GIVING THEM SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

At a time in society when actual conversation is becoming more and more rare, it’s good to know there is at least one thing we can all talk about: the weather. It remains our universal shared experience, a topic on which even the most shy can come up with a comment and all can discuss without causing offense.

The weather has always been front page news. When the telegraph started bringing news from around the nation and world to local papers, readers had even more weather news to discuss. A randomly picked front page from the Topeka Daily Capital in September 1884 reported an intense heat wave in eastern regions and cyclones in Wisconsin.

In Topeka, formal weather forecasting began in 1887. The first official weather station was in the basement of Rice Hall on the Washburn College campus. The first official report from the weather bureau’s many, T.B. Jennings read: "June 1, 1887. A station of the second order was opened here this morning per L. R. 31 dated O. C. S. O., May 18, 1887. Generally clear cool weather. No snowfall. No aurora. Fair sunset verified." (1)

In 1870, the weather service was formalized with an act of Congress setting up weather observation stations at military installations around the country. (2) The weather bureau was under the War Department’s signal corps, which was started in 1860 to send messages over distances using flags in the daytime and torches at night. (3)

In 1890, the weather bureau was moved to the Agriculture Department, despite objections from Gen. W.B. Hazen, who had taken over the signal corps in 1883. Hazen said the military was better equipped to ensure readings were taken precisely on time and had the means to punish any observer who didn’t fulfill his duties. Hazen also said it was cheaper for the military to do it than to hand it over to a civilian corps. (3)

Leading the effort to move the service was Rep. Edward Funston of the 2nd District of Kansas, chairman of the House Agriculture Committee. Funston was the father of Frederick Funston, who rose to the rank of major general in the Army and received the Medal of Honor for service in the Philippines during the Spanish American War.

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From the President’s desk
Christine Steinkuehler

This summer is a hot one — and not just the weather. It was a great spring at the Historical Society. We had lots of visitors at the Ritchie House, including groups from KU, KSDE and several schools. We received a grant from the Topeka Community Foundation that will pay for all 7th grade students in Shawnee County to tour, as Bleeding Kansas is part of the 7th grade Social Studies curriculum, and there is nothing more “sticky” than coming to an actual site.

The first ever Show and Tell was a spectacular success. Members brought their favorite artifacts and the stories that go with them for the monthly Sunday event. The room was packed, so this will become an annual or bi-annual event. Some of the highlights included Mr. Kays’ history of the National Weather Service in Shawnee County, Kris Cruz’s acronym from the wood from the first Harvey House Restaurant at the Santa Fe Depot, Paul Post’s fantastic photo albums from the Bates family, Ron Reese’s artifacts from silent film actress Fay Tincher, the fantastic work that Shirley Driscoll has been doing with the land records from Rossville and so much more.

The Ritchie Cemetery tour with Don Taylor was fantastic. A number of people who attended grew up in the area and had stories about it, which made it even better.

The highlight of the spring, though, was Wyatt Jones, a 7th grade student from Robinson Middle School, who spoke about his National History Day project at the Shawnee County Preservation Awards ceremony. Wyatt’s candor and wit about studying ancient history were refreshing. Recognition this year went to:

- Doug Wallace, who has literally written the book on Shawnee County history—a number of them in fact.
- Tim Paris, who led the city’s preservation office, assisting with neighborhood surveys, writing grants and supporting national register nominations.
- The Beacon, which reimagined and restored the Women’s Club at SW 9th and Topeka Boulevard.
- Adam and Kassie VanDonge, who have transformed the lower levels of the Columbian Building into a premier nightlife spot.
- Sunflower Health, who took the vandalized remains of SBA/Menninger and returned them to use in health care.

Turnout was high for tours of the St Simon’s Gardens at Grace Cathedral with Ann Palmer in June, and at the new Kansas Turnpike Authority building with Tim Paris, who led the city’s preservation office, assisting with neighborhood surveys, writing grants and supporting national register nominations. The church is collaborating with THS on garden projects, including allowing the culinary classes to cultivate vegetables and herbs in the garden’s planters and bed.

The grounds are open to the public and can be accessed from Polk Street.

In July, David Jacobson led a tour of the new Kansas Turnpike Authority building on South Topeka Boulevard. He began with a presentation on the history of the road, which pre-dated the Interstate Highway System. The building was designed to reflect what the KTA does, with fixtures created from items used in road construction and even lane marking lines in the restrooms.

David described the latest update to the system — a cashless toll scheme that records the amount due based on tracking license plates as they move on and off the toll road.

The public is welcome to any of these tours and presentations, and we’d love to see you!

