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Kansas and the Cold War

This article was written by
Landry Brewer

Because of its part in the nation's nuclear arsenal, in a movie depicting nuclear war, and in providing an American President, Kansas's Cold War role was among the nation's most important.

To counter the Soviet Union's Cold War nuclear threat in the 1950s, the United States government began creating an offensive nuclear capability that included intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs, capable of reaching the Soviet Union. The first American ICBM was the Atlas Missile. Schilling Air Force Base & Forbes Air Force Base played a crucial role in the nation's nuclear arsenal from 1960 through 1965 by building several missile launch sites and housing Atlas E & Atlas F intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Topeka learned in October 1958 that Forbes AFB would operate the Atlas E missile and that 9 launch sites would be built in nearby locations. These launch sites were located in the vicinity of Bushong, Delia, Dover, Holton, Osage City, Overbrook, Valley Falls, Waverly and Wamego. Site construction

began on June 9, 1959. The 548th Strategic Missile Squadron at Forbes AFB stood up on July 1, 1960, and all 9 missiles had arrived by October 1961. All 9 Atlas E missiles were housed in horizontal underground "coffins" with retractable roofs above ground that would expose the missile during launch.

During flight, the missile reached a speed of 16,000 miles per hour and could travel more than 6,700 miles in 43 minutes. An Atlas Missile fired from Kansas could reach the Soviet Union in less than an hour—with a 4-megaton nuclear warhead (equivalent to 4 million tons of TNT) that was 200 times more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II.

The most sophisticated among the Atlas missiles, the Atlas F was created to be housed in deep, "hardened" underground silos to protect them against possible Soviet nuclear attack. Constructed of the strongest concrete possible poured over rebar, each silo was 174 feet deep with a diameter of 52 feet, and each was entirely below ground. Each silo housed

a missile along with an extensive steel structure, the "crib"—which was attached to the silo walls by four extremely large springs—that allowed for routine missile maintenance. Connected to the silo by a 50-foot long, 8-foot wide tunnel was the launch control center, or LCC. Also built of reinforced concrete and steel, its 2 floors housed the launching equipment and was where a 5-man Air Force



crew lived 24 hours a day, ready to launch the missile if necessary.

The 12 Atlas F missile sites near Salina and Schilling Air Force Base were located at Bennington, Abilene, Chapman, —cont., p. 2→

—cont. from p. 1 →

Carlton, McPherson, Mitchell, Kanopolis, Wilson, Beverly, Tescott, Glasco and Minneapolis.

Building ICBM launch sites was dangerous; nationally, more than 50 people died in silo accidents. Two men died during Atlas E site construction near Topeka, and 5 men died during Atlas F site construction near Salina.

In mid-October 1962, only one month after Kansas's 12 Atlas F missile sites became the property of the United States Air Force, the nation—and the world—entered into the most dangerous two weeks of the Cold War. The Kennedy administration learned that the Soviet Union was building sites in Cuba capable of launching nuclear missiles against the United States, and the Cuban Missile Crisis began.

President Kennedy addressed the nation about the Cuban crisis on the evening of October 22, 1962. In his address, he said, "It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union."

That "full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union" would have included firing the 12 missiles surrounding Schilling Air Force Base and the 9 missiles surrounding Forbes Air Force Base.

Fortunately, the Cuban crisis ended peacefully, and none of Kansas's ICBMs were fired toward a Communist enemy, nor would they

ever be. In November 1964, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara announced that all first-generation American ICBMs, including the Atlas E and F, would be retired the following year.

Eighteen Titan II ICBMs were attached to McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita. The nation's largest ICBM, the Titan II was 108 feet long and 10 feet wide. Its 9-megaton nuclear warhead was the most powerful warhead of any American missile. Each Titan II warhead contained 3 times the explosive power of all bombs used during



World War II, including both atomic bombs. The air force assumed control of the final McConnell-area Titan II silo on January 31, 1963. All McConnell sites were deactivated by August 8, 1986.

