



January/February 2026

Vol. LXVII No. 1



Alice Duncan sits next to a wartime photo of her husband Lt. j.g. Dale Duncan.

TRUE VALENTINES

How the U.S. Postal Service helped fan the flame of this Kansas couple's connection

By Janet Duncan

Dale Duncan, born on a farm in western Kansas, grew up steeped in the heroism of the West. Family and love were witnessed across the years — not least by the valentines he kept which showed a farm boy's dreams in the mid-1920s.

As these long-saved valentines show, along with the champion wrestler he became, Dale was a

lover and a fighter.

In 1934, Dale had an offer to attend Kansas State College of Agriculture and Applied Science, but there was no money for college so he joined the Civilian Conservation Corps. He was assigned to form a camp baseball team, and, impressed with Dale's abilities, the camp commander convinced several businessmen to invest in Dale's education.

This gift from his hometown let him enroll at Kansas State College. He won the Big Six wrestling championship (145-pound class) in 1937 and was Missouri Valley Champion in

See **VALENTINE**, page 3

FROM THE PRESIDENT Happy New Year from Riley County Historical Society

Well, it's hard to believe, but another year has come and gone, and this represents my first letter for 2026.



Mary Mertz

We have just completed one full year of our Strategic Plan, and I can say with confidence that we have initiated many of the objectives outlined in the plan during 2025.

What we did and continue to do from 2025

We are working to clean out many of our storage areas within our historic site buildings to allow for increased usage; we are looking at new uniform signage for our properties; we have taken bids and will soon begin renovation work on the Wolf Photography Studio and grounds; we have cleaned up our membership lists and created new levels and benefits; we have redrafted our bylaws to more adequately reflect our current board positions and policies; we have added additional social media presence; and we continue to issue the finest newsletters in the museum industry.

We have formed a new committee entitled Partner-

See **LETTER**, page 2

ship and Community Engagement. The society collaborated with the museum on many tours, programs, and talks in 2025, supporting their efforts and appreciating the creativity and hard work ethics that they bring to all activities!

We did hire a society administrator in the Spring of 2025, but the position was ended under amiable circumstances. We have now formed a new hiring team to search to fill this staff position once again, approaching the task with greater experience and clarity.

What to look forward to in 2026

Join us to tour the Wolf House on Saturday, Jan. 24, to honor Kansas Day. Expect exciting things as 2026 will be the celebration of the 250th birthday of America! Our new Partnership Committee along with museum staff will be heavily involved with the creation of a time capsule for Riley County as well as many other events planned throughout the entire year. You can also look for additional membership opportunities for docent training and other ways to become more involved with our mission.

I am so humbled to be able to continue working with our society board members, Katharine and her staff, and all of you as we continue to write our history and stories in the records of Riley County, Kansas, archives.

Thank you and Happy New Year!

—Mary Mertz

CURATOR’S CORNER

Y2K: Ringing in Doomsday or the New Year?

By Melanie Highsmith

On New Year’s Eve 1999, the world held its breath to see if the “millennium bug” would bring unprecedented chaos, or just a minor glitch in the technology people were coming to rely on. Shorthand for the year 2000, Y2K is most often associated with the panic surrounding early programming protocols that used a two-digit year format, as opposed to four digits, to save memory on early computers.

This coding error had the potential to affect critical technologies in banking, transportation, healthcare and power grids. At the Riley County Historical Society’s annual meeting on Nov. 18, 2025, I gave a presentation detailing how Riley County officials helped the community prepare for the new century.

On the same day, a new exhibit with the same name opened at the Riley County Historical Museum. From within the collection, there was only one related artifact that could be brought out for exhibit: a “millennium bug” plush. Most of the other items selected for exhibition were sourced from community members, including Gloria Freeland and Conner Dillard, though two computer monitors were donated from a Kansas City resident.

Come by the museum to see

the technology of the era, reminisce about the pop culture, and learn how Americans tried to combat the possible “digital dark age.” A comfortable retro patterned recliner awaits guests who wish to watch, on a period-appropriate television, the PBS documentary “Millennium Factor: The Truth about Y2K” on VHS, which first aired in November 1999.

If you have any memories of the phenomenon, a memory wall is available to share your experiences.

“Y2K: Ringing in Doomsday or the New Year?” is open now through March 29, 2026. Admission is always free. Museum hours are 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and 2-5p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

The Riley County Historical Museum’s Y2K “millennium bug” artifact.