Three new members on SCHS board
Mark Law, Paul Post and Lisa Sandmeyer have joined the Shawnee County Historical Society Board of Trustees.

Mark is a heating and air conditioner expert who also knows a lot about Topeka pharmacies and where most old bottles were made.

Paul is a retired attorney who has been involved in various historic preservation projects. Lisa is in charge of the Topeka Cemetery and enjoys sharing the history of the more than 35,000 souls buried there.

Tours cover variety of topics
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Bethany Place, describing its design and development. The grounds were originally part of the College of the Sisters of Bethany, a seminary for young women. The south half of the tract owned by the Episcopal Church was sold to the city in 1928 as the site for Topeka High School. The church is collaborating with THS on garden projects, including allowing the culinary classes to cultivate vegetables and herbs in the garden’s planters and bed.

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Calendar of events
On-site tours are a benefit of your membership; non-members will be charged $5 per person. Memberships will be available at the events, and will allow you to attend all tours for a year!

Aug. 13 — 3 p.m. Tour of the fallout shelter in the basement of the Shawnee County Courthouse, 200 SE 7th. Limited to 30 people, and a second date may be added to accommodate everyone interested. Email shawnee countyhistory@gmail.com or call (785) 224-4156 to reserve your spot.

October (Date TBD) — 3 p.m. Tour of Historic Topeka Cemetery. Gather on Mausoleum Row to hear stories about early Topekans and capital city history (and maybe a ghost story or two).

Historic Homes Tour is planned, with date still to be determined. Tour hours will be 1 to 5 p.m.

Dec. 3 — Noon annual Membership Meeting. Lunch is $35 a person if you wish to eat. Site is still to be determined.

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Something to talk about

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For the first 20 years of these efforts, the service merely reported weather conditions, but as the data accumulated, the logical next step was to attempt to predict the weather. The instruments used then are the same used today: barometers for air pressure, thermometers for temperature, rain and show gauges, anemometers to measure wind speed, and hygrometers for humidity. There was even a device that records the number of hours of sunshine with a lens that focuses the sun’s rays on a card and left a burn line. The Campbell-Stokes sunshine recorder was used in the 21st century. (4)

T.B. Jennings

Thorp Battelle Jennings (1849-1925) came to the Topeka weather bureau in 1866 after stints with the bureau in Washington, D.C.; Toledo, Ohio; and Chicago. In 1863, he moved to Kansas and worked as the official line had praise for decades.

T.B. Jennings was the first weather bureau chief in Topeka, starting from an office in the basement of Rice Hall on the Washburn College campus.

Cider Smith

While T.B. Jennings was the official weather forecaster for Topeka, he had a knowledgeable amateur rival. Isaiah Munson Smith (1819-1905) first got involved with weather data when he started a telegraph business in the 1840s in Wisconsin. That technology revolutionized weather forecasting by allowing forecasters to see weather movements.

Starting in 1849, the Smithsonian Institution provided telegraph offices with weather instruments, and their reports were used to create the first weather maps.

For the first 20 years of these efforts, the service merely reported weather conditions, but as the data accumulated, the logical next step was to attempt to predict the weather. (2)

Predictions were where Cider Smith excelled. As a farmer, the weather affected everything he did. He grew apples on his farm he had in the Highland Park area of – hence the nickname.

Smith told the Topeka State Jour- nal in 1902 that he started observing the weather when he lived in Wiscons.

in. From telegraph reports that came through the offices he ran, Smith was able to learn about weather condi-
tions in different areas of the country and watch how conditions moved. “Mr. Smith makes his forecasts for periods covering several days or even weeks,” the Journal said, “while Uncle Sam’s warnings are sent out not more than 24 hours in advance.”

The State Journal had a stake in promoting Smith’s ability to prognos-
ticate – the newspaper had exclusive rights to his forecasts. Most days, the weather report included the predic-
tions from both Jennings and Smith. Smith’s success in weather forecast-
ing wasn’t luck. The man didn’t have much of that in his life. His telegraph business ended up heavily in debt from unpaid taxes. Smith abandoned the business, but partner Ezra Cornell stuck with it and ended up making millions and co-founding Cornell University.

Smith then started selling wagons and moved to Chicago. He bought two lots in the business district – Dearborn Street – right in the path of the Great Chicago Fire in 1871. He left those behind, too, and moved to Topeka. And giving every-

Though there often were jokes made about the abilities of the fore-
casters, the official line had praise for the weather bureau. The Mail also observed: “In the past six months, 90 percent of the predictions have been absolutely correct, and it is a rare thing for a prediction to be absolutely wrong.” (4)

Cider Smith was technically an amateur weather forecaster, but people sought out his predictions.