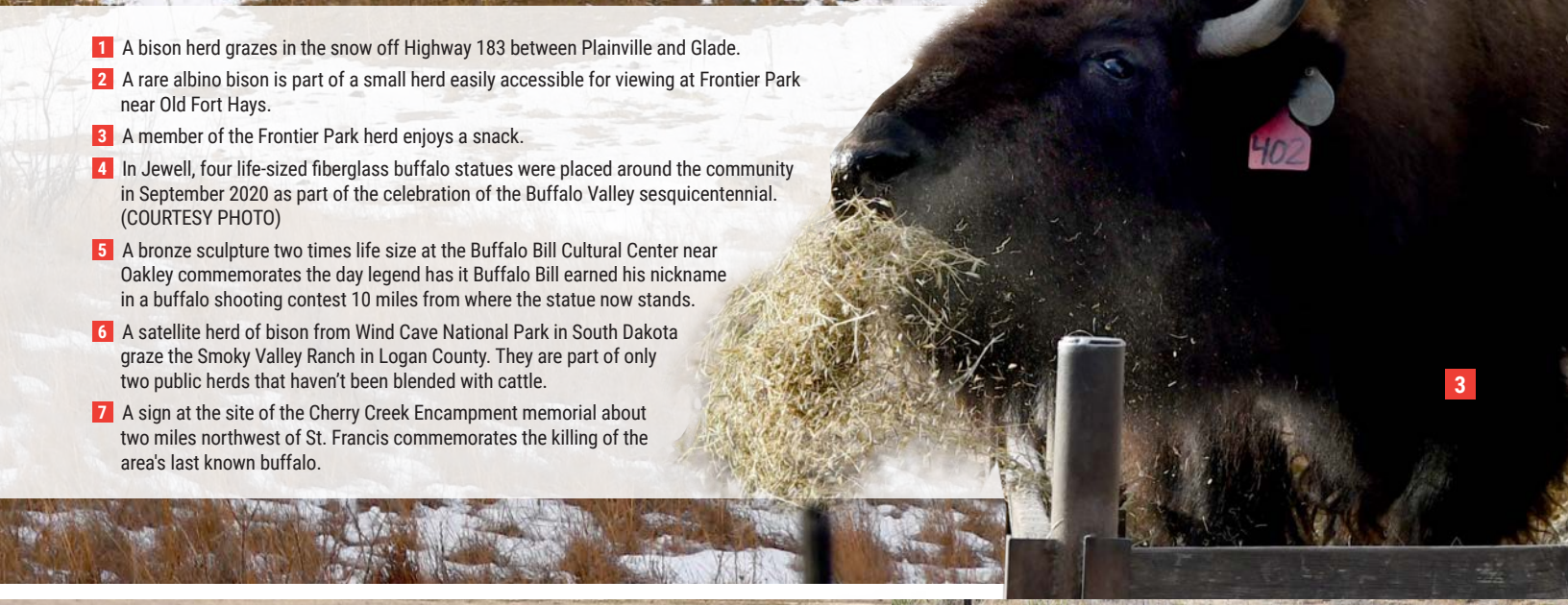


1 A bison herd grazes in the snow off Highway 183 between Plainville and Glade.

2 A rare albino bison is part of a small herd easily accessible for viewing at Frontier Park near Old Fort Hays.

3 A member of the Frontier Park herd enjoys a snack.

4 In Jewell, four life-sized fiberglass buffalo statues were placed around the community in September 2020 as part of the celebration of the Buffalo Valley sesquicentennial. (COURTESY PHOTO)

5 A bronze sculpture two times life size at the Buffalo Bill Cultural Center near Oakley commemorates the day legend has it Buffalo Bill earned his nickname in a buffalo shooting contest 10 miles from where the statue now stands.

6 A satellite herd of bison from Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota graze the Smoky Valley Ranch in Logan County. They are part of only two public herds that haven't been blended with cattle.

7 A sign at the site of the Cherry Creek Encampment memorial about two miles northwest of St. Francis commemorates the killing of the area's last known buffalo.

ACTION, from page 15

that had some parched corn in it, and they ate every bit of that," she said.

The girls encountered wolves while alone on the prairie. Goodrich said she developed a new appreciation for the fear a howl could inspire after spending a night at a farmhouse south of Oakley and listening to coyotes just outside.

"I'm telling you what – there's something primal in you, the fear," she said. "I knew I had nothing to be afraid of. I had a house around me, but it really hit home how those little girls must have felt. It was horrifying. I can't even imagine being a child and being in that situation."

Ken Fields, a member of the board of the White Deer Land Museum Foundation, of Pampa, Texas, which has been raising funds for the movie's production, found Julia and Addie's ordeal unforgettable.

"When I first read *The Moccasin Speaks*, I was just gripped by it when I realized this happened, in part, just 10 or 12 miles south of where I'm sitting in a five-story building," he said. "I was just captivated by the horror visited on this Christian, nuclear, Southern family, who were no threat or harm to anybody."

He said at the time the Germans decided to make the trip, settlers had come through the area without incident for a number of years.

"They had no way of knowing that they were moving into a hornet's nest," Fields said. "All of the battles of the Red River War were taking place down in the panhandle of Texas right at the time they were making their journey."

The pasture where it happened

Over the years, descriptions in the books of where the attack occurred led many local history buffs to the Younkins' Logan County ranch. About two years ago when Spurgeon, Goodrich, Fields and others talking about making a docudrama first arrived, the Younkins welcomed them.

"When it comes to stuff like this, it's part of history, and I think you're obligated to do that. I think ethically you should," Younkin said as he drove Fields through his pasture in an all-terrain vehicle during a break in filming. They followed the still-visible Butterfield Overland Trail until, at the crest of a ridge, Younkin pointed out four side-by-side indentations he'd noticed this spring for the first time. A stone on the west end may have served as a marker. He said he believes that is where German family members were originally buried before their bodies were later moved to the Fort Wallace Cemetery. Fields said the sight of the shallow graves made the family's tragedy real to him.

Donella and Randall Younkin gave the docudrama crew access to Smoky Y Ranch for filming.

"Now I've got a whole different story to take back to Pampa with me," Fields said. Fields said he truly appreciated how generous the Younkins had been with their time and resources, even allowing the movie crew to utilize a ranch building when the wind was too strong for the tent they'd planned to use.

"I think it meant something to everybody involved in the filming that they were on sacred ground," Goodrich said. "I think that affected everybody, and I have to think that affects the quality of what you're getting across to the audience."

