



COLBY FREE PRESS

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TISHA COX/Colby Free Press
The Welk-Um Inn sign came down last week and on Friday, it was replaced with a Motel 6 sign. Owner Mike Woofler said work to renovate the hotel should be done in about two weeks.

Employees stumble onto hidden drugs

By PATTY DECKER
Free Press Editor

It's almost like a game between drug dealers and police when it comes to hiding large quantities of marijuana, cocaine, guns or other illegal items.

In fact, there are times when the police nationwide miss a false compartment or other hiding place for illegal substances and the seized vehicles are sold at a sheriff's auction.

That might have been the case in Colby had it not been for employees at Butch's Body Shop who discovered a second hidden compartment under the seat last Friday, said Randy Jones, chief of police.

The vehicle, a 2001 Nissan Xterra, was sent to the body shop to be put back together after the Kansas Highway Patrol seized 87 lbs. of cocaine exactly one year ago to the day.

Capt. Kelly McGuire in Hays said today that on Feb. 27, 2003, two men from Juarez, Mexico were arrested after a Kansas Highway Patrol trooper stopped them just outside of Colby going eastbound on Interstate-70.

The Nissan had no tag information and was registered in Mexico, McGuire said. The two men were identified as Nevarez Vencoma, 36, and Armando Contreras, 39, both from Juarez. After their arrest, the two were taken into custody by the federal Drug Enforcement Agency and the car was left in Colby to be sold at auction.

Jones said that two or three auctions had passed before the Nissan could be placed on the next round of sales. The reason for the delay was due in part to the vehicle's registration being out of Mexico.

After the vehicle was cleared for sale, the next step was getting it back together prior to the next auction.

While removing and repairing the hidden floor compartment, Jones said, employees at the body shop saw something unusual under one of the seats and discovered the cocaine.

"The second compartment was well-designed," Jones said, "and this does happen (finding secondary hiding places for drugs)."

Jones explained that drug runners look for many places to stash drugs. "We have found drugs in radiators, tires, spare tires, airbags, in the door panels, gas tanks and elsewhere — in fact, if we can think of a hiding place, so can they."

Most of the time, Jones said the officers do find all the hiding places, but in this particular case, the patrolman probably thought he had it all and didn't look further.

"Normally there are tell-tale signs of something different about the vehicle," Jones said, "and our only other alternative would be to

“ One time we found drugs in the engine while it was still running.”
Cpt. Kelly McGuire
Kansas Highway Patrol

completely tear up the entire car.”
McGuire said he is “amazed” at some of the hiding spots.

“One time we found drugs in the engine and while it was still running,” he said. The days of stashing drugs in the trunk or under the seat are over — it's gotten to be harder and more work to find the stuff.

“Ordinarily we don't miss that big of a chunk,” McGuire said about last Friday's additional 85 lbs. of cocaine.

The trooper had seized a big amount and missed the secondary compartment, but this does happen.

Jones said that whenever cars are sold at a sheriff's auction, buyers are warned to be aware of possible other hidden things.

“Maybe a gun or some other kind of weapon could be missed or hidden in an area that was overlooked,” he said. “Sometimes the false floors or other hidden areas look like the real thing — complete with a second undercoating.”

When asked what would happen to the innocent buyer in the event drugs, guns or other illegal items were found, both McGuire and Jones said the person would probably be arrested.

Although once it was explained that the vehicle was bought at a sheriff's auction, the person would more than likely be cleared.

“It has happened,” McGuire said about cars being found with additional illegal items, “but ordinarily when we find out the car was purchased at an auction, people are cleared.”

One case, Jones remembered, involved a car bought at an auction somewhere out east and the buyers later discovered \$80,000 in a hidden compartment. They did turn the money over to authorities, Jones said, but he didn't know what happened to the money after that.

As for all illegal substances and weapons, McGuire said the state contracts with a firm to “incinerate” everything. “We can toss big bundles into the incinerator and with two seconds the drugs are in ashes or the weapons are completely melted down,” he said. Thomas County has a similar procedure involving burning illegal substances as well, once they are no longer needed as evidence.

McGuire is the troop commander for northwest Kansas and based in Hays.

Township clerk, fair board posts filled

By TISHA COX
Colby Free Press

The Thomas County Commissioners made two appointments at their meeting today at the courthouse.

They appointed Deel Olson as Summers Township clerk and Scott Snyder to the Thomas County Fair Board. Snyder replaces Steve Shepard who resigned his post.

In other business, the commissioners gave the go ahead for Registrar of Deeds Maybelle Moore to have the department's archives microfilmed. Moore said it will cost approximately \$2,500 to get everything done.

She said it's one of her goals to get her department's books microfilmed and formatted so everything is searchable on computer. Also, she

said it would be a good idea anyway because eventually the books will deteriorate.

