

Chohon retires after 37 years of service

Tom Chohon, County Executive Director of the Ainsworth District Farm Service Agency Office and Valentine FSA Office is retiring after serving 37 1/2 years with the USDA agency.

Chohon began his career in what was called the Agricultural Stabilization Conservation Service in June of 1984, and served in the Holt County, Stapleton District, and Stanton County Offices, before transferring to the Ainsworth District FSA Office in May of 1999, where he served the farmers and ranchers of Brown, Rock and Keya Paha Counties for over 22 1/2 years.

In August of 2020, he was also assigned the duties of managing the Valentine FSA Office, which includes the counties of Cherry, Grant, Hooker, Thomas and Blaine counties, in addition to the counties of Brown, Rock and Keya Paha.

Chohon said he enjoyed



his career immensely and what he enjoyed the most was being an ambassador for the FSA programs and explaining to farmers and ranchers how the FSA programs could benefit their operation. He said it was an honor and privilege to serve the farmers and ranchers in the Ainsworth and Valentine Offices and other locations throughout the years.

As for the future, Chohon said if the opportunity arose, he would

still like to work with area farmers and ranchers.

His final thought was, "If you are not willing to change, you will grow stagnant."

Chohon also acknowledged all of the county committee members who were great to work with throughout his career.

Tom and his wife, Lisa, are looking forward to visiting their two sons more, traveling, and enjoying the company of the hundreds of local partners in ag that he's come to know so well.

He said they would be staying in the area and he plans to continue to help farmers and ranchers by providing a service that helps them add value to their operations through a litany of USDA and non-USDA programs, enjoy traveling more, and helping their parents more.

The Ainsworth County Committee hosted a Retirement Open House for Tom on Friday, January 14th in Ainsworth.

Dewitty became 'springboard' for Black Nebraska homesteaders



HISTORY NEBRASKA PHOTO

Three Dewitty residents, Edward (front), Robert and Glenn Hannahs, work a load of hay. Dewitty, Nebraska's main Black homesteader settlement, located near Valentine, reached roughly 150 people in the early 20th century before all but disappearing in the 1920s.

By Matthew Hansen
Flatwater Free Press
First In A Two Part Series

Nebraska homesteaders were poor and poorer, Catholic and Protestant, European and American. And almost uniformly white.

Except for the homesteaders who settled in a place called Dewitty, near present day Valentine.

These homesteaders were Black. Some came from the South, lured by the promise of the 1904 Kinkaid Act – a kind of second version of the Homestead Act – that promised 640 acres of free land in the Nebraska Sandhills. Some came from Canada, where they had escaped to decades earlier. And some moved from Overton, near Kearney.

Many of the original homesteaders had survived the horrors of slavery. So yes, they could figure out how to grow some crops in the drought-prone Nebraska Sandhills.

There were roughly 150 residents of Dewitty by 1915.

"Dewitty is a story about what's possible here," said Mikal Eckstrom, a professor at UNL's Great Plains Studies who has studied the settlement. "It's a story about the realities of rural life then, the difficulties, yes, but also... Dewitty was a place

where families came to stake their claim. To provide a platform for their children. It was a springboard."

The residents of Dewitty grew corn, potatoes, oats. They grew sorghum and turned it into molasses. They built churches, a general store, a post office and a school that some nearby white children attended, too.

They celebrated the 4th of July with nearby Brownlee, the nearest white settlement, which still exists as an unincorporated town. The two towns played baseball against one another. They held dances.

"Let's be clear about this: They danced in the same space, but that didn't mean that African American and white homesteaders were dancing with one another," Eckstrom said.

The residents of Dewitty never meant to stay forever, Eckstrom said. They meant to build a better life, and go somewhere new. The settlement had all but vanished by the mid-1920s, done in by weather and plummeting crop prices in 1921. The residents also faced several problems that white homesteaders didn't.

One: The sons and daughters of original Dewitty homesteaders had a hard time finding marital partners, since interracial marriage was then illegal.

Two: It wasn't easy to get a loan as a Black man in Nebraska in the early 20th century.

The residents of Dewitty did leave. Today its descendants are spread out over the country, many of them attributing some success to their grandparents or great grandparents who homesteaded in the Sandhills town.

But what the residents of Dewitty did leave in Nebraska, Eckstrom thinks, what stayed here even after the Black homesteader community vanished, is the potential for eye-opening things to happen in seemingly unlikely places. Where, when largely left to their own devices, Nebraskans, then and now, can do something incredible.

