

HIGHLIGHTING REGIONAL LIFESTYLE, BUSINESS & ARTS

NORTHWEST KANSAS TODAY

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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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ON THE COVER: Shortly after the 1905 Dutch Colonial was moved to its new location east of Lincoln, Julie and Eddie Flores stand before the house that will become their home.



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Home. It's a word that conjures up a sense of place, a sense of belonging, a sense of safety. A home can be an apartment, a mobile home, a traditional single-family house, or even a tiny house. Across Kansas people seeking a new home are having a difficult time. In this issue, we feature a number of stories about home ownership in Northwest Kansas. It's one of the things the Hansen Foundation is working on together with other organizations and communities.

Stories include homes that are environmentally friendly, homes that are above downtown businesses, homes that are being refurbished or moved, and new construction. You can also read about the work that the Innovation Center is doing to research new construction methods.

A common theme in these stories is Northwest Kansans making a difference by taking personal action to increase housing availability. These efforts are paying off for their communities.

The Dane G. Hansen Foundation thanks those who are involved or will become involved in these challenging, inspiring, and community changing actions. Your efforts will create positive change that will last for generations.

Another, very different story about homes is our feature on the Orphan Train Museum in Concordia. Learn how families found homes for their children at a time when many cities were overcrowded and poverty was overwhelming. Many landed in good homes right here in Kansas. Their descendants are surely readers of this magazine.

I believe you will also enjoy our photo feature pages on the amazing murals that are popping up all over the area, and the story about one such mural in the city of Stockton. What a great example of community pride.

And finally, in this issue we celebrate long-time Hansen Trustee Cy Moyer as he steps into his new role as a retiree. We will surely miss his 28 years of institutional knowledge, thought provoking questions and comments, kind and caring nature, as well as his wit and wisdom.

I hope you enjoy these stories, and share them with others who may want to make their home in Northwest Kansas.

Doug Albin
Doug Albin, Trustee

There's no place like Home

There's no place like

Northwest Kansas experiences something new: A hot housing market

STORY AND PHOTO
BY ERIN MATHEWS

[HAYS] There were bidding wars and houses selling above list price and offers made by people who had never seen the house in person – all happening in Northwest Kansas.

“We actually went through the craziest cycle I’ve seen in 20 years,” said John Holub, president of the Hays Board of Realtors. “Our market was so good we thought we were a big city.”

After more than a year of intense demand and short supply, the Hays housing market was still hot for those selling, but it was beginning to cool somewhat by November. Holub cited the arrival of winter temperatures, a bit of economic

uncertainty and mostly — higher mortgage interest rates. People who had been looking at houses in the \$400,000 to \$500,000 range were scaling back to \$280,000 to \$350,000. And instead of selling on the day they listed, houses were sitting on the market for at least a week.

“Prices are still up, although they’ve come down a little bit,” Holub said. “Inventory is still below average, but we’re starting to see more. It was absolutely insane for about a year, and now we’re kind of coming back to normal, I guess.”

How insane did it get? Holub said at one point the more than 90 real estate agents in the Hays area only had six houses to offer that weren’t under contract. On average, the Hays market has about 110 houses



Preserving the housing stock

Hansen Foundation and NCRPC offer pilot programs aimed at reducing home ownership barriers

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

[BELOIT] Stephanie Simmons, of Beloit, vividly recalls her daughter Hayven’s excitement the first time she saw her new backyard.

Simmons, a long-time renter, was considering buying a

home in the summer of 2018 when the loan officer she’d been working with told her about a pilot program available through the North Central Regional Planning Commission (NCRPC). The loan/grant program, funded by the Dane G. Hansen Foundation and NCRPC, made closing costs and a down payment more feasible and was the deciding factor in her home purchase in July 2018.

“We’re so grateful and blessed – feeling like we have such a great home, and for how it helped

available at any one time. He said in November the city had about 70 residential listings.

Holub said while Ellis, Victoria, Russell, and Plainville offer houses that are a great value for the price, in Hays houses are “pretty high.” In Hays, incomes and home prices have remained high enough to incentivize keeping the housing stock in good repair, and new construction has continued. The median year an Ellis County house was built is 1972, which is far more recent than median years elsewhere in Northwest Kansas, according to the Kansas Statewide

Housing Needs Assessment completed in 2021.

Builders have taken advantage of a Heart of America Development Corp. subdivision being promoted by Grow Hays. Prices for the first 36 houses were capped at \$225,000. The next 18 will be capped at \$235,000. Houses

and “they’re shocked to see that we’re quite a bit below what they’re used to.”

Prices up everywhere

Online offers above asking price weren’t exclusive to Hays. Housing markets across Northwest Kansas saw a surge in interest.

“Through the first half of this year, Kansas home prices appreciated at a pace above 17%. That’s just unheard of here,” Longhofer said. “That has slowed, but our forecast for next year is for Kansas home prices to appreciate at 5.4%. That’s still really strong appreciation.”

Longhofer said as the price of existing homes rises, the market becomes more favorable for new construction, which is what is needed in the long run to ease the housing problem. In many rural communities, home values had fallen below what it would cost to build.

So, what’s going on with the housing market? Where is the demand coming from? Is it an influx of people from the West Coast or Colorado’s Front Range?

“Whether or not there’s some of that, our current

See **HOME**, page 6

“Our market was so good we thought we were a big city.”

JOHN HOLUB | PRESIDENT, HAYS BOARD OF REALTORS

have been shooting up on the east side of the city and selling faster than they can be built.

Even though prices tend to be higher in Hays, Holub said the recent frenzy of buyers included more than a few from Denver and Colorado Springs,

Across Kansas and much of the United States, prices have gone up as the housing supply has fallen short of demand. Stan Longhofer, director of the Wichita State University Center for Real Estate, said a housing shortage exists in all different sizes of communities, and a lot of it has to do with older housing not meeting “modern needs and modern desires.”

me grow in my financial education and investment toward our future,”

Simmons said. “I recognize how much it did for us.”

Simmons, executive director of the Mitchell County Regional Medical Foundation, said she keeps in touch with the family that originally built the house, as well as exchanging Christmas

cards with the people she bought it from. They’d refinished the floors and installed new cabinets, and each spring she enjoys seeing flowers bloom that they planted.

“This is my home, and it’s where I want to spend my life,” she said. “This program has made it happen and given us a home.”

Beginning in 2018, the Hansen Foundation partnered with NCRPC, based in Beloit, on pilot programs designed to reduce barriers to home ownership and preserve the area’s housing stock. That first year, the NCK Home

See **STOCK**, page 6

John Holub, president of the Hays Board of Realtors, said in January that things had slowed in the Hays housing market with the arrival of higher interest rates and winter weather.

HOME, from page 5

supply situation really traces its roots to the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008,” Longhofer said.

“We were building enough housing prior to then, and it’s been since then that new construction’s really been low, and multiple issues sort of built up over those



STAN LONGHOFER

15 years. We expect that a shortage of inventory will be with us for at least the next few years. It’s not something that’s going to fix itself overnight.”

Longhofer said the majority of buyers come from within the local area, or elsewhere in Kansas. He said during the pandemic, many office workers shifted to working from home, resulting in a desire for a home office, or just causing them to think more critically about their homes as they spent more time there.

Mortgage interest rates were low, so people started looking to upgrade. However, the already low supply of houses on the market dwindled even further during the early months of the pandemic.

“We had an extremely good fall after the COVID situation somewhat stabilized and the immediate fear of what was going to happen went away,” Holub said.

But then supply chain issues contributed to soaring construction costs, and a shortage of construction workers has compounded the difficulties of building a house, Longhofer said. That made existing houses even more attractive.

Keeping track of who’s been coming and going is a bit of a challenge. According to U.S. Postal Service change-of-address forms, since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, Ellis County has seen a net out-migration of 662 households, which represents a 5.48% drop. Overall, the state has lost 35,909 households.

Holub said figures showing a population decrease don’t seem to square with what he’s experienced.

“I don’t have anything concrete to refute that, but I find that a little hard to fathom based on what our business and our market was like,” he said. ■

STOCK, from page 5

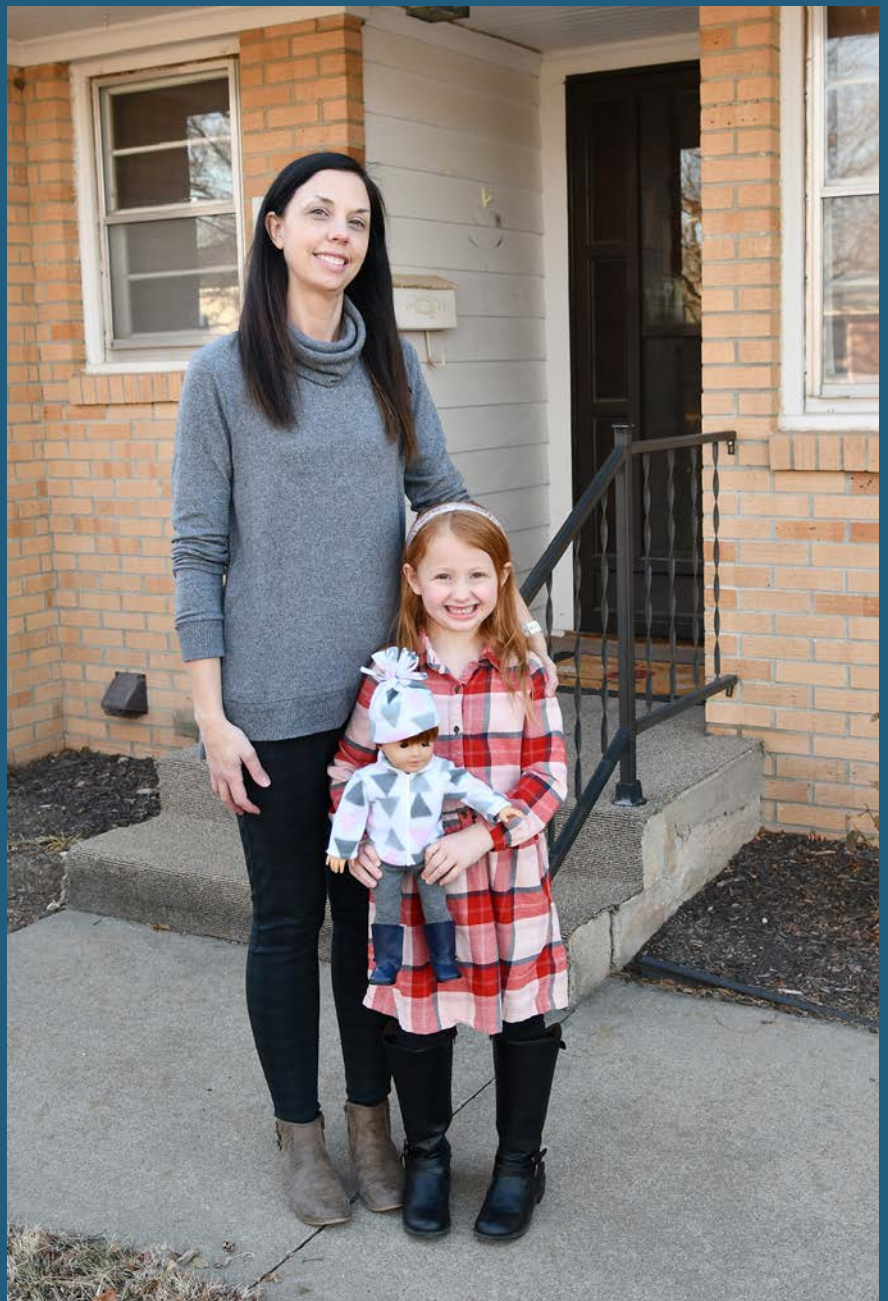
Ownership Loan/Grant Pilot Program offered a 0% loan of up to \$10,000 in down payment assistance and a grant of up to \$2,500 toward closing costs.