Riley County Historical Society

2026 Board of Directors

Executive committee

- Mary Mertz, President
- Carol Hockersmith, Vice President

• Dori Milldyke, Immediate Past President

- Janet Lowell, Treasurer
- Colene Lind, Recording Secretary

Directors through 2026

- Jana McKinley
- Larissa Oshima
- Lauren Ritterbush

Directors through 2027

- Charlene Brownson
- Gloria Freeland
- Rafael Garcia
- Joe Knopp

Directors through 2028

- Robin Edmunds
- Mary Kohn
- Steve Smethers

Riley County Historical Museum Director

- Katharine Hensler

VALENTINE, from page 1

1938. He received his degree in 1938 and was hired at Lenora, Kansas, to coach all sports and teach biology, health education, physiology, and manual arts.

In another part of Kansas, Alice Young lived in a “soddy” before her family moved to their Norton County farm. She rode her pony to elementary school, then drove a Model T with a rumble seat in the back to high school. After graduating in 1935, she took a job as one of two teachers in a one-room school.

In May 1936, a teaching course brought her to Lenora where Dale’s students dared him to ask the pretty lady for a date, so Dale sent one of the boys to say that “coach” wanted to meet her. He was smitten. He told his students that Alice didn’t know it yet, but she was to be his future wife. It was love at first sight for them both, but Alice had to return to her teaching, and their courtship was mostly thanks to the U.S. Postal Service.

Dale offered his proposal of marriage by letter.

Alice accepted by return mail.

They were married in 1939 when they were both supposed to be at a state teachers’ meeting. The honeymoon must have been brief as they had to return to their respective schools. Separation was too difficult, however, even with the Postal Service, and Alice resigned at the end of the semester and moved to Eskridge, Kansas, where Dale was then athletic director and coach for football, basketball, wrestling, boxing, track, and baseball.

In early 1943, Dale was offered a position in the Athletic Department at Kansas State College. It was his dream job, but he was soon pulled to the service of his county after the U.S. entered World War II. He was



Dale Duncan, left, and Alice (Young) Duncan, right, as children.

commissioned ensign in the U.S. Navy and received his orders. Alice, now with a 2-year-old son and baby on the way, waited at home, once again depending on the postal service.

While Dale was in the service, Alice looked up at the stars and thought of their favorite song, “Stardust.” In one of her letters to him when he was in the South Pacific, she included a newspaper clipping with the lyrics and her own message, “I still LOVE you!!!” written before the first verse — “And now the purple dusk of twilight time/ Steals across the meadows of my heart/ High up in the sky the little stars climb/ Always reminding me that we’re apart.”

Dale sent the clipping back with his note added at the end of the last verse — “Though I dream in vain/ In my heart it will remain/ My stardust melody/ The memory of love’s refrain” “Thank you I LOVEEEE you you you!!!”

In March 1944, Alice took 3-year-old Patrick and 6-week-old Michael by train to San Francisco for a visit before Dale shipped out as naval gunnery crew commander aboard the “Robert C. Greer” — a ship that guarded merchant marine convoys in the South Pacific. Back in Man-

hattan, Alice was resourceful. She realized she had a chance to buy a house, and with no husband present, she bought one at 1106 Ratone St.

Lt. j.g. Dale L. Duncan was discharged from active service in 1946 and returned home to his family in Manhattan. In 1956, he applied for the position of postmaster, and, in 1957, he was put forward by President Dwight Eisenhower and confirmed by the U.S. Senate to become the postmaster in Manhattan.

It was a fitting career — letters had been important to Dale and Alice their whole lives. While they saved no valentines from later years, there is no doubt that every year valentines were exchanged with love and a sprinkling of “Stardust.”

Janet (Kridler) Duncan moved with her family to Manhattan, Kansas, in 1949. Educated in Manhattan schools — including Eugene Field Elementary, Manhattan Junior and Senior High School and Kansas State University — she and her late husband returned to their roots after many years living and traveling in many places. Dale and Alice of the above story were parents of her husband, Patrick.



President Ronald Reagan gave the Kansas State University Landon Lecture on former Kansas Gov. Alf Landon's 95th birthday, Sept. 9, 1982. Accompanying the governor was his daughter, Nancy Landon Kassebaum. **Courtesy of Richard L. D. and Marjorie J. Morse Department of Archives and Special Collections, Kansas State University Libraries.**

PRESIDENTS DAY: HAIL TO THE CHIEFS

Over the years, several U.S. presidents — some with Kansas connections — have stopped by Manhattan. Here's who.

By Lauren Ritterbush

As we prepare for the 250th Anniversary of the American Revolution and the birth of our nation, we are reminded of George Washington, who served as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, president of the Constitutional Convention, and first president of the United States.

Americans have paid homage to him on his birthday since at least 1790, during his first year as the U.S. president. Although

Washington may not have sought this recognition, he understood the importance of events that unified citizens.

