

Happy New Year

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COLBY
FREE PRESS

Thursday

December 31, 2009

Volume 120, Number 203

Serving Thomas County since 1888

10 pages

New pool, wet weather highlight 2009

2009 was a year of growth for Colby and Thomas County, with new buildings, new ideas and new leaders coming on the scene. It was also in many ways a difficult year. Crops were damaged, proposals shot down and tame animals turned wild.

Here are just a few of the stories from the pages of the *Colby Free Press* that captured our attention this year:

1 New pool voted in

Perhaps the biggest news in Colby this year was the passage of a quarter-cent sales tax to pay for both the new fire station and a new pool and a water park to replace the city's aging pool.

The Colby Aquatics Committee first proposed the tax in July. The City Council had been planning to increase property taxes to pay off bonds for the fire station, but a public backlash led them to put the quarter-cent sales tax up for a special election. The idea was to have it pay for the \$2.5 million fire station and the \$5 million pool without a property tax increase.

Preliminary designs for the water park were unveiled in October. It will include a "lazy river" float area, several slides and play areas and a separate pool for lap swimming and competitions.

Despite a few calls for the two projects to be separated, they remained on the same ballot issue. In November, the tax issue passed with more than 74 percent of the vote.

The council recently decided on a plot of land north of Colby High School, with construction set to begin next year.

2 Weather monkeys with harvest

For a year that saw heavy rains and hail that delayed harvest and planting alike, the first few months, precipitation was well



This corn stalk was one of many damaged by a hail storm that marched across Thomas County this summer. Some fields were declared a total loss, but for those that survived, much-needed rains made for bumper crops.

below normal.

In January, February and March, the area was sometimes more than an inch below the norm. In March, the *Free Press* reported that the wheat crop looked good despite dry topsoil. At that time, Gov. Kathleen Sebelius had asked for Scott County to be declared a federal disaster area because of drought and wind.

Things picked up in April, when total precipitation was 3.44 inches, well above the normal 1.79. A heavy rain on Easter weekend heralded a wet spring, which was good for the wheat.

But not all the weather was good. The rain kept coming, hin-

dering the maturing of crops, first wheat and then milo and corn, often making it too muddy for farmers to get their equipment in the field. Add to that hail storms in July that damaged a wide swath of corn across the area.

A mid-summer streak of hot weather helped get the wheat harvested. Aside from many damaged fields, record wheat yields showed up at the elevators.

Later in the year, rain and snow delayed the fall milo and corn harvests well into the winter. Some fields were still standing as the year came to a close, with four- and five-foot snow drifts around the edges.

3 Budget problems top to bottom

The Kansas state government hit a giant snag in 2009 when tax revenue estimates kept getting lower. First the Legislature and then new Gov. Mark Parkinson were forced to make deep budget cuts, many of which filtered down to the local level.

Public schools were the most affected, losing more than \$125 million in money from the state. The Colby School District had to make more than \$600,000 in cuts to make up for less money coming in.

For the most part the cuts were many and small, but a few caught the public eye. The school board decided to limit busing to students who lived more than 2 1/2 miles away from their school. While crossing guards were sent out at major intersections and some students learned to walk to class, streets around the grade and middle schools jammed up as other parents brought their kids to school in private vehicles. It took a few days to sort the traffic out.

Public schools weren't the only one's affected. In February, Colby Community College began look-



This lion and two other, plus two tigers, were sent to new homes after a man was attacked at their enclosure near Oakley, in southern Thomas County. The cats had been kept near the Free Breakfast Inn at U.S. 83 and Interstate 70. The lions were sent to the Detroit Zoo while the tigers were sent to a refuge in Pittsboro, N.C.

ing for ways to rely less on state money. One answer was raising tuition. Heads of two Kansas universities, Fort Hays State and the University of Kansas, visited Colby in October and November, talking about their budget difficulties and how their institutions were reacting.

Even the county and city gov-

ernments are keeping their budgets tight, restricting raises and expenditures.

4 Fur flies over lions and tigers

In February, a man working at the Free Breakfast Inn near Oakley was mauled by a lion kept by Jeffrey Harsh. Harsh had three lions and two tigers housed in cag-

es near the motel. The man was bitten on the arm after sticking it into the lions' cage.

The Thomas County commissioners, Kansas Department of Wildlife and the activist group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals pushed to get the ani-

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Halford family farm celebrates century status

By Vera Sloan

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The second farm in Thomas County to be designated as a "Century Farm" this year is the Henry Bremenkamp Jr. farm near Halford.

Mr. Bremenkamp lives on and farms a quarter section of land purchased by his grandfather, Frank Bremenkamp, in 1904.

The family's farming history began with Henry's great-grandfather, Joe Bremenkamp, who was born in Westphalia, Germany, in 1846. He was a boy of 4 when he came to America with his parents in 1850, according to the family history. The family

settled in Jersey County, Ill. near St. Louis.