Between 2018 and 2021, the program assisted in the purchase of 93 homes. About \$1.1 million of the \$11.6 million total value of the homes purchased in Cloud, Ellsworth, Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Ottawa, Republic, and Saline counties was provided through the pilot program in the form of no-interest loans and grants.

The pilot programs were available in two counties each year. On average, the price of homes purchased was \$125,000, with about 76% of funds coming from a bank loan, 15% from borrower cash and 9% from the loan/grant program.

Evolving with market changes

In 2021, as the housing market changed and demand exceeded supply, the pilot program evolved into a community development tool to improve the quality of the



Stephanie Simmons and daughter, Hayven, are happy to be living in the Beloit home Simmons bought with the help of the North Central Regional Planning Commission’s loan/grant program.

housing stock and increase or maintain the number of livable spaces. Eligible home project types now include new construction, manufactured homes and homes with planned renovations.

“Housing programs need to remain flexible to meet market changes,” said NCRPC Housing Director Keegan Bailey.

The pilot programs have continued to evolve and are providing data for the development of a regional relocation housing incentive program. The program’s goals are to benefit employers in recruiting and retaining employees, provide housing opportunities for people who wish to return to the area, reduce commuting time and launch first-time buyers into home ownership.



KEEGAN BAILEY

Who’s buying?

According to a survey of home buyers who took advantage of the pilot program, 22% of the 32 who moved because of a new job said the incentive was a factor in their decision. Eighty-two percent graduated high school in Kansas, and 64% of those were from NCRPC’s 12-county service area. Forty percent of recipients were first-time homebuyers.

“With each pilot, we continued to see strong interest from individuals with local ties to the region,” Bailey said. “We were also encouraged by the high percentage of young buyers accessing the program and staking roots in the region.”

Families who participated in the program brought 12 new children to area school systems, as well as an additional 30 preschool-aged children and infants. Seventy-nine percent of participants were younger than 49 years old.

In August 2022, the program was modified to offer a \$12,500 relocation incentive to attract new residents to move to the area and work, start or buy a business or retire. Funds from the Hansen Foundation, along with matching funds from NCRPC, were used to create

a two-year pilot with plans to assist in the purchase or construction of 25 homes in eight counties in North Central Kansas. In the first three months of the pilot, results have been encouraging, with 33% of those using the incentives moving from out of state, Bailey said.

Making existing stock better

An obstacle to growth in rural areas is older housing stock that is often in poor condition. After someone shuts the door for the last time, an abandoned home deteriorates quickly.

“Saving the existing housing stock for any community is just as important as your other infrastructure,” Bailey said. “Without a supply of viable homes, a community cannot stabilize or grow.”

Also, starting in 2022, NCRPC is administering a separate four-year pilot program called the NCRPC

projects that were funded included new windows, siding, flooring, and sewer system repairs. The first-year funding was projected to cover 10 rehabilitation projects and eight demolitions per county.

It is anticipated that the NCRPC Housing Initiative will be expanded to remaining counties in the Hansen Foundation service area through a phased rollout over the next three years. Over the course of the four-year program, the NCRPC hopes to fund rehabilitation work on 240 homes and demolition of about 190 unfit housing structures.

Similar programs have long existed to assist low-income homeowners, but Bailey said programs targeting moderate-income residents are not as common. NCRPC staff completed outreach for the NCRPC Housing Initiative by writing

“Saving the existing housing stock for any community is just as important as your other infrastructure. Without a supply of viable homes, a community cannot stabilize or grow.”

KEEGAN BAILEY | NCRPC HOUSING DIRECTOR

Housing Initiative, funded by the Hansen Foundation, that provides approximately \$125,000 in grants in each of six counties for moderate income housing rehabilitation and \$40,000 for demolition of dilapidated homes. Eligible homeowners have income between 60% and 150% of the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Kansas Income Limits based on family size. For example, the income range for a one-person household used in the first round of applications was no less than \$32,513, but no more than \$81,281; the larger the family size, the larger the income limit (HUD updates figures annually).

First-year funds, which were available in Cloud, Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Russell, and Smith counties, were distributed within 48 hours after the program was announced in May, Bailey said. Grant recipients had 90 days to have the work completed. Bailey said

letters to cities in the six counties, attending county commission meetings, and utilizing newspapers, radio and social media.

“Throughout our years of work in the housing area, our data collection and observations have shown that strengthening the housing stock amongst the moderate-income level has been overlooked,” Bailey said. “Many homeowners are not able to reinvest in their current home or are only able to do a little bit at a time. This program is allowing homeowners to do more work earlier.

“Our housing stock is just like any other larger infrastructure; we need to upgrade and repair it to ensure that it is viable for the future. Our partnership with the Dane G. Hansen Foundation seeks to strengthen the housing stock in an effort to ensure it will be there for generations to come.” ■

Downtown apartment renovation projects
underway in several communities

LOFTY GOALS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

Within about a year, the tall arched windows on the top story of some of Smith Center's downtown buildings will no longer be sealed off with plywood. Sunlight will spill through newly installed glass into refurbished loft apartments.

"This is going to be so great up here," owner Chris Rowe said, as he looked at the exposed wall studs, lathe, and brick in the upper story of one of his buildings. "This is going to be super cool."

Completing the second-story apartments and vacation rental units and finding people who love living and visiting there will be the final steps in the transformation of three buildings, two owned by Rowe and one by business partner Raquel Boxum. The main floor retail spaces in each have already been renovated and are in use. They house a dance studio, a consignment shop, and a shoe store. Rent from those buildings helps to cashflow the loft restorations.

"We want Smith Center to be what it was when I was a kid," Boxum said.

The project in Smith Center is one of several in Northwest Kansas communities where efforts are underway to renovate or create apartments in downtown commercial buildings. Russell

Development is seeking funding to create 11 apartments in a former hotel. In Oakley, the oldest building downtown is being refurbished to house the Logan County Community Foundation on the lower floor and vacation rentals upstairs. Other projects that include loft apartments or short-term rental space have been completed by individual owners in Osborne, Lincoln, and other communities.

With the advantage of having electrical, water, sewer, and street infrastructure already in place and the



ABOVE: Business partners Chris Rowe and Raquel Boxum stand in a dance studio in downtown Smith Center. Before they renovated the building, it had a tree growing in it and was near collapse.

RIGHT: Rowe describes what the upstairs loft space will look like when he's done.

BACKGROUND: While most of the upper story windows in downtown Smith Center remained covered with plywood in November, new windows were in the process of being installed that would change the look of a building owned by Rowe.



LOFTS

appeal of a walkable community to attract younger people, downtown loft living is having its moment.

High above Smith Center

Rowe and Boxum have been working together to bring new life to Smith Center's downtown since 2020. They and their crew have also swung hammers and operated drills on jobs that improve other factions of the city's housing stock, including about a dozen houses they remodeled and now rent out. Rowe is also building one of two spec houses under construction in Smith Center.

To fully appreciate how much they've

already accomplished, you may have needed to live in Smith Center and walk by the dance studio building before mirrors lined its walls. Back then, it was full of pigeons, and people complained about the smell. In April 2020, it sold at a tax sale for \$275. The original purchaser doubled his money that afternoon when Rowe acquired it from him for \$550.

"There was a tree growing in here and when it rained, it rained through the roof," Rowe said. "It really wasn't safe to walk in here."

Rowe and his five-man crew replaced the roof and seven rotting beams. They hauled 15 loads of debris out of the building and also repaired and jacked up the floor to fix a two-inch slope.

"I thought we could save it," he said of the building at 112 S. Main. "There were times in the process we questioned that."

Rowe advertised the newly renovated building for rent, agreeing to finish it out for the renter's purpose. It sat empty for about a year before the owner of a gym across the street approached him about turning it into a dance studio. The first classes were held in May.

Now Rowe looks forward to finishing the upstairs apartments, even though that may not exactly make financial sense. He has in mind a wide open, modern concept. Rowe said he anticipates having a mix of apartments and vacation rentals because Smith Center needs both, and a well-used rental would bring in better income.

"Part of the problem is, if we put in the money that we really need to get them to look nice, we're not going to get the money back," Boxum said. "You can't charge the rent that some bigger town can. That's why we do other projects first — because really this is just to feed his heart."

