HIGHLIGHTING REGIONAL LIFESTYLE, BUSINESS & ARTS

# NORTHWEST KANSAS TODAY

*Fall 2022* | VOLUME 4, ISSUE 2

Feature Story

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Counties launch efforts to teach about resources, opportunities for leadership

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*Northwest Kansas Today* is a publication of the Dane G. Hansen Foundation
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**OUR MISSION:**
The Dane G. Hansen Foundation is committed to providing opportunities for the people of Northwest Kansas to enjoy the highest possible quality of life.



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

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**ON THE COVER:** Tessa Weltmer, 9, of Smith Center, dons a coyote fur hat and holds a percussion black powder pistol at the North Central Kansas Outdoor Youth Fair in Osborne. (Photo by Erin Mathews)




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As I wrap up my 28th year as a trustee, I marvel at how far we have come. The foundation has continually grown in scope while remaining true to Mr. Hansen's vision — set more than 57 years ago.

As we always have, every month the trustees review grant applications for various projects in our 26-county service area. We continue to work with the scholarship committee to support students we hope will return to Northwest Kansas.

Starting in 2016, the Trustees added some more strategic initiatives to the Foundation's work. We launched a new organization, Northwest Kansas Economic Innovation Center, Inc., to focus on economic development in our area. You can read about one of their successes helping a small manufacturer in Quinter.

Since 2017, we have created focused initiatives for early literacy, expansion of the arts, educational enrichment, planned giving, leadership development, and child care. We have poured millions of dollars into countywide community foundations to help create additional sources of philanthropy in the area. We are partnering with area organizations to address the need for housing because we have families moving back or simply choosing to live here from other parts of the country.

We see the change that is happening in our communities. We wanted others to see it too, so in 2019 we launched this magazine. It's been helpful in sharing our collective story about Northwest Kansas and its people. Some featured in this issue include a young paraplegic athlete, the people who started a youth fair in Osborne, and those who established the farmer's market in Phillipsburg.

The magazine shows the opportunities available in Northwest Kansas for innovative businesses, such as the family raising miniature cattle or those raising pheasants, or those serving hunters to harvest the pheasants. And it highlights places to visit — the fall pumpkin patches or our unique museums.

There is a sense of renewed faith in our rural way of life. It's catching. Read about the city of WaKeeney and how an out-of-towner has helped promote volunteerism and change — or about the county leadership programs and how they are encouraging the next generation of community leaders.

Speaking of new leadership, for me, 28 years as a trustee has been challenging, exciting, and fulfilling. Now it's time for me to step down and enjoy my retirement. As of the end of the year, I'm looking forward to watching the foundation's work in Northwest Kansas from a new perspective.

The trustees encourage you to be a part of your community — join the rural revolution happening in Northwest Kansas. Mr. Hansen saw the potential, and so do we.

Charles A. Moyer

Cy Moyer, Trustee

# Leading the way

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

Above: Members of the Russell County Leadership class took a mini bus tour of Russell County highlights.

Right: Alice Hill relies on certified organic methods to control pests in her "topless high tunnel" greenhouses. Spiders do a lot of the pest control.

# *Counties launch efforts to teach about resources, opportunities for leadership*

*Look at the flaws in what exists and create something better, advised a woman working toward creation of a regional food system alliance.*

*Word spreads fast in a small town. If you don't know what you're doing, everybody else does, warned a woman who runs a local event center.*

*Always stay where you have an escape plan, cautioned a volunteer firefighter.*

Members of area leadership classes are getting solid advice from Northwest Kansas people currently leading the way in a variety of capacities. From businesspeople to county government officials, each is imparting insights and sharing information with young people who may one day be in their shoes.

To help mold future leaders, the Dane G. Hansen Foundation's NWKansas LEADS initiative was launched in 2021 after a need for leadership development was identified in all 26 counties the foundation serves. Currently, leadership programs in Norton, Osborne, Phillips and Russell counties are being funded through the initiative. Other counties, such as Ellis, Ellsworth, Mitchell and Saline, have continuing leadership programs that were already in place.

"One of the things participants say they like about the class the most is getting to learn more about the resources available in their county and the area," said Nadine Sigle, community consultant for the Hansen Foundation.

## Russell County Leadership

In Russell County, on Sept. 14, eight leadership class participants rode to Paradise and Lucas on a small tour bus belonging to Agrilead, a Russell business. Jeff Ochampaugh, president of Agrilead, was at the wheel, and his son, Andrew, the leadership class board chairman, was also onboard.

"We're trying to explore different industries and success stories and learn about the challenges each of our communities face," Andrew Ochampaugh said. "Hopefully we'll begin to connect leaders in our county and communities and figure out ways to collaborate to overcome some of the challenges."

The Russell Chamber of Commerce and Russell Development Inc. joined forces to make the class happen, with funding through NWKansas LEADS. The class held its first meeting in August and will continue to meet a day a month through spring. Andrew Ochampaugh said he hopes there will be enough interest to make the class an annual event.

Diana VanBruggen, city production superintendent for the Russell water treatment plant, said she applied for the current class because she felt she had something to learn – being relatively new to a supervisory role – as well as something to offer.

"Usually, we overlook water. We just expect to wake up in the morning and take a shower and flush the toilet and make a cup of coffee, and you don't really think about it. It's just one of those things that's always there," she said. "We're in a drought, and maybe it would be nice if I could offer input on what we do to make it so that you will always have water at your tap."

### Leadership in crisis

In Paradise, the importance of water to fight fire became readily apparent as volunteer firefighter Todd Schneider, of the Waldo-Paradise-Natoma Rural Fire Department, described what he and other firefighters went through on Dec. 15, when dry conditions and nearly 100 mph winds propelled a blaze unlike anything they'd ever seen.

Dispatcher Becky Anschutz, a member of the leadership class, said she and another dispatcher handled 1,200 calls in the first hour of the blaze.

> *"These folks haven't just crawled off in a corner and given up. They're rebuilding their community, and when this is all said and done ... your community will come back stronger than it was."*
>
> **JEFF OCHAMPAUGH** | PRESIDENT, AGRILEAD

Brynae Thompson, assistant manager of Paradise Grain Co., said ranching is at the heart of the community, and it will likely take years before the cattle lost in the fire are replaced. Her family alone lost 200 head.

"There are still a lot of unknowns, but we're moving in a more positive way," she said. "People are rebuilding. If we could get some rain and Mother Nature

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**LEADERSHIP**, from page 5

would work with us here, that would be very helpful."

Jeff Ochampaugh said Paradise was a great example of leadership in crisis.

"These folks haven't just crawled off in a corner and given up," he said. "They're rebuilding their community, and when this is all said and done, my suspicion is that with your faith and your energy and your attitude, your community will come back stronger than it was."

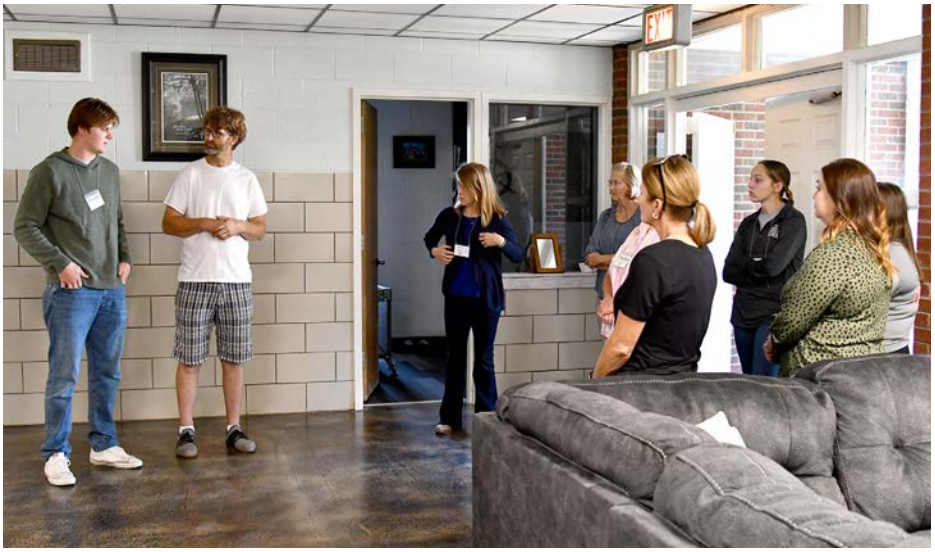
Back on the bus, the class drove to rural Luray, where they met Alice Hill, who — with Krista Ulrich — created the Step Back in Time Food Market in Luray. Hill is a proponent of a return to regional food systems that provide for most nutritional needs locally. She grows produce for the Luray market in two large greenhouses of her own design, which she calls "topless high tunnels." The greenhouses have anti-hail netting that allows sunshine and rain through the top, and plastic sheeting to block wind and pests on the sides.

"Luray was perfect for the concept of feeding ourselves first," she said. "There was no grocery store there. It's been 11 years since they had one. You lose half a day to go to Russell and get groceries."

## Osborne County Leadership

Jim Hindman, of Osborne, said Osborne County leadership classes had been held annually in the 1990s. In 2017, a steering committee was formed to restart the course, which is held every other year. They applied for an Osborne County Community Foundation grant to support activities and then shifted to NWKansas LEADS. Hindman was both a member of the steering committee and of the first class in 2018-19.

"A generation ago, there were twice as many people to spread out different volunteer jobs because there were so many more people living in the area," Hindman said. "The problem is there's half the number of people living here now.




Ron Thompson and his father, Martin, discuss their plans for Nation Builders Ministries with Ron's Osborne County Leadership classmates. The Christian outreach for men is based in the former Alton-Osborne Junior High building.

"There was a huge need in the county for this because if we want to continue to be successful, sustain and maybe even potentially grow, there's a whole population that needs leadership training to ascend to those roles and be able to multitask, communicate with different generations, learn how to run a meeting and file for political office and not be afraid of it."

LaRhea Cole, of Downs, was also in that first class and now serves on the steering committee. While the course covers helpful information about personality traits and leadership styles, she said the countywide networking opportunities afforded class participants have been the most beneficial aspect of the program.

"Our classes travel to each community in the county, and we've had people, including myself, that hadn't been to some of those communities," she said. "We got to learn what they had to offer."

This year's class includes six adults and, for the first time, five high school students. They meet one day a month for six months. After that, they'll be asked to devise a class project.

*"We're trying to get that younger generation involved so they can grow as leaders and want to stay here. Personally, I've grown as a leader. I've taken on some more roles."*

**LARHEA COLE** | OSBORNE COUNTY LEADERSHIP STEERING COMMITTEE

"We're trying to get that younger generation involved so they can grow as leaders and want to stay here," Cole said. "Personally, I've grown as a leader. I've taken on some more roles."