Reviving warriors

Cheyenne warriors with faces painted and dressed in historically accurate costumes were filmed riding horses on hand-crafted Cheyenne saddles. Their costumes were hand-made by Ken Weidner, of Copeland, a sought-after expert in the material culture of the Southern Plains Indians. Oakley veterinarian Jake Bauer was instrumental in finding the horses, and wrangler Molly Renner Lamb, of Russell Springs, provided riding instruction.

Actors portraying the German family members, whose sunbonnets, cotton dresses, wide-brimmed hats and suspenders were equally historically accurate, walked beside their covered wagon, after costume designers

Donald Christopher Yellow Eagle, who portrays Chief Medicine Water, is one of about 200 people alive who fluently speaks the Cheyenne language.

"I was raised by my maternal grandparents in western Oklahoma... and all they spoke was Cheyenne. I learned English at the same time."

Set costumer Christy Railsback applies trail dust to the dress of Nora Dooley, who portrays Catherine German.

Levi Self, who plays Stephen German, and other actors portraying his sisters get a ride from the staging area to the set.

Nate Denny takes a photo of fellow cast members Cassandra Gonzalez and Mary McDonough.

applied trail dust to their clothing and faces.

"The family would have been out in this (wind) too," said Pearce, who helped serve the cast and crew catered meals. "The suffering was real back in the day."

Before lunch, Spurgeon offered a Christian prayer, and cast member Donald Christopher Yellow Eagle, of Weatherford, Okla., sang and prayed in his native language. Yellow Eagle, one of fewer than about 200 people alive who fluently speaks the Cheyenne language, advised Spurgeon on Cheyenne dialogue used in the movie.

"I was raised by my maternal grandparents in western Oklahoma, and it was spoken in the house," he said. "My great-grandmother passed away when I was 13 years old, and all they spoke was Cheyenne. I learned English at the same time. We watched Saturday morning cartoons just like everyone."

The language spoken by the Cheyenne is guttural and complex, and like the romance languages, it assigns gender to various objects, he said.

"Even our storms – spring storms are male storms and summer storms are female storms," Yellow Eagle said.

Yellow Eagle, who portrays Medicine Water, the leader of the raiding party, is special projects director for the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes Governor's Office. He said he carries a lot of precious knowledge in his head about Cheyenne language, culture, and beliefs. Participating in projects like the docudrama allows him to share some of it with a wider audience.

Making connections

Also among American Indian actors in the cast was Philip Caldwell son little coyote, of Hutchinson. He said tribal ancestors had been giving him signs encouraging his involvement in the film. He said he didn't know until the day shooting began that two of his cousins were also in the cast.

"It's been good, because it's united family," he said. "It's opened up many, many doors."

The movie was also bringing together cousins who were descendants of the German sisters.

Scott Dean, of Kirkland, Wash., the great-grandson of Julia German, was watching filming from a nearby staging area. He said when a cousin told him about the movie, he asked a lot of questions.

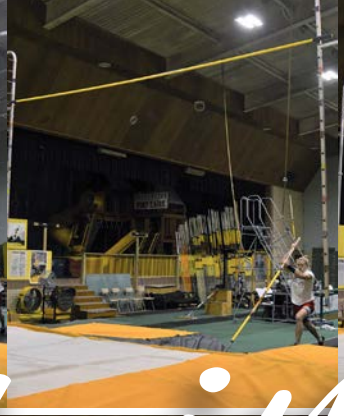
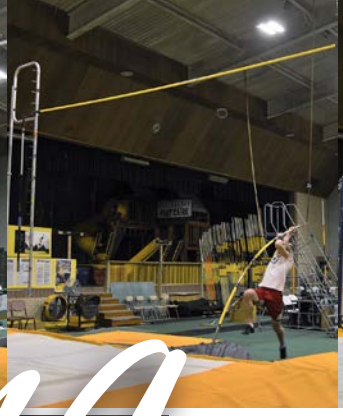
"As a family member, I was a little concerned. Is this for good? Is this honorable? Is it right? Is something positive going to come out of it?" he said. "I was just blown away the more I learned about the project."

He and his wife, Cynthia, had been planning to retrace the German family's steps in their recreational vehicle, but instead they got to Logan County in time to observe the docudrama being filmed. Actress Mary Beth McDonough, who plays Lydia German, put Dean in contact with a German family descendant she knew who invited him to a family reunion.

"There's so much good coming out of this already – the connections, and to see the interest in the story," he said. "Out of death comes life." ▪

"There's so much good coming out of this already – the connections, and to see the interest in the story. Out of death comes life."

SCOTT DEAN, KIRKLAND, WASH. | GREAT-GRANDSON OF JULIA GERMAN

Flying High

Mark Breault's Tailwind Pole Vaulting Club teaches kids to play it safe while flying high

"I have had vaulters from all over the United States — quite a few from Oklahoma, Missouri and Colorado ... Texas, Minnesota, Illinois, North Carolina, and nine or 10 different countries."

MARK BREAULT | OWNER, TAILWIND POLE VAULT CLUB

Top: Cloud County Community College freshman Ben Okraska vaults at a December practice session at Tailwind. Okraska, from Harvard, Neb., cleared 14ft. 5.25 inches for fifth place and a national qualifying mark at a meet in Nebraska last month against NCAA Division 1 vaulters.

Cloud County Community College freshman, Mia Manley, Eudora, can't quite clear the bar at a practice in December at Tailwind Pole Vault facility. Coach Mark Breault says the challenge to keep going higher means that in practices, vaulters miss far more often than not.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING

[JAMESTOWN] Mark Breault, aka "Doc Bro," doesn't necessarily look like an athlete. But he lives – literally – and breathes pole vaulting. Breault lives and works in the gym that was once part of the former Jamestown High School. His apartment is in what was the boiler room and locker rooms. Out the heavy metal door and up the concrete stairs is a magical space where people, mostly students from all over the area — and at times the world — come to seek Breault's advice on pole vaulting.

Breault draws on his own experiences to inspire would-be pole vaulters to aspire to high levels. He can relate to those who come to him wanting to pursue their passion for the sport, or perhaps to show others that they can do something that for many, looks pretty scary.

"When I was a little kid in Concordia, my brother was a vaulter and we set up a pit in our backyard," Breault said. "We vaulted with a bamboo pole and an aluminum pipe and just whatever we could find to use. I really enjoyed it."

In junior high, he said, he wasn't allowed to pole vault.

"They said they had enough pole vaulters," he recalled. "They put me in pretty much every other event in track and field to try and find a spot for me."

"I got to go to one track meet, and I was a high jumper because one of our high jumpers got sick. I just wasn't that athletic. I was a tiny little kid and I wanted to pole vault."