Rowe said he'd like to find a financier and earn an equity position. He said he and his crew can do the work, and they already own the downtown properties he's wanting to improve, but they are short on capital.

"We love these buildings, but I don't have a problem giving up ownership if we can see them come to fruition," he said.

Boxum grew up in Smith Center. She was working as a radiation therapist in Kansas City when Rowe convinced her to come back to her hometown. Rowe grew up in Olathe, where he started his first business (auto-detailing) at age 14. He'd had a varied career before starting a construction company in 2018.

He first came to Smith Center to work on a friend's house. He stayed because so many other people approached him about doing their home improvements. He now owns HBD Construction, and Boxum owns HBIC, a development company. In addition to construction work and property management, Boxum works in Hays two days a week doing radiation therapy.

Rowe said he loves doing work that makes Smith Center a better place to live.

"If I'd have won the big Powerball,

See **LOFTS**, page 10





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I think I still would have gone to work today,” he said. “I’d book a vacation, but I’d go to work today.”

Russell’s revival

A \$2.8 million effort to rejuvenate the three-story Holland Hotel in downtown Russell is underway. The iconic building opened in December 1926 with 48 small rooms. Over the past two decades, the 12,000-square-foot brick building was only used for storage and has fallen into disrepair. Efforts have been launched to develop the building into 11 studio, one- and two-bedroom apartments.

Russell Development, Inc., acquired the building in the fall of 2022, and the Russell City Council agreed in September to apply for a \$650,000 Moderate Income Housing (MIH) grant through the Kansas Housing Resource Corp., as well as Housing Investor Tax Credits to encourage private investment in the project. The project was denied funding in December, but plans were to try again in February.

The council also approved a resolution proposing the creation of a Rural



Raelene Keller, president of the Logan County Community Foundation board, stands in the upper story of a downtown Oakley building that was renovated to provide offices for the foundation. A Colby contractor has leased the space above the offices to create vacation rentals.

Housing Incentive District for the hotel, which would capture increases in property taxes created by the development to help cover the costs of improvements for up to 25 years.

“Getting the project going is going to be very heavily dependent on our ability to raise charitable contributions and grant funding,” said Andrea Krauss, vice president of the Russell Development board. “There’s just no developer who wants to make that kind of individual personal investment in something of this magnitude.”

Krauss said the building’s original woodwork and fixtures were stripped out in the 1990s.

“We’ve got a clean slate,” she said. “We don’t have to worry about ruining the historical integrity because

there is none.”

Caden Pfeifer, a Russell native and Kansas State University senior studying planning and design, worked on the project in the summer of 2022 as an intern. He got estimates, checked zoning requirements, and worked on preliminary architectural drawings.

If funding is obtained, Krauss said the apartments would target young professionals, such as teachers and nurses. Krauss said many new hires in Russell commute from other communities and ultimately decide to take a job there.

“We’re hoping to stop that drain by being able to provide housing,” she said. “Maybe they’ll set down some roots here, buy a house and decide to stay long term.”



Project 1886 in Oakley

When bricks began falling off the oldest building in downtown Oakley, there were people who thought it was time to tear it down. But Raelene Keller, president of the Logan County Community Foundation board, saw a project she was willing to spearhead.

“The bricks were in the street for two years,” she said. “Many in the community were just cussing this building. The street was fenced off for months.”

Keller began applying for grants and asking individuals and businesses for donations in November 2020. About \$800,000 later – including grants from the Dane G. Hansen Foundation and the Patterson Family Foundation – the downstairs offices and remote work space were expected to be complete by the end of January.

The south wall was all new brick. Other exterior walls had been tuckpointed, and a new storefront, a new roof, all new doors and 30 new windows had been installed. Within the month, Keller hoped the community foundation could move in. Also downstairs, a commercial kitchen was planned, which would be available on a rotating schedule to vendors who would offer lunches and possibly dinners.

“One woman who is interested in serving once a week uses organic food and offers healthy options,” Keller said.

Keller is also excited about what’s happening up the 22 steps that lead to the building’s second floor. There,

Mike Woofter, president of Woofter Construction & Irrigation in Colby, is leasing space to create three vacation rental rooms with private bathrooms.

Demolition and construction work is underway, and Keller said she could already envision the vacation rentals becoming a destination for visitors and tourists coming to Little Jerusalem Badlands State Park, Monument Rocks or for a Lesser Prairie Chicken tour.

Suds your duds in Osborne

Osborne needed a laundromat, Amanda Schultze reasoned. If your washer or dryer broke down, as such appliances do, that meant a 12-mile trip to Downs until you could get your appliance repaired or replaced, which always takes a while.

“I felt like it was a community need. It’s more of a community service,” she said. “Laundry is a necessity, not a luxury.”

So, Schultze began shopping around for a laundromat location. She and her husband, Bryan, purchased an empty building at 128 W. Main in June 2021. While they waited for the washers and dryers they ordered to arrive, they began rehabilitating an upstairs vacation rental unit. They did most of the work themselves, stripping everything off the walls and installing all new electrical and plumbing. They started the job in July and had their first renter in November.

Thirty-one steps below, the washers and dryers were ready to be installed in



ABOVE: Amanda Schultze stands in the kitchen of a short-term vacation rental loft apartment she and her husband, Bryan, renovated in downtown Osborne.

BACKGROUND: A customer waits for her laundry in The Washboard, a new laundromat in downtown Osborne.

the new laundromat, The Washboard. It was ready to open in January. Then the Schultzes headed back upstairs to finish a long-term lease apartment.

Amanda said demand for the vacation rental fluctuates — with holidays, hunting season, weddings and funerals being good for business.

“I could never figure out exactly how you could predict income from a laundromat, so I felt like I needed to be able to utilize a space with some diversity of income,” she said. “This building worked the best because it had living space upstairs.” ■

Two Homes and counting...

Local investors tackle a lack of housing in Atwood

PHOTOS AND STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

[ATWOOD] Brian Clark grew up in Atwood. He had planned to grow old there, but by the 1980s he was having second thoughts. His hometown seemed to be aging much faster than he was.

"I used to travel around and work in St. Francis, Hoxie, Oakley and some of the other towns," he said. "When I'd come home, it was pretty evident to me that we had a problem."

Clark became convinced that other towns were doing a better job of maintaining their housing stock. When he'd come home from a day's work for Midwest Energy, he couldn't help but notice the broken windows and missing shingles on vacant houses.

"I knew if we are not building two to three houses a year, we are going backwards – we're dying," he said. "That's how many houses we're discontinuing utilities to every year."

So, Clark brought together a group of like-minded people. They pooled their resources to purchase dilapidated properties and tear them down. That first group of 23 investors, known as Atwood Property Development (APD), began sprucing up the city. Clark said Midwest Energy has been supportive of his community service efforts.

"When we first started, there were

74 uninhabited properties in Atwood," Clark said. "Half of those hadn't had the utilities turned on since I'd been working for the utility company – probably 20 years – and many were owned by people who didn't even live in our community anymore. We had a terrible problem."

Dilapidation patrol

Things are changing. Not only has APD torn down a significant number of blighted houses, the lots they cleared have been resold. People have built on some of them. A dental clinic now sits on one lot the group cleared.



DIANA TONGISH

"I was on the alumni association, so one year we went to all the class reunions and called ourselves the party crashers," said APD board member Diana Tongish. "I said, 'OK, people, take time to drive around Atwood.' They were amazed at the cleanup and what had been done."

Tongish said she and other board members acquired dilapidated properties by contacting out-of-town owners and attending tax sales. Then they got to work tearing them down and hauling off the debris. Tongish, a professional hairdresser, was concerned that there weren't any decent places to rent, so she personally purchased and rehabilitated three homes as rentals.



Brian Clark became interested in improving his hometown through his work with a utility company.

During a drive around Atwood in November, Tongish could still spot houses she believed were beyond repair.

"We've been trying to work on these for a long time," she said, pointing at two small, uninhabited houses sitting side by side. "There were quite a few homes around like them that we did away with."

However, at this point, the success stories outnumber the disappointments. An abandoned trailer park inhabited by skunks is no more; the two-story house that burned is gone; the house with the freezer full of rotten meat is history, and a number of houses with trees growing inside have disappeared. Greg Cahoj, of Cahoj Earthmoving, was a big help in the demolition process, Tongish and Clark said.

"There were some real dandies," Clark said.

New homes appear

In 2013, the rebuilding process got a jumpstart when Two Homes LLC was



The two houses on the right remained under construction in November, but houses further down the block had become someone's home. The Atwood subdivision is a project of Two Homes LLC.



Two Homes LLC board member Diana Tongish, right, came to see the home construction projects underway in November in a new Atwood subdivision.

formed. Thirteen local investors – who committed from \$5,000 to \$20,000 each – chose the name because they thought they had enough capital to finance construction of two houses. Those first



JOSH WOLTERS

two houses got built and got sold, and construction continued.

“Why stop?” asked Two Homes LLC President Josh Wolters.

“This worked; we need more, so let’s do it again.”

Tongish, who also serves on the Two Homes LLC board, said the group’s aim was to provide a community service and help some younger people get a start.

“There’s just a bunch of stubborn bohemians out in this area that decided we’re going to do it,” she said.

Several local employers – including

Carlson Industries, SureFire Ag (now SurePoint Ag Systems), Carlson’s Choke Tubes, Beaver Valley Supply Co., and J.D. Skiles Co. – were growing and looking to add workers.

“If they were going to bring anybody into town, there really wasn’t housing,” she said. “That’s kind of how we determined that maybe there was a need. We also thought maybe some elderly farmers would want to move to town.”

According to the October 2022 Kansas Economic Trends report from the Center for Economic Development and Business Research at Wichita State University, Rawlins County is ranked first for employment and wage growth in Northwest Kansas. Statewide, it’s ranked second for wage growth and third for employment growth.

“We definitely have some good

things going on economically, which is all part of what’s making it work for us,” Wolters said.

To date, Two Homes LLC has engaged contractors to build 10 homes in Atwood. Eight are in a new subdivision behind the Greason Industrial Park. By November, the four houses in the first block had become family homes. Construction vehicles were still in and out of the subdivision’s second block. An electrician strung wiring, and crews from Straight Line Remodeling, a Hays company owned by Atwood-native Rodney Rippe, hung siding and drywall on four houses at once.

