

Fires, drought tear up 2012

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**
sdecamp@nwkansas.com

The year just passed was marred by fires and drought, made hopeful with fresh new faces and saw maybe as many advances as it did setbacks. Combing through the archives, here's what *The Oberlin Herald* found to be the 10 most intriguing stories of 2012:

The Wildfires

On Tuesday, July 3, a young man in an overheated car pulled over on U.S. 36 about six miles west of town. Damian Kogl, then 19, of Herndon, did what he was told to in the situation, but once the heat of his engine and exhaust hit the dry grass of the shoulder, it sparked the first of a series of fires that lasted three days and blackened over 7,000 acres of pasture and crop land.

"There was nothing he could have done about it," said Undersheriff Allen Marcum at the time. "He didn't do anything you or I wouldn't have done. I mean, that's what you're supposed to do when a car overheats: get off the road."

And it wasn't just crops that were lost, but machinery, structures, and most notably, a one-of-a-kind barn that belonged to the Bremer family. Others affected were Martin May, Ralph Unger, and Connie Grafel, and other families whose fields were sparked by dry lightning through the rest of the week.

At least four other fires were reported in the ensuing days, though thankfully, there were no deaths or serious injuries. At a meeting almost exactly a month later, the heads of county departments came together to discuss the blazes and their causes. Apparently even attempts to stop the spread of the fire by discing up strips of wheat stubble failed.

"Normally when you turn the soil up in a situation like this," said Fire Chief Bill Cathcart, "the moisture in the dirt will be what stops the fire. But everything was so dry that the fire was just setting the stubble underneath the soil on fire. They were doing the right thing, but the fire was just moving too fast."

Commissioner Ralph Unger agreed, and mentioned that the corn, too, had appeared to be on fire, but this was a result of the corn being planted on top of dry stubble.

"Normally sparks wouldn't catch a corn stalk like that, but it was," he said. "Everyone working together was the only thing that got the whole fire put out."

The first fire burned 6,000 to 7,000 acres at an estimated cost of \$2 million, according to Mr. Unger and Mr. Cathcart, who estimated the cost at the time. Mr. Unger reported 80-year-old windbreaks being wiped out, and Lynn Doeden, then the administrator of Decatur County

Hospital, said that six people came in due to the fires, though only three were checked in for treatment of smoke inhalation.

The Pool Project

Mother Nature having her way with the land this year didn't stop a crew of mothers from drawing some inspiration from her—and channeling that energy into a campaign to build a new swimming pool.

It wasn't an easy feat, as the construction will cost an estimated \$2.15 million, and while the City Council went ahead and passed a measure to pay for the project by raising the city's sales tax by 1.5 percent, it's still not known when construction will start or how the council will finance the project.

Oberlin voters approved the tax increase 434 to 230 in November, but the final yes-or-no decision came down to the council, whose members voted 3-1 in favor Dec. 20.

The biggest concern expressed by those voting against the pool was that borrowing the money needed for its construction could max out the city's credit. The pool committee, however, countered that the city could set up a Public Building Commission, which can borrow money on the city's behalf without that money being held against its credit.

Those who supported the pool argued that the current one is out of date, wasteful and dangerous. A new pool, members of the committee said, would be safer, accessible to the handicapped and bring money to city businesses. Many people go to neighboring towns for their pool facilities when they would rather be spending their money here, they argued. The new pool would have facilities for seniors and adults, and would be large enough to hold swim meets.

While the council confirmed the implementation of the tax at its last regular meeting for the year, many who showed up for the meeting were let down by Mayor Rob McFee's statement that construction would not likely start in August as originally hoped.

"Here's how it has to work," he said. "John (Haas, the city's bond advisor) comes out to explain our finances to us, then we adopt a resolution to build the pool, then we start to take bids."

"But I don't think it will start in August. I don't see any way that it can start that quickly with everything involved. There is a timeline and a time limit the way these things work, and the way it is, we probably won't have it done by August."

Councilwoman Fonda Farr and Councilmen Josh Williby and Tim Bowen are up for re-election in April, Mr. McFee noted, and if



THIS 95-YEAR OLD barn was one of the worst casualties of the wildfires that tore through Decatur County over the summer. Since then, benefits have helped raise money for the Decatur County Rural Fire Department. This summer,

the volunteers had the double challenge of putting the fire out during a drought, using old, outdated equipment.

— Herald staff photos by Stephanie DeCamp

they're all replaced, then whoever takes their place can change any decisions on the project.

"So until then," Mr. McFee said, "there's no point in making promises we can't keep. If the people want to build a pool that's fine, as long as we can pay for it."

The Drought

Everyone knew it was dry before the fires started, but the full extent of the drought that northwest Kansas, and most of the Midwest, has suffered this last year wasn't fully put into perspective until the weather started to change.

State Climatologist Mary Knapp at Kansas State University began to analyze the data coming in about every Kansas county's moisture. What she found was that Decatur County's moisture levels were as low as the peak years of Dust Bowl, the second driest years on record.

According to the weather records, Ms. Knapp said, Oberlin had 9.62 inches of rain through November, with precipitation this year 11.38 below the long-term average of 21 inches as of the first week of December. In 1939, rainfall was only 11.05 inches below normal.

But things may not be as grim as it sounds, she added. Part of the problem in drawing conclusions from old records is that this year came on the heels of a wetter period, so we could just as reasonably expect wetter conditions for next year, too.