Discouraged but resolute, Breault said he went home and set up the old pole vault pit in his backyard.

"Using an aluminum pipe in my backyard, I was jumping as high as the kids at school could jump and still, they would not let me challenge for a position on the team," he said.

A coach makes a difference

His freshman year in high school he didn't go out for track.

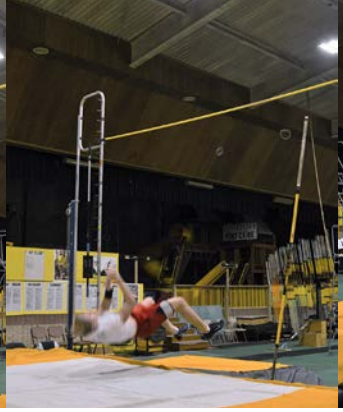
Then head coach, Bob Baumann, wanted to know why.

"I told him, I was not good at anything," Breault said. "I told him all I wanted to do was be a pole vaulter, and 'You guys won't let me.' "

"Baumann said, 'I don't know who told you that, but if you want to be a pole vaulter, come out for track, and you can try to be a pole vaulter.' I made the team as a freshman. I medaled at state four times, winning the state championship as a senior with a vault of 13'6".

"It really gave me a passion for it."




Mark Breault aka "Doc Bro," enjoys life at Tailwind Pole Vault Club in Jamestown, where he coaches vaulters of all ages to find their passion and achieve excellence with three rules: Be safe. Have fun. Jump high.

Breault went to Cloud County Community College on a pole-vaulting scholarship before heading to chiropractic school in Iowa.

After graduation, he began what would be a successful 35-year career as a chiropractor in Concordia, and became known to almost everyone as "Doc Bro."

Then in about 1996, Breault took an afternoon off from his practice to watch son Bradyn pole vault in an 8th-grade school track meet. When he got there, his son informed him that meet officials would not let him vault because he did not have a vaulting coach.

"I approached Bob Baumann, who was still the head track coach and asked about coaching the kids," Breault said. Again, Baumann said yes.

Breault coached at Concordia junior high for a year and then added high school kids the following year. Soon, he was also coaching Cloud County Community College vaulters.

"I coached them all three at the same time, for about 10 years," he said. It was about that time that he purchased the gym in Jamestown, so he had an indoor facility for winter practices.

Success for all

Breault's vaulting teams were very successful. Word spread, and soon he had students from other schools asking if he would help them out. He began working with individual kids on nights and weekends. Eventually, he started a summer program for his students and others.

"Kids would come from all over," he said. And although it was fun for Breault, it created a conflict with the local schools.

"The school wanted me to be their coach and work only with their kids. I understood, but I loved helping anybody that I could," Breault said. "So, I resigned from the high school and started Tailwind Pole Vault Club. That was about 2006 or 2007.

"Initially, it was very scary. It was in Jamestown, Kansas – which was the only place I could find a building big enough to do pole vaulting indoors," Breault said. "Who was going to come to Jamestown?"

Turns out a lot of people would come to Jamestown.

He converted the old boiler room and locker rooms into his home about 5 years ago when he retired from his chiropractic practice. Now vaulting is a full-time pursuit and pleasure.

Tailwind is a place of encouragement and support. But former USD 305 Salina pole vaulting coach J.D. Garber says, when he needed to, Breault could get intense. "He expects you to do it right.

"If anyone was using the wrong pole, or not acting right, he would get on them," Garber said.

That was OK with Garber, because it was all part of the No. 1 rule at Tailwind: Safety.

Three important rules

Breault says there are three rules at Tailwind: Be Safe. Have Fun. Jump High.

Garber regularly brought his vaulters to Jamestown and, like many of Breault's students, they were very successful.

Breault said that his chiropractic career allowed him to invest in Tailwind. He purchased all the equipment, including hundreds of poles of various sizes, the crossbar, all of it. Initially, he did not charge the vaulters for his coaching.

"I built the club from a grassroots effort and eventually it became very popular all through Kansas and Nebraska," Breault said. "I have had vaulters from all over the United States — quite a few from Oklahoma, Missouri and Colorado, because they are close, but also from many other states, including Texas, Minnesota, Illinois, North Carolina, and nine or 10 different countries."

At a practice in December, vaulters from Cloud County Community College were working out. Skylar McFarling, a freshman from Manassas, Va., has been vaulting for only a couple of years, but he is enjoying the sport and training at Tailwind.

"I think it's very cool. I like how they converted the old gym into this facility. I live in a pretty busy area, just about 30 miles

See **TAILWIND**, page 25

No phony baloney

Brant's Meat Market marks 100 years with traditional recipes

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

Before Ashley and Adam Comeau met and fell in love, they were both fond of peering through the glass fronts of the butcher display cabinets at Brant's Meat Market in Lucas.

For Adam, it meant his family was picking up meat to grill when they got to Wilson Lake.

For Ashley, it meant her family was stopping by when visiting her great-aunt in nearby Waldo.

This year, the original Brant's Meat Market location in Lucas is 100 years old, and the Comeaus are the reason the business has reached that milestone. About two years ago, they also opened a second location in Plainville.

"The local butcher counter has almost become extinct," Ashley said. "We've done a lot of research, and I've only managed to find a few meat markets nationwide that are older than this one – and not by much. In Kansas, we're one of two that are 100 years old, and nationwide we're one of maybe like five."

'What a shame!'

In January 2018, an announcement was made that Brant's would be closing. The Comeaus were among customers who were sad to hear that news.

"Everybody was upset on Facebook and saying, 'What a shame!'" Ashley said. "They sold out of all their product when they made that announcement, so they made another batch and sold out of that in a day. Then that was it, and they closed."

Doug Brant, the third generation of his family to operate the meat market, was in his 70s at the time. He hadn't planned to close, but Kansas Department of Agriculture inspectors wanted him to submit additional paperwork and make updates to facilities, and it seemed too big of an ask for the one-man operation.

He said no to several offers to buy his family's recipes, some of which were more than a century old, but he and his wife, Linda, listened when Adam came to talk about buying the business.

"The one thing they were adamant about was the only way they would consider selling it was if we kept the Lucas store open," Adam said. "It was such a big part of the town, and Doug and Linda are huge supporters of the economic progression of Lucas."

In April 2018, a deal was struck, and Brant spent the summer training Adam to make the family's traditional Czechoslovakian recipes, including Jaternice, smoked sausage and ring bologna, which is similar to summer sausage.

"The check crossed the table, and then the recipes came across the table," Ashley said. Brant still stops in from time to time.

"Doug likes to come in and check to make sure we're doing everything right," Adam said. "He calls it quality control. We love having him check in."