“Anything that comes through has to be reproduced,” Moore said. “I want to aim for the imaging.”

Commissioner Ron Evans told County Clerk Tracey Perkins to work with Moore to see if anything else at the courthouse needs to be put on microfilm.

The commissioners also read a proclamation declaring March as Thomas County Historical Society Month. Sue Taylor, director of the Prairie Museum of Art and History and the rest of the museum's staff, were on hand for the proclamation.

She told the commissioners the museum has about 1,000 members and is holding a membership drive this month to recruit more.



More moisture

Colby, Oakley, Hoxie area Tonight...Partly cloudy. Cooler. Lows around 19. Northwest winds 10 to 20 mph decreasing to 5 to 10 mph after midnight. **Tuesday...**Partly cloudy. Highs in the mid 40s. North winds around 5 mph shifting to the east 5 to 15 mph in the afternoon. **Tuesday night...**Mostly cloudy. A 20 percent chance of rain showers and snow showers after midnight. Not as cool. Lows in the upper 20s. Southeast winds 10 to 15 mph. **Wednesday...**Mostly cloudy with a chance of rain. A chance of snow in the afternoon. Highs in the lower 40s. Southeast winds 5 to 15 mph. Chance of rain and snow 40 percent. **Wednesday night...**Cloudy with a 50 percent chance of rain and snow. Lows in the upper 20s.

The numbers
Sunday's high, 43
Low this morning, 18
Records for March 1, 81 in 1972 and -14 in 1960
Year ago today, 44 and 20
Weekend precipitation up to 8 a.m. today, 0.88 inches
Weekend snowfall, trace
Soil temperature, 42

The sources:
The forecast is from the National Weather Service, and other numbers are from the Northwest Research-Extension Center, Colby.

No place to go



TISHA COX/Colby Free Press

Semi trucks and other traffic headed west on Interstate-70 in Colby this morning were diverted off the interstate into Colby. The Kansas Highway Patrol said the road was closed all the way to Denver because of blizzard-like conditions in Colorado. Interstate-70 was closed in Burlington and then Goodland starting at 7 p.m. Sunday after hotels there filled up. When hotels in Colby are booked full, the road closure will be backed up to Oakley so motorists aren't caught out in bad weather.

Briefly

Retirement reception Tuesday

Colby's former postmaster, James McDonald, who retired Dec. 31, 2003, will have a belated retirement reception Tuesday beginning at 8 a.m. at the post office, 535 N. Court. Mark Kerschen, manager of postal operations for Western Kansas in Hutchinson will be here to recognize McDonald's years of service.

Senior Center fund raiser

The Senior Progress Center will have a Sausage and Pancake feed Saturday from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the center, 165 Fike Park. A free will donation will be taken at the door. The funds go for Senior Progress Center upkeep and activities.

Volunteers need for tournament

Volunteers are needed for the Colby High School Eagle forensics team tournament, Thursday, March 25, starting at 2 p.m. All competitions will be held at the high school and more than 20 schools are expected to participate, said Nancy Rundel, head coach.

For those who can volunteer their time, Rundel and Linda

Jones, assistant coach, urge them to call (785) 360-5300, ext. 3504 and leave a message or stop by the high school and pick up a judging form.

Scouts, Rotary plan supper tonight

Boy Scout Troop 141 and the Colby Rotary Club are co-sponsoring a soup supper tonight and Tuesday from 5 to 7:30 p.m., at the Colby Community Building before the Colby High School sub-state basketball games. Cost is a free-will donation. All proceeds will go toward the scouts going to the National Jamboree Camp held in Virginia in the summer of 2005.

Chautauqua discussion planned

A book discussion on “All True Travels and Adventures of Liddie Newton” will be at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Pioneer Memorial Library. The event is one of many leading up to Kansas Chautauqua in Colby in June. For information, call (785) 462-4590.

School board to meet today

The Colby School Board will meet at 5:30 p.m. today in

the board room of the administration building. Items on the agenda include principal reports, a report from the curriculum director and superintendent, track resurfacing bids, kindergarten program, republication of the 2003-2004 budget, drug-free schools subcontract and personnel matters. The meeting is open to the public.

Gem Lions plan soup day

The Gem Lions Club is sponsoring its annual winter soup day Saturday from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. at the Gem Community Building. The event is featuring chili, veggie and potato soups with all proceeds from the free-will donation going toward service projects. Club members are also reminding everyone that the Lions recycle eyeglasses and hearing aids.

Sacred Heart pre-enrollment planned

Sacred Heart School will have pre-enrollment for its kindergarten and preschool from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Wednesday, March 3, in the school lobby, 1150 W. 6th St., Colby. Pre-enrollment is for the 2004-05 school year and parents are asked to bring their child's birth certificate, immunization records and social security number with them.