Thus, he would have understood why in 1879, Congress and President Rutherford B. Hayes declared his birthday, Feb. 22, a federal holiday. The date of this holiday has changed over the years and is now celebrated on the third Monday of February — Feb. 16 in 2026 — and, to many, is known as Presidents Day. This name originated as a means of

expanding recognition of Abraham Lincoln, who was also born in February. Today, many Americans celebrate Presidents Day to honor all U.S. presidents and the office they fill.

So, how does Presidents Day fit into the history of Riley County? As a national holiday, most federal employees have the day off. This day is not formally recognized as a State of Kansas holiday; nonetheless, this should not deter us from using this day to honor George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and other U.S. presidents.

We can do so by remembering those presidents who have visited

Cont. on next page

Riley County, even if briefly.

The first standing U.S. president to pass through Riley County was Theodore Roosevelt. On May 2, 1903, the 26th president stopped briefly to address a crowd of local residents and students at Manhattan's Union Pacific depot as part of his "Great Loop" tour of Midwestern and Western states. To learn more about this whistle-stop, read the "The Manhattan Train Depot, Teddy Roosevelt, and K-State" installment in Anthony Crawford's "K-State Keepsakes" series, accessible at newprairiepress.org/ebooks/3/.

Not surprisingly, Kansas-born U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower visited this part of Kansas, but it was before his presidency. Eisenhower was born and raised in Abilene, Kansas, and was brother of Milton Eisenhower, a Kansas State College graduate and president of his alma mater between 1943 and 1950. In January 1944, General Dwight Eisenhower was a guest at the KSC president's campus home, where he relaxed with family before returning to Europe to lead the Allied invasion of France later that year. He went on to become the 34th U.S. president in 1953.

Other U.S. presidents have visited Riley County as contributors to Kansas State University's Alfred M. Landon Lecture Series. President Richard M. Nixon was the first sitting president to give a Landon Lecture on Sept. 16, 1970, during his second year as the 37th U.S. president.

Ronald Reagan also visited during the second year of his presidency on Sept. 9, 1982. This was not his first trip to Manhattan, however, having presented a Landon Lecture on Oct. 26, 1967, when he was governor of California.

Reagan's vice president, George H. W. Bush — later to become the 41st U.S. president — also spoke to students, faculty and the regional public on Sept. 9, 1985, while serving in that role. His son, 43rd U.S. President George W. Bush, spoke at Kansas State University on "Presidential Decision-Making" on Jan. 23, 2006, while he was president.

Other presidents who shared their insights of national and international affairs include former Presidents Gerald R. Ford, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, who each presented Landon Lectures in the years following their presidency.

Lauren W. Ritterbush is a professor of anthropology at Kansas State University. She has spent the past 27 years in Manhattan teaching courses in archaeology, critical thinking, ethnohistory, and museum collections management while also pursuing regional archaeological and ethnohistorical research. She presently serves on the Board of the Riley County Historical Society board of directors.



Manhattan residents and Kansas State Agricultural College students welcome President Theodore Roosevelt at the city's Union Pacific train depot on May 2, 1903. **Courtesy of the Riley County Historical Society & Museum.**

Who owns the quartzite stone tower on Sunset Avenue? We do.

By Carol Hockersmith

An eight-foot, red Sioux Quartzite rock tower stands alone at the south end of Sunset Avenue. It's owned by Riley County Historical Society.

It's a tribute to Joseph Denison (1815-1900), early-day settler of Manhattan and first president of Kansas State Agricultural College. Known as Denison Circle, note that the property isn't connected to Denison Avenue, which also honors the man but whose south end is 0.17 miles away as the crow flies.

On the monument — a turn to the north onto North Evergreen Avenue, a short one-way street off the 1900 block off Poyntz Avenue — a plaque reads:

DENISON CIRCLE
A MEMORIAL TO DR. JOSEPH DENISON
FIRST PRESIDENT OF
THE KANSAS STATE AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE
AND TO THE PIONEERS WHOSE DAUNTLESS
COURAGE AND TIRELESS ENERGY MADE POS-
SIBLE OUR HOMES AND COMFORTS TODAY.
ERECTED BY THE RILEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
1932

Land deeded for monument in 1915

The monument may have been dedicated in 1932, yet the circle was deeded to the Riley County Historical Association — the historical society's original name — on Feb. 13, 1915, by Sam Kimble (1854-1924), judge of the Kansas 21st Judicial District, with his intent fully described for the land he wanted called "Denison Circle" and how he wanted it to be the site of a memorial structure dedicated to Denison.