Doug Brant said he's glad he and others in Lucas can still buy meat at the store.

Doug Brant (left) and Adam Comeau stand near the original smoker. (COURTESY PHOTO)

He said he's enjoying retirement.

"I'm proud that we've been able to keep our business going this long and hope it can keep going," Brant said in December. "I'm really excited because we're keeping the name alive and the business alive, and it will be 100 years old in 2022."

The daily grind

In 1922, when James and Marie Brant first purchased the store, the days were long and hard. James would get up at 2 a.m. and travel to Russell for ice. Then he'd butcher a cow and make sausage before opening for business at 8 a.m.

Adam wouldn't have to do an ice run or butcher a cow, but other parts of his diverse skill set were called upon in

Background photo, right to left: James Brant, the original owner of Brant's Meat Market, his son, Frank; a store employee, and James' niece, Bess.

Right: Ashley, Calvin and Adam Comeau stand in front of an original Brant's Meat Market sign, which now hangs in their Plainville store.

the new business endeavor. There were renovations to be done, and government regulations to comply with. There was kitchen equipment to purchase at auction. There was a specific type of wax for the ring bologna and pepper sausage he had to be fluent enough in German to order in a call to Germany. And, finally, there was bologna, pepper sausage and smoked sausage to make. The Brants' daughter, Stephanie Svaty, continued to work in the store the first year and trained them in the day-to-day operations.

"We feel like we have this duty to keep their legacy alive while still trying to make it our own," Ashley said. "We're trying to make sure their family recipes are exactly the same while also bringing in our own recipes, things from our heritage."

Adam, a full-time paramedic, was driving to the Lucas store at 8 a.m. after he got off work at Ellis County Emergency Medical Service. He would often be there working until late into the night before driving about 45 miles home to Plainville. He'd restored the storefront and inside area to look more like it had in older photographs before reopening the market that June.

With Brant's guidance, he was making the recipes, but he said he was having trouble keeping up with demand in the small kitchen. Bologna was routinely selling out by the end of the week.

Another problem was delivery service. Online sales would be an important source of revenue, but the Lucas post office had shortened its hours, and UPS and FedEx wouldn't pick up packages from the Lucas store.

"We have people who will order Jaternice, or liverwurst, online who have never been to the store, but mom or grandma or somebody used to make it," Ashley said. "They google it and find it on our website. We just had somebody ship a box full of it to their grandma in Oregon."

> *"We feel like we have this duty to keep their legacy alive while still trying to make it our own. We're trying to make sure their family recipes are exactly the same while also bringing in our own recipes, things from our heritage."*
>
> **ASHLEY COMEAU** | OWNER, BRANT'S MARKET

One is good; two is better

The Comeaus decided a second location closer to home would make their life easier. A building that had been a Mexican restaurant was available in Plainville, and they found out they could get packages picked up there.

It needed a new roof and had to be completely gutted, but it had a much bigger kitchen space and a small front room for sales. Again, Adam did a lot of the work, and about a year later the Plainville location was open.

"Adam has this knack for getting onto online auctions and finding equipment at insanely good prices," Ashley said. "He's very talented at managing the business side of things and finding something that fits within our budget."

Now they prepare meat – according to original Brant's recipes – in Plainville. They transport it to Lucas in a refrigerated trailer. There it is smoked in the 100-year-old brick smoker, so that the flavor and color remain the same.

"We have loyal customers that would know the difference," Adam said. "You can smell it all over town when we're smoking in Lucas."

The second store opened full time in February 2020, which turned out to be fortunate. After the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the Plainville store had more foot traffic than the Lucas store, which is largely supported by travelers.

"We knew Lucas had tourist traffic, but we did not know until we were over there renovating, and we were in the business every day, how big it would be. We had no idea there were buses that would come in," Ashley said.

Ashley Wickham, tourism director for Russell County, said visits to Lucas have picked up again.

"We do get people from out of town, even out of state, who come to Lucas just for Brant's and their bologna, and they also check out the other attractions while they're there," she said. "When I do trade shows, it's a staple when I bring up Lucas. I always talk about the Garden of Eden, the Bowl Plaza and Brant's Meat Market."

See **BRANT'S**, page 24

Thick steaks meant to attract hunters are featured at the Plainville store.


Sausages hang in the Lucas smoker.

BRANT'S, from page 23

From Czech to German

Although the Wilson and Lucas area was settled primarily by Czech immigrants, in Plainville, the Comeaus found demand for bratwurst and other German specialties. They started searching for recipes to add to the product line. New products include original, honey barbecue and pepper beef sticks, coarse ground all-beef hotdogs, bacon burger, brats, a sandwich-sized bologna and German rawburger – lean, uncooked beef mixed with seasoning and spices and used as a cracker spread.

"It's shockingly good," Ashley said. Adam added that he "can't start eating it or I'll eat the whole thing."

Rawburger is traditionally served at Christmas, but the Comeaus said they make and sell it throughout the year.

"We usually get a list of people together and call them so it's fresh for everybody," he said.

Utilizing a Securing Local Food Systems grant from the Kansas Department of Ag, the Comeaus added a new state-of-the-art smoker in Plainville. There they prepared and sold turkeys before Thanksgiving, including 20 for the Sacred Heart Grade School Thanksgiving meal.

Meating demand

Although they'd hoped to be able to source beef locally, they quickly found that they couldn't get butcher dates during the pandemic. They've been able to occasionally offer small batches of a locally grown heritage breed of pork or Wagyu beef, but for the most part they order high-grade cuts of Midwest beef and ham through local meat packers.

"We're also doing some dry aging ourselves – 30-day and 60-day," Adam said. He said they don't attempt to compete with Walmart prices and definitely don't want to take business away from the local grocery store. Instead, they


Adam Comeau slices strip steaks. (COURTESY PHOTO)

offer unique meat cuts. In November, fat T-bone steaks were displayed in the butcher case in Plainville, because hunters want "a great big, thick steak after sitting in a deer stand all day," Adam said.

The Comeaus tell customers they will try to order any meat they can't find elsewhere.

"We've gotten ox tail; we've gotten skin-on pork bellies – liver, pork bones for dogs, beef bones for bone marrow – things people used to make and things they grew up with," Adam said.

Ashley said they learned a lot in September 2019 when Rooks County Economic Development sent them to a boot camp in Colorado for business owners. There they were advised to "reserve time to work on your business, not just in your business."