She said her message to others is to try. Why not?

"You may fail, but you can learn," she said.

### Small town, big opportunities

During a Sept. 27 session in Alton, the class met several community leaders.

"One thing everybody here has in common in their businesses is they are in a small rural community and yet they have plenty of business because people believe them, trust them, and they're needed,"

said Ginger Howell of Alton PRIDE.

Shelley Roach, owner of the Front Porch Event Center, who served the class lunch, said she had enjoyed working as a school secretary for more than 20 years but realized she needed to try something new when she wasn't keeping up with technology.

The Bull City Community Foundation had moved the event center building into town but keeping it staffed was a financial challenge. When Roach inquired three years ago about buying the building, the foundation was ready to sell.

"The Alton Jubilee was the 200th event I've served since we opened," she said. "It's truly been a blessing. I work very hard at it, but I love it. I've done everything from weddings to funerals to double funerals to family reunions to birthday parties. My big birthday party people are my seniors. I've done from age 80 to 101."

Class member Ron Thompson led his classmates on a walk to the former Alton-Osborne Junior High School building, where he is helping his father, Martin, start a Christian outreach for men called Nation Builders Ministries. They plan to teach work skills that will be in demand in the Alton area. Three men had come to live at the facility since they opened Sept. 3. Ron Thompson estimated once renovations are complete, the facility could house 10 to 15 men.

"I don't know that this would have happened anywhere else," Martin Thompson said. "You guys have a very blessed town and community, and we're very grateful to be here with you."

# Phillips County Horizon Leaders

In Phillips County on Sept. 29, five young people who were recruited to participate in the leadership class toured the county courthouse with their five established-businesspeople mentors. Morris Engle, who serves as staff for the class, said the group has been meeting every other month since November 2021 for dinner and an evening seminar covering topics such as volunteerism and governmental action. He said each class will last about two years.

Phillips County Register of Deeds Robert Keesee shows members of the county leadership class a map of Phillipsburg.

"It's important to the future of our small community that everyone sees that they do have a role and participates by coaching a softball team or being treasurer of their church or running for city council," he said. "Leadership in about any aspect of community life."

Class member Leyla Karim, 22, said she grew up partly in Phillipsburg and partly in California. Karim, who recently returned from a visit to family in Dubai and Yemen, works in a coffee shop.

"I'm hoping to find out more, and if I want to stay here, I'll probably get more involved in the community," she said. Classmate Nick Arment, 21, a Phillipsburg native who works at a furniture and appliance store, said that pretty much sums it up for him, too.

## Leadership project in Norton County

In Norton County, the next leadership class will be held in 2023-24. A class had been available from the late 1990s until 2014. With the new funding, a class was launched again in 2021 and was completed in April. Currently, class members are working on their class project, said Keith VanSkike, K-State Twin Creeks Extension agent, who helps facilitate.

He said Norton County's history of leadership training has equipped and motivated about 100 area young people into leadership roles.

"You see them peppered around the community," he said.

Taryn Graham, a 2021-22 class member, is among the newest leadership-trained community members. She said the class was beneficial.

"It opened my eyes a lot to what was going on in our community," she said.

She said for a class project, the group researched options for a piece of land adjacent to Washington Park that was recently donated to the city. She said class members visited parks in Hays, Concordia, Belleville and Wichita while traveling to and from a conference at the Kansas Leadership Center in Wichita.

The class decided to recommend construction of an outdoor pavilion with public restrooms. Graham said in October that an architect with ties to Norton is developing plans for the project. She said a pavilion would be useful during the annual car show and other public events.

She said the class plans to be involved in fundraising and other steps to make the pavilion a reality.

"It kind of suits everybody," she said. "It's not just aimed toward one age group or one activity. It's something the entire community can enjoy." ▪

# Lift Up WaKeeney

## Community supporters launch effort to clean up, improve city

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

[WAKEENEY] On the plane ride home after attending his mother-in-law's funeral in WaKeeney, Richard Wittenauer pulled out his yellow legal pad and started writing. His notes became a letter sent out near Christmastime last year to others who care about WaKeeney.

RICHARD WITTENAUER

"What if we, as current or former residents of WaKeeney, donated our 'time, talent, or treasure' to help keep our town the truly special place that it was and is to all of us?" Wittenauer asked, proposing the formation of a group called Lift Up WaKeeney.

An endodontist who grew up in St. Louis, Mo., and now lives in Mission Viejo, Calif., may not be the first person you'd expect to inspire an effort to improve a town of about 1,800 in Northwest Kansas. Nevertheless, he did – and already there have been some tangible results.

"Now my in-laws are both gone, and I looked at the great things they did in that small town, and I kept thinking about others who had relatives who left their legacy in WaKeeney," he said. "It feels like now that they're gone it's time for us to step up and do something."

Wittenauer credited his late father-in-law, Wes Randall, with making a generational change for the youth of WaKeeney by spearheading efforts to build a track and a gymnasium during his tenure as high school athletic director. Wittenauer's mother-in-law, Elaine, was known by children throughout the town as an elementary school lunch lady.

"I was riveted by the outpouring of love shown her by the community at her service, but additionally, by the comments made during one of the eulogies by our daughter, Sarah, about how much her grandma and also the community of WaKeeney has affected her life," Wittenauer said.

While attending the funeral at the First United Methodist Church, Wittenauer noticed a sign in the sanctuary that showed the number of people at that week's church service: 23.

"The Methodist Church was big when my wife Laura was growing up," he said. "Services were packed on Sunday. There were three rows just for the choir. Every night there were youth groups, Bible study groups, men's fellowship."

He said Laura's high school graduating class in 1981 had 64 kids. There are 35 in WaKeeney's current senior class.

Wittenauer said all of that hit him "like a gut punch." He'd been regularly visiting WaKeeney for 40 years, and he felt a strong connection to the community.

"The next day, I got on the plane, and I thought, 'I can't let this town just dribble down to nothing,'" he said. He reached out to people about Lift Up WaKeeney and filed the paperwork to make it an official nonprofit organization.

"I put the word out, and people responded," he said. "There's 150 people in this group right now."

He said several times he has heard something along the lines of "We're choosing to live here. We want to raise our family here, so anything we can do to make this town better, we're all in." He's also heard from people who grew up in WaKeeney and live elsewhere but want to help.

### Bringing back the Bryant

The group's first workday came in May. Trego County Economic Development Director Cheryl Gibson was working on a project she called A New Day for Old 40, and she was launching a cleanup effort for properties along historic U.S.


Volunteers made quick work of clearing rooms at the Bryant Motel of damaged furnishings and carpeting during a Lift Up WaKeeney effort in May. (COURTESY PHOTO)

The 55 volunteers who showed up cleared the Bryant Motel in four hours. (COURTESY PHOTO)

Highway 40 — Barclay Avenue within the city limits.

One property on Barclay is the Bryant Motel. Built in the 1950s, the Bryant had regularly hosted guests until WaKeeney was hit by a devastating hailstorm in August 2017. Hail the size of grapefruit tore holes in the roof and smashed windows. The building has set deteriorating ever since.

"We put the call out and got 55 people to show up," Wittenauer said. "I fed them breakfast on the courthouse lawn, and we all went over as a group and cleaned out every room of the motel and got it ready for renovation."

Friends Helen Tinkler and Cindy Welch had purchased the motel earlier this year with the hope of restoring it. The work ahead was overwhelming, but they didn't want to see the motel demolished.

"The amount of work that was done in a four-hour period would have taken us months," Tinkler said. "For me, it wasn't just the fact that the work got done. It was how the work got done. These were people from across the community – older people like me down to kids in elementary school – who were there just to lend a hand because they believe in the future of WaKeeney and the future of Trego County. More than the work getting done, that's the big story."

Since then, the motel's roof has been replaced and work has begun on replacing broken windows, she said. Efforts are underway to schedule construction, plumbing and electrical.

Wittenauer said he "can't even express what it felt like" to complete the cleanup.

"People showed up with horse trailers and skid loaders, and some of these farmers came with trucks and equipment. I didn't ask them to do that. They just did," he said. "They hauled out couches and mattresses and old carpeting. They took 50 loads of stuff to the dump. It was an unbelievable event to help our community."

*"People showed up with horse trailers and skid loaders, and some of these farmers came with trucks and equipment. I didn't ask them to do that. They just did."*

**RICHARD WITTENAUER** | LIFT UP WAKEENEY

## Just getting started

On Aug. 5, Wittenauer invited every business owner, city council member, county commissioner, mayor, pastoral alliance person and all Lift Up WaKeeney members for a dinner at the Shiloh Winery to explore the possibility of applying for the Kansas Main Street program.

"I cannot wait. We are setting up a leadership committee to drive the application process and give the presentation to Kansas Main Street," Wittenauer said. "I want to talk about how great this town is, and we want to do anything we can to make this a vigorous, thriving community."

Wittenauer said other projects are in the works. People are talking about investing in housing.

"I think we've got the possibility of still doing a lot of great stuff," he said. "I think we're just getting started."

Gibson, who became economic development director just over a year ago, said Wittenauer "and his 'want-to' came along at just the right time." Several efforts are underway to strengthen the community.

Gibson is also working to revitalize downtown. To increase opportunities for entrepreneurship, she saw to it that WaKeeney became a NetWork Kansas E-community this year. During Buzzard Bash on April 22, 2023, she hopes to bring in investors from out of state who see the potential in WaKeeney's business district.

"Everybody in Northwest Kansas has buildings like we have on Barclay – buildings that are kind of falling apart now because nobody's paying attention to them. I'm hoping to bring in some different eyeballs to rescue these buildings and bring them back to life," she said. "I call them fallen swans. I'm thinking with the right investors, they will become swans again."

Gibson believes that outside investors will be charmed by WaKeeney, just as she was. She moved from the Denver metro area after she and her husband found a house they loved and determined that the community had a grocery store, a library, gas stations, a post office and a good water supply.

See **WAKEENEY**, page 17


# More

## The Phillips County Farmer's Market is all about community

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING

[PHILLIPSBURG] Three friends in a car, energized from attending Cultivating Courage, a retreat focused on women in agriculture, cooked up an idea that has become a transformative event in Phillipsburg.

"We were challenged to find ways to spark our passion and give back to the community," said Myndi Krafft, who owns and operates Krafft Beef with her husband, Jason.

Krafft; Katie Van Allen, who works in radiology at Phillips County Hospital and helps her husband, Matt, operate Van Allen Seed; and Ashley Schilowsky, kindergarten teacher and co-owner of Westbrick Salon & Boutique, were the attendees of the retreat. On their way home, they called friends Jennifer Hamons, a physician assistant at Phillips County Hospital, and Deb Weishaar, consumer science teacher at Phillipsburg High School.