This year's wheat crop, she said, could still do well if we got a wet December or a good spring.

But farmers and elevators alike are prepared for a poor wheat harvest after the dismal numbers behind this year's corn crop.

"It's terrible," said Fred Callander of the corn harvest. of Hansen Mueller Grain in Oberlin the first week of September. "In the 25 years that I've been in this business, this has been the worst I've ever seen it. What

(corn) they do pick, it'll make 20, 25 bushels an acre, tops."

Mr. Callander's assessment wasn't too far off for the summer's corn. By October, the harvest was in full swing, but farmers were only getting about that much out of their fields. Jason Rowh said he'd be lucky to pull a 45-bushel average.

"Patience is a virtue out here," said Mr. Rowh that week. "Sometimes I can lose mine pretty quick... but you know, you think about it, get

a hold of reality again, and realize where you stand. There's not a lot you can do. A lot of what you do is dictated by Mother Nature, and she can be a bitch."

The Election

This election year set records for the amount spent on Republican and Democrat campaigns for the presidency, but brought some shake-ups and surprises closer to home.

Here in Decatur County, the pro- (See YEAR on Page 5)

House fire started because of wiring

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**
sdecamp@nwkansas.com

A fire destroyed the home of Laurie Milnes, at 702 E. Commercial St. last weekend after a pinched cord in a hanging light fixture apparently sent off sparks, driving the owner out into a frigid night.

Fire Chief Bill Cathcart said Ms. Milnes, 50, signed herself into the Larned State Hospital that same morning.

"The kitchen and dining room were completely gutted," Mr. Cathcart said, "completely destroyed. And then the rest of the entire structure sustained heavy heat and smoke damage. The upstairs bedroom had flame damage also.... She had a lot of antiques. Replacement cost, at least, will be at \$300,000, no less than that."

"It's a total loss."

Mr. Cathcart said that Ms. Milnes was not hurt, but was taken to the Decatur County Hospital.

"It was a pretty devastating ordeal for her," he said, "so we took her down for psychiatric evaluation. She voluntarily committed herself, and my wife and I took her down to Larned that night. From what I understand, she'll be back (as of Friday)."

Ms. Milnes couldn't be reached for comment.

Officer Scott Zeigler worked the call, which came in about 3 a.m. on Sunday, Dec. 23.

"It was cold out there that night," he said Friday afternoon. "Last I looked, it was about 14, I think. (When I got there) it was a house ablaze. It's probably a total loss, I know I wouldn't want to have to fix it."

"Maybe the foundation is the only thing that's left of it," Police Chief Troy Haas agreed. "Normally, the Red Cross will step in in a situation of a displaced family. But we haven't talked to her and don't have the details...."

"It... was reported by a neighbor, so we're all really thankful for that. And the neighbors have been watching the house for her, too."

"This was an old Victorian house with the old wiring," Mr. Cathcart said, "and it had never been updated, and that was the big contributing factor that made it happen."

Mr. Cathcart said that Ms. Milnes has a daughter in Colorado Springs, Brittany Anderson, who was likely on the way here, but he didn't know for sure. When asked if there was anything else that he thought people should know, he said no.

"Stop the gossip," he advised, "and wait for the facts."



A FIRE at Laurie Milnes' home on East Commercial Street started from a short in a pinched wire and quickly spread through the old Victorian home, said Fire Chief Bill Cathcart. The house was assessed to be a total loss.

— Herald staff photo by Stephanie DeCamp

Food drive short of New Year goal

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**
sdecamp@nwkansas.com

It's down to the wire, but Stanley Hardware owner Joe Stanley isn't worried about making his goal of collecting 2,000 items for the Decatur County Food Pantry.

"We're still a little short," he said Friday afternoon. "We're at 1,749. Tomorrow and Monday are all that's left basically, but I bet we make it. We always have."

Mr. Stanley said that he isn't worried because every year, since it started in 1999, the drive has made its goal. He's not expecting any more big collections from groups or clubs, he said, but this year the store has gotten close to \$500 in cash and checks.

The store will be open until 4 p.m. on New Year's Eve to receive the last donations, he said. A group of kids from the school will help help him cart the goods to the pantry on Thursday afternoon.

Mr. Stanley said the drive started for the 1999 holiday season. He and his wife Regina were trying to think up promotional ideas for the millennium changeover when the food drive came to them, he said, and they've reached their goal of 2,000 items every year since.

"There have been years where we've gotten over 2,000 items in one year," he said, adding that every

year is different. "There have been a few times we just barely made it, but also a couple years when we just got a ton of stuff."

"It's a great thing, and people are always very generous.... We were worried that first year and had no idea how it would work out. Two thousand didn't seem like too ambitious of a goal, but it took us to the last week to fill it up. It always works like that; the majority of the food comes in the last two weeks."

The pantry is having a fantastic holiday season so far, so good that manager Melanie Anderson said she thinks this may have been the best one yet.

"The donations have been pouring in," she said, "and they're helping a lot of people. We got the donations from Teens for Christ, and from the teens at the high school. They're very special people, to help that much."

Miss Anderson said that the pantry isn't wanting for anything in particular, but if people are looking for something good to bring in, it could use some more laundry supplies and personal hygiene products such as tooth paste or shampoo.

Just take it all over to Stanley's.