They found staff who could take over some of Adam's responsibilities in both store locations as he continued to work full-time as a paramedic. In Lucas, Chris Kressley runs the store and helps with smoking the meat, with the help of Tabitha Blackburn. In Plainville, Jameson Klein serves as production manager, and Adam's mother, Shirley Comeau, manages the storefront. Ashley, who also works full-time away from the meat market, is an attorney for Jeter Law Firm in Hays. She has out-sourced the store's bookkeeping work but continues to manage the website and social media posts.

"We have a whole new appreciation level for everyone who owns their own business, especially people who started from scratch and take on that risk," Ashley said. "We had the benefit of having bought a business that was well established. We would highly recommend that.

"There are definitely days where we're like, why did we do this? But 95 percent of the time I just think it's such a cool business. It's fun, and it's unique, and it's an honor to keep something going that's been here this long." ▪

Brant's Meat Market
125 S. Main, Lucas | 785-525-6464
121 W. Mill, Plainville | 785-688-4350
brantsmarket.com

TAILWIND, from page 21

out of D.C. When I came here, it was a big change, but I really like it actually — the small-town feel, not as much traffic, and you really know everyone."

Jamaica native and sophomore Andrew Betton is a decathlete. He said he enjoys training at Tailwind. He hopes to transfer to an NCAA school, "probably for high jump, that's my best event, and to study sports medicine."

Have fun, jump high

Rule No. 2 at Tailwind is to have fun. Both Breault and Garber fully adopt that as a critical factor in keeping kids interested and helping them to achieve goal No. 3 – jump higher.

"A lot of people think you are happy when you are doing good and sad when you are not," Breault said. "Well, I don't agree with that. I think you do good when you are happy. When you are mad and frustrated, your vaulting is going to go to crud.

"In pole vault, if you make a certain height, we are going to raise the bar, and if you make that, we are going to raise the bar. So, if you judge everything you do on whether you make that bar or not, you are not going to be a very happy person.

"We play music. We'll run from different distances, we'll go right or left hand on the pole, we'll do some relay vaults where more than one person vaults at the same time. We'll hook up a hula hoop and vault through the hoop. We just do a lot of things to incorporate fun back into the sport."

Garber adopted the have-fun-philosophy as well. He said other coaches were not always on board with that.

"They could not figure out why I would drag speakers and hula hoops and all kinds of things out to practice," he said. "But I always had a lot of kids out for pole vault because we made it fun and were successful."

The music and vaulting games are not the only thing that sets Tailwind apart from other coaching strategies.

"The No. 1 thing Tailwind does that others don't – they start you on a short run and a short pole," Garber said. "Mark takes the danger out of it for the most part. He makes it very easy for people to have success."

A poster on the wall at Tailwind outlines the process Breault adheres to. Breault says sometimes his methods, such as the short step concept, are not well received by other coaches because they are unique.

Garber agrees. In particular, he notes that Tailwind vaulters "push the pole" on the ground on their approach.

"Traditionally in pole vault, you carry the pole on the approach," Garber said. "Other coaches hated that I taught kids to push the pole. But we did it because it was safer, especially for beginners.

"Mark teaches kids to run with one hand (on the pole), then add the second hand. Coaches think it slows them down. But that is not true. We timed them. And, our kids were winning," Garber said. "He has professional coaches and Olympians come to his camps and work with the kids. It doesn't seem to bother them. It is the results that tell the story."

"I remember showing up at meets," Garber said. "We would be by far the best team there. But as we were warming up, they (other coaches and vaulters) had never seen kids push the pole. They would be laughing at us – until our kids were still jumping and they were heading home."

Breault says that high-end vaulters trained at Tailwind have earned more than half the pole vault medals in Kansas for the past seven years. They've also won in Nebraska, Oklahoma, Colorado and Missouri.

Breault has helped vaulters from age 5 to 70. He vaulted his own personal best height, 14'7", at age 47.

He does not have any employees. But, he said, when he has camps, he brings in additional coaches and a cook.

"It's always fun when you get in other coaches who have our same basic philosophy. I'm real choosey on who I get to coach. It gives the kids a little different point of view, but it doesn't conflict with what we are saying."

A place to fit in

Breault says success breeds success.

"We've had multiple national champions and multiple All-Americans. That brings people to your club," he said. "But my strong interest and really strong passion is working with the average or below average kids like I was, that need a place to fit in.

"Kids that other schools are not looking at, or they don't have a coach or equipment, but they have a passion. They fit in here. And some of them become very, very successful." ▪

Cloud County Community College students practice pole vaulting at Tailwind Pole Vaulting Club in Jamestown.

Top: Skylar McFarling hangs upside down on the rope while sophomore Andrew Betton looks on.

Bottom: Students can select from a huge inventory of poles to use at practice. The length and flexibility of the pole is a significant factor in vaulting.

Brenda Danielson of Anvil Alpacas loves hanging out with her little herd. The feeling is mutual, as she gets some love from the youngest baby, Carmen BlackBlaze. Willa Starlite, Mulberry Moon Shadow and Saphyre Skye are lounging nearby.

from FARM *to* LOOM

Anvil Alpacas
1880 130 Rd., Belleville
785-955-0009
www.openherd.com/farms/7171/anvil-alpacas

‘Shear’ delight

Northwest Kansas alpaca owners enjoy their pets with personality

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS
PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING AND ERIN MATHEWS

If she’s having a bad day, Vickie Vandament heads for her alpaca barns. Actually, she likes to go there on good days, too.

“You just come out here, and the alpacas are pretty nice,” she said. “They don’t argue.”

Since 2004, the fluffy South American species has been a part of life for the rural Osborne woman. That was the year she and her late husband, Mitch, invested in their first three animals. Malcazar, one of those original alpacas, is now 19 years old and still lives in the male barn. A photo of him on the North 40 Alpacas billboard draws travelers in from westbound Interstate 70.

She said Mitch was able to negotiate a decent price for those first three gelded alpacas just to see how they would do in the Kansas climate. They did OK, as long as they were kept cool enough in the summer.

“We thought this is something we could do when we retired – come out and feed the animals, pet them, get spit on a little bit,” Vandament said. “I knew Mitch was never going to not be a farmer, so I thought he could grow the hay, and I could play with the animals.”

They built their first barn for the males in 2005 and a larger one for the females the following year. In 2015, in front of the larger barn about three miles north of Osborne, they opened a store featuring socks, gloves, hats, stuffed animals, sweaters, and coats made from alpaca fiber.

“The boys are up on the hill, and the girls are down here at the store because girls like to shop, and the boys like to run,” she said.

Another herd near Belleville

Ten miles northwest of Belleville, Brenda and Ray Danielson, owners of Anvil Alpacas, made their own business plan. They soon discovered their investment in alpacas paid off — just not financially.

