

Janet Carman – Historical society

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

“Connecting the dots.” That was a fun game to play when I was a kid. Today we’ll learn about an initiative in northwest Kansas which used the term “connect the dots” to describe its purpose in preserving the unique family histories in the county. It is bringing together the family stories of people from all ages and all walks of life. This is today’s Kansas Profile.

Janet Carman is a volunteer with the Cheyenne County Historical Society and Cheyenne County Museum. The museum is located in St. Francis, the county seat of Cheyenne County.

Janet has deep roots in Cheyenne County, which is in the very northwest corner of Kansas. Her great-grandfather came west and homesteaded here. His rural location was south of Wheeler, which today is an unincorporated town with a population of perhaps 20 people. Now, that’s rural.

Janet grew up in Cheyenne County and went to K-State where she studied education. She met her husband and they eventually moved to Dallas where they spent 36 years and Janet taught for 22. A few years ago, they had the opportunity to buy her great-grandfather’s house. They bought the house, moved back, and restored it. “It was a labor of love,” Janet said.

Another labor of love for Janet was to volunteer with the Cheyenne County Historical Society. The society identified a need to preserve the verbal and written accounts of the county and its families using newer technology. In spring 2015, the Dane G. Hansen Foundation of Logan provided a grant which enabled the purchase of digital equipment and the gathering of such histories.

The historical society bought a computer, camera, DVD burner, wall-mounted television, portable sound system and more. Society members advertised about the project in local newspapers, conducted and filmed interviews, and hosted a “Telling Your Story” workshop led by a local published author who acquainted participants with various approaches for writing their personal stories. This included interviewing hints, writing techniques, and options for publishing.

Meanwhile, local historian Marilyn Holzwarth had compiled a Cheyenne County Legacy Family digital document of 110,000 names during her lifetime. This collection was also donated to the historical society and will be augmented with the family data, pictures, obituaries and stories from the Hansen project.

“This project has taken on a life of its own,” Janet Carman said. Several lessons were learned through this project, such as that smart phones are excellent (and convenient) tools for recording audio and video stories, and that it takes time, organization, and diligence to arrange interviews. They found that the process is most successful if families are directly contacted personally.

Several things have grown out of the grant, according to Janet. These include student involvement and volunteers who have found their special niche in recording such histories. Cheyenne County now has a “Discover Your Roots” genealogy club, Snapshot in Time programs, and bimonthly “Night at the Museum” sessions.

“A 90 year old woman from Denver came into the museum and presented us with a book of well-preserved letters which her father and brother had written in the 1880s while homesteading,” Janet said. “She was in tears.” The brothers, aged 13 and 14, were to develop the homestead while dad returned to Iowa to take care of the rest of the family.

The Cheyenne County Museum was dedicated in 1987. Its entrance features bricks from the St. Francis Brick Factory in 1888. Inside the museum is a rich collection of county history. All displays and furnishings in the museum come from homes or businesses in Cheyenne County. Now the museum also includes a Genealogy Center with family resources and the Legacy Family Project where multi-generational family stories are preserved and shared.

For more information on the museum, go to www.cncoks.us/historymuseum.

“Connecting the dots.” That is a fun kid’s game, and it is also a way to describe the connections that are being made in Cheyenne County. We salute Janet Carman and all those involved in the Cheyenne County Historical Society for making a difference by capturing, preserving and sharing these rich family histories. They’re not only connecting the dots, they are connecting the generations.

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