"The whole mythos of the opening of the West was called Manifest Destiny, and it was encoded in a way that it really meant it was a space for white immigrants," he said.

"Except (the residents of Dewitty) manifested destiny in a way that included them. They fought and wrote to the Secretary of the Interior. They fought for those land claims. They manifested their own destiny."

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Filing Deadlines Rapidly Approaching

Election filing deadlines are rapidly approaching for the May 10, 2022 primary election in Nebraska. Lorissa Hartman, Thomas County Clerk, said the filing deadlines for incumbents is February 15 at 4:00 p.m. and March 1 at 4:00 p.m. for non-incumbents. A complete list of offices to be filled by election and the number to be elected, appeared in last week's issue of the *Thomas County Herald*.

As of Thursday, January 27, several filings have been received in the clerk's office in Thedford

and include:

Thedford Public Schools Board of Education (Non-Partisan): Spencer Burk, incumbent.

Village of Halsey (Non-Partisan): Wilma Heinowski, incumbent.

Thomas County Commissioner (vote for 2 – at large): John Seeley, incumbent and James Purdum, incumbent (both Republicans).

County Clerk: Lorissa Hartman, Republican.

County Treasurer: Andrea Thomas, Republican.

County Sheriff: Wm. Joseph Smith, Republi-

can.

County Attorney: Kurt Dam Arganbright, Republican.

Clerk Hartman reports redistricting was completed and changes were made due to the 2020 census.

Voters are reminded that Thomas County is now in District 42 and will be voting to replace Senator Groene who is ineligible to run again due to term limits. Changes were also made to NRD sub-districts and more information will be appear in an upcoming issue.

County Commissioners Reorganize

The Thomas County Board of Commissioners reorganized for 2022 at an organizational meeting held January 4.

Pam Moody was elected chairperson and John Seeley, vice chair.

Holiday dates to be observed in 2022 were set and the regular board meeting dates will be the first and third Tuesday of each month at 8:30 a.m.

The *Thomas County Herald* was designated as the official news publication and Security First Bank, Thedford, as the official county depository.

Appointments were made as follows:

Thomas County Weed Superintendent: Richard Cook.

Thomas County Emergency Manager: Joseph Smith.

Thomas County Highway Superintendent: Lloyd Smith.

Thomas County Zoning Administrator: Lorissa Hartman.

Thomas County Veterans Service Officer: Richard Cook.

Board appointments were named as follows:

Region II: Pam Moody
West Central District Health Department: Pam Moody and Ronda Haumann.

West Central Area on Aging: Pam Moody

Region 26: Joseph Smith

Lexington Solid Waste: Jim Purdum

West Central Development District: John Seeley
Sandhills RC & D: John Seeley
Thomas County Safety Committee: Jim Purdum
Upper Loup NRD Drought Plan: Jim Purdum

Thedford Board Of Education Reorganizes For New Year

Thedford Public Schools Board of Education met for a regular meeting January 17, at which time officers were elected for the new year and will be Bridget Licking, president; Jay Jones, vice president; Steve Ahlstrom, secretary; and Dixie Hoffman, treasurer.

Committee assignments were made as follows:

Americanism & Textbook, Curriculum and Instruction Committee: Bridget Licking, Dixie Hoffman and Jay Jones.

Negotiations: Dixie Hoff-

man, Jay Jones, and Bridget Licking.

Board Policy: Bridget Licking, Jay Jones, and Dixie Hoffman.

Other (Building, Grounds & Transportation): Spencer Burk, Steve Ahlstrom, and Matt Blackford.

Sports Cooperative Committee: Steve Ahlstrom and Matt Blackford.

Superintendent Dahlberg reported pre-K through 12 enrollment numbers increased from 132 in September and now stands at 142.

The board voted unanimously to approve continuation of planning by the board for building and grounds improvements, including planning, financial options and discussion with the community.

A work agreement for Kale Anderson as custodian-maintenance was approved.

The next regular board meeting was set for Monday, February 14, and a meeting scheduled for February 2 to discuss building projects.



HISTORY NEBRASKA PHOTO

George Barnes and family pose in front of their caved-in sod house in 1887. The Nebraska homesteader's wife had died the year before. Early Nebraska photographer Solomon Butcher titled his photo, "Three motherless children and a caved in soddy."