As they drove, plans for a farmer's market for their home community began to take shape. Like traditional markets, the five wanted to connect local producers — animal products and produce — with consumers. But they were thinking bigger. They wanted the market to also be a destination event for families.

"This was the perfect storm. After COVID, people were wanting to support local," Krafft said. "Consumers wanted to connect with where their food comes from, and millennials wanted event-style presentation, so we included food trucks, entertainment and the kids' corner."

The five women went to work and found great support.

"We met with city officials and the county commissioners and they were all very supportive," said Van Allen. "People are sharing their ideas, stepping up to help, and the commissioners agreed to close the courthouse square to traffic and parking on event days, so kids can run around safely."

"We wanted it to be a family event," Weishaar said.

The five planners evolved into a formal board and filed for nonprofit status as Phillips County Farmer's Market. Their first market was in June. They were not sure what to expect,

Top to bottom:

Shoppers line up for supper at one of the many food booths.

Market vendors sell fresh fruits and vegetables as well as other homemade items.

Five friends started the market and serve as board members: Jennifer Hamons, Katie Van Allen, Myndi Krafft, Deb Weishaar and Ashley Schilowsky.

Grace Grau, Phillipsburg, sells a homemade blanket to Max Van Allen. Grau said she's been making blankets for about 20 years.

# e than a Market

but they estimate more than 500 people turned out. The market repeated every second Tuesday of the month through October and will start again next summer.

They do not have an exact method for calculating attendance, but said they get numbers from the food vendors, and that gives them a good idea. The five board members are also always in attendance, helping with any questions or issues that come up, so they have a direct feel for the size of the crowd.

## Homemade or Homegrown

"Vendors are limited to "homemade or homegrown," Van Allen said. The number of vendors has varied from 25 to 32. In September, there were 30 booths. They ranged from beef products to floral arrangements, to handmade blankets and crocheted goods, to fresh fruits and vegetables.

In the kids' corner, corn hole, face painting and a giant "Operation" game were available courtesy of Phillips County Hospital. Each month a different club or business sponsors the corner and provides the games and activities.

"People are getting really creative with the booths," Weishaar said. "Tonight, we have a professional photographer doing family pictures, and our face painter this month also does caricatures."

First National Bank of Phillipsburg sponsors wooden Market Money coins for children who participate in the kids' corner games, or sometimes the board passes them out at random to children on the grounds. Each coin carries a value of $2 that can be spent at any booth. The bank then reimburses the vendors for any coins they collected that evening.

"Kids get one coin per market. It teaches them to spend responsibly. It was a very creative idea," Weishaar said.

The market is open from 4 to 7 p.m. The board said the time frame has worked well to offer a steady stream of traffic.

"We get the seniors and sometimes the young families in the afternoon, and the after-work crowd starts about 5 or 5:30," Krafft said.

4-year old "Magpie," Margaret Woerth of Agra gets her face painted at the Phillipsburg Farmer's Market in September.

## It's about community

Establishing and growing the market has been a lot of work for the five busy women. But they collectively say that the payoff has been worth the effort.

"Seeing the community come out and support the local businesses has been wonderful," Van Allen said.

Following each market, the board gathers that evening to go through the event while it is fresh in their minds. They talk about what worked, what did not work as well, and what ideas they have for the following month. Then they meet again two weeks before the next market to solidify the plans.

"It's very fluid," Weishaar said. "We are able to switch gears quickly if we need to."

Though they are open to ideas, board members are resolved to stick to their homemade and homegrown rule. They do not allow multilevel marketing companies to set up booths.

"We are constantly evolving," Van Allen said. "We are like sponges soaking up the ideas people tell us, and are learning as we go. And our vendors are evolving, too. For example, there were few vendors with tents the first month and now nearly every vendor has a tent. Vendors who have done this before share ideas with us from other markets, so we can improve for next year."

Krafft points out that the commerce is good, but the goal is community.

Schilowsky had recently shared a story with the group about overhearing two elderly market customers talking as they browsed. They were both widowed, and one relayed to the other that he hated walking into a room alone. He said it was nice to be at the market where you just join the crowd, there's always people to talk to, and everyone was friendly.

Weishaar said, "We were all tired after the market that night, but then Ashley told us that, and we were re-energized." ▪

Right: Darlene, Dan, Justin and Tyrel Chupp work together in Quinter at their business, Premier Tillage.

Far Right: When not in use, the Minimizer folds up to about the width of the tractor.

Background: Small clods on the top of the soil help prevent blowing topsoil.

# A Cut Above

## Quinter plow manufacturing firm looks toward expansion

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[QUINTER] After decades of repairing farm equipment, Dan Chupp had decided to try his hand at building his own plow. But just as his business was really getting started, the bank that provided the business loans was failing.

"We had a bank fail on us in the midst of the most crucial moments of getting up and going," Chupp said. The line of credit that Premier Tillage had used to buy steel to make into plows was frozen.

That's when the company's chief financial officer, Monte Keller, began communicating with the Northwest Kansas Economic Innovation Center, Inc., a private operating foundation based in Norton that works with existing businesses in need of financial resources or mentoring. When Keller informed NWKEICI of the size of the company's payroll, the board decided to act. They provided a loan to allow Premier Tillage to buy steel and keep producing plows.

"Premier Tillage is another shining star in Northwest Kansas," said Scott Sproul, president and chief executive officer of NWKEICI. "Ag production is the largest economy in Northwest Kansas, and this manufacturer is building blade plows that are shipped all over the United States. It is a major employer in Gove County and a large contributor to its local economy."

Keller said NWKEICI was there when the company needed it.

"The cool thing that came out of this is the company's stronger than ever before," Keller said. "You have to have that financial oxygen to get you from point A to point B."

That was in 2019. Then came the challenges of 2020. Thanks to federal programs that provided funding during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as changes in the market that allowed the company to start charging for plows upon order, Premier Tillage has continued to grow.

"It's a great company, and it feels good to see it have the financial structure it needs," Keller said. "We have lots of great people here, and we have a roadmap now for where we're at and where we're headed."

Premier Tillage, which employs between 30 and 40 people at its three locations in Quinter, is now on the verge of expansion, Chupp said. Plans are being considered for a new, larger production space, and ideas are being developed for additional equipment to enhance the product line.

Three decades of knowledge about the weak spots on existing equipment helped form the design of the Premier Tillage Minimizer. In 2021, the company sold about 60 plows. This year, they are on track to build 72. The goal is to get to 100 annually — and then keep going, Chupp said.

"Basically, what we're trying to do is minimize your cost, minimize your weeds, minimize inputs," Chupp said.

### All in the family

As young boys, Chupp's sons, Justin and Tyrel, spent summers in their dad's pickup, traveling from one farm to another assisting him as best they could while he repaired broken plows.

Now, they both work with their father — Tyrel on marketing, research and development, and "whatever else yells the loudest that day," and Justin on tool and die, programming the computerized machinery and "whatever breaks down."

> *"We have lots of great people here, and we have a roadmap now for where we're at and where we're headed."*
>
> **MONTE KELLER** | CFO, PREMIER TILLAGE

Since the Chupp men built a prototype for the Minimizer in 2014, some of Dan's previous customers have given up on their old plows and purchased the Minimizer. If Dan could make their old plows work so much better, surely he could design a plow that would operate better from the start, they reasoned.

"If you're 100 miles from home and you fix somebody's stuff, you're a genius," Dan said with a smile.

That said, he believes the Minimizer, which comes in seven sizes ranging from 25- to 66-feet, is more durable and does work better in some important ways. Its V-shaped blades can run through a field faster and plow shallower, slicing through the roots and efficiently killing chemical-resistant weeds in fallow fields while leaving the surface level, he said.

"I understand dry land and how to conserve moisture and what we're doing to control the weed population and soil

erosion," he said. "We're working on things that allow that to happen."

Supply chain shortages have necessitated some design changes, not all of which have come easy, but Premier Tillage is better off than some companies because most parts and supplies needed are American made. The company also makes and sells replacement blades and other parts for existing equipment.

## Demand increasing

The news that the demand for plows is increasing might come as a surprise for people who have heard of recent farming techniques that either eliminate tillage or reduce tillage.

The National Resource Conservation Service says minimizing disturbance to the earth is important. Overuse of tillage can contribute to soil compaction, erosion and disruption of microorganisms and organic processes that make soil healthy. In western Kansas, topsoil being carried off in the wind is of particular concern.

But the no-till method relies on herbicides, and weeds are becoming resistant. Herbicides can also be harmful to microorganisms in the soil.

"Weeds have adapted. They've mutated. The interesting thing about it is these weeds are changing quicker than they can come up with modes of spray," Dan said.

Dan said many farmers who a few years ago would have had their fields sprayed are back to using a plow for weed control. Organic farmers also often rely on tillage to control weeds, since herbicides aren't an option for them.

Dan said a blade plow doesn't cause as much disruption as conventional plows used to. The Minimizer, which cuts through soil without churning it, is similar in design to minimum disturbance blade cultivators that were first developed to help prevent topsoil from blowing during the Dust Bowl. The technique killed weeds but left them on top of the field to hold the soil in place.

"We're trying to find the terminology to get away from tillage — tillage is when you turn something. With the blade plow we're not turning, we're just lifting and setting it right back down," Dan said.

## Plowing through

After trying his hand at farming as a young man, Dan started his career repairing Flex King plows, another blade plow once produced in Quinter. Setting out in 1985 with a welder mounted in the back of his DC Welding pickup, he traveled to an estimated 800 to 1,000 farms in Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas.

"After 10 years, I could diagnose them over the phone," he said. "I finally got to the point where nobody could throw me any more surprises."

Dan would mostly find new customers from his annual booth at the 3i Show in Dodge City. He took a plow, half of which he'd left as was and half he'd rebuilt.

"Basically, we could take a 20-year-old plow and actually make it work better than the day it came out of the factory," he said.

Dan modified his business when he realized farmers were paying a sizable amount for used plows without realizing it would cost even more to get them in working order. He started buying used plows himself in the late 1990s. He knew exactly how much to spend because he knew how much it would cost to fix them. Then he'd resell the refurbished plows.

"When we got done, they were completely repainted with all new tires, blades, pickers, rebuilt cylinders – basically they would leave with a brand-new machine," he said.

By 2014, he said it had become difficult to find plows that were worth fixing. Costs were rising, and there was more competition. The metal the old plows were built of was starting to fatigue. That's when the Chupps started thinking it might be time to build their own plow.

About five months before the 3i Show that year, Chupp told his sons it was time to build a prototype. They'd already changed the company name from DC Welding to Premier Tillage.

