



COLBY FREE PRESS

12 pages

Fallen officer

Sheridan County Sheriff shot and killed

By Jan Katz Ackerman
Colby Free Press

Sheridan County Sheriff James "Jimmy" Johnson was shot and killed at his office in Hoxie on Thursday afternoon while interviewing a man with possible mental problems.



J. Johnson

A deputy who was in the room with Johnson shot and killed the suspect, Steven Paul Reitcheck, 35, of Hoxie, said Kyle Smith, deputy director of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation.



K. Smith

He said Johnson, 54, was interviewing the man for a possible civil commitment when Reitcheck apparently pulled a handgun and shot him about 1:20 p.m.

Smith later confirmed that Reitcheck was suspected in vandalism at his father's grave at St. Francis Catholic Cemetery, about a half mile west of Hoxie.

Last month, Leroy Reitcheck's headstone was broken into several pieces, and Thursday afternoon, the soil around the grave had been dug up.

The elder Reitcheck was killed in a hit-and-run car accident in June 2003. The driver later was arrested and convicted.

Johnson and his deputies were interviewing Reitcheck in the two-story blonde brick building which houses the sheriff's office and jail. The office is on the west side of the building, next to a second office, the evidence room, a break room and the dispatcher's office.

The county jail is on the second floor; across the parking lot to the northwest of the Sheridan County Courthouse. The tree-shaded complex is a block west of downtown Hoxie.

Shortly after the shootings, yellow police tape stretched from the building out to the two trees west of the office.

The sheriff's blood-covered chair sat in the middle of the roped-off section.



JAN KATZ ACKERMAN/Colby Free Press

Sheridan County Sheriff Jim Johnson's chair sat outside in a yellow police taped off area between his office and patrol vehicle Thursday afternoon after he was shot and killed by a suspect he was interviewing.

Deputy Hessel Anderson when asked if it were true the sheriff had been shot and killed, he said Johnson had been shot, adding that he couldn't say anything else.

"We'll be here a long time," said KBI agent Mark Kendrick of Colby. "It'll be a while before we can tell you anything."

County Attorney Mike Haas arrived about 3:45 p.m. and went inside.

Other officers started arriving, including Graham County Sheriff Don Scott and Gove County Sheriff Allan Weber.

Kansas Highway Patrol troopers arrived, parking their cars in the intersection just to the northwest of the sheriff's office to block traffic.

Two troopers, including Terry Kummer of Colby, started setting

up mapping equipment and took measurements of the area nearest the sheriff's office and of all vehicles parked to the south of the building.

Graham County Undersheriff Melanie Scott arrived and left about 4:30 p.m., as did Decatur County Attorney Steve Hirsch. Smith, who had been at a meeting in Hays, arrived about 5:25 p.m.

"I'll get a handle on things and come out and talk to you," he said. After the shooting, Johnson was taken by a Sheridan County ambulance to Colby, where he was to be airlifted to a larger hospital. However, police there said the sheriff was pronounced dead about 3:20 p.m.

Johnson was elected sheriff in 1988 after having served on the

Hoxie Police Department.

He leaves his wife, Linda, also his office manager, and five grown children.

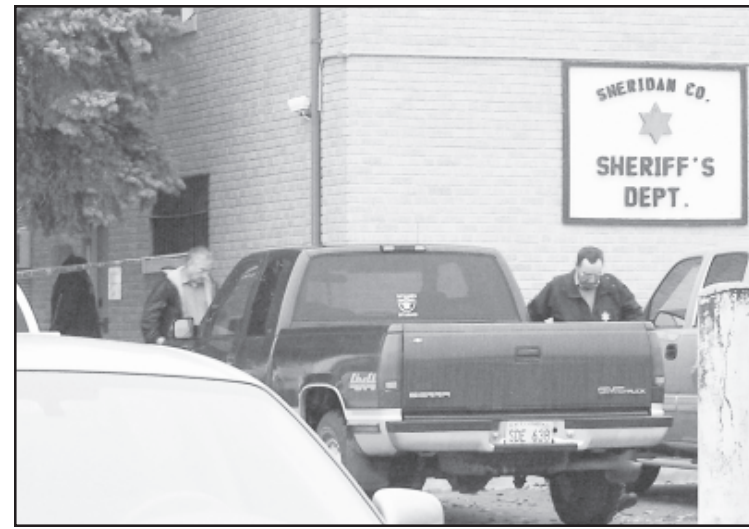
Smith said the KBI is heading up the investigation with the help of area law enforcement agencies, including the Highway Patrol.

The deputy director, who drove to Hoxie to lead the investigation, refused to name the officer who shot Reitcheck.

"That's part of the investigation," he said. "I'm not going to comment on that right now."