Deed Record No. 132 describes "Lot One (1) heretofore duly platted and named 'Denison Circle' in the Sunset Addition to the City of Manhattan" for \$1 and faithful performance of the conditions laid out in the deed.

Kimble's conditions were "dedicate the tract of land described to public use and as a memorial to Dr. Joseph Denison, first president of The Kansas State Agriculture College and one of the pioneers and old settlers of the State of Kansas. . ."

Kimble outlined that the historical association was to hold control and use the tract of land forever under the name "Denison Circle," "plant to trees and flowers, and to erect thereon such memorial structures and designs as shall advance the Public interest and

pleasure in the early History in Educational and material development of the County and the State. . ."

Why 17 years later to build the monument?

The Riley County Historical Association was founded in 1914. The next year, 1915, association members were building a log cabin in the Manhattan City Park that was dedicated in 1916 as the first Riley County Historical Museum. Perhaps working on the cabin museum in 1915 — the year the association gained Denison Circle — delayed the development of Denison Circle to Kimble's specifications.

Newspaper clippings reported a Sept. 10, 1932, basket lunch meeting of the county historical society in city park announcing plans for erecting a marker in "Dennison circle near the cemetery." Note that the clippings use an incorrect spelling of the honored Denison's name.

Two months later, the Riley County Historical Society dedicated the Denison monument after a society meeting on Nov. 12, 1932. A write-up of the event by J.T. Willard described the structure as "built of three huge glacial boulders and several smaller ones laid in cement. The foundation is of limestone from piers of the Juniata bridge which crossed the Blue River between Rocky Ford and Manhattan."

Willard continued: ". . . its rugged contour and imperishable material make it an appropriate symbol of the dauntless pioneers."

The historical society had the assistance of the Daughters of the American Revolution, as well as individual and corporate donations, to honor Denison with the monument. A bank book in the museum collection has an entry showing total cost of the project was \$58.65, or \$1,376.20 in 2025 dollars. Remarkably, the entry shows the project was paid in full by January 1934, or in other words, came together during the Great Depression, the severe global economic downturn from 1929 to 1939.

Kimble didn't live to see the monument built. But his vision of a memorial to Kansas State University's first president and the pioneers who settled Kansas is forever standing in his designated Denison Circle.

Carol Hockersmith holds a journalism and mass communication degree from Kansas State University, which she used to write for social service and educational organizations. She is a member of the Riley County Historical Society board.

Manhattan residents gather for the 1932 dedication of the Denison momument at Denison Circle. **Courtesy of the Riley County Historical Society & Museum.**





MUSEUM DIRECTOR’S ANNUAL REPORT

Strong momentum heading into 2026

Greetings from the administrative offices of the Riley County Historical Museum. 2025 was a busy year from its very start when we closed the museum for the first six weeks in January to completely remodel the permanent galleries and install all-new, updated exhibits.



Katharine Hensler

Thanks to your support through donations, volunteering, and attending our events and programs, we had a record year in several ways.

The statistics below were gathered from Nov. 1, 2024, through Oct. 31, 2025:

- **Opened all new permanent exhibits** in the museum. Admission is still free!
- **Incorporated more diverse features** of Riley County communities, people and their stories.
- **Introduced a brand-new Kids’ Zone** with hands-on, interactive learning tools (fun for all ages).

- **New galleries feature digital media** in the form of historic film footage, offering visitors a small “theater” area with seating for resting and reflection.
- **Renovated the lobby and gift shop** and added new inventory and payment acceptance methods.
- **Upgraded gallery lighting.**
- **Approximately 150 previously unexhibited objects** were incorporated into the new exhibits.
- **Increased attendance:** Nov. 1, 2024 – Oct. 31, 2025, shows a total of 17,024 visitors who have either visited the museum, the Goodnow House, the Wolf House, Pioneer Log Cabin, Rocky Ford School, or attended one of our education or outreach programs. This is a 19% increase from 2024 attendance.
- **Increased volunteer activity:** Volunteer hours are up 4.3% from 2,074 in 2024 to 2,164 in 2025.
- **Organized and cleaned:** A large-scale clean-up and organization effort occurred this year in the library, archives, on-site and

Members of the Silver Creek Beneficiary Club tour the Riley County Historical Museum’s newly renovated exhibit area in spring 2025.