Dan said with the Minimizer they didn't try to reinvent the wheel, "but we tried to go to a different style of wheel."

"From that day to the day before the 3i Show, we got one built," he said. "We put some hours in on that one and got it to the show.

"We learned more about blade plows and how to build them from our own failures. I've come to the belief that we go through struggles in life for a learning experience." ▪

# The Also Rans

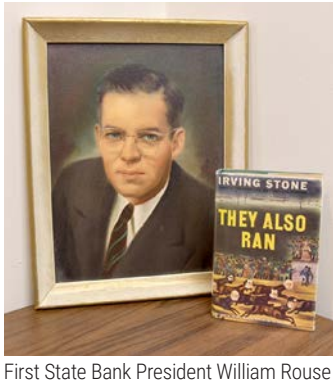
## Norton gallery features people who made it on the ballot, but not to the White House

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[NORTON] A large portrait of Hillary Clinton hangs next to an equally large portrait of Donald Trump. It's the kind of wall décor you'd find only at the They Also Ran Gallery in Norton.

Admission is free for the tourist attraction that celebrates presidential could've-beens in the upper-floor gallery of First State Bank in downtown Norton.

"It's one of the quirkiest, most unusual museums in the United States," said bank employee and gallery curator Lee Ann Shearer. "It's the only one like this."




First State Bank President William Rouse was inspired to start the They Also Ran Gallery after reading Irving Stone's book.

Since 1965, when a new president is sworn in to the Oval Office, a photo of the chief opponent gets hung in the gallery in Norton. How did that get started?

"Back in the 60s, everyone was doing a little tourist stop – the ball of twine, biggest prairie dog – stop-off-and-see things," Shearer said.

William Rouse, then president and owner of the bank, helped recreate a stagecoach station as a tourist destination in Norton. An image of *New York Tribune* owner Horace Greeley was placed in the station window because Greeley – remembered today chiefly for the advice to "Go west, young man," although Greeley denied authoring the phrase – arrived in Norton via stagecoach in 1859.

"A couple years later, Mr. Rouse received a book entitled *They Also Ran* by author Irving Stone. This was so interesting to him," Shearer said. "It talked about 19 gentlemen that had a similar fate of being defeated for the presidency, and the first one it talked about was Horace Greeley himself."

Rouse tried to pitch his friends who helped develop the stagecoach site on the idea of a They Also Ran museum.

"His friends laughed and said, 'Bill, who's going to stop and see almost-presidents? Nobody's going to be interested,'" she said. But Rouse, convinced the second-place candidates deserved recognition, was not deterred. He contacted the Library of Congress for copies of their portraits, which he hung in his bank. Until his death in 1981, Rouse wrote a short biographical description of each new presidential wannabe, which he hung below each black-and-white portrait. Shearer acquires the portraits and now writes the bios.

As it turned out, Rouse's friends weren't exactly wrong. The number of visitors the gallery gets is not overwhelming. About 200 to 250 people show up in a typical election year, most of whom say they learned about the collection in the travel guidebook *Atlas Obscura*, Shearer said.

"We're nowhere near the ball of twine that is 24/7, 365," Shearer said. "But if you look through the guest book, you'll see they come from everywhere. I can have a dry spell for a month, and then I'll have three tours in a day."

### 'Impressive line-up of leading losers'

Walking through the section of newer photos gives a guest the opportunity to contemplate how the country would have changed had an election gone differently. Biographic information for more historic candidates gives a sense of deeply challenging times the country has previously weathered. Both slave holders and abolitionists are represented.

Shearer points out that the strength of the losing candidates is one measure of the strength of U.S. democracy.

"Taken as a group, the losing candidates were as well-qualified as the winners," she said. "Most have made substantial contributions to our nation. A few presidential losers made a greater public difference than the men who beat them out."

There are 16 former presidents included in the

The They Also Ran Gallery is in the top floor of the First State Bank in downtown Norton.

**THEY ALSO RAN GALLERY**
ADDRESS: 105 W. Main, Norton
PHONE: (785) 877-3341
HOURS: 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday-Friday
WEBSITE: theyalsoran.com
FACEBOOK: They Also Ran Gallery

gallery. They are there because of an unsuccessful campaign, either before or after they held office.

The gallery does not include every single person who has unsuccessfully run for president. However, more than one unelected contender made the collection some years, which is why there are 62 also-rans in the gallery and only 46 presidents to date.

Ross Perot and Ralph Nader, two familiar also-rans from recent decades, aren't in the display. Shearer said the late billionaire businessman Perot is the most requested, and she agrees he should be included, but wall space is limited.

Reading the short biographies on each photo makes it clear the also-rans were an accomplished bunch. Most earned degrees from elite universities. There are war heroes, governors, senators, and Supreme Court justices.

"No other nation can brag of as long and impressive a line-up of leading losers," Shearer said.

## The first also-ran

The chronological display begins with Thomas Jefferson, who ran in 1796 to succeed George Washington, the only president unanimously elected – not once, but twice – by the Electoral College. Jefferson became an also-ran when he was defeated by Washington's vice president, John Adams.

*"...the losing candidates were as well-qualified as the winners. Most have made substantial contributions to our nation. A few presidential losers made a greater public difference than the men who beat them out."*

**LEE ANN SHEARER** | GALLERY CURATOR

However, Adams' portrait is next in line because Jefferson beat him four years later. Although the two were often bitter rivals while engaged in politics, they eventually became close friends. They died on the same day – July 4, 1826.

Also in the 1800 election was Aaron Burr, who tied with Jefferson for Electoral College votes. The House of Representatives broke the tie in Jefferson's favor. Four years later, Burr killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel, ending his political career. More than 200 years later, the smash Broadway musical *Hamilton* made sure Aaron Burr is remembered.

When Shearer gives a tour of the collection, she points out such persons of interest. Another standout she mentions is "most consistent loser" Henry Clay. He changed political affiliations three times while vying for president in six election cycles from 1824 to 1848.

"He started in politics at 19, and never made president, but tried and tried and tried," she said.

Before there was Al Gore and the hanging chads of the Florida election, there was Samuel Tilden, who won the popular vote in 1876, but saw all 20 electors in four contested states vote for Republican Rutherford B. Hayes. A deal had been struck by a bipartisan electoral commission, which allowed Hayes to win 185-184 if federal troops were removed from three Southern states, effectively ending post-Civil War Reconstruction.

An also-ran remembered more for his role in the Scopes Trial than for his three unsuccessful presidential bids is William Jennings Bryan. Bryan, a Democratic candidate for president in 1896, 1900 and 1908, prosecuted John Scopes in 1925 for teaching the theory of evolution while substituting in a Tennessee high school biology class. The "silver-tongued orator," as Bryan was described, was even put on the witness stand by defense attorney Clarence Darrow.

Many candidates had Kansas connections, Shearer points out. Shearer said one of her favorite also-rans is John C. Freemont, who lost

See **ALSO-RAN**, page 17


Top: Students from Salina search for their very own pumpkin at Sunny Side Pumpkin Patch in Assaria.

Left: Kindergartener Kaden Firner, from Salina, is pleased with his pumpkin choice.

Above right: Oren Parrish, Tenley Williams and Tenley Fall from McPherson's St. Joseph school pose as sunflowers.

Below right: Charisse Nurnberg talks with students before they head out to the patch to select their pumpkins. Charisse and husband Grant, own Sunny Side.

# Pick of the patch

All across Northwest Kansas, local pumpkin patches welcomed families in for fun fall activities. Now in its 20th year, Sunny Side Pumpkin Patch near Assaria hosted families and school groups to pick pumpkins, find their way out of mazes, enjoy play areas, slides, a petting zoo, a bouncy area, hayrack rides and even nighttime activities. Learn more at *sunnysidepatch.com*.

**WAKEENEY**, from page 9

"We don't have to drive elsewhere for the basics. It's all right here," she said. "We're going to try to bring in some of the extra cool stuff, but right now we have enough goods and services in WaKeeney that it is self-sustaining. However, additional small businesses and an increase in population will help continue to move us forward."

Wittenauer is looking for projects that the Lift Up WaKeeney group could tackle next.

"There are a lot of rundown properties in these small towns," he said. "We've got junk hoarders and trash lords, and some houses haven't been painted in 100 years."

Gibson said her office received a matching grant from the Dane G. Hansen Foundation for a Paint the Town program, which offered up to $600 per house for paint and supplies. Next year she hopes to add siding to covered items.

## Enforcing the code

Letters from the city's new code enforcement officer have spurred several homeowners to make improvements, said WaKeeney Mayor Irene Dirks. She said officials updated the city's codes over the past three years, and in May hired a person from out of town to impartially enforce them. That hasn't exactly been popular with everyone.

"I'm planning on running again, but if there's enough people in town that don't like what we're doing, that's their choice. That's the freedom of democracy," Dirks said.

Dirks herself received a courtesy letter saying she and her husband needed to fix windows broken during the hailstorm and make other repairs to a garage in their backyard.

"That was on my list for five years, and we were going to put new siding on," she said. "It moved up the list quite quickly after we got our courtesy letter. I tell people, 'Drive through my alley. I've got a pretty garage now.'"

Dirks said the city recently qualified for a $1.3 million Kansas Department of Transportation grant to redo the curbing and sidewalks on Main Street to bring them into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. She said city officials are also exploring possibilities for getting public restrooms in the downtown area.

She said Lift Up WaKeeney has added momentum to ongoing efforts to improve the town.

"They bring fresh eyes and have some connections to alumni WaKeeney residents that have some ideas that those of us who live here haven't even thought about," she said. "They're putting their work where their mouth is, so to speak, versus just saying, 'Do this, do that.'"

Dirks, a retired teacher, said she's always believed the biggest selling point for WaKeeney and the rest of western Kansas is that it's a good place to raise children.

"Our kids can still ride their bikes to the swimming pool," she said. "The end goal is we want people to realize WaKeeney and western Kansas are a good place to live. Bring your manufacturing plant. Help us grow." ▪

They Also Ran Gallery curator Lee Ann Shearer holds a portrait of the late U.S. Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan., from the gallery's collection.

**ALSO-RAN**, from page 15

to James Buchanan in 1856. A topographical engineer, Freemont mapped the Midwest for travelers and settlers. He came to what is now Norton County in 1843 and gave Prairie Dog Creek its name.

"This gentleman was quite a character if you ever like to read about historic figures," Shearer said. "I call him my soap opera guy. He had the best things happen and the worst things happen. His life was very tumultuous."

Also in the gallery is Alfred Landon, former governor of Kansas, namesake of the Landon Lecture Series at Kansas State University and father of long-time U.S. Senator Nancy Landon Kassebaum. He challenged Franklin Roosevelt when he sought re-election in 1936.