“We’ve had them 17 years, and our first one cost $17,000,” Brenda said. “Five years later, we bought one for $8,000. Five years after that, we bought one for $3,000. The prices were going down, and we could see we weren’t going to be making money selling alpacas.”

Still, the Danielsons continued to add to their herd because they enjoyed the animals and had fun taking items made from alpaca fleece to craft shows. School groups and other visitors have enjoyed the alpacas too.

“They all have different personalities and interact with people differently,” Brenda said. “It’s just nice to be around them. They’re always happy. To me, they’re part of my family. Each one is special for a different reason.”

Eliot Gold munches on hay at Anvil Alpacas in Republic County.

The Vandaments also made the craft show circuit from 2012 to 2020, when shows were canceled. Vickie Vandament said she doesn’t plan to do craft shows in the future, since Mitch, who particularly enjoyed doing the

shows, died late in 2020.

In November, Vandament's herd added a new baby and its mother, bringing the total number to 39. The Danielsons have 19 animals, including three babies born this year. Once a year, animals in both herds are sheared, and their fleece has been taken to Shepherd's Mill in Phillipsburg to be processed into yarn.

On the yarns and other items they sell, the Danielsons like to include a photo of the individual alpaca the fleece came from and a little information about that animal.

"On the back side of the care card that has instructions how to launder it, we put a story with a few lines about the alpaca, so people get to know that Maisy is our super mom, or Eliot is our schoolteacher and cares for the babies when they're weaned, or Baxter loses 12 pounds getting a haircut," Brenda Danielson said. "I wish I could go to the beauty shop and lose 12 pounds."

On the motorhome circuit

Vandament has found an income stream that keeps her store busy, even in the summer, typically the off-season for alpaca clothing items. In 2019, her alpaca barn and store became a vendor for Harvest Host, a Vail, Colo., service that offers its members camping

See **FARM**, page 28

Each label on the yarn for sale at Anvil Alpacas includes a photo and a little story about the individual alpaca whose fleece was used to create that skein.

The Shepherd's Studio
839 Third St., Phillipsburg
785-543-3128
www.kansasfiber.com

Sally Brandon, founding owner of The Shepherd's Mill in Phillipsburg, recently sold her yarn-making machines. She now plans to spend more time at her looms.

Time to weave

Successful Phillipsburg yarn mill sold, but business to stay

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[PHILLIPSBURG] The yarn Sally Brandon was producing at The Shepherd's Mill was exactly the yarn she wanted to weave. The only problem was she was so busy making the yarn that she rarely had time to weave at all.

In November, Brandon and her husband, Jay, were under contract to sell The Shepherd's Mill. The sale will include a list of customers from 43 states as well as the equipment that spins fleece from alpaca, yak, pygora goat and sheep, as well as other fibers, into yarn that brought top dollar from knitters and weavers across the country. The yarn-making equipment from the back room would be moving to Miami County, south of Kansas City, but the retail store and weaving looms were staying put in downtown Phillipsburg.

The store is now called The Shepherd's Studio, and Sally is excited to be its artist in residence. Instead of overseeing staff who operate yarn-making machines and trouble-shooting those machines herself, she spends her time weaving, teaching, and consulting.

"Weaving has always been my passion," she said. "The yarn mill was kind of an afterthought that has been fun."

As it turned out, Brandon devoted more than 17 years to that afterthought. She said people don't believe her when she says the yarn mill was her husband's idea. Jay had gone with her in 2003 to the first-ever Great Western Alpaca Show in Denver, where she was promoting herself as a commission weaver. He became interested in the machines a small mill from Colorado was displaying in a booth next to hers. On their drive home, Jay, who in addition to farming is also a minister, suggested that opening a mill was "what the good Lord would have us do," she said.

She agreed to go visit with the county's new economic development director. Over the next six months, she attended entrepreneurship classes and wrote a business plan projecting the worst possible outcomes, primarily to convince

See **LOOM**, page 29

FARM, from page 27

locations with unique opportunities for things to see and do. Three to four self-contained campers or motor homes as long as 45 feet can park in her parking lot, and their owners get a tour, shop in the store and give treats and hugs to the alpacas.

Vandament said her business was the only Harvest Host location in the area. An added bonus for her guests is an unobstructed view of a Kansas sunset, she said.

"If anyone's going from Lawrence to Colorado, we're pretty much it," she said. "2020 was like gang busters. We had two or three a night. Everybody bought a camper and a pickup or a big motor home and had their kids out of school. Everybody was remote learning and working."

So, why not learn about alpacas?

Vickie Vandament and Ashley

No red pajamas, they're alpacas – not llamas

Native to the high altitudes of the Andes in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and Chile, alpacas are similar to llamas, but they are typically more docile and smaller, weighing 120 to 200 pounds. They have a lifespan of 15 to 25 years, and unlike llamas, which have courser fur and are used as pack or guard animals, alpacas are raised for their fine fleece, which comes in 22 natural colors.

"Their fleece was called 'fibre of the gods,' and only people who had money could afford to wear alpaca," Vandament said. Alpacas were first imported into the United States in 1984, and in the early years, $75,000 would not have been an unusual price for an alpaca, she said.

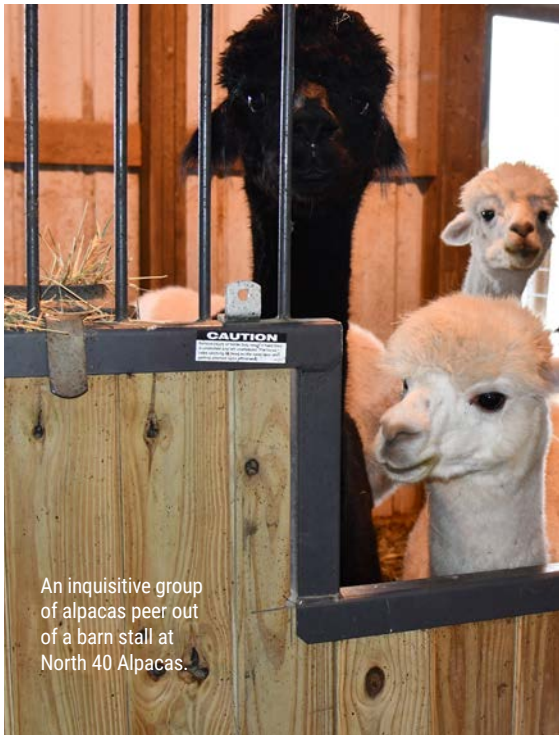
Brenda Danielson said most of her neighbors don't understand why anyone would spend money on an alpaca. She said when Ray first proposed getting some animals for their three-acre yard, she didn't know what an alpaca was.

