

The trials and tribulations of Rawlins County: A rich history in Kansas and McDonald's involvement

Since I began work here at KRWA I have been involved with every KANSTEP project except for the ever so important first one in Formoso. It was the first KANSTEP success.

Every project has been successful thanks to the hard work of the volunteers in the small towns and rural areas across the state. This is a very rewarding job and there isn't a day goes by that I don't thank my "lucky stars" for the opportunity to be involved, working with the people of Kansas.

Shane Holthaus
KAN STEP Tech



KAN STEP as you may know is a community development program sponsored by the Kansas Department of

Commerce designed to help communities with an acknowledged community improvement problem. A minimum of 40 percent savings of typical "retail costs" must be shown by using this "self-help" program.

Types of utilities that qualify include improvements to:

- water or sewer systems
- buildings

Examples of eligible buildings may include:

- senior centers

- community buildings
- libraries
- fire stations.

The funds for the projects are part of the Community Development Block Grant program. Those are federal dollars through HUD. Kansas however is the only state that is constructing buildings under the program.

McDonald, rich yesterday, stronger tomorrow"

The community of McDonald located in western Kansas in Rawlins County has a rich sense of its history and what is a continuing struggle for survival by small communities.



A \$155,432 KAN STEP grant was awarded to Rawlins County in extreme northwestern Kansas to construct a new fire station in McDonald. The fire station, which will be owned by Rawlins County, has an estimated market value of \$250,743.



Volunteers began construction of the new fire station at McDonald in July 2003. Many of the 50 people who donated time constructing the project are farmers and volunteer firemen.



Combined fire station - community meeting room

The new fire station has three truck bays, which will open to be one large space. The new facility is attached to their existing fire station (truck bay) by a breezeway. The old fire station will also be insulated and repainted to match the new building. Existing bathrooms will be remodeled and new windows installed. A new heating and cooling unit were installed in the training/meeting room and kitchen area.

The project representative at McDonald is Bruce Nickel. Donnie Marrs of DMA Architects, Salina, is the architect. The grant administrator is Michele Kippes with Northwest Kansas Planning and Development. I was representing KRWA providing inspection services and assistance to this KAN STEP project.

The Goal: New 5,760 sq. ft. fire station

As of June 1, the McDonald Fire Station is nearly complete. It lacks the finishing touches. Brush off the tables, sweep and wax the floors – in that order, gentlemen. It's nearly time for the open house and the building's use to begin. The

More than 50 volunteers worked on the Fire Station. That count does not include those who prepared meals and kept water, tea and cookies coming to the workers.

McDonald project has encompassed several seasons and the volunteers are sure glad to be finished with their building.

How KAN STEP works . . .

The KAN STEP program has two factors that indicate whether a project is a candidate. Here are the steps:

■ **Potential** – Does the community have the capacity to do the project? This includes having leadership within the community, as well as persons with skills to do the project. Has the community been successful with other self-help projects?

■ **Readiness** – Is there a strong local perception of the problem, belief that local implementation is the best or only solution, and support of the project by the local government?

■ **Process** – any community that is interested in learning more about KAN STEP should contact the Kansas Dept. of Commerce. See their website at www.kdoccommerce.org. The most important consideration: 1) does the community meeting LIM and 2) are there volunteers to construct the project? Either is essential.

■ **Partners** – successful project require partnerships. For KAN STEP projects, that means the local community of sparkplug leaders and volunteers, the engineer or architect, the grant administrator and KRWA has inspectors and assistants.

■ **Follow-up** – progress of the projects is monitored during construction by Dept. of Commerce and periodically following to ensure that the project is being utilized for intended purposes.

KAN STEP is non-competitive, with open cycle funding. Eligible entities include communities and counties. Rural water districts are eligible through county sponsorship.

More than 50 volunteers worked on the Fire Station. That count does not include those who prepared meals and kept water, tea and cookies coming to the workers. It really humbles me at times to see the individual sacrifices people will make for the good of their community. Many of these people are farmers and volunteer firemen. What a good group of friendly people to have the chance to work with.

Personal guide to the past

I was fortunate enough to get to know a farmer/cowboy by the name of Ron Johnson. After working the week away we found ourselves with little to do one evening. I had been telling everyone how I admired him or her and the part of the country they were in. Ron Johnson said, "Well would you like to take a

ride down through the valley"? "Of course," I said. "Let's go!"

So we left the hot dusty jobsite, headed down what to me was a trail of history and adventure. It turns out that Ron travels the road nearly every day. Everywhere you look several miles south of McDonald you see an oil well. It's a huge oil field that has been pumped for 20 years or more. There are also quite a few center pivots dotting the landscape. Ron and I probably traveled for 40 or 50 miles or so south then east along Little Beaver Creek nearly back to the county seat of Atwood, making a loop back to McDonald. We even traveled through some open range; it sure was a picture of the old west.

Shoot out over water rights

Back in 1903 there were no center pivots or irrigation of

crops of any sort in these parts. What I learned on this trip with Ron was that a real water rights issue took place in Rawlins County. Little Beaver Creek was running water in late July 2003 - even though northwest Kansas was in a drought of several years. And just as in 1903, a lot of land along the creek is owned by the Dewey's. A single water tank was a focus of a bitter dispute between two ranching families in Rawlins County.

Bitter feud

The Dewey vs. Berry feud started many years before June 3, 1903, but ended that day in a shootout. Three Berry's were killed. The Dewey's had come for a water tank that was purchased by them the day before at a sheriff's sale. Some words were spoken and before you know it guns were blazing. Thankfully, disputes over water rights are handled differently today. Where water is available, wells can be drilled deeper and water can be treated for domestic

use. I appreciated Ron Johnson taking time to fill me in on some of the colorful history of Rawlins County. In future KAN STEP projects we are going to meet many more interesting people and we will learn more about their communities. To me that is what the KAN STEP program is all about. The message is this: No matter if you want to pursue a KAN STEP grant for your community or not, take pride in your town and your area. Life is too short to just worry about when the bills are due or who is emailing you or when the workday is ending.



The son and father team of Andrew and Ron Johnson fasten headers in the McDonald Fire Station in August 2003. The new 5,760 sq. foot building was completed in June 2004.

Help your community improve and have some fun doing it. For more information about KANSTEP, contact Marilyn Graham, Program Manager at the Kansas Dept. of Commerce by calling 785/296-3400.

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