

Funeral for sheriff today at Hoxie high

By Jan Katz Ackerman

Colby Free Press

Funeral services for Sheridan County Sheriff Jim Johnson will be at 2 p.m. today in the Hoxie High School auditorium, with burial in the Hoxie Cemetery about a mile north of town on K-23.

Gove County Sheriff Allan Weber of Quinter, interim sheriff for Sheridan County, said Gov. Kathleen Sebelius is planning to come. More than 300 lawmen from across the state are expected, mostly in uniform.

Officials were preparing for a huge crowd, maybe 1,700 people. Pastor Derek Slack of the Hoxie Christian Church will officiate, and Gov. Sebelius is expected to speak.

Thomas County Undersheriff Jason Moses spent much of the day Monday making arrangements for the funeral.

Superintendent Scott Hoyt announced there will be no school in Hoxie on Tuesday due to the funeral.

"There will be parking at the elementary school and buses will shuttle people to Sheriff Johnson's



Johnson



Smith

funeral at the high school," Moses said. "Busses will be parked on the northeast side of the grade school by the gymnasium entrance."

He said people can take a bus back to their cars at the grade school or stay on the bus to go to the cemetery.

He said there will be one or more buses driving around the elementary school area picking up people to take them to the high school starting at 12:30 p.m. Sheridan County Public Transportation vans will also be driving around the area.

Moses said part of his work included preparing for news reporters who will cover the funeral.

"I'm working on the details," he said about 10 a.m. "We know where we plan to have the media's trucks with the big satellite dishes parked so far."

Moses said besides television crews, he is preparing locations for newspaper reporters who plan to cover the funeral and burial.

At Hoxie High School on Monday, a crew from Cox Communications of Hays was running lines to feed coverage of the funeral from

the auditorium to the gymnasium, where officials plan to send the overflow. The funeral will be broadcast throughout Hoxie over the cable system Channel 12, starting at 1:30 p.m.

Harm Briery, manger of the Hoxie cable system for Cox, was overseeing the project.

"This is such a sad situation," he said as the crew worked on the lines.

After Johnson's death on Thursday, political wheels were turning in the background in Hoxie.

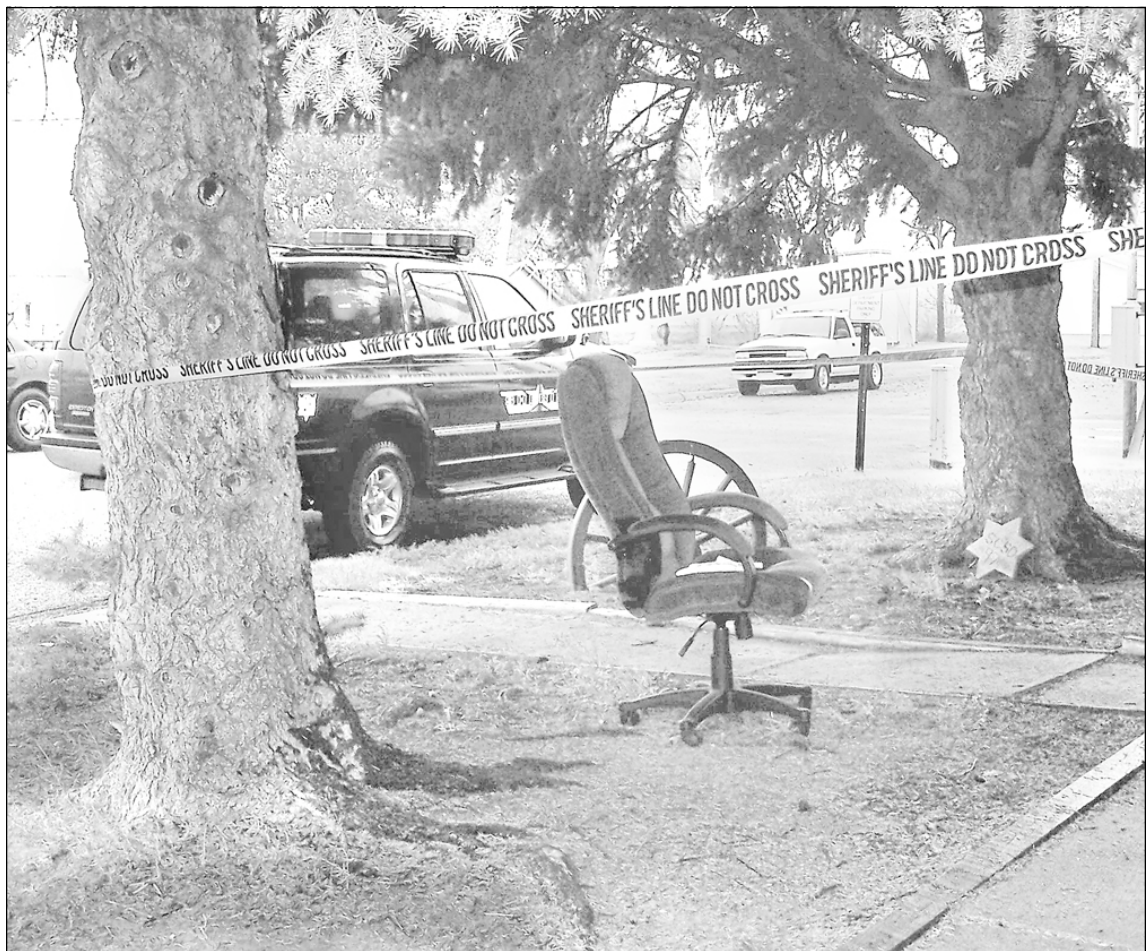
Weber said Saturday morning he has talked with Sheridan County Undersheriff Brian Fenner about Fenner accepting an appointment by the Republican Party to finish out Johnson's term., which has two years left on it.