“It’s adding necessary housing that is the right quality and the right price,” Wolters said. “The people who have moved into that housing have been young families in some cases. In some cases, it’s retired folks. It’s just added necessary, quality housing.”

Buyers have signed contracts on all four of the houses under construction, which are valued between \$200,000 and \$300,000. Two Homes LLC owns the property until construction is complete, and the buyer can pay for the home with a conventional mortgage.

Wolters said investors’ money stays in a bank account to serve as collateral for construction financing. He said it’s typically more difficult for an individual homebuyer to get a construction loan, which requires a larger down payment. However, two lots in the subdivision have been sold to buyers who are building their own houses.

Wolters said when Two

See **TWO HOMES**, page 14



TWO HOMES, from page 13

Homes LLC first started building homes, there was concern that the appraised value would fall short of the actual construction cost.

“That was absolutely a concern we had when we started, but I can say that getting a house to appraise for the value necessary for a home loan has never been a problem in the 10 that we’ve done,” he said. “Appraisals have met sales price.”

Some homebuyers have a previous home to sell in Atwood, providing an opportunity for another family to move in. By September, Atwood’s high school enrollment was up enough that the school is now classified as 2A instead of 1A.

Failure leads to opportunity

Tongish said long before ground was broken in the recently developed subdivision, an attempt was made to give away the land where the development now sits. About 20 years ago, lots were offered for free to anyone who would agree to build a home on them. That effort fell flat once interested parties found out they’d have to pay for installation of infrastructure to get water, sewer, and electrical service, she said.

Infrastructure is no longer an issue because it was brought to the area 10 years ago, as part of a grant-funded project to improve the industrial park, said Tim Colgan, a former Atwood mayor. Colgan, an electrician, was busy in late November installing electric wiring in the wall frames of the houses under construction.

“I remember when I was on city council, I was told we’d never see this developed,” he said. “I’d like to tell that individual to come back to Atwood and look at this because we got it done.”

Colgan said the houses in the subdivision sold relatively quickly.

“If you build it, they will come – that’s almost true,” he said. “Nobody’s lost money. That’s encouraging. The local bank put the loan up to get this going. They recognize what economic development is.”

Clark said over the years, Two Homes

LLC investors’ confidence has grown. They’ve taken on bigger projects.

However, he said at this point, it’s not clear what will follow the subdivision.

“We’re trying to find someplace else to go, and that’s just been impossible,” he said. “Atwood sits down here in a creek bottom, and we’ve got rock bluffs around us. On the east, we’ve got the



Electrician Tim Colgan wires a house in the Atwood subdivision.

sewer ponds; the south side is all rock; out west, there’s a lot of flood zone, and to the north is the lake and the golf course.”

Plus, the cost of extending infrastructure to unserved areas quickly becomes cost prohibitive. He said the group is exploring the possibility of grant funding for infrastructure, and that might help ease the situation.

“We’ve had some people call and ask how we got to this point,” Clark said. “It was just a bunch of generous people is what it was. Our mission statement was to build two homes. We told everybody that invested in it, ‘We’ll do our best to keep from losing your money, but there’s no guarantees here.’”

One grateful family

Two Homes LLC’s first house, built by contractor Camron Paxton, of Goodland, was sold to a young couple who still lives there.

Andrew Melia, a SurePoint employee, and his wife, Jen, a high school history teacher, bought the \$160,000, four-bedroom house in the 500 block of South First Street in 2014. They moved from a small home owned by Jen’s family shortly before their first child, Mary, was born. She’s now 8.

“We had to get out of the house we were in because we had no room whatsoever. This basically was our only option, to be honest, but it worked out really well,” Andrew Melia said. “It has been the absolute perfect house for us.”

He said Two Homes LLC representatives “were willing to really work with you.”

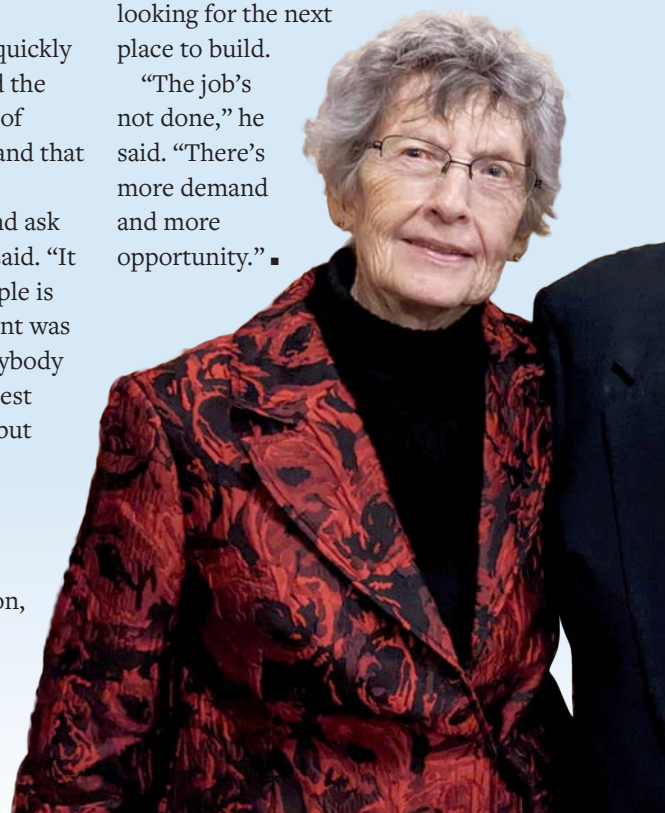
“We ended up negotiating a privacy fence and appliances,” he said. They also were granted a rent-to-own lease on the home until they had enough money saved up to make a down payment and get a bank mortgage.

The Melia family has since expanded to include younger brother Madden, 5, and Waylon, a 180-pound English Blue Great Dane. Andrew Melia said he’s grateful to the local investors who made it possible for his family’s home to be built.

“It’s pretty awesome that these people basically put their money together and invested in the community to fix a problem,” he said.

Wolters said the group is always looking for the next place to build.

“The job’s not done,” he said. “There’s more demand and more opportunity.” ■



“Consistency of wisdom”

Cy Moyer retires after 28 years as a Hansen Foundation trustee

STORY BY BETSY WEARING

[PHILLIPSBURG] Shortly before Dane Hansen’s death, a young Phillipsburg banker, Cy Moyer, visited him in the hospital. Moyer tells the story of that visit, where Mr. Hansen shared his intent to use his estate to create a trust that would benefit his family, and another trust that would benefit his hometown of Logan and surrounding communities in Northwest Kansas.

As Moyer tells it, Mr. Hansen asked him if he thought anything would ever come of it. Moyer assured Mr. Hansen he thought it would grow and be beneficial.

Moyer said that the initial gift to the philanthropic trust was somewhere around \$12 million.

What Moyer had no way of knowing at that time, was that

he would one day be at the table helping to determine what grants would be

made from Mr. Hansen’s trust, now the Dane G. Hansen Foundation.

His first meeting as a trustee was nearly 30 years after Mr. Hansen passed. Moyer recalled asking the board if they had a particular area that they wanted him to learn about, and he said then-trustee Ross Beech told him they had decided to put him on investments.

“There was about \$39 million at that time,” Moyer said, “and about the same in the family trust. Turns out they wanted me to manage them both.”

He said he was nervous about being responsible for both of the trusts, and he went home to think about it.

“At that time, Dane Bales (Mr. Hansen’s nephew) was on the board,” Moyer said, and he told the board he preferred not to manage the family funds. “I said, Dane Bales is sitting here, I don’t want to look him in the eye if things do not go well!”

Throughout his 28 years on the board, Moyer remained involved with the investments, still serving on the investment committee at the time of his retirement on December 31.

Bringing people together

“We’ve grown tremendously,” he said, “From that \$39 million to more than \$600 million.”

As a trustee, Moyer has been a part of thousands



After 28 years, Hansen Trustee Cy Moyer, right, celebrated his last board meeting with a fish fry given in his honor. Trustees Carol Bales, left, and Doug Albin on Cy’s right, were among those who attended the meal.

of grant discussions. He said it’s too hard to pick out one that meant the most to him as a grantor. But he noted that he was really happy that the Foundation had supported so many community centers, such as the Huck Boyd Center in his hometown of Phillipsburg.

“These places help keep a community viable,” he said. “If you ask people what they are proud of, those things matter, a place where community celebrations happen. That’s what’s important to me, bringing people together.”

Moyer’s last meeting as a trustee was in December. He said he had several projects he wanted to focus on in retirement, and thought he would stay busy with those, and spending time with his wife, Gladys.

What will he miss the most about being a trustee?

“Knowing what’s going on in the 26 counties,” he said. “And the camaraderie of the board. This is a group of people who

care about Northwest Kansas and want to help however they can.”

“Cy’s 28 years of service has created a sense of consistency and timeless wisdom for our foundation,” said Doug Albin, a trustee who has worked with Moyer for the past nine years.

“His personal relationship with Dane Hansen prior to the formation of the foundation has helped us continually align our mission with the desires and direction of Mr. Hansen. He will be missed.”

Keeping up with all the initiatives and work happening at the Foundation has been a lot of work, but also a pleasure, Moyer said.

“The volume of what the Hansen Foundation is doing today is multiple times what Mr. Hansen thought it would do,” Moyer said, perhaps recalling that hospital conversation so many years ago. “Taking care of Logan, and Northwest Kansas – that’s what Dane wanted his money to do. I think he’d be pleased.” ■



Cy Moyer and wife Gladys at the Hansen Foundation Christmas celebration.