He said the Gove County sheriff, Weber, of Oakley, had been sworn in as Sheridan County's interim sheriff late Thursday.

Officers from surrounding counties will be helping Weber provide patrol and dispatch service for a



AN KATZ ACKERMAN/Colby Free Press



ABOVE: Undersheriff Brian Fenner, right, and Kansas Bureau of Investigation Agent Bruce Mellor left the Sheridan County Sheriff's Office late Thursday afternoon. An unidentified agent in the background stood outside Johnson's office while others inside conducted the investigation into Johnson's shooting by Steven P. Reitcheck, 35, of Hoxie. BELOW: Patrol cars blocked the street next to the Sheridan County Sheriff's Office. A deputy responded and shot and killed Reitcheck.

while, he said.

Besides the Johnsons, the sheriff's department comprises Undersheriff Brian Fenner, full-time deputy Anderson and part-time deputy Brandon Fenner, Brian Fenner's son, and dispatchers Marie Jones, Cindy Mowry, Sharon Thummel, Jade Baalman and Ed Peltz. Sheridan County Clerk Paula Bielser, who swore Weber in, said in the wake of Johnson's death, members of the Republican county committee will meet and nominate someone to replace him.

The name will be recommended to Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, who will make the appointment, although the governor's stamp of approval is not required for a party nominee to take office.

Kansas Attorney General Phill

Kline in a written statement expressed his sympathies.

"This is a sad time of great loss," Kline said. "Kansas law enforcement has lost another of our best and most brave."

"I join all Kansans in expressing our deepest sympathy to his wife, Linda, and the Johnson family."

Kline said he had asked Gov. Sebelius to order flags be flown at half staff at the Memorial Building, which houses the office of the attorney general, and at the KBI headquarters.

Mickey-Leopold Funeral Home of Hoxie is in charge of Johnson's funeral arrangements.

See "SHOOTING," page 3

Heading for state



TISHA COX/Colby Free Press

Colby High School junior Aubrette Stephens was showing off her new headgear after a state send-off Thursday at the school. Stephens and the Eagle boys cross country team will run in the state cross country meet Saturday in Wamego.

Extra patrols planned on Halloween

By Tisha Cox
Colby Free Press

Halloween Tuesday means little goblins and ghouls will be out in force. And so will law enforcement in Colby and Thomas County.

Colby Police Department Chief Randy Jones said extra patrols will be out and about on Halloween.

"We'll see how it goes," he said. "If it's quiet, patrols will be released as needed. I'm fairly sure since this is a school night things will be pretty quiet this year too."

Last year, Halloween was uneventful.

Jones said besides the extra patrols, he wants to urge motorists to be cautious and remember safety first on Halloween.

With many children out trick-or-treating, he said drivers should be careful and watch for kids darting out between parked cars and across streets.

He also said parents should remember to not let children under 12 member old out without an adult. They



R. Jones

"I'm fairly sure since this is a school night things will be pretty quiet..."

Colby Police Chief Randy Jones

should plan trick-or-treat routes and only stay in areas that are familiar.

Costume safety should also be something to think about. Costumes should be loose to allow for warm clothing underneath and masks should not restrict vision.

Jones recommends using face paint instead of a mask.

He also said no mischief will be tolerated, and that includes egg-throwing or any criminal damage.

Thomas County Sheriff Mike Baughn will also have extra patrols out on Halloween, as he has on years past.

He also wanted to remind parents and children to be safe on Halloween.

And for parents who don't want their little spooks to be out after dark, there are plenty of opportunities for a Halloween treat or two Saturday and early Tuesday.

The first Halloween event will be held from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Saturday at Infinia at Colby, which is holding

its first "Trick or Treat Street."

Included will be treats, games, face painting, costume judging and more.

Early Tuesday, the Thomas County Office Complex and Thomas County Courthouse staffs will be holding trick-or-treat for children in fifth grade and younger from 3 to 5 p.m.

From 6 to 8 p.m., Heartland Christian School is holding "Trunk or Treat." Organizer Tonja Winger explained the idea came from co-organizer Debbie McNinch. The

event is open to the public, and families can come trick-or-treat in a unique way.

She said McNinch recently moved here from St. Louis, Mo., and it was done there.

The Trunk or Treat will feature between more than 20 vehicles with their trunks decorated with various themes, from Kansas City Chiefs to a princess and more. The vehicles will be parked at the three driveways at the school, 1995 W. Fourth St. Winger said visitors are asked to park at the east side of the parking lot and walk over to trick-or-treat.

At Pioneer Memorial Library, a come-and-go Halloween open house will replace the regular Tuesday night family storytime.

The open house will run from 6:30 to 8 p.m. and trick-or-treaters can show off their costumes and get goodies.