"We've visited about it a little bit," Weber said, "but he just hasn't made a decision."

Johnson was shot Thursday while talking with Steven P. Reitcheck, 35, about voluntary commitment to a mental facility.

Doren Follis, Sheridan County Republican chairman, said Saturday morning said he's checking into the procedures of filling the vacancy.

"I've got to talk with the secretary of state's office and the Kansas Republican Party people and see how long we have," Follis said. "I think



The bloody chair of Sheridan County Sheriff Jim Johnson sat among yellow police tape between his office and patrol vehicle Thursday afternoon after he was shot and killed by a man he was interviewing. Photo by Jan Katz Ackerman/Colby Free Press

we have 15 days, but I don't know that for sure."

Follis said while the county needs time to grieve the loss of Johnson, it too must move forward.

"It's a sad thing that, happened," Follis said, "and we'll have to get it taken care of soon."

When a sheriff dies or can no longer serve, state law says the county clerk becomes sheriff or se-

lects someone to do the job.

County Clerk Paula Bielser contacted Weber on Thursday afternoon about filling in, and about mid afternoon swore him in to office.

The Republican Party is not "fully organized" in Sheridan County, Follis said, but with the need to replace the sheriff, the party will get its act together.

The last time Sheridan County

had to appoint someone to fill an unexpired term, he said, was when Commissioner Stan Rogers of Selden died in office in 1998 and John Karls was appointed by Gov. Bill Graves to take his place.

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

Shooting of sheriff surprises, shocks community

By Jan Katz Ackerman

Colby Free Press

The shooting death of Sheridan County Sheriff Jim Johnson on Thursday apparently came as a surprise, investigators say, and in the laid-back atmosphere of a small town, the sheriff was without his bulletproof vest.

"Sheriff Johnson was interviewing Steven Reitcheck, a person he'd known all his life, and (Reitcheck) had agreed to commit himself," said Kyle Smith, deputy director of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation.

The killer apparently had been distraught over the death of his father, Leroy Reitcheck, killed in a hit-and-run accident caused by a drunk driver in June of 2003.

Smith called Reitcheck's behavior "bizarre." Last week, Steven Reitcheck apparently tried to dig up his father's body last week. In September, he allegedly smashed the headstone at his father's grave at St. Frances Cemetery west of Hoxie.