Mural Mania



8

1. This double mural in downtown Beloit, the Queen City of the fertile Solomon Valley, was painted by local artists Joyce Benedick, Tobi Watkins, Connie Kopsa, Andrea LePon, and Greg Holdren.*
2. Local artist Dennis Schiel painted the "Three Amigos" mural – the first of about 10 painted in downtown Hays.**
3. Artist Matt Miller, of Hays, takes advantage of the shade while working on a downtown Stockton mural in October.
4. A mural pays tribute to Buddy Louthan, who left an estate gift that benefits the town of Simpson. It was created by local artists Joyce Benedick, Hannah Bowers, Maria Marcotte and Nancy Rush.*
5. The Wallace County Visitors Bureau hosted three mural unveilings in December, including this one in Weskan painted by Lissa Sexson. (Photo courtesy of Debra Fischer.)
6. Strand Plaza in downtown Salina is filled with colorful wings thanks to French-born artist Youri Cansell, also known as Mantra.***
7. What's that trapper doing with a cell phone?! It takes a second glance to see that this log cabin is actually a mural on a utility building in Simpson created by local artists Joyce Benedick, Hannah Bowers and Greg Holdren.*
8. A nod to the work of The Land Institute, this mural on the back of the Hoffman building in downtown Salina by San Francisco artist Mona Caron includes Kernza, a perennial wheat of the future, along with other native grasses.***
9. A mural depicting military personnel, equipment and vehicles over the decades was created on the American Legion building in Russell by Olathe artist Buck Arnhold.

* Part of the Murals of Mitchell County Initiative

** Part of the Brush the Bricks Initiative

*** Part of the Salina Canvas Project



9

A patchwork

[STOCKTON] As the final block was fitted into place, a cheer rose up.

“Did you bring the champagne?” asked Amber Muir. “We could have toasted out of the paint cups.”

“Why didn’t we think of that, Amber?” responded Jayne Prockish.

After months of work, the true reward was seeing the beautiful result of their efforts come together on Oct. 26. Prockish and Muir were among about 35 local painters who created a barn quilt mural 10 feet high and

word. It was painted by local people, and each two-foot-square block is sponsored by a local person or designed to represent a local family, business, farm, attraction, organization, or event. Some blocks serve as memorials for deceased loved ones or recognize businesses that no longer exist. Others feature current residents and enterprises.

Sixteen black and white half blocks frame the dozen blocks proclaiming, “Welcome to Stockton.”

Included in the other 127 blocks completed since June are a peony to represent the town’s annual Peony Festival, two featuring the Stockton High Tiger and two with scenes from nearby Webster State Park.

“You have to just look at each and every one of them individually to appreciate the work and the time they’ve spent,” said Kelly Desmarteau, whose wife, Vickie, participated in the painting sessions. Prockish said volunteers had put in about 1,500 hours to complete the first phase of the project.

Several blocks represent local churches, and many depict cows, tractors, or other features of agricultural life, including the livestock brands used by area farmers. There’s a four-block image of a monarch butterfly that visitors can pose in front of, and nine-block tributes to both the University of Kansas’ national basketball

54 feet long. Thanks to Roger Hessler and Prockish’s husband, Jim, and son, Jake, who climbed the ladders and operated the drills, it now covers

most of the side of the city of Stockton’s equipment shed.

“We’re pretty excited about it, and even more excited to get it finished,” Prockish said.

The quilt that transformed the plain metal building welcomes people to Stockton from the west on U.S. Highway 24. Although it can be seen from the highway, it can’t be fully appreciated without stopping the car. The mural overlooks Stockton City Park, so there’s a good place to pull over.

“It’s not to be seen at 35 mph,” Prockish said. “Stop and take a look.”

The mural is a community project in every sense of the

JAYNE PROCKISH



Jake Prockish, on the ladder, gets help from his dad, Jim, to mount a nine-block tribute to Kansas State University.



of paint

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

Stockton's barn quilt mural brings community together

championship and Kansas State University's Power Cat.

"Once word was out about the KU blocks, the Mid Continent Catbackers paid for nine blocks with the Power Cat," Prockish said. "We have a lot of KU and K-State people in town."

More to come

A block representing Fort Hays State University is planned as part of Phase 2 starting in early 2023. At the conclusion of that second phase, the mural may well cover the entire 120-foot length of the wall.

That would take 160 more blocks, more than half of which had already been sold by early January for \$25 each to individuals who plan to paint their own or \$35 for people who want a volunteer to do the painting. Stockton residents and those with Stockton roots can participate. Prockish can recommend a pattern, or the buyer can make his or her own quilt block design with approval.

"We think once everyone sees this, they'll be saying, 'I'd like a block,'" Prockish said. "It could very well end up covering the whole wall as people continue to decide they want to be included."

Prockish, who teaches barn quilt painting at her



Stockton artists take photos of their work shortly after the last block was hung in a large barn quilt mural in October. The second half of the project was launched in January.

business, The Sunflower Shed, said the project "was just something I really wanted to do." She pitched the idea at a countywide Strategic Doing session. Strategic Doing is a process designed to help people form collaborations and take steps to bring projects to completion.

"When everybody else thought it was a good idea, we thought we just need to take this and run with it, so we did," Prockish said. "The goal was to become a destination, and to bring the community together to work on a common project that makes more of an impact. Even people who have never painted before can paint a barn quilt. I drew the patterns, and they came and used paint tape and followed the lines, and I

was there to help guide them."

The timing was good. The mural was up in time for the city's 150th anniversary celebration in November.

The Heartland Community Foundation and the Stockton Community Fund provided funding for most of the paint, lumber and sign board needed for the project. Prockish said the money from the sale of the blocks will be used for signage and promotional efforts to draw people into town to see the mural.

She said the City of Stockton supported the project. In addition to providing the wall for the mural, City Hall was made available for painting sessions. A directory describing the history of each block is planned for the city's website.

Muir painted some of the more intricate scenes, such as the KU National Championship block and a Lions Club emblem. She said she loves painting barn quilts. When Prockish told her about the project, her response was, "I'm in."

"My favorite part of the whole experience of this project is getting to know everybody and hanging out – just giggling at each other and listening to everybody's stories," Muir said.

Prockish said if other Rooks County communities decide to do their own barn quilt projects, she can offer guidance.

"I'm like a kid at Christmas," she said. "I'm so excited to get this far." ■



In January, a house built in 1905 was lifted off its foundation and moved to a new location east of Lincoln by Unruh House Moving, of Galva.

Coming Home

Saving one old house kicks off other activity in Lincoln

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[LINCOLN] The once grand house had fallen into disrepair, but when Julie and Eddie Flores walked inside in late January 2022 they could immediately envision their family living there.

“Basically, my husband and I literally walked in the front door, and we were like, ‘Oh my gosh! This is exactly what we want,’” Julie said. “We fell in love with the character and layout of the home.”

Soon they weren’t the only ones interested. On Feb. 4, the 2 million followers of an Instagram page called Cheap Old Houses learned about the vacant two-story, 1905 Dutch Colonial in Lincoln. The Instagram post, which quickly went viral, explained that the

house was being offered for free to anyone who would move it off land the hospital foundation now owned. It also mentioned that a \$30,000 grant was available to help with the cost of relocation and rehabilitation. Media coverage started mounting.

“For two weeks, my phone did not stop ringing. I’d have to clean out my voicemail every day, and there were hundreds of emails,” said Lincoln County Economic Development Director Kelly Gourley. “We established an application process, and people who matched our vision got a second round of questions.”

For Gourley, the huge interest in Lincoln’s free house was sudden and overwhelming. She’d been trying unsuccessfully to give the house away for more than a year before the Cheap Old Houses post brought to bear the power of the internet.

By mid-April, Lincoln-native Julie Flores and her family were selected by a committee that reviewed the applications. The Flores family had relatives in town, which would make it easier for them to “rally people together to help hang

drywall,” Gourley said.

“We got a call, and Kelly said, ‘Hey, I’d like to give you a big old free house,’” Julie Flores said. “We said, ‘All righty, then.’”

In July, Julie, a stay-at-home mom who works remotely part-time as a bookkeeper, and Eddie, a traveling nurse, were saying goodbye to their Olathe home and packing up their three kids, Lily, 3; Drey, 2; and Sophia, 1, for the move to Lincoln. Until renovations are complete, the family is renting a relative’s



KELLY GOURLEY

nearby farmstead.

By November, they’d made significant progress, which Julie had documented in her blog at

nursingbacktolife.com. They’d had the roof replaced, removed all lathe and plaster from the second story and completed other projects the moving company required before loading up their house. They had purchased three acres of land about a mile east of town along Kansas Highway 18. They had a basement poured and a well dug. They were looking forward to the house being moved in early January.

“We really hope to be in it by next Thanksgiving,” Julie said. “If we are, we said we’d host. The pressure is on. We shall see.”





Giveaway leads to sales

The impact of the online exposure didn't end with restoration of one house. The offer also attracted the attention of a young real estate investor from north Texas.

"We didn't end up applying for the free house because they'd had so much interest, I thought there was probably no way we were going to get it," Jacob Littlejohn said. However, he visited the Lincoln County website and noticed a package of rental houses for sale. He and his wife, Emily, came to Lincoln for the first time to see the 10 houses in March, and they closed on them in April.

Littlejohn was impressed with a beautifully restored vacation rental loft they stayed in downtown, and he was captivated by Lincoln's limestone business district and by people he met there.

"My wife and I are from a small town in Texas about the size of Lincoln, but it's so close to Dallas that recently all of the farmland and everything has been bought up by developers," he said. "It's growing really quickly, and it's really changed the dynamics of the town. Going to Lincoln is like stepping back in time to my childhood in a small Texas town."

Littlejohn was able to sell property he owned in Texas at a significant profit, and now he's investing in Lincoln. He said

Lincoln's property values are artificially low because many houses are never listed online before they are sold. He spent a total of \$155,000 to buy those 10 houses, nine of which were occupied, and soon he had purchased additional rental properties in Lincoln.

"We immediately spent quite a bit on replacing roofs," Littlejohn said. "I think we did five new roofs after closing, and the rest has just been kind of putting out fires as we go."

By November, he owned 11 rental houses that were leased, three that needed work before they would be livable, one house where he and Emily stay when they visit, and three downtown buildings that range from "almost usable to caving in." Littlejohn said there's a lot of work to do, but he plans to specialize in quality rental properties. He said he's keeping rates as low as possible for current tenants, but "you can't afford to do repairs at \$250 a month."