"It was the first year telephone polling came into being, and the results were saying it was for sure going to be Landon," Shearer said. "But they forgot about the people who didn't have phones."

Landon ended up carrying only two states. Kansas wasn't one of them.

Finally, there's the late U.S. Sen. Bob Dole. Dole accomplished a lot during his years in Congress, but as a Republican presidential contender, he couldn't defeat Bill Clinton in 1996. When Dole was in his early 90s, he almost became the first also-ran candidate to visit the gallery, but because it is on the second floor without elevator access, that didn't happen.

"He came to Norton in 2014 on a tour of all 105 counties in Kansas to say thanks for letting me be your senator for many years," Shearer said. "I had 60 seconds to shake his hand, and I couldn't explain what I wanted to say in 60 seconds.

"How do you go up and say, 'Congratulations! You lost! We have you in our shrine to the almost.'" ▪

Jeff Mathews, of LeCompton, stokes the fire that heats water into steam and powers the engine.

Right: A steam-powered tractor sets out on a trip around the Tri-State Antique Engine and Thresher show grounds.

# ALL STE

## Bird City show is in 69th year of demonstrating the way things were

**MARK YOUR CALENDAR!**

The 70th annual Tri-State Antique Engine and Thresher Show will be July 27 to 29 at 1375 County Road 29, Bird City.

*Calling volunteers: "We've got a guy who's going to fix tractors up for us in his shop. We never know where the next person's going to come from that wants to get involved in this," said Tri-State Antique Engine and Thresher Association president Rod Klepper. If you want to volunteer, call (785) 734-2291.*

PHOTOS AND STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

[BIRD CITY] The rain was coming down hard, but nobody at the second day of the 69th Annual Tri-State Antique Engine and Thresher Show was going to complain about rain. In late July in Bird City, rain was every bit as rare and valuable as the steam engines and other pieces of equipment on display.

ROD KLEPPER

Despite the weather, this year's show brought in about $22,000 in memberships and day passes between July 28 and 30, said Tri-State Antique Engine and Thresher Association president Rod Klepper. People came from all over, and many attended all three days.

"It's pleasant in this rain. We're not disappointed when the day gets rained away," Gabe Gienger, of St. Francis, said as he sat eating lunch in the dining hall on show grounds with his wife, Brie, and sons Warren, 3, and Judah, 2. Before the rain came, the boys had been busy doing what they love to do best at the three-day show: Sit on tractor seats.

"I don't get why they want to do it, but they are all into this," Brie said. "My kids could sit on every single tractor."

Show founder Roy Kite would probably understand. The Bird City implement dealer developed a passion for antique farm machinery as a boy watching his father and uncle operate threshing rigs. Kite got his first opportunity to operate a steam engine in 1917 at the age of 15. Thirty-three years later in 1950, he bought himself a 65-horsepower Case steam engine that had been stored in a shed in Norcatur.

That year, a young Gerald Wright was among the crowd watching Kite demonstrate his steam engine. Most

# AMED UP

steam-powered machinery had been replaced by about 1920 with equipment that burned gas or kerosene. During World War II, many of those old steam engines were scrapped to supply iron for ships and tanks. But after Kite's demonstration, several area men were inspired to seek out their own steam-powered tractors, and in 1953, the first official Tri-State show was held on Kite's farm. Wright was there, and every year since he's been an integral part of what makes the show work.

Friday morning when the rain was still up in the clouds, Wright was trying to help replace a leaky gasket on one of the steam-powered tractors on the show grounds located just off U.S. Highway 36 north of Bird City. His upper body disappeared inside the engine compartment, and when he emerged, his hands were black with grease.

Wright "taught more kids more about steam engineering as they've grown up than probably anybody," said one of his former students, Lynn Osburn, of Denver. As rain began to fall, Osburn was in the dining hall demonstrating a Corliss Engine that had quietly and efficiently powered a feather duster factory with steam from 1878 to 1973. When the Iowa facility closed down, the engine was moved to Bird City, where it hums to life on show days.

Osburn, who has assisted with the show for about 25 years, said the Corliss is self-oiling and has virtually no moving parts. It would be a challenge for today's engineers to come up with such an elegant design, he said. Osburn had been fascinated with steam engineering as a boy. He read textbooks from the 1920s to learn more. At age 12, he came with his father to the Tri-State show and met Wright.

"As a 12-year-old, you're looking at all this stuff going, let me get this straight: You get to play with fire and nobody yells at you? Sign me up!" he said.

## Licensed to operate

Osburn, like many of the show's volunteers, is a licensed steam operator.

Volunteers Gerald Wright and Lynn Osburn discuss a piece of steam-powered equipment.

The Kansas Antique Engine Steam Safety Association provides training and licenses people who have passed a test and demonstrated proficiency operating a boiler. KAESSA personnel also inspect equipment annually to ensure it can be operated safely. There's a reason for caution. Failure of a boiler can result in a powerful explosion.

At the annual event in Bird City, steam has safely been harnessed for decades,

See **STEAM**, page 20

**STEAM**, from page 19

and its power has been put to all kinds of uses. There's a steam-powered whistle that used to indicate shift change at a meat-packing company, and even a steam-powered popcorn wagon. Steam engines operate a sawmill, grind and shell corn, and thresh and bind wheat. A steam engine even provided the heat to cook the corn for the evening barbecue.

"The steam engine is a very simple device. There's not much to it," said Jeff Mathews, who drove 350 miles from his LeCompton home to operate one of the 25,000-pound steam-powered tractors crawling across the grounds. "There are two separate machines working here at the same time. You've got the boiler – the pressure vessel – which heats the water and contains the steam, and then you've got the reciprocating engine that turns it into rotary motion and makes it useful."

Mathews, a self-described "die-hard steam guy," said his father had a steam tractor, and he remembers his mother "dragging me off that engine kicking and screaming" when he was 2.

## Battle-tested draw

About 80 percent of the impressive assortment of steam-, gas- and kerosene-powered farm implements belongs to the association. The rest is privately owned and stored on the grounds or brought in for shows. Klepper said the "crown jewels" of the association's collection are a wooden Holt combine with all its original wood that was built in Stockton, Calif., in 1922, and a horse-pulled McCormick gleaner.

In addition to the items on display annually, the association comes up with a new attraction each year to bring people back. This year's show featured military vehicles, artillery equipment and battle re-enactments, as well as a historical presentation by the Buffalo Soldiers of the American West, of Brighton, Colo.

Association president Klepper made connections with several collectors of battle-tested vehicles and equipment, and their displays and demonstrations proved popular.

"I always tell everybody when you move here, you've got to watch out for that guy," the association's vice president Willy Martinez said of Klepper. "He'll put you to work."

Martinez speaks from experience. His carpentry skills have been put into use time and again. He spent months cleaning, building shelves and hanging peg boards to display donated tools.

"I'd go home after looking at those peg boards, and all I could see was spots," he said.

In another building, Martinez also helped construct a mini-Main Street, including a railroad depot, a bank, a sheriff's office, and a barber shop, where appropriate furnishings and implements are displayed. The sheriff's office contains the original Bird City jail cell, where many a local teen once spent time after Halloween pranks. The railroad depot counter is from St. Francis, and the barber shop contains a copper bathtub that was the first in nearby Oberlin to have running water. Plans are to add a butcher shop next.

A large collection of pedal-powered tractors lines the walls of one building on the Tri-State Antique Engine and Thresher Association grounds.


Volunteers Gerald Wright and Willy Martinez stand behind a steam-powered popcorn wagon in the association's collection.


A steam-powered sawmill is set up on the show grounds by some of the many volunteers that make the show happen.

## Plenty to see, folks

For an outdoor event, the Tri-State show is unusually well equipped to provide visitors with something to see even if it's too muddy and wet for the plowing demonstration, steam engine races, steam engine parade, and children versus steam engine tug-of-war.

The show's 46-acre grounds include 28 buildings, many of

A selection of antique cars are part of the wide-ranging collection on the Tri-State Antique Engine and Thresher Association grounds.

Jeff Mathews, of LeCompton, shovels coal delivered to the steam engine he operated during the show.

Karen Kafka, dressed as a WWI nurse, bandages the arm of Jazmine Webber, 6, of Oakley. Kafka brought medical supplies like those used during past military conflicts.

which house a wide-ranging assortment of collections. For example, in various buildings on the grounds, visitors can see an impressive array of milk bottles, dozens of antique blow torches, 1,350 hotel room key cards, two 1,000- horsepower drag tractors, a gyrocopter, and paintings of buildings that existed in downtown Bird City during the early life of painter Maynard Wright.

Each display is neatly presented; each item is well cared for, and most vehicles and pieces of farm equipment kept on the grounds are in running order. The effort volunteers put into keeping everything maintained is evident.

Some of the buildings themselves are part of the collection, and show the diversity of what can be found on the grounds. Among buildings that were moved in are an old schoolhouse, which appears ready for class; a former church, where a nondenominational service closes each show; a creamery, containing milk bottles and cream separators; and a railroad section house, which houses a massive collection of tools.

## To the stars, around the world

An ongoing project is restoration of the Koken Observatory, which was built by a local farmer and used for years by Bird City students in high school astronomy classes. The small observatory building featuring a spiral staircase and a domed roof was moved to the show grounds in 2019. Plans to unveil the observatory in working order at this year's show didn't quite pan out. A few weeks after the show was over, a group was planning to gather to mount the telescope.

"It turns and it's set up to follow the earth and the moon," Klepper said. "There's a lot of people who went to school here that remember it."

Two buildings that house impressive private collections were also moved to the grounds. A barn from Jim Leach's former Bird City area farm holds memorabilia amassed by Leach and his wife, Cindy, while leading tour groups across the U.S. and around the world. A former manufacturing building moved from Clay Center now houses vehicles and a large collection of pedal tractors.

Other buildings were constructed on site. Wright said when the show moved from the Kite farm to its current location in 1975, the association's bylaws said that anything displayed during the show would be stored for free. That proved popular with collectors.

"We built buildings for seven years straight – 100-foot buildings," he said. "We're still running out of room."

One building constructed on the grounds is a sod house built in 1985 during the Bird City centennial celebration.

"We built that sod house ourselves," Wright said. "We cut the sod out here northeast of Bird City and hauled it in and stacked it up."

Buildings constructed over the years protect the steam engines when they're off duty and house a selection of antique toys, cars and farm implements. The existing buildings are about to be dwarfed by a new one, planned to include a tribute to local veterans and a display of military items, a fiber arts area, and an exhibit about aviator Charles Lindbergh, who lived in Bird City early in his career.

"We have a complete print shop in the back of one building," Klepper said, adding that the association now has three printing presses.

