

Jeff Hanson - Muscotah

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

“These are the saddest of possible words: Tinker to Evers to Chance. Trio of bear cubs and fleetier than birds: Tinker and Evers and Chance.” These famous words come from a poem about baseball. The poem was written from the standpoint of a rival team, but it made famous the best double-play combination in baseball at the time. One of those great players, Joe Tinker, was born in rural Kansas. His hometown is now honoring that history in a big way – and I mean that literally. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Jeff and C.J. Hanson live in the Atchison County town of Muscotah where Joe Tinker was born.

Joe Tinker debuted with the Chicago Cubs as a shortstop in 1902. In the lineup, he joined second baseman Johnny Evers and first baseman Frank Chance. The defensive combination clicked. The fleet-footed Tinker would snag ground balls and throw them to Evers at second base who would throw to Chance at first to put out the runners: Tinker to Evers to Chance.

In 1905, Joe Tinker led the National League in double plays. Tinker, Evers and Chance led the Cubs to four pennants and two World Series championships. It motivated a rival fan to write: “These are the saddest of possible words: Tinker to Evers to Chance.”

More than a century later, people in Joe Tinker’s birthplace of Muscotah were looking for ways to help the community. After a carpentry career in Colorado, Jeff and C.J. Hanson had moved to Muscotah to be close to her aging parents (who are a mere 92 and 96 years old. Wow!).

Jeff and C.J. had volunteered on a project done by Marci Penner and her Kansas Sampler Foundation in a nearby community. Marci wanted to help Muscotah as well. Her group noticed a sign saying that Muscotah was the birthplace of Joe Tinker. One person suggested that the round water tower be painted to resemble a baseball, but it wasn't practical at the time.

Then when the municipality chose to upgrade its water system and replace the tank, Jeff Hanson had a creative idea. What if Muscotah could repurpose the old, round water tank to look like the world's largest baseball, with a baseball museum inside?

Of course, there are a few zillion complications with such an idea, such as who would do this and who would pay for it? Rural communities like Muscotah don't have big city staffs or budgets. But Marci Penner of the Kansas Sampler Foundation encouraged the idea.

When a contractor brought down the tank, Jeff Hanson bought it to save it from salvage and moved it to a location where it could be seen from the highway. Marci helped organize a weekend for volunteers to work on this project.

On May 17-19, some twenty-five volunteers came together to remake the water tank. The Kansas Sampler Foundation collected nearly \$6,000 in donations to support the project, not counting donated labor and supplies. Not one penny of taxpayers' money has been spent on this project. In the best tradition of rural Kansas, a group of volunteers came together to make it happen.

Now the giant, 20-foot diameter baseball is freshly painted, complete with red rebar which looks like stitching. Work is continuing on the interior and on the landscaping of a 1/4-scale ball diamond. Joe Tinker-era memorabilia and local family histories are being collected for display in the museum, which will open when resources allow. The Guinness Book of World Records has been contacted. How remarkable it would be to find the world's largest baseball in a rural community like Muscotah, population 200 people. Now, that's rural.

“I hope this baseball will be a symbol of the rebirth of Muscotah,” Jeff Hanson said.

“These are the best of possible words: Tinker to Evers to Chance. Inspired a museum as today you have heard: Tinker to Evers to Chance.” That's my variation on this famous baseball poem, featuring Muscotah's native son Joe Tinker. We salute Jeff and C.J. Hanson, the people of Muscotah, Marci Penner, and all the wonderful volunteers who are making a difference by making this dream a reality. They are having a ball.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development,
this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.