Littlejohn said he and Emily plan to move to Lincoln after she finishes up her English PhD at Texas A&M Commerce.

"Lincoln is an awesome place. I absolutely love it," Littlejohn said. "There's a lot of work to do there, but it seems like people are moving in the right direction. There's

just a great group of people to work with in Lincoln, including the bankers. You get a level of service that I don't think you could get anywhere else."

Housing stock hurdles

Gourley is pleased every time one of Lincoln's roughly 675 homes sells to someone who plans to fix it up. Thanks to a Moderate Income Housing grant from the Kansas Housing Resources Corp., she was able to provide financial assistance to repair six houses in 2022.

"The free house got one of our grants," she said. "It was vacant a long time, sitting there wasting away. We can essentially add a housing unit because something that's been written off is going to become a viable house again."

In recent years, housing has become one of Gourley's chief concerns. If there aren't quality homes available for new workers accepting positions with local employers, they won't be able to attract quality employees, she said.

"We're trying to figure out how to get people to move here, but every conversation comes back to housing,"

See **HOME**, page 22



HIGH TECH HOMES

Innovation Center, Grow Hays partner to build a concrete house

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

Is there a way to build a home more efficiently? More economically? Are there new technologies that could be explored?

Scott Sproul, president and CEO of the Innovation Center, said those are questions the private operating foundation based in Norton is trying to answer.

“We’re looking at new technologies to try to increase

efficiencies and the sheer speed that we could get new homes added to our rural communities,” Sproul said. “It’s been a big priority to see if there are any kinds of technologies that we could share with area builders that they may want to adopt.”



SCOTT SPROUL

Sproul said three different types of construction technology have been targets for study: Use of Structural Insulated Panels and other types of panels in home construction, 3D printed homes and the Waffle-Crete construction system, which is

produced in Hays.

“Everything we’re looking at would be rated for our area as far as wind, hail, those type of things,” Sproul said.

Sproul said representatives of the Innovation Center toured plants in Lawrence and Kansas City that make SIPs, a high-performance building system with an insulating foam core that makes it energy efficient. He said research continues on the uses of SIPs.

“SIPs panels are not a new technology, but they haven’t been widely used in home building in our area,” Sproul said.

Sproul traveled to Richmond, Va., to see a house being 3D printed, but that didn’t happen.

“The night we got there, somebody stole the controller from the job site and that brought it to a halt. They had to ship a new controller from Denmark,” he said. “We didn’t actually get to see it run, but we did get to talk to all the

engineers and professionals who were there printing the home.”

He said homes are “printed” out of concrete, which is directed out of a chute during the printing process. He said the Innovation Center has determined that that technology seems less immediately useful in Northwest Kansas.

Can’t beat concrete

He sees more promise in Waffle-Crete systems, which are a different, more economical way to make a concrete home. The Innovation Center plans to partner with Grow Hays in construction of a model home made of Waffle-Crete in the second half of the Tallgrass Addition in Hays.

James Robben, director of business development and special projects for Grow Hays, said lots in the area where the home is being built sell to builders for \$15,000, and the



Workers line house up with its new foundation.

HOME, from page 21

she said. “People see we have such a workforce need here, but if someone’s trying to move into the community to take a job and there’s no place for them to live, they’re not going to take the job. They’re not going to move here if they think their choice is living in a dump or a house that doesn’t fit their needs.

“By moving housing standards up, you move other standards up that can also feed into a better workforce, what’s happening in the schools, volunteering and leadership.”

According to a housing inventory completed by Gourley’s office, 11 percent of Lincoln’s houses are in bad enough condition that they may need to be demolished. Another 20 percent show major wear, and the remaining nearly 70 percent are in satisfactory condition.

Dealing with dilapidation

Dilapidated homes represent a significant challenge. If a house is allowed to deteriorate to the point that its value goes down, other residents must pick up a larger share of the tax burden to support needed community services. Reversing the problem can be complicated or cost prohibitive. Rundown vacant houses are often owned by out-of-town family members who inherited the property.

“The house may be full of grandpa and grandma’s stuff that has to be divided out among a bunch of people that don’t get along or live in different corners of the world,” she said. “When those property values are going down, it’s just easier to pay the \$100 a year in taxes than to deal with a houseful of stuff.”

Until recently, real estate listing

INNOVATION -CENTER-

The Northwest Kansas Economic Innovation Center, Inc. has a new logo and is now using the abbreviated name Innovation Center. The mission remains the same: *Providing economic and entrepreneurial assistance to businesses in Northwest Kansas.* The Innovation Center serves 26 counties with a variety of programs. For more information, go to nwkeici.org or email office@nwkeici.org.

price of homes constructed is capped at \$235,000.

“Our hope is to develop that home, understand what the costs are to finish it, understand what the labor inputs would be, and if there are any savings,” Sproul said. “We plan to have an open house for contractors to come see this technology once it’s completed. We don’t have any intentions of being developers or contractors at a large stage. It’s not our intent to compete with construction companies or developers.

“It’s our intent to show the technologies that are out there, and for us to take the risk on figuring out what the costs are and if there are any efficiencies that could be shared. We’ll have a month to two months that people can set up appointments to come see the home, and then it

will be sold.”

Sproul said when the model house sells, it will be a good opportunity to confirm that the house will appraise at a price that allows the buyer to get a loan.

Quasi-tornado proof

Waffle-Crete panels are made of six- to eight-inch-thick molded concrete. They are pre-cast in reusable pan forms that can be used for walls, floors, and roofs. The

panels are bolted together for sturdy construction.

The company that developed the Waffle-Crete system started operating in Hays 30 years ago. Its

panels have been used in office buildings, apartments, motels, retaining walls and single-family homes. The technology is widely used in tropical locations where structures need to be able to



JAMES ROBBERN

stand up to earthquakes and hurricanes.

“We’re doing the model house to determine interest and see if it’s a viable option for Northwest Kansas to build affordable homes,” Robben said. “I don’t think many people would balk at a quasi-tornado proof home. It’s a completely concrete house.”

Robben said there are several older Waffle-Crete structures in Hays that are still in fine shape, but “we just need to do a modern build to see how it compares to a traditional stick-built house.”

Sproul said with wood

prices being volatile, it seemed like a good time to explore the possibilities of concrete. He said the panels can be poured onsite or hauled to the build site.

Robben said plumbers and electricians would also be welcome to come see the model house to learn how plumbing pipes and electrical wiring are installed.

“Some of this will be educational, if it is viable, to make sure people know how to work with it,” Robben said. “If this works, we can put in a bunch of houses in Northwest Kansas.”

websites were not typically used when a house was put on the market, and that also contributed to lower sales prices. Homes tended to sell for what local buyers were able to pay, and nicer houses would sit on the market for a long time. Constructing a home or even extensive renovations had become money losers in Lincoln County, Gourley said.

“I kind of look at it as we have to have prices rise in order for the market to support development,” Gourley said. “There’s a correction in the housing market in other places, and I feel like there’s a correction that has to happen here to balance things out.

“At some point we have to stop the slide. If you’re not ever building new, then you just have fewer and fewer houses which means it’s harder and harder to move here.”

Countywide open house

She started trying to address the issue in 2019 by listing 11 properties online in a countywide open house. She was hoping to attract potential buyers from the Salina area.

“The point was to generate interest, excitement – the feeling that you need to act now,” she said. “It worked. One house sold before the open house was even held.”

After the arrival of COVID-19 in 2020, fewer people decided to participate in the event. Five houses were listed that year. In 2021, the open house was expanded from one day to a one-month time frame. Six houses were listed.

This year, there were so few properties available, she didn’t hold the open house. Use of online real estate websites was becoming more common place, and

properties that were offered for sale were moving quickly.

“Having housing listed where people are looking is absolutely key,” she said.

Even now that the market has slowed with rising interest rates, Gourley said there are people interested in moving to Lincoln County, and there have been recent successes. She cited a young couple with an infant who found a rental house on Zillow and moved to Lincoln from Utah. She said Lincoln’s central location appealed to the husband, who is a traveling insurance adjuster.

“I really feel like there will be changes in the next 10 years,” she said. “You either plan for them and try to direct them in a certain way, or change happens to you, and you just get whatever you get. We need to make more of a conscious effort to direct things.” ■

A photograph of an elderly couple, Wayne and Millie Horlacher, standing in their greenhouse. Wayne, on the left, is wearing a light-colored button-down shirt, blue jeans, and glasses. Millie, on the right, is wearing a red turtleneck, a blue floral jacket, and a matching blue floral skirt. They are both smiling. The greenhouse has a wooden ceiling with exposed beams and fluorescent lights. Various potted plants, including orchids and leafy greens, are visible in the background. A round clock is mounted on the wall behind them.

Array of suns

Housing development uses the power of the sun

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[COLBY] It may have seemed like Wayne and Millie Horlacher were ahead of their time in 1980 when they platted a housing development where the homes would be required to be environmentally friendly and meet energy efficiency standards, but Wayne points out it wasn't exactly a new idea.

"The Mesa Verde Indians knew all about building their cliff dwellings on the south facing sides of the mountain, and farmers out here built hen houses with a clerestory window so the winter sun would shine into the middle part of the houses," the retired Colby jeweler said.

Millie added that building methods that utilize passive solar design to collect and retain heat have been available for a long time, but that knowledge "just hasn't been utilized."

Wayne and Millie, who will celebrate their 70th anniversary in May, met each other when they were both playing baritone for the Kansas State University marching band. After two years in the Army and completing the horology program at Bradley University in Peoria, Ill., Wayne brought his bride to Colby, where he bicycled to work at Horlacher Jewelers, the business his father started in 1927. The Horlachers' son, Jeff, now owns and operates the downtown store.