"It seems like we will get in a new item and the next thing we know we've got three of them," Martinez chimed in. ▪


Above: David and Ryan Wacker stand in the incubator room.

Background: Newborn pheasant chicks climb over the egg shells they had recently escaped

# Hunting for a better life

## Pheasant hunting proves a profitable enterprise in Northwest Kansas

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[HUNTER] When 1,000 acres of farmland David Wacker had been renting went up for sale, he couldn't afford to buy them. For the Lincoln County farmer, it felt like the world was coming to an end.

But that was 25 years ago, and today Wacker is still climbing into his pickup and kicking up dust on Lincoln County roads.

He found a way forward that has proven to be more profitable for him than traditional farming. His son, Ryan, who grew up working with dad, is now a full partner in Prairie Land Gamebirds – the business venture that kept the Wackers on the farm.

"We thought it was the worst thing in the world when we lost all that farm ground," David Wacker said. "It turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to us."

The Wackers raise Ring-necked Pheasants, Chukar, and French Red-legged Partridges on the 1,100 acres they own. In 2016, they built a hatchery and started selling eggs and chicks to other gamebird operations — in addition to the adult gamebirds they'd been selling to hunting preserves across the country. In 2023, they expect to be shipping eggs to the United Kingdom and Sweden.

"We'll probably sell in excess of $3 million worth of pheasants this year," David Wacker said. "I'm going to retire comfortably."

Close to 10,000 licenses were sold last year that allow the holder to shoot gamebirds only at a controlled shooting area, or CSA, such as the ones operated by hunting preserves Wacker supplies. Hunters with a regular license can shoot at a CSA as well. In 2021, there were 295 CSAs permitted in the state.

### Fewer wild, more pen-raised

As the population of wild pheasants has tapered off, the number of birds in the Wackers' pens and those raised by other gamebird operations in the area has continued to grow. When they are fully grown at about 20 weeks, some of the Wackers' birds are loaded in a trailer to make the short trip — about 10 miles up the road — to the Ringneck Ranch near Tipton. Others will travel as far as Idaho, Georgia, or Texas.

Ringneck Ranch, in southwest Mitchell County, is where David Wacker first learned about the opportunities available in the hunting preserve industry. After he lost his rental land, he took a job picking up hunters at the Wichita airport. Then he became a hunting guide. In 1996, he started raising pheasants.

"The first 10 years of this business it was incredibly difficult to grow, but now it's like 'Whoa! We've got to stand back and catch our breath a little bit,'" he said. "The last three years have been an incredible market for the pheasant growing business."

### 2 million pheasants hatching

Avery LaCombe, long-time operations manager for Ringneck Ranch, purchased the business this summer. Keith and Debra Houghton, who started Ringneck Ranch in 1983, plan to establish a foundation to maintain the historic buildings and land that have been owned by five generations of the Houghton family.

LaCombe said the Wackers' gamebird operation is one of six businesses within about 40 miles that have started as an offshoot of Ringneck Ranch. Combined, they account for about 2 million eggs and pheasants annually in and around Tipton, LaCombe said.

During peak season in early May, hens on Wackers' farm produce about 9,000 eggs a day. Those eggs are gathered, sorted and washed. The ones that aren't sold as eggs make their way to one of six incubators and then one of two digital hatchers.

"They spend 23 days total in the incubator and hatcher, normally. They always hatch on a Monday," David Wacker said.

The eggs are produced by laying hens placed in one of three


Top: Young pheasant hens, and a few roosters, live in an enclosed laying barn. The birds' eggs are gathered from nests along the edges of the barn.

Bottom: David Wacker pulls a traveling carton used to transport pheasants out of a Prairie Land Gamebirds trailer.

(soon to be four) barns full of fresh straw and LED lights programmed to add 15 minutes of light twice a week until 14 hours of light a day is reached. The lengthening light, as well as the one rooster for every 16 hens, cause the hens to start laying eggs by the end of January. In March, the first chicks of the year are hatched.

The fluffy, striped, constantly cheeping chicks are sorted by sex and placed in cardboard crates. David Wacker delivers vanloads of 20,000 chicks to customers as far away as Georgia, driving at night and avoiding stops during hot weather. Other chicks are allowed to grow for the first six weeks of their lives in the protection of a heated building on the farm. They are fed a specially prepared pheasant ration that is delivered by the semi load from Hubbard Feed Mill in Beloit.

### Hiding in the weeds

When the birds are six weeks old, they are moved to one of five large outdoor enclosures. They are fitted with blinders mounted on the top of their beaks to prevent them from pecking each other. Tall kochia weeds provide shelter as they

See **HUNTING**, page 26

# Wild & free

## Elusive pheasants continue to bring hunters to the area

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

Northwest Kansas has long been an enticing destination for pheasant hunters.

Area communities welcome hunters each November with a variety of events from pancake feeds to oyster fries. In Oberlin and Hoxie, Pheasants Forever banquets were held Nov. 11. In Colby, the annual Kansas Governor's Ringneck Classic hunt was slated for Nov. 17 to 20.

The Ring-necked Pheasant, originally from China, adapted quickly after 3,000 birds were introduced to Kansas in 1906.

JEFF PRENDERGAST

"Pheasant season has always been a major draw, and it's a huge economic boost," said Jeff Prendergast, who runs the upland gamebird program for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks. "Kansas has been the third largest pheasant harvest in the country for the last 20 to 30 years and remained as such last year."

Of the about 80,000 hunters who stalked wild pheasants in Kansas last year, about 33,000 came from out of state. They shot 338,000 birds, at a cost in goods and services averaging $159 per wild rooster. That adds up to an estimated $53.7 million in economic revenue generated by wild pheasant hunters alone, Prendergast said.

"My job comes down to two things every year: trying to figure out how many birds there are to shoot and trying to figure out how to make more birds to shoot next year," Prendergast said.

Kansas tops other states for Bobwhite Quail, but in recent years, pheasant populations have been a challenge. With each passing decade, there have been fewer pheasants to flush, and consequently fewer hunters have come to try. In September, the Pheasants Forever forecast said the

See **PHEASANTS**, page 26

# Discovering the Great Outdoors

## Youth learn fishing, shooting and other skills at annual fair in Osborne

PHOTOS AND STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

[OSBORNE] When Cleo Hahn and Roger and Donna Macy greeted the 19 kids who showed up at the very first North Central Kansas Outdoor Youth Fair in 2005, they knew right away they had a problem. There were 18 prizes.

CLEO HAHN

"I went back to town and got something for the last kid," said Hahn, of Portis. "From there, it just kind of started doubling every year until we got into the big numbers."

The 17th annual event was held on Sept. 10. On a grassy area shaded by large, old trees on the west end of Osborne's Main Street, 438 children and youth up to age 17 showed up from 50 communities in Kansas, Nebraska and Oklahoma to have fun in the great outdoors. They went canoeing in the South Solomon River. They operated metal detectors to unearth $50 worth of coins hidden just for them. They had one-on-one supervision while learning to safely use a slingshot, a bow and arrows and a variety of guns. They rode bikes on a 4½-mile trail through the trees. They caught catfish and bluegill in two ponds, and then let them splash back into the water.

Among the about 100 volunteers teaching fly-fishing techniques and other skills were area outdoor enthusiasts, 4-H volunteers, members of the Kansas Fur Harvesters Association District 3, Solomon Valley Muzzleloaders and Pheasants Forever. In addition to Hahn, organizers included John and Jodi Cockerham and Chris Lecuyer.

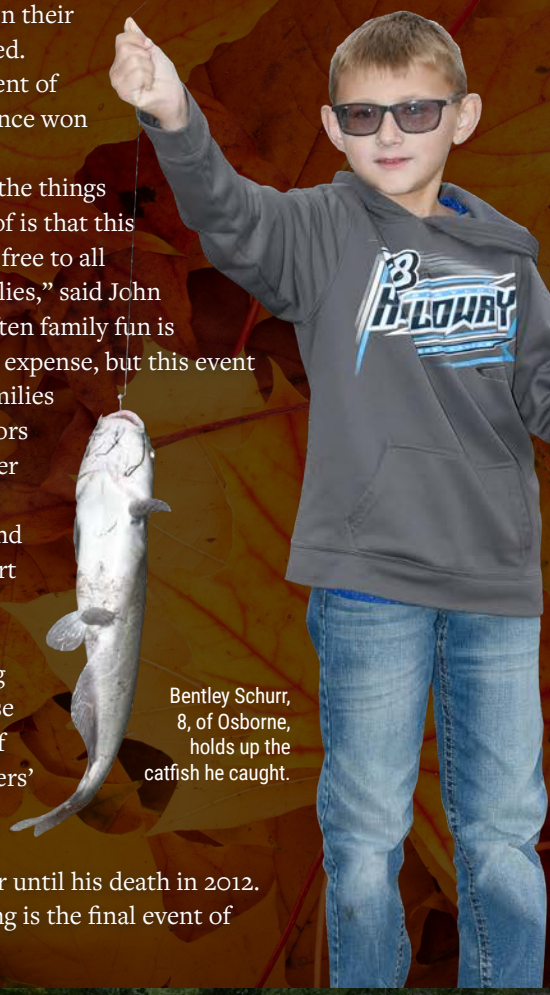
"The ultimate goal is to keep kids from doing this," Hahn said, imitating holding a cell phone and typing with his thumbs. "The Youth Fair is really an educational thing for both the kids and their parents. We've had people who have never fished before. To me, in Kansas that's unreal."

After the morning of fun, there were hotdogs and hamburgers, and then, of course, the prizes – still a big feature of the fair. The list of more than 200 sponsors and donors has gotten so long it no longer fits on the back of the T-shirts participants receive. Smiling winners went to retrieve bikes, kayaks, fishing poles, and a huge variety of raffle prizes when their numbers were called. More than 30 percent of the kids in attendance won something.

"Perhaps one of the things we're most proud of is that this event is absolutely free to all kids and their families," said John Cockerham. "So often family fun is just another added expense, but this event is not. We want families to enjoy the outdoors and all it has to offer for years to come."

The prize near and dear to Hahn's heart is the Keith Hahn Memorial lifetime hunting and fishing combination license given in memory of his brother, a hunters' education instructor who helped with the fair until his death in 2012.

The raffle drawing is the final event of



Bentley Schurr, 8, of Osborne, holds up the catfish he caught.

Families had an opportunity to try canoeing on the South Solomon River during the North Central Kansas Outdoor Youth Fair in Osborne.

Perry Curry, of Osborne, carries his son Ford, 2, and the trike he won.

**MARK YOUR CALENDAR!**

The 2023 North Central Kansas Outdoor Youth Fair is planned for Sept. 9. Volunteers are always welcome, both to help out on the day of the fair and to organize or donate in advance. Message fair organizers through the North Central Kansas Outdoor Youth Fair Facebook page.

the fair, and after both their children won something in quick succession, Marty and Demi Morris, of Osborne, were headed toward their car with Ryder and River and the children's grandpa, Bo French.