Lured by stories of the fertile, rolling plains of western Kansas, left Illinois and headed west.

Joseph brought a homestead claim from a man who had survived the killer blizzard of 1886, and was ready to leave western Kansas behind him. Bremenkamp paid him \$400 and a good team of horses for the 160-acre claim with a one-room dugout.

Family history records that the dugout was roofed at the front with timbers and sod, and the back part was merely dug into the earth, with an arrangement of shelves dug into the ground to serve as sleeping places.

In later years, a permanent

home, a large frame house, was built on the west side of the southwest quarter of section 28, township 8, range 32, near Halford.

The nearest towns at the time were Oberlin and Grinnell.

Farming wasn't the only mark Joseph Bremenkamp and his sons left in the history of western Kansas. After the towns of Colby and Oakley were established, the railroad built a spur track between the two, and Joseph and his sons helped to build the roadbed.

He was a successful farmer and he and his wife raised 10 children. He so believed in the

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Library, college given \$3.1 million from late Gem farmer's trust fund

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Pioneer Memorial Library and the Colby Community College Endowment have received gifts totaling more than \$3.1 million from the estate of a Gem area farmer.

The bequests were handed out at a meeting Tuesday in the law offices of John Gatz, attorney for the estate of Maxine Neville, along with a smaller one to an animal shelter in Hays.

Gatz presented the library with a check in excess of \$1.7 million on behalf of trustees Larry Higerd and Roger Kough. Director Melany Wilks and board members Lisa Wilson and Mike Wiems accepted the gift.

"Pioneer Memorial Library is extremely blessed with the very generous gift..." Wilks said. "It is a once-in-a-lifetime legacy."

The board plans to invest the money, she added. The library's tax levy has not increased in at least 15 years, while expenses have continued to climb. The interest will help pay for projects and needs not

normally afforded by the budget, she said.

"This is overwhelming," said Wilson. "It is not a normal experience, and we appreciate it and we honor her."

Nick Wells, director of the college Endowment Association, and board members Darrell Pabst and Kris Cameron were on hand to accept a gift of \$1.4 million, including 160 acres of crop land.

The gift is designated to endow the nursing program at the college, but is not limited to the Colby campus, Wells said.

"This will nearly double the Norton program," he said, "and the interest income will allow for many more scholarships and improvements."

Wells recalled that in 1996, the Endowment was still trying to reach its first million, and now with this "incredible gift," they are getting close to \$5 million to help students with scholarships.

"Nobody knew it was coming," he said. "This is great, and we can probably go ahead and get started for fall."

Paul Phillips and Jerry Horton, representing the

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Briefly

Church plans New Year's party

The Colby United Methodist Church plans an informal New Year's Eve party from 9:30 to midnight in the church fellowship hall at the corner of Pine Street and Franklin Avenue. There will be refreshments, table games and a short worship service at midnight. For information, call Millie Horlacher at 462-3104 or Carolyn May at 460-3655.

Pets available for adoption

Looking for a pet? Colby Animal Clinic has a 1- to 1 1/2-year-old brown female boxer, a 1- to 2-year-old male dachshund-beagle mix and a 3- to 4-month-old female mixed lab puppy available for adoption. Lost or strayed animals are often brought to the clinic. Call or stop by 810 E. Fourth St. All animals have current shots, and costs are minimal. For questions, call 460-8621.

Fatherhood program to start soon

The Northwest Kansas Regional Prevention Center's "24/7 Dad" fatherhood program will be offered again starting at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the First Presbyterian Church in Colby. For information, call the center at 460-8177.

Hospital plans birthing classes

Citizens Medical Center will hold a four-week series of childbirth education classes from 7 to 10 p.m. Thursdays beginning next week for women due to deliver before May. The partner who will be with the mother during labor should attend. The next classes will begin April 1. For information or to register, call Jeanene Brown in the Education Department at (785) 460-4850.

Conservation meeting Jan. 15

The annual meeting of the Thomas County Con-

servation District will be at 6:30 p.m. Monday, Jan. 25, at the Colby United Methodist Church. Make reservations by Friday, Jan. 15, with district manager Debbie Potter at 462-7482, extension 303.

For latest flu info, call 460-4599

A hot line for questions on seasonal influenza and the H1N1 flu strain will be available throughout the flu season at (785) 460-4599. The Thomas County Health Department posts information about the status and availability of vaccines, priority groups and the like.

Medical class to begin in February

An Emergency Medical Technician class will begin Thursday, Feb. 4, and run Wednesdays and Thursdays plus two Saturdays each month until May 15. Registration is due by Thursday, Jan. 21. State

grants cover the cost. For information, call Dawnelle Umberger at 460-4585.

Hospital auxiliary needs help

The Citizens Medical Center Auxiliary is looking for volunteers to greet visitors, operate the gift shop and help patients and their families, among other things. If you'd like to get involved, call Tama Unger at (785) 460-1214 or Mary Smith at (785) 462-3387.



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