"The farmers around here are like, 'Alpacas? What do you do with them? You can't ride them. You can't rope them. You can't milk them. What do you do with them?'" she said. What she and Ray do is shear them.

When the yarn comes back from the mill, Danielson's sister, Sandra Bostwick, crochets and knits items for the store on their farm and to sell at craft shows. Alpaca fiber makes garments that are naturally moisture wicking and stay extremely warm in cold weather and cooler when it's warmer outside.

"When we were little, Sandra was inside learning to sew and such, and I was always outside with the animals," she said, laughing. "Things haven't changed much."

Danielson said she and Ray shear their alpaca themselves, so they don't put up too much of a struggle.



An inquisitive group of alpacas peer out of a barn stall at North 40 Alpacas.

"My husband built a shearing table, and most of the alpacas will get on there and say, 'OK, I'll take my nap now while you're working on me,' " she said.

Ray also built alpaca shelters, a haybarn, gates, fences and food bowl holders.

Vandament said about 15 years ago, she and Mitch stopped doing the shearing themselves and started hiring a professional shearer from Minnesota. Other volunteers come out on shearing day in early June, and while they are at it the animals get their shots and have their teeth and toenails trimmed.

"It's kind of like their spa day," she said.

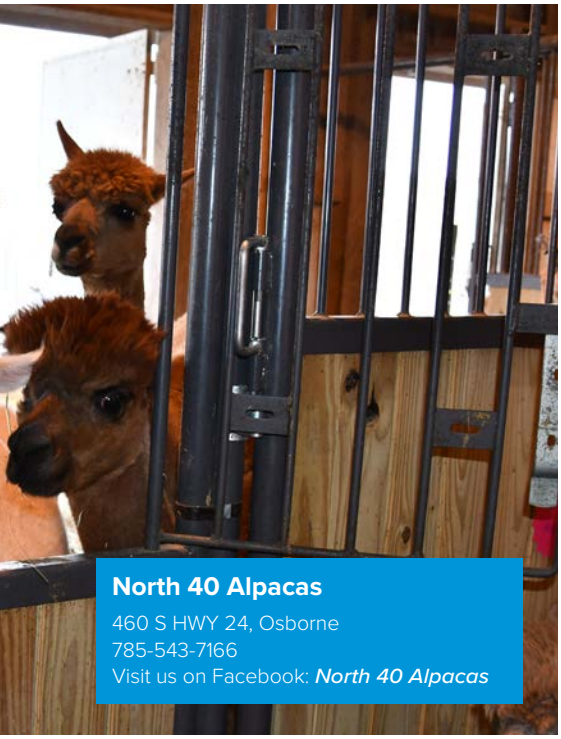
Babies! There are babies!

Danielson said the three babies born this year are keeping things lively at Anvil Alpacas.

Females ovulate when they hear a male's mating call. Males give the mating call anytime they are put in a pen with a female. "The spit test" will confirm a pregnancy about 14 days after breeding.

"If you put them back together, she'll spit him off and not let him rebreed," Vandament said. "She will spit, and she is naughty about that. It's not a pretty scene."

Females only give birth to one baby – called a cria – each year. At the end of the 11 ½-month gestation, the babies are



North 40 Alpacas
460 S HWY 24, Osborne
785-543-7166
Visit us on Facebook: ***North 40 Alpacas***

almost always born between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. In the high altitudes, where they originated, a baby born outside that time frame would die.

"Out of the 32 births we've had here, only one was born outside that time frame," Vandament said.

Vandament and Danielson both said they choose which animals to breed based on behavior. Vandament said she hopes for babies with pleasant personalities who like people.

"That's kind of unusual, but I want our animals to be nice and hopefully personable when we have people come on the ranch," she said. "I've been to a lot of ranches, and a lot of them have animals that are not near as friendly. They're more standoffish, and they have more spitters."

Vandament said as a result, she can allow guests to get in a pen in the pasture with her alpacas, and even young children have been able to lead them with a halter. The Osborne school previously had a Kiss an Alpaca fundraiser, and Vandament said she hopes students can come out and read to the animals.

"I have lots of good ideas," she said. "I'd like to have people come out and do dancing with the alpacas or yoga with the alpacas. The alpacas could just be present – eating and observing." ■

LOOM, from page 27

her husband the mill wasn't God's plan. Instead, the process changed her mind, and she began thinking of the mill as "a neat opportunity."

"I don't know of too many weavers who are able to create the yarns they want specifically for what they want to make," she said. "In my mind that was pretty intriguing."

As a result of her low-ball projections, Brandon said her first five-year business plan ended up being "spot-on."

After that, things began to take off.

"I'm not sure how we earned the reputation we've earned in the industry. It kind of boggles my mind," she said. "We've gained a following, and my customers are wonderful."

A contract with Tabbethia Haubold-Magee of Long Island Yarn and Farm who sheers alpaca and sheep all up and down the East Coast led to more connections. What woven goods Brandon had time to make were offered at the Hampton Classic Horse Show through the Long Island Yarn and Farm booth. But Brandon really knew she'd made the big time when a yarn she produced was used by online knitting personality Kristy Glass. Glass knitted with the grey yarn with pops of pink — inspired by a pot-bellied pig named Pansy — while leading a flash mob of knitters on a New York subway train on their way to the annual Vogue Knitting Live show.

"I would be a real genius if I was the one that came up with all this, but it just seems like I get connected to the right people," she said. "I've met some really neat people over the years."

Finding the thread

Brandon's connection to weaving began before she was born.

In the 1930s, her grandmother launched the local 4-H club. When Sally and her siblings came along, they all showed cattle in 4-H. But in her freshman year of high school, she told her cattleman father she was tired of dealing with the large, heavy animals and would prefer sheep.

"My dad said, 'Your grandpa would turn over in his grave,' but he and my uncle went to the sale the next Saturday and bought me 10 head of sheep," she said. "I fell in love with the sheep."

When she applied during college for a 4-H exchange trip, she was selected to travel to Finland. There, she was exposed to a culture where weaving was part of the lifestyle. Rugs, curtains and table coverings were all handwoven, and she had her first experience of weaving at a weaving house, where looms were set up for public use.

This yarn-making machine and others were recently moved from Phillipsburg.

A few months later she happily returned to Phillips County, where weaving took the back burner while she planned a wedding. Jay had recorded his marriage proposal on cassette tape and mailed it to her overseas.

She hadn't intended to fall in love with a farmer. She came of age when farmers were driving their tractors to Washington, D.C., to let the government know how hard things were for small producers.