"All he wanted was a (toy) skid steer. He saw it up there," Marty Morris said of Ryder, who happily displayed the toy he'd chosen from the selection of prizes. "Last year he didn't get anything, so this year's perfect. It was worth the wait, wasn't it buddy?"

Ryder had success fishing during the fair.

"I hold two of them – fish," he said of his catch. "Our bobber went under water two times if we about caught a fish."

Marty Morris, who works as a professional hunting guide, said the fair, designed to get kids more interested in outdoor activities, is "awesome."

"It's really good for the youth – getting them interested in becoming outdoorsmen," he said. "Seeing all the kids out here, it's a good deal."

## Making a difference

Hahn said after years of putting together the fair, he has some reason to believe that it's making a difference.

"This year there have been kids down at the dam fishing about all summer long," he said. "That's so neat because that's what we did 60 years ago. That hands-on experience is a big deal."

As Hahn walked among the 20 stations spread across the fair area, he saw kids trying everything from bow fishing, to making rope, to throwing tomahawks, to weaving with items found in nature, to sampling venison chili or a bite of deep-fried turtle dove.

See **GREAT OUTDOORS**, page 27

Leah McKelvey, 14, of Osborne, tried shooting a .22 rifle for the first time. She didn't miss one of her five shots.

Birdie Carlin, 9, of Osborne, poses with the T-Rex after her arrow hit its eye.


Arrow Kline, 3, of Smith Center, was thrilled with the semi she won in the raffle drawing. Helping her carry it is her sister, Tylie, 6.

Jackie Roderick, of Beloit, joins her sons Uriah and Xavier as they try their luck with slingshots.

### PHEASANTS NEED YOUR HELP

*"In the Northwest area, there's a lot of opportunity for improving pheasant numbers with a little bit of grass," said Jeff Prendergast, who runs the upland gamebird program for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks. "You don't have to plant the whole field. We have programs to plant the pivot corners, the lower producing areas of the field and along waterways. We're losing ground now. We need to be looking for ways to be getting more grass out there."*

**PHEASANTS**, from page 23

Smoky Hills region has the highest roadside densities this year. Further west, drought has caused the bird population to suffer.

"North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, Kansas – the big feather states – have all been seeing declines in the pheasant harvest," Prendergast said. "It's a combination of factors – both fewer birds on the landscape because of habitat losses and drought, but also the number of hunters has declined.

"Lately, our best years have been about 450,000," he said, adding that that's about half of where the pheasant harvest had been historically.

## Call of the wild

Prendergast, a small game specialist, said hunting wild birds with strong instincts for self-preservation is different from hunting pen-raised birds.

"When you look at hunter motivations, there's a strong desire for wild birds," he said.

At the same time, he said, hunters want success. They are much surer of that with plentiful pen-raised birds.

Avery LaCombe, owner of Ringneck Ranch, said the opportunities to flush a wild pheasant aren't there like they used to be.

"These days you can go walk for two days on some public walk-in ground and not see a bird," he said. But that doesn't stop him and others from trying.

"I'm not knocking that at all because I go do it myself," he said. ▪

Ryan Wacker, right; his wife, Melissa, left; and Prairie Land employee Jaco Synman, rear, sort pheasant chicks by sex.

**HUNTING**, from page 23

continue to mature. An electric fence surrounding the pen protects them from raccoons and other predators. Wacker said a greater danger is bird flu, which has so far hit harder in Europe.

Together, the pens encompass about 70 acres. Inside each of the pens, 6,000 to 7,000 birds mostly stay hidden in the weeds.

At 20 weeks old, the birds are herded into a building by a six-person farm staff (including hired hands and family.) Lights are kept low so that the birds' eyes don't adjust but human eyes can tell the difference between the brightly colored males and muted females. The blinders are removed, and the two-pound birds are sorted into containers for transport.

Wacker said he thinks Prairie Land Gamebirds is the fourth largest producer of adult gamebirds in the nation.

"We're projecting 270,000 adult pheasants plus the Chukar and red legs that put us up to about 300,000," he said. He said adult pheasants sold for about $14 apiece this year.

"The advantage we have over the rest of the farming operation is that we set the price on our pheasants," he said. "We still have competitors, so we've got to be reasonable."

## A pheasant every few minutes

The experience of hunting at a CSA differs in several ways from hunting wild pheasants: The season is longer; hens are fair game as well as roosters, and the daily bag limit is higher. Depending on the location, all hunts can be guided, and the ranch might clean the pheasants. But the big difference is the number of birds a hunter is likely to encounter.

Ringneck Ranch operates five CSAs on about 3,500 acres of varied terrain. Pheasants are released on the ranch each week during hunting season, with the goal of providing small groups of hunters with the thrill of flushing a pheasant about every two to three minutes. Hunters can shoot birds at Ringneck from Oct. 1 to March 4, with a daily bag limit of six included in the price of the hunt. For an additional fee, a hunter can shoot even more.

"We have to put out more birds than we harvest in order to be licensed through the state," LaCombe said. "We'll put out about 30,000 birds this year. We'll harvest somewhere in the 22,000 to 23,000 range."

LaCombe said at Ringneck Ranch, the goal is to mimic a real native bird hunt.

"We buy top quality birds," he said. "We say they should act and fly like a native bird on opening day."

For guests who want the $650 full package hunt, Ringneck's nearly 70 full- and part-time employees work to prepare tasty meals and sleeping accommodations in the lodges, which have room for up to 70 guests. All hunts start with a trip to the clay range, so that staff can determine the experience level of the group and watch for any problems with their shotguns.

Supply chain issues have made ammunition difficult to come by, but LaCombe said the ranch buys in bulk, so he's been able to take care of guests' ammunition needs.

AVERY LACOMBE

Most of Ringneck's hunters come from out of state, and many are repeat customers. Last year, on average about 1,200 hunters spent two days at the ranch, he said. Up to 10 groups of six or fewer hunters can hunt each day.

"We've got people that have been coming 30-plus years on the same day," LaCombe said.

Every year there are groups who come to Ringneck for a day after spending a day in public areas.

"They might shoot one or two birds in that first day in a group of six or eight guys," he said. "The kids are going, 'Dad, can we just do two days at Ringneck?'" ▪

**GREAT OUTDOORS**, from page 25

"The rabbit's all gone. The prairie chicken's gone. We've run out of drum fish. We got rid of all the flathead and a little bit of channel cat. We can't keep up with them today," said Roger Macy, who was preparing samples of wild game.

Tyson Kline, of Smith Center, was a first-time volunteer at the bow fishing station.

"I didn't stop. I'm not kidding," he said. "It was one little kid after another. I'm talking from 2 on up to 15-16."

Hahn asked parents and kids he encountered if they were having fun. The answer was almost always affirmative.

## 'You cost me money'

"One of the neatest things that happens about every year somewhere down the line is I'll have a parent or grandparent come up to me and say, 'You cost me a lot of money.'" Hahn said. "Good. We got through to somebody. They are going to buy fishing rods or a gun or archery stuff or something. That's when you know that you touched somebody."

This year those words came from Grandpa Don Koops, of Osborne. His grandsons, Bentley Schurr, 8, and Brody Schurr, 6, both caught catfish.

Fishing volunteer Jessie Ericson held Bentley's large catch above his head and called out to the other children holding one of the 28 poles available.

"OK, guys, there are some good fish in here, see it?" he said. Releasing the fish back into the pond, he added, "He's got the taste of a worm now."

But Bentley and Brody had had enough of fishing. They were anxious to get back to the archery range.

"I may have to get you those for Christmas now," Koops said when the boys were holding bows again.

Also enjoying the archery range was Birdie Carlin, 9, of Osborne. She posed next to a foam T-rex target with one of her arrows sticking out of its eye.

"Oh my gosh. Right in the eye!" archery volunteer Blake Grabast said when the arrow hit its mark. "There were a couple of kids over here earlier trying to get him in the eye, and they didn't get 'er done, but here you are."

Hahn said some people are skeptical of the event.

"I've had people say, 'You just want kids to kill things,' because we shoot and stuff, but that has nothing to do with it," he said. "You can shoot guns without killing stuff. A lot of people do."

After some quick advice about aiming a .22 rifle from a friend and instructions from a fair volunteer, Leah McKelvey, 14, of Osborne, proceeded to make all five of her bullets count. She hit the shooting range targets every single time, although she'd never shot a gun before.

"I didn't even miss one," she said proudly, after the shooting range volunteer described her as "a natural."

Hahn was pleased to see McKelvey discovering a previously unrealized talent. He said such moments make the event worthwhile.

"This young lady was even one of the lucky winners of a lifetime hunting license at the end of the day," he said. "Hopefully, we got something started with her that will last a lifetime."

Hahn said the fair is always a lot of work to do, "but it's worth every minute."

"It's the only thing I've ever been successful at. I don't get a penny, but I get a lot of payment otherwise," he said. "I mean just look at how much fun they're having! That's our payment."

Visit TwistedTDexters on Facebook and message the Thomases to set up a visit.

# Mini cows are mi

## Miniature breed brings maximum fun and profit for Mitchell County family

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING

[BELOIT] One of the first things you might notice when you look at Mike and Carol Thomas' herd of White Dexter Cattle is that not all the cows are white. The second thing you might notice is that it's a small herd — and not just in numbers.

The White Dexters are a miniature cow. Measured from the hip, they stand less than four feet tall. Depending on the breed, a mature full-sized cow stands 38 to 48 inches tall at the hip.

"Our tallest is about 45 inches at the hip, and our shortest, Lucy, is about 32 to 34 inches," Mike said.

The Thomases haven't always been small cattle breeders. Previously they had Angus.

"Our son, Cole, got us into this," Carol laughed. "He's always researching and checking things out. He wanted to have a few, so he went and bought some."

Once they were introduced to the breed, Mike and Carol decided they had to have some, too.

"They are so cute," Carol said.

Cole's cows live with those owned by his parents on their small farm on the outskirts of Beloit.

"On a small acreage farm, it's hard to grow much with Angus," Mike said. "There's not enough space."

The Thomases grow their own hay for winter feeding, and their cattle graze on pasture in the spring and summer months.

Mike said farms as small as 15 acres, considered hobby farms, can raise the smaller Dexter cattle.

Mike works in pest control, and Carol is a teacher. The farm is their love but not their only means of support.

The Thomases' combined herd includes 18 cows and calves and two breeding bulls. They also raise chickens, guineas and turkeys.

The White Dexters may be small in stature, but as an investment, Mike says they stand tall.