The couple have long been energy conscious. In 1955, they had their own home constructed with an awareness of how the sun's angle changes with the seasons. They consulted books,

Wayne and Millie Horlacher, developers of Eco Acres, stand in their greenhouse.

hine



Eco Acres is a Colby subdivision with energy efficiency requirements for homes built there.

the magazine *Solar Today* and Millie's brother, who taught solar classes at Garden City Community College, to create a house that gains warmth from the sun in the winter and is shaded

would not meet the requirements of the Eco Acres housing covenant, Wayne said. He said at the time of its construction, they didn't have as much awareness and experience, nor access to the improved

foolish and maybe we were off the deep end," Millie said. "There have been a lot of rumors about Eco Acres. At first it was that houses had to be 'weird looking.' I don't think any of the houses are weird looking."

"As time passed, people said, 'You were way ahead of your time,'" Wayne added. "So, our thought was, 'Catch up.'"

Construction starts

The first house in Eco Acres was built by the late Bill and Pat Donelan. The Donelans attended a solar building school in Maine and hired a Denver architect known for pioneering work in residential solar technology to design their house. However, in the first 37 years of Eco Acres' existence, theirs was one of only five lots sold out of 26 available. Then, finally, the day dawned when energy efficient construction had wider appeal.

"The encouraging thing is people are becoming more aware of the need to conserve resources," Millie said. "It's easier to build an energy efficient house now. The materials and the process of building have become more energy efficient and readily available. Part of it has been pushed by utility companies because there are limited lines and resources available."

By May 2017, only six lots were left. In November 2022, only Lot No. 9 was unsold. None of the lots have special assessments.

Not every lot has seen construction. At present, 13 houses have been built in the development. Some people bought two of the \$14,000 to \$17,000 lots to give themselves more space, and some people

See **SUNSHINE**, page 26



Some Eco Acres homes have more visible solar energy features, like the large bank of south-facing windows on this home.

from the sun's glare in the summer. A bank of windows along the south side allows winter sunlight to spill into their home, and by winter solstice, on Dec. 21, the house is warmed by full sun. An overhanging eave shades the house in

construction materials available today.

In the 1980s, there weren't many people in Colby other than the Horlachers who were incorporating knowledge of sun angles and solar orientation into their home construction plans. Their Eco Acres

"As time passed, people said, 'You were way ahead of your time. So, our thought was, 'Catch up.'"

WAYNE HORLACHER | DEVELOPER, ECO ACRES

the summer when the sun is positioned higher in the sky.

"The house has functioned very well, for four children and 13 foster children," Millie said.

As energy efficient as their house is, it

housing development – planned for a 26-acre pasture located between Pine Street and Poplar Avenue where their children's horses had once grazed – was slow to take off.

"A lot of people thought this was a bit



Homes in Eco Acres all have a different appearance. A housing covenant for the subdivision includes several requirements regarding energy efficiency but none regarding appearance.

SUNSHINE, from page 25

just haven't built yet. Before a house is constructed, plans must be approved by a verification committee, including the Horlachers. After the house wrap and windows are installed, Midwest Energy performs a test to determine how airtight the home is and whether more work is necessary to meet covenant requirements.

The Horlachers installed three cul-de-sacs in the development and constructed one spec house to spur interest. They call Eco Acres "the realization of our dream."

"These are nice energy efficient houses that have a very minimal drain on utilities and are comfortable and healthy to live in," Wayne said.

Different, but the same

Each house in Eco Acres looks different, but each incorporates construction techniques that ensure energy efficiency at a level that far surpasses traditional stick construction techniques. Skylights, intentional use of airflow, a variety of insulating materials, dark surfaces that soak up heat and provide thermal mass, large windows on the south with overhangs to block excessive summer sun and earth berms on the north are just a few of the variety of features that various homes incorporate to achieve the level of energy efficiency stipulated in the Eco Acres covenants. Energy recovery ventilation, in which the temperature of outgoing, stale air is transferred to incoming, fresh air, is highly recommended.

Wayne said top selling furnaces and windows available on today's market

exceed the efficiencies required in the covenant. Although the homes in Eco Acres utilize passive solar design, they also incorporate active backup systems. However, Wayne said the owners of at least one home have told him they wouldn't have bothered with that had

"I think every house built should be built at least as efficient as these covenants say, even if it's not on Eco Acres."

WAYNE HORLACHER | DEVELOPER, ECO ACRES

they realized how constant the passive systems would keep home temperatures.

"I think every house built should be built at least as efficient as these covenants say, even if it's not on Eco Acres," he said.

Wayne said the upfront cost of energy efficient construction is slightly higher, but that expense more than pays for itself in decreased monthly utility bills.

It makes winter tolerable

Josh and Ronda Faber can attest to those lower bills. Josh designed and built their house himself. Since they moved in in 2019, Ronda said he has made a habit of monitoring the temperature inside, even when they are on vacation. She said last December, while they were in Arizona, even though it was bitter cold in Colby, the house stayed warm enough that the heater didn't kick on for six days.

"We have the best passive solar home in the whole world, and we just love it," Ronda said. "I just love using what God's already given us."

She said in the winter, the warm house "makes winter tolerable for me because I'm not a winter person." She said in the summer, overhangs Josh designed keep the sun out, so the house stays cool.

"The sun doesn't start to peek in onto the windowsills until the very end of August," she said.

The covenants each homeowner must abide by enable energy and water conservation, as well as solar access. To ensure that neighbors don't interfere with each other's solar access, the covenants prohibit any vegetation, structure or object that casts a shadow longer than 30 feet onto an adjacent lot between the hours of 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. Dec. 21, the day with the least amount of sunlight.

"They're performance covenants," Millie said. "They're not about whether it

has to be brick or wood. It can be stucco or brick or wood as long as it performs. We wanted to emphasize that style wasn't the critical thing – it was performance. I think all in all, it's been a success."

In November, Colby builder Ralph Brighton, of Tri Star Homes, was putting a driveway in to wrap up the latest home construction project.

Brighton, who came to Colby from Colorado, said he already utilized many of the techniques common to energy efficient home construction, such as Insulated Concrete Form foundations, which prevent heat from escaping, and attic insulation with R values of 45 to 60 to restrict heat flow. However, working on Eco Acres projects has caused him to add more efficiency measures to his standard practices. For example, he cited combining a layer of polyurethane foam spray insulation with fiberglass batts in a technique known as Flash and Batt.

"I'm starting to make that more of a standard thing – anything to separate you from the competition," he said. ■

Bird City BOOM

Spec house, other new homes being built

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[BIRD CITY] Bird City residents have been watching something they don't often get to see: A new home being built. In fact, four new homes were recently underway, and a downtown building was being remodeled to include apartments.

Bird City Century II Development Foundation

Executive Director Teryn Carmichael said the foundation board voted in late 2021 to build a spec house on an empty lot near downtown. The 1,800-square-foot, five-bedroom, three-bath house with finished basement and attached garage is nearing completion.

Goodland contractor Camron Paxton and his crew are expected to put on the finishing touches in April. Carmichael said the asking price has yet to be determined, but construction costs are expected to be around \$325,000.

"It's been super exciting," said Carmichael, who drives by the house

on West Fourth Street and checks on progress at least once a day. "I've been here almost six years, and this has been talked about ever since I was hired. It's been a long time in the works."

In addition to the spec house, several local families were in the midst of their own construction projects in November. A poured foundation awaited the arrival of one family's prefabricated home, and an older couple moving into town from a farm was building another house near downtown. A tiny house was being completed by a couple moving from a rental. In addition, a corner building downtown was being renovated into new offices for the Greater Northwest Kansas Community Foundation. Two apartments and a vacation rental were being developed in the back part of the building.

"It's kind of hopping around here!" Carmichael said.

Carmichael said if things go well with the first house, the foundation is prepared to build a second. Though plans are not set, it may be smaller to target couples who are ready to downsize. In early February, there had been interest expressed in the spec home but not yet a firm commitment from a buyer. Carmichael remained confident.

"Houses hit the market, and they're off

the market. It's insane. Houses do not sit on the market here," she said. "It doesn't seem to have slowed down even though the interest rates have gone up."

The two major employers in Bird City are the Bird City Dairy and Cheylin USD 103. It has been a struggle to fill positions in businesses because of the lack of housing in Bird City, Carmichael said.

Century II has a long history of taking calculated risks to benefit Bird City. In 2007, nearly half of the foundation's assets were committed to purchase land for and help finance a Bird City expansion of McCarty Dairy.

"In the long haul, that's been a huge blessing to our community," Carmichael said.

In 2016, the foundation paid for construction of a licensed group home for child care near the school. Paxton, who is building the spec house, previously built Cougar Cub Daycare, which continues to serve Bird City children.

"Everyone knows if you're in a rural community, you have to be very open minded and to a certain extent willing to take risks in order to make things survive," Carmichael said. "That's our job, to go out there and take risks and try to make this a better place than where we found it and keep pushing it forward." ■



TERYN CARMICHAEL

Goodland contractor Camron Paxton and his crew are expected to put the finishing touches on the Bird City spec home in April.





Previously untold stories

History is told through the eyes of children at Concordia's Orphan Train Museum

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING

[CONCORDIA] In the heart of Kansas, a critical piece of American history is being researched, preserved, shared, and celebrated. The Orphan Train Museum in Concordia is dedicated to telling and sharing the story of hundreds of thousands of children who were transported by train, from mostly East Coast cities to new homes, often in the middle of the country.

This important history is often a surprise to people, yet it is quite possibly a part of their personal family history.

"It is estimated that one in 25 Americans are related to an Orphan Train rider," said Kaily Carson, museum curator. "The current estimate is that about 250,000 children were riders between 1854, or maybe as early as 1850, until about 1929."

That means their descendants are in the millions.

Cities overwhelmed

Between 1850 and 1930, roughly 35 million immigrants poured into the United States, mostly from Europe. New York City was the primary landing place, and the city simply could not cope with the influx. There were not enough jobs, and not nearly enough homes. Tenement houses were overflowing with large families who were living in single rooms. Less fortunate families lived on the streets. Factories where the lucky few found work were unregulated and unsafe. And nearly everyone was hungry.

As a result, many children were orphaned due to parents who died from injury or illness. In even more instances, overwhelmed parents made the selfless but heartbreaking

decision to give up their children hoping they would have a better future – or any future.

"The main reason for the Orphan Trains was not really that they were orphans," Carson said. "It was poverty. It's hard to say for sure, but it is estimated that at least half of the children had at least one living parent.