"Every FFA speech I wrote had some part of farm stress because that's what the 80s were," she said. "I laugh because I know that's why The Shepherd's Mill was here. That's been what's kept us stable and paid our wages so that Jay could be a minister and grow the farm."

The future looms

Once married, Brandon was back to thinking about weaving again. Although

See **WEAVE**, page 30

Sally Brandon's store in Phillipsburg features a wide variety of fine yarns.

WEAVE, from page 29

she'd learned to love weaving in Finland, she knew nothing about setting up a loom. When a loom kit she ordered arrived from Canada, the French instructions weren't much help, but she sat in the middle of their living room and started figuring it out.

She set up her studio in a little house about 10 miles north of Phillipsburg, but people weren't exactly beating a path to her door for handwoven goods.

"My mother made me put 'antiques' on the sign," she said. "She said, 'Nobody is going to stop, but if we say antiques, they might get intrigued.' My brother collects and sells antiques, so he brought over some pieces for us. It tickled me. It's what you've got to do to get people to slow down."

About two years later, Jay proposed the yarn mill. Brandon moved her studio into the downtown location they secured for the mill, but for about the first five years of operating the mill, time at a loom didn't easily fit into her busy schedule.

That improved for a while, but by about year 10, she had eight people working in the mill, and Brandon spent all of her time supervising or training.

"That was hard for me," she said. "There is a lot I learned, and I really appreciate that, but my personality profile does not point to me being a supervisor."

Now that the mill has been sold, the new owners are using Brandon's instructions to make the same yarns Brandon had produced for clients, but now under the name MM Fiber Mill. Brandon is continuing to be the general contractor for her major client to ensure that client continues to receive the yarns she wants.

But mostly she spends her time weaving, benefitting from connections already in place to a larger online market. She weaves using everything from pieces of cardboard to her large computer-aided production loom.

"I focus on one-of-a-kind items, but I try to do a balance of artistic and production weaving to make it more cost effective," she said. "I can change up the colors or the patterning in the fabric to make each piece unique."

She also plans to do some teaching and consulting .

"There isn't a textile college for spinning everything from alpaca to yak. My knowledge is all hard-learned." ▪

Sharon and Doyle Neher

Tractor a

Pfeifer man enjoys sharing collection of farm toys

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[PFEIFER] Standing amid rows of carefully maintained toy tractors; cardboard, wood, tin and plastic barns with little animals and a wide variety of other collectibles, Doyle Neher didn't want people to get the wrong idea about him.

"You might think I've done nothing but play all my life," the Pfeifer man said. "I did milk a few cows."

Since 2015, Neher and his wife, Sharon, have enjoyed welcoming visitors to the Harmony Farm Toy Museum on their property in Pfeifer. Neher started amassing his impressive collection while Christmas shopping for toy tractors for his grandkids in 1991.

At Tractor Supply, Neher saw a model of an A Farmall tractor like his father's – the first tractor he'd learned to drive. He decided he needed a toy tractor, too.

"I stood there staring at it, and Sharon said, 'If you want it, go ahead and get it,'" Doyle said.

Above is the Ayrshire statue Doyle Neher found after 10 years of searching. On the right is a Guernsey.

Doyle Neher enjoys sharing his farm toy collection. He encourages anyone who wants to see the Harmony Farm Toy Museum to give him a call at (620) 662-7592 or email him at *dsneher@gmail.com*.

ttraction

"Little did I know," Sharon added.

That first tractor led to hundreds more. Now shelves around the walls of the museum are filled with 1/16-scale tractors, combines and replicas of farm machinery of every make and model. About 100 are hand-made by Neher or painstakingly restored by him. Some are exceedingly rare collectibles that he sought for years. Many were well-used but cleaned up nice. He found them on eBay, at garage sales, antique stores, toy shows, traded for them with other collectors and received them as gifts.

"It pleased me to buy used toys and fix them up. I always thought toys were made to play with," Neher said in a document he wrote to inform his son, Jeff, about the collection.

Recollections of collection

As Neher leads visitors through his museum, he shares detailed recollections about the toys – where and from whom they were acquired, where they originally sold or the fate of the real piece of equipment after which they were modeled.

"You'll find more of those toys than you will the real thing," Neher said of a Samson tractor. Overly aggressive cost-cutting measures had been imposed on production of the real tractor to make it more cost-competitive, he said.

"I've heard they got every one of them back but one because they were just a piece of junk," he said.

A miniature train hauling farm equipment circles a farm and city diorama on one table. Neher said he bought most of that display from a Michigan man who sold him his entire collection. Neher kept what he wanted, sold the rest and ended up making his money back.

More than 100 farm sets, which date back to the early 1900s, reflect the times they were made. Milton Bradley farm sets sold by Sears between 1939 and 1949 started out containing a selection of rubber animals. During World War II, rubber went to the war effort, so the farm animals were made of clay. After the war, rubber animals bounced back.

Neher pointed out a set of farm buildings that nest inside each other, saying he knew it existed from a reference book, but the one in his collection is the only real one he's ever seen.

"That would be true of several of these farm sets," he said.

Neher's been to the National Farm Toy Show and participated in shows throughout Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri for many years. He said he made several thousand dollars before retiring from the show circuit.

"I sold at toy shows almost as many toys as I still have," he said.

Over the years, people from across town and across the country who shared his interest in collecting farm toys have become close friends. They are a big part of what made the hobby so enjoyable, he said.

Herding the cattle

Parts of Neher's collection tell the story of his family. There's a toy Case steam tractor just like the one his grandfather's threshing crew stands in front of in an heirloom photo displayed beside it. There are the farm buildings he and his son constructed and modeled after their real houses and barns. Then there are the cows.

Neher grew up on his parents' dairy farm and spent his working years as a dairyman on a farm near Hutchinson. Hundreds of trophies and ribbons his Guernsey cows won are displayed.

His most prized possession is one of the cows in a small herd of Display Master cow statues contained in a glass case. The owners of state fair-winning cattle used to receive the breed-specific statues of their animals. On display are Guernsey statues family members took home for having the reserve national champion cow in 1978 and the best cow owned and bred by exhibitor in 1985. Joining them in the case are statues of Holstein, Jersey, Brown Swiss and – hardest to find – an Ayrshire. The Ayrshire headquarters burned down, and most of that breed's models went up in flames, he said.

"When I decided I was going to collect farm items, the first thing I started looking for were these cattle," he said. "The Aryshire was just about impossible."

After a decade of searching, he found one on eBay being sold by a woman in Vermont who bought it at a garage sale. Both horns, one ear and the tail were broken off, but under Neher's care, they've grown back.

"I loved going to the fairs and couldn't wait for the next one to come after one just got over," he said. ▪

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