"With the White Dexters, the profits are better than with the Angus," he said. "They are a triple purpose breed. Sometimes they are called homestead cattle. They are used for beef, dairy and draft. Though they are not used for draft very often anymore."

He said beef is probably the primary use, but they are also popular for dairy.

"A single cow can produce enough milk for her calf and a family," he said.

The Thomases use their herd for beef and breeding.

A White Dexter cow weighs about 750 to 850 pounds, and a bull weighs about 1,000 — roughly half of a traditional breed.

"They take up less freezer space," Mike noted, so an individual can more easily purchase the whole cow. He said that can be a benefit when selling for processing.

"They are pretty docile and easy to get along with and train. And they are easy on the pasture," Mike said.

"And fun!" Carol added.

That's important to the Thomas family because their young grandchildren spend a lot of time at the farm and with the cattle.

"Fridays are farm day," Carol said. Their three children, sons Cole and Max, and daughter Maddi, all live in Beloit and come with their families out to the farm for dinner and fun.

### What about the color?

So why are so many of the White Dexters black or red? The black and red cattle are Dexters, registered as White Dexter breeding stock. The herd purposely contains both. Mike explains that because the breed is still relatively new, it is important to continually add to the bloodlines.

"If you breed a White Dexter bull with a red or black cow, fifty percent of the time you will get a white calf," Mike says, "which is preferable to sell for breeding purposes."

"We are


Mike and Carol Thomas stand tall among their miniature cattle.

# ghty fun

working toward a fully registered, smaller framed herd," Mike said, referring to the White Dexter Cattle Registry. Son Cole's herd is not all registered.

According to the registry, the White Dexter breed was introduced in 1999 and is considered an upgrade to the original Dexter breed. White Dexters are typically

> *"They are pretty docile and easy to get along with and train."*
>
> **MIKE THOMAS** | CATTLE BREEDER

characterized by their white color and black or red ear tips, nose and "socks." As the breed has grown, the ways in which the color patterns passed remained somewhat elusive. In June of this year, the registry announced that a test was now available to identify the white color variant. The test determines the number of copies of the white variant any given animal possesses. This gives breeders an accurate method to plan and select animals to meet their goals.

The breed registry has grown by more than 1,000 percent since it was introduced to the public in 2014. Colored heifers can be registered as breeding stock.

The Thomases have two registered bulls for breeding, Samson and Blizzard. Blizzard has their preferred black markings and allowed black speckles in his coat. Samson is also white but has red markings.

With two bulls, the Thomases can selectively keep and breed their heifers while maintaining their bloodlines and continuing to build toward their ideal herd. Mike thinks they will eventually go with a single bull and more cows.

"Because the registry is still relatively small, we have to be really careful," Carol said, "All the white bulls can be somewhat related."

"It's a lot of paperwork, but you have to check the bloodlines," Mike said. He said they would always have colored cows to continue to diversify the bloodlines.

Mike said they have been working for about three years toward their preferred herd. He said the beef and dairy qualities are not different, but for marketing purposes, the white calves bring more money.

Some breeders are working toward even smaller cows, called Condro. "It's a mutation in the gene. They have a little different look, like a stunted cow," Mike said.

## A family affair

Different than the Angus they had before, the Dexters are not typically sold through the local sale barns.

"We sell through the registry or the small cattle association," Mike said.

There are many breeders in Kansas and across the country. One of their cows went to a breeder from Georgia. Depending on the genetics, Mike said calves can bring two to three times what he realized out of his Angus calves.

Colored heifers might be kept for breeding and colored bulls are sold for beef — with one exception. One steer, Big Red, is considered a family pet. He has visited the nursing home, the daycare, and even went trick or treating last year. He is a favorite at community events.

"He'll always be with us," Carol said. "He's special."

They do have one cow, Sally, who is horned, but the Thomases are breeding for the polled – or hornless variety.

"With the grandchildren, it's just safer," Carol said.


Above: Granddaughter Emma smooches a calf she helped raise after it was orphaned. The sweet nature of the breed is part of the allure for the Thomas family. (COURTESY PHOTO)

Below: Big Red visits schools, senior facilities and community events, and the Thomases say that even though he is not used for breeding because of his color, he will always be part of their herd.

"They don't try to hurt you," Mike said of the horned cows, "but when they swing their head, it can be a little dangerous. They are small cows, but they are still large animals.

"We wanted something the family could participate in, and we would enjoy, but also have a quality product. They are just more docile and easier to be around. It's a nice fit."

Recently when they lost a cow unexpectedly, the grandchildren took the calf under their wing and bottle raised it. It sold in September. The calves weigh about 25 to 45 pounds at birth.

"The babies are just a ball of fluff when they are born," Carol said. "Cute as a button."

All the cattle are tagged with a number and their name. Carol said the grandchildren don't have an issue with eating beef that comes from the herd.

"They know where their food comes from," she said. "And that goes for the chickens and turkeys as well." ▪

# Unstoppable

## Hoxie wheelchair athlete Tucker Baalman finds friends, opportunities through sports

**STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS**

[HOXIE] When Lichelle Baar saw Tucker Baalman, she could tell he'd already heard the news. She remembers how excited he was when they met in the school hallway.

"He came up to me super pumped," said the Hoxie High School track coach. "I said, 'I know! I just found out! Let's go!'"

Baar and Baalman were celebrating after the Kansas State High School Activities Association (KSHSAA) announced that athletes who use wheelchairs would be allowed to compete in 100-meter and 400-meter races in the 2020-21 season.

The timing was perfect for the freshman athlete. That spring, his photo was added to the Hoxie High School hall of champions after he placed first of three competitors in both races during the state meet.

The next year, as one of eight competitors, Tucker – wearing push gloves to spin the rims of his racing wheelchair – came in third.

"It was kind of cool for these boys because there were eight lanes filled," said Lola Baalman, Tucker's mom. "I'm just glad these kiddos had the opportunity to do something and not just watch from the sidelines."

Now a junior, Tucker plans to continue competing in the high school races, but he has discovered he prefers throwing sports. He hopes KSHSAA will add javelin, discus and shotput for athletes with disabilities, and if that were to happen, he's ready.

In the shop on his family's farm, he fabricated, welded and painted in Hoxie Indian red, his own throwing chair. He added foot plates from old wheelchairs and ordered straps to hold him and his chair in place. Currently, he uses it during summer competitions outside of school sports.

Baalman shotputs in the throwing chair he fabricated and welded himself.

"It's a good chair," Tucker said. "It keeps me stable, so I don't fall back."

Tucker qualified for the Move United Junior Nationals in Denver, Colo., last year, where he brought home first-place medals in powerlifting and discus and seconds in javelin and shotput. He's also set two bench press records for his weight class at Hoxie High. Tucker, who weighs about 125 pounds, can bench press 215 pounds.

His involvement in sports doesn't end there. He manages both the Hoxie football and boys' basketball teams, and he plays basketball on the Wichita Wildfire team, part of Wichita Adaptive Sports. It's too far for Tucker to make the twice weekly practice sessions, so he usually spends his practice time shooting baskets in the Hoxie High gym or his own backyard.

"I think he's an inspirational guy," said Lance Baar, athletic director and head football coach. "He's there at every huddle. He's there just as much as every player is at practice. He's got the water in a milk crate on the back of his wheelchair. He takes it upon himself to take care of all the guys out there, including the coaches.

"He's very detail oriented, and he takes pride in what he does. As a coach, that's what we want our players to do, and he does that as a manager. I don't think I could ask for a better manager."

### Overcoming obstacles

Tucker, the third of four children in Mitch and Lola Baalman's family, was born with spina bifida, a neural tube defect that results in damage to the spinal cord and nerves. He's never been able to move his legs and has no

feeling in them. Over the years he's had 33 surgeries – "just some of the perks of having spina bifida," Lola said.

"He got his first wheelchair at 18 months," she said. "It was a little tiny baby wheelchair. Before that, he would army crawl all over the house. He's just been a kid that's always on the go."

Tucker has had eight to 10 wheelchairs. Some he's outgrown. Some he's worn out. Some are constructed in specific ways for specific uses. His aerodynamic racing chair has large rear wheels that are tilted toward him at the top to enhance speed and a third smaller wheel in front. His basketball chair also has tilted wheels and a circular metal frame to ensure that basketball is not a heavy contact sport. Much of the cost of keeping Tucker in wheels is covered by the Baalmans, but his basketball chair was purchased with a grant from the Challenged Athletes Foundation.

The chair he spends most of his day in has a customized seating system to help his posture and keep his skin healthy. He expertly navigates it through classroom doors and other tight spots at the school where he is one of 33 students in the junior class.

Tucker speeding along in the two blocks between his family's home and the school is a familiar sight for Hoxie residents. Either he's using his powerful biceps to propel himself down the block, or he's using his Firefly motor attachment that adds a front wheel and handlebars he can steer while powering his chair at a speed of up to 12 miles per hour. Now that he has his driver's license, he also gets around in a pickup truck equipped with hand controls.

"I'm glad he's had the ability to grow up in a small town," Lola said. "He's been able to be part of this community. They've always been very accepting.

"Everybody knows Tucker wherever you go. He's got buddies all over."

## Heading out

A fair amount of travel is required for Tucker to participate in the athletic competitions he enjoys. Last summer, he played in basketball tournaments in Dallas, Kansas City, Oklahoma City and Wichita, as well as competing in the Endeavor Games in Edmond, Okla., and the Junior Nationals in Denver. He competes in the high school division, although there is also an adult division he could keep playing for in the future. Through the Endeavor Games organization, he works with a personal trainer via text message.

"There's so much available," Lola said. It's a whole new world of possibility and opportunity. There are college programs. We want to make sure he has that opportunity to do what he likes."

The Paralympic Games are a far-off dream, but Tucker said, "if they are looking at me, I would look at it."

When he's not in school or involved with sports, Tucker enjoys helping his dad in the FDK Partnership farm shop. He keeps a smaller wheelchair he outgrew so that he can get in between rows and help fix problems on the planter. He also likes to help out at Hoxie Ag and Radiator near the family's home.

Baalman has set two bench press records for his weight class at Hoxie High School.


Baalman competing at the state track meet. (COURTESY PHOTO)


Baalman reaches to block a pass during a Wichita Wildfire game. (COURTESY PHOTO)

"He's good with his hands and fixing things," Lola said. At the top of Tucker's Christmas list this year is a drone, which he would put to use on the farm. He's considering pursuing further education in unmanned aerial systems.

Tucker also enjoys hunting.

"I sit at the end of the field," he said. "I'm a blocker, and other people walk into the field."

Lola said Tucker applies himself to overcoming about any obstacle.

"He doesn't let much stop him," she said. ▪

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