Johnson was talking with Reitcheck, 35, about a self-commitment for mental health care shortly after 1 p.m. in the sheriff's office. Smith said though Reitcheck had agreed to commit himself, the conversation abruptly turned violent.

"At some point, the young man was asked to take off his coat, and from then it deteriorated," Smith said. "Mr. Reitcheck pulled a hand-

gun and shot Sheriff Johnson."

Smith said Johnson had known Reitcheck well and apparently did not believe he posed a threat to anyone. Reitcheck had no known criminal history and no one knew why he had a concealed weapon.

While Johnson was talking with Reitcheck, Undersheriff Brian Fenner and at least one other deputy were in the room. Smith said after Reitcheck agreed to get mental help, Fenner left to make arrangements to take him to the hospital. That's when the shooting began.

The deputy, who Smith refused to name, saying it's part of "the ongoing investigation," shot and killed Reitcheck. The deputy has been placed on administrative leave, Smith said.

Smith said Johnson was not wearing a bullet proof vest, adding that many officers in small towns do not see any reason to wear one.

"Forty-eight percent of sheriff offices in Kansas have five or fewer

officers," he said. "Sometimes we get a little casual, and not wearing a vest is not uncommon."

Smith said members of Johnson's staff on Thursday night were referred to psychologists from the Kansas Highway Patrol.

"There was a peer support group available (Thursday) night in an effort to minimize damage done in incidents like this," he said. "These are people you work with, attend meetings with and even play golf with or occasionally have a beer with, but this is all part of the job."

Autopsies on both Johnson and Reitcheck were done Friday in Hays, Smith said, and preliminary reports could be available within a few days. It could be several weeks to get toxicology reports, which could determine whether Reitcheck was under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Smith said once the bureau completes its investigation, reports would be turned over to Sheridan

County Attorney Mike Haas, who is expected to make a final statement about the shooting. Haas said Johnson's murder is the first in Sheridan County since he became county attorney in 1972.

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 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.

Deputy Hessel Anderson, asked if it was true the sheriff had been

shot and killed, 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 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 sheriff's 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.

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.

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Office getting help

While activities around the Sheridan County sheriff's office may have seemed normal Friday morning, they were nothing but.

As agents from the Kansas Bureau of Investigation investigated Thursday's shooting death of Sheriff Jim Johnson, law officers and dispatchers from surrounding towns pitched in to handle the business of the day.

"Various agencies are providing patrol and dispatching," said KBI Deputy Director Kyle Smith during a late morning press conference in Hoxie. "It would be easier to name agencies which aren't helping out than those who are."

Sherman County Sheriff Kevin Butts said Monday that a deputy and Undersheriff Roger Studer will be in Hoxie Tuesday to help cover a shift and help with traffic control for the funeral. Butts said a Sherman County deputy will be on duty in Sheridan County on Wednesday to help out. Crissy Conger, Sherman County communications director, said she would be going to Hoxie on Tuesday to help out and another Sherman County dispatcher, Barb Disney, will finish the shift during the funeral.

*Like all the days before
And all the days to come
Remembering you with love*

Robert C. Baker
August 26, 1920
October 30, 2003

What We Hold In Our Hearts, We Can Never Lose,
And All That We Love Deeply Becomes A Part Of Us

Nothing Can Replace The Heartaches Of A Loved One,
The Only Thing That Will Ever Come Close To Filing The Void Are The Memories.
They Will Swirl Around In The Vacant Space
And Prevent Your Heart From Crumbling

When Hearts Are Connected By Love,
A Physical Separation Of Bodies
Cannot Erase The Bond

Family Is The Circle Of People Who Serve As
Our Haven From Bad Weather,
Our Source Of Encouragement During Times Of Fear,
And
Our Never-Ending Supply of Love and Support.
Dad
Pa Pa

Our Loss Is Your Gain,
For You Now Walk In The Meadows Of Heaven.
Celebrating YOU Today,

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Vicki Baker, Kathy Baker
Granddaughters Stephanie & Samantha Reid
Grandsons Tyler, Conner & Jackson Baker