Only about a quarter were truly orphans."

In 1853, the Children's Aid Society was established in New



CHARLES LORING BRACE

THE NATIONAL ORPHAN TRAIN COMPLEX

300 Washington St., Concordia, (785) 243-4471
orphantraindepot.org

Open Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m.

Admission: \$8 for adults; \$4 for children/students;
\$7 military (active and veterans)

Group price (10 or more): \$7 for adults and \$3 for children/students

An Orphan Train is part of a brick relief on the side of the visitor's center in Concordia, branded as The Orphan Train Town.



Top: Agent Anna Laura Hill on the far right, is featured throughout the museum. She accompanied and placed hundreds of children in the Midwest, including Kansas.

Middle: Large immigrant families often lived in one-room tenement houses in New York and other East Coast cities. Poverty is considered the main driver for families who placed their children on the Orphan Trains.

Bottom: This photo of Orphan Train rider Anne Gruele Harrison is part of a display of photos, letters, and postcards that Agent Anna Laura Hill saved from years of correspondence with children she placed.

York City by Charles Loring Brace to help address the needs of children who were orphaned or abandoned. The society is commonly considered the founder of the Orphan Train movement, but Carson says there were many involved. The New

York Foundling Hospital was another major player, usually with much younger children, including infants.

Children from the orphanages in New York and Boston were the primary riders, but Carson said that as other cities grew, trains also ran from places like Cincinnati and Chicago, and later cities farther west such as St. Louis and even Sacramento.

Matching children with new families

Children who were most likely to be received in a good home were selected for the Orphan Train program. Carson said the train riders were generally in good health, had no major disabilities, were well behaved, mostly English speaking and of European decent.

She said the perception of many people is that trains full of children stopped in a town, and people gathered to pick out a child right there at the depot. In reality, Carson said most organizations selected a destination ahead of time, and in some instances the family was also preselected.

“It was all pre-arranged,” she said. “It was not really a stop and shop. Local people helped to pre-approve families ahead of time.”

Children traveled with an agent or agents – adults who shepherded the children, anywhere from 5 to 30 or 35 at a time – while they were on the train and as they transitioned to their new homes.

Once the train reached a destination community, Carson said the agent helped get the children ready to meet their new families. “They often went to a hotel to freshen up,” she said. “They always met the families in a public place.”

The agent facilitated the transfer of the child. “There was usually an agreement, sometimes written but sometimes verbal, that stated that the family would provide for the child as their own, give them a good education, things like that,” Carson said. “Some required payment for labor – most often for teenaged boys – who were paid for labor performed on their foster family’s farms.”

The agents played a crucial role and are a significant part of the stories that visitors can find at the museum.

Orphan Train town

Though the Orphan Trains are a lesser-known part of history, residents and visitors in Concordia would find it hard not to know about the Orphan Train riders thanks to an initiative that brings the museum to the people. In 2015, the city branded itself as the Orphan Train Town. At that time, there were some representative orphan statues on the museum grounds.

A program was launched where individuals, businesses or organizations could select an orphan train rider and sponsor a statue to be placed somewhere in the community. The cost is about \$5,000 to \$7,000. Each statue is accompanied by the rider’s story and names the sponsor.

Carson said the statues are not intended to be exact likenesses of the children – the cost of that would be prohibitive. Instead,

See **ORPHAN**, page 30

ORPHAN, from page 29

the museum works with a foundry that has a variety of statues and selects one that represents the rider's story.

"We really work to try and find a statue that matches – maybe a musician, or a baseball player," Carson said. "The foundry is in New York, so all of our children still come from New York," she laughed.

She said the only statue in town that is designed to look like the actual person is one honoring agent Anna Laura Hill, who placed hundreds of children in Kansas and throughout the Midwest. Multiple donors came together to sponsor the statue, which sits outside the city's visitors center. Behind it is a brick art installation that depicts the Orphan Train, another part of the community branding. Hill's story is predominant in the museum.

"I found you!"

New Orphan Train stories are uncovered or updated through the museum's research. Other than Carson, the only other paid position is part-time researcher, Lori Halfhide.

Halfhide answers inquiries from people who want to research a rider, or who bring her a name to see if that person might have been a rider. It can be painstaking work, but rewarding, Halfhide said during an interview in December.

"Last week, I was working on a case. The girl was adopted, and her family thought she might have been a rider," she said. "Normally, I get a gut feeling about it.



In Blue Rapids, Kansas in 1908, area residents gather to meet children arriving on the Orphan Train.

Below: Outside the Concordia Convention and Visitors Bureau on Hwy 81 and 6th St., is a statue depicting the likeness of agent Anna Laura Hill holding the hand of Orphan Train rider Anna Louise Doherty who lived in Clifton. The statue was funded by community members to honor Hill's three decades of work on behalf of hundreds of children.

I had an inkling that
Ethel was not a rider."
Halfhide uses
tools such as
newspaper archives
and ancestry

websites. On the intake form completed to begin a search, requesters are asked for as much information as possible on the potential rider. This time Halfhide had little to go on – only the city where the child was raised, a first name and possible last name, and possible sibling names. She had not been successful locating the child on two previous attempts.

"This was my third crack at it," Halfhide said. And she finally found her. She said everyone in the office knew she had been successful, because she shouted out, "I found you!"

Halfhide laughed, "Sometimes I just get caught up in it." And no, Ethel was not a rider, but Halfhide was still able to provide the family with important information on her background.

"People are desperate to find out where they came from," she said. "I was able to tell those people who their great granddad was."

Finding and sharing the stories

Ethel's story had other intriguing facts, such as that the birth mother had left her husband and took her children

with her — unusual stuff for that time period. Halfhide wrote up the story for the *Concordia Blade-Empire*. She writes a weekly column about various aspects of the Orphan Trains, the riders, and other interesting stories she uncovers, like Ethel's.

Anyone interested in a search can submit a request through the museum's website. Halfhide said there is about a three-month waiting period. The cost is \$60 for two hours of research time. She said after that, she can usually tell if she is going to be able to find something. Additional time can be requested, or Halfhide can tell a family she has good leads but needs additional time if they



LORI HALFHIDE

want to pay for that.

Carson said that she also spends time researching for the museum, but different than Halfhide.

"It's more about the Orphan Train movement, such as what was it like to live in an orphanage in New York or how the railroads operated. My job is to understand the movement as a whole, interpret it, then share it."

Her efforts result in the written information for new displays or articles on the museum website. She also presents to clubs and classrooms. She said she and her dedicated volunteers are also continually working on cataloging and organizing the museum's collection.

Though some of the museum's display is permanent, displays about individual riders are changed regularly so that the content is fresh. An individual story is usually up for about a year and may include artifacts, photographs, and written correspondence, sometimes between the child and the agent, who often remained in touch with the children and families to ensure things were going well.

In a separate building, visitors can visit a refurbished train car set up as it would



Curator Kaily Carson sits in the rail car replication at the Orphan Train Museum in Concordia.

have been to transport the children. In the research center building, visitors can begin their experience by watching an introductory film. The building also includes a gift shop with a multitude of books about the Orphan Trains and riders. The main museum building is located, appropriately, in the former train depot.

History that's personal

Carson said the majority of the children who rode the trains landed well and had positive experiences with their new families.

"The percentage of negative placements from the Orphan Trains is about 20 percent, about the same as modern foster care rates," she said.

Carson has been the curator for almost two years. Originally from South Dakota, she graduated from Utah State University with a degree in Art History and

Museum Studies. She said she had previously lived in Topeka, so Kansas was not unfamiliar.

She said, that like many people, before taking the position, she was unfamiliar with the Orphan Trains, but she had always been interested in the time period.

"It was a very exciting time in American history," she said.

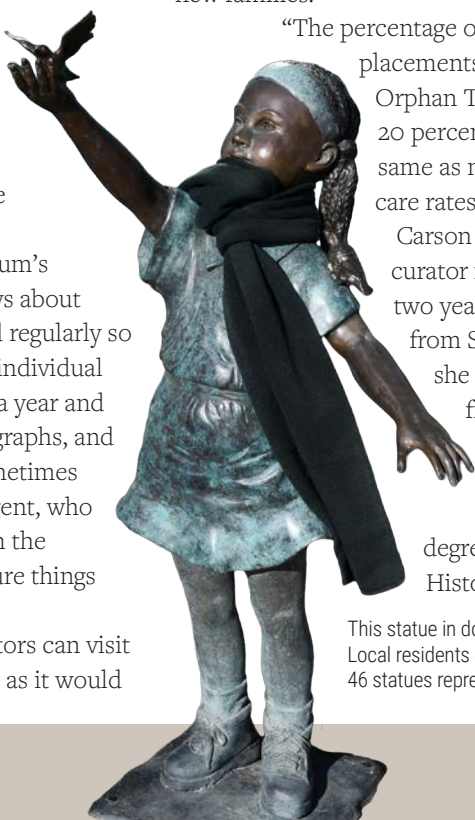
What she has discovered and appreciates about her work is that the historical focus is unique.

"This is history focused on children. That's very, very rare. Most history is written by and about adults," Carson said in December, shortly before the birth of her first child. "And this history is so up close and personal. It's stories from a different perspective — children.

"It's also a lot about the history of adoption and foster care. There is a lot of adoption in my family, so there is a personal connection as well."

Carson said the experience for the visitors to the museum is unique because of that personal aspect.

"It's so impactful for our visitors. In an art museum, if a piece is meaningful to people, it may bring tears. But here that happens all the time. People are amazed to be a part of this history." ■



This statue in downtown Concordia honors Orphan Train rider Thelma Taylor from Cincinnati. Local residents can sponsor an orphan statue to be placed around the community. There are 46 statues representing Orphan Train riders scattered throughout Concordia.

ECRWSS
LOCAL POSTAL PATRON



Visit the *Hansen* *Museum* in Logan

For 50 years the Hansen Museum has told the unique story of Dane G. Hansen and his remarkable family. Totally renovated in 2021 to create an interactive experience, the museum also regularly hosts new art exhibits and offers classes for all kinds of arts and crafts.

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