- off-site storage, and the Wolf Photo Studio. Approximately 10,000 objects were handled for improved organization.
- **Culture of education:** Forty-six unique educational and outreach programs were presented throughout the community through presentations, workshops, field trips, walking tours, etc.
- **Field trips:** We hosted 663 fourth-grade students and their teachers for Wolf House field trips in April and May. Additional field trips at other sites throughout the year were offered, with nearly 800 people introduced to this interpretive programming for school-aged children. Nearly 30 volunteer docents give their time in the spring to support this program and provide hands-on, historical interpretive programs to local public, private and homeschooled students.
- **Launched the Riley County Historical Digital Archives** — a free, new online platform, that gives users the ability to view

thousands of our digital images from the convenience of their homes. We currently have over 12,000 images uploaded, and we continue to work on more. Visit the platform at rchsdigitalcollections.epistrophepictures.com today and search away!

New to RCHM in 2026

- Our education team created “Progress and Peril: On the Trail to Kansas” — a new board game that will be introduced to the public in the new year.
- With the help of students and faculty from Kansas State University’s Department of Modern Languages, we will launch a Spanish language audio tour of the Goodnow House State Historic Site.
- “America250” occurs in 2026, and museum and Riley County Historical Society staff and volunteers are busy planning exciting community events and programs that will be introduced over the next twelve months.



Riley County Historical Museum staff developed and playtested “Progress and Peril: On the Trail to Kansas” — a board game that will be launched in early 2026. **Courtesy of the Riley County Historical Society & Museum.**

Bright year ahead

I would be remiss if I did not recognize the team of people we employ at the Riley County Historical Society and Museum. Without them and their dedication to the mission, we could not provide the diverse programming listed above. A huge shoutout to the team, and

thank you for all you do! We look forward to our continued partnerships with the RCHS, our community, and you — our friends and supporters. Thank you for your continued support. We are excited to see you in this bright, new year!

— Katharine Hensler

Society honors Kansas’ birthday with Wolf House tours

Join the Riley County Historical Society at the Wolf House, 630 Fremont St., on Saturday, Jan. 24, to honor Kansas’ 165th birthday.



This special event, “Celebrate Kansas,” is on the weekend before the actual Kansas Day. From 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. that Saturday, docents will be in each room to tell you about the Wolf House, which was built in 1868, just seven years after Kansas became a state.

The two-story limestone house, owned by Riley County Historical Society, is currently interpreted as an 1880s boarding house. The event is open to the public at no cost, yet society members who show their membership card, will be treated to a party favor as our thank you for your continued support. Staff can also confirm membership for those without a card.

Our membership year is the calendar year, Jan. 1 to Dec. 31. It’s easy to become a member or renew membership. Go to rileychs.org/become-a-member.cfm or stop by the Riley County Historical Museum.

If you wish to join or renew on January 24, you will have the opportunity at the event.



Ritterbush presents on Riley County's Indigenous history

By Gloria Freeland

Lauren Ritterbush, K-State professor of archaeology and a director on the Riley County Historical Society board, gave a presentation — “Native American History and Late Pre-History in Wildcat Creek Valley” — to the Silver Creek Beneficiary Club in Keats on Nov. 6.

Ritterbush discussed the Kanza tribe and the Indigenous peoples who have lived in this area for more than 13,000 years, and she showed an 1819 sketch of Blue

Earth town, which was located east of Manhattan.

The sketch, done by Titian Ramsay Peale, was of lodges, each of which could hold 10 people. She also showed portraits of Kanza tribe members O-ron-gas-see (“Bear Catcher”), Meach-o-shin-gaw (“Little White Bear”) and Hon-je-a-put-o (“Wife of Bear Catcher”), which were done by George Catlin in 1832.

Other evidence of Indigenous people being in this area can be found in the Kanza language, Rit-

terbush said. For example, Wildcat Creek was known as “where Midayinga was killed,” although no one has yet discovered who Midayinga was.

In addition, she showed examples of potsherds - broken pieces of pottery - and tools made of flint.

***Gloria Freeland** is a professor emerita in K-State's A.Q. Miller School of Media and Communication and a member of the RCHS board of directors.*

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

January 1 – New Year's Day, Museum and RCHS offices/sites are closed (Happy New Year!)

January 19 – Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Museum and RCHS offices/sites are closed

January 24 - "Celebrate Kansas" honoring Kansas Day, 2:30-4:30 p.m., Wolf House Museum at 630 Fremont St., MHK, free and open to the public; Active RCHS members will receive a gift at event

January 29 – 165th Kansas Day, please contact museum staff if you wish to host us in your classroom for Kansas Day programming

February 2 – Groundhog Day

February 16 – Presidents Day, Museum and RCHS offices/sites are closed

Join Riley County Historical Society

... or renew your membership for 2026.

Membership year runs Jan. 1 to Dec. 31.

Find member levels, see benefits, and join online at:

rileychs.org/become-a-member.cfm