The Kansas missile sites provided jobs for more than 3,000 people and an economic boost for Kansas. Most importantly, the Kansas missiles kept all Americans safe during the most dangerous period in the history of the world.

The Day After aired on ABC the evening of Sunday, November 20, 1983, to an audience exceeding 100 million viewers. The made-

for-TV movie depicted the impact of a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union by showing the destruction of Kansas City and how the people in Lawrence, Kansas, and western Missouri coped with the aftermath.

Director Nicholas Meyer intended to forego using any known stars, but he relented to ABC who needed some known actors to sell the movie overseas, so Jason Robards played Dr. Oakes who, shortly after the nuclear attack, makes his way back to the University of Kansas to tend to the living wounded. Broadway actor and future Northern Exposure star John Cullum also landed a role, and he was chosen to appear on ABC just prior to the movie's airing to warn viewers that they would see some "unusually disturbing" things in the next 2 hours.

The post-attack scenes center on Lawrence, Kansas, and northwestern Missouri, where dying survivors cling to life amid the destruction and the resulting chaos that included martial law following the elimination of most civil government.

Much of the movie's cast—including University of Kansas faculty and students—were locals. The 100 million viewers represented about 2/3 of that night's television audience, and the broadcast still ranks as one of the most-viewed televised programs in history.

The attack on Kansas City includes bright flashes as mushroom clouds ascending after explosions, which is when the government footage of actual missile tests

supplements the Hollywood nuclear simulations, and viewers see a “rapid-fire series of ‘skeletonized’ people instantly killed in the midst of everyday activities.”

The Day After had a profound impact on United States President Ronald Reagan, who, after viewing the movie the month before it aired, recorded in his personal diary that watching the movie “left me greatly depressed... My own reaction was one of our having to do all we can to have a deterrent & see there is never a nuclear war.” In fact, after Reagan signed the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that eliminated an entire class of nuclear weapons, the president sent Meyer a message: “Don’t think your movie didn’t have any part of this, because it did.”

Following a relaxation of Cold War tensions in the post-Cuban Missile Crisis 1960s through the Détente years of the 1970s, *The Day After* aired during a time of renewed Cold War fears in the early 1980s.

The INF Treaty eliminating intermediate range missiles was move toward ending decades-long conflict between the world’s two superpowers. Gorbachev recognized the significance of the INF Treaty. He wrote in his memoir that the “INF Treaty represented the first well-prepared step on our way out of the Cold War...”

By his own admission, *The Day After* encouraged President Ronald Reagan to sign the historic 1987 INF Treaty that, according to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, helped bring about the end of the Cold War.

Kansas’s Cold War efforts were among the nation’s most important. With 3 of the state’s 5 military installations serving as hubs for intercontinental ballistic missiles, Kansas hosted more air force bases that operated ICBMs than any other state. Kansas missiles were part of the nation’s awesome nuclear deterrent that moved Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to plead with President Kennedy during the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis to pull back from the brink and avoid civilization-ending nuclear war.

In Abilene native Dwight D. Eisenhower, Kansas provided 1 of only 2 Cold-War United States Presidents to serve 2 full terms. Although his presidency witnessed repeated nuclear war scares, this soldier who succeeded like no other in waging war during

World War II succeeded equally well in maintaining the peace during his 8 years in the White House.

Kansans were also featured in a movie filmed and set in Kansas that motivated President Reagan to sign the 1987 INF Treaty and move the world toward peace as the Cold War’s end began.

For the duration of the 45-year conflict, Kansas’s efforts were significant. Kansas’s Cold War role was, arguably, the nation’s most important.

Landry Brewer is Bernhardt Assistant Professor of History at Southwestern Oklahoma State University and teaches at the Sayre campus, and he is the author of *Cold War Kansas*.

A more in depth discussion on this subject can be seen at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsvGq8_aSRY



Shawnee County Historical Society Member:

Please take a moment and renew your membership to our society. We would appreciate you sending in your payment as soon as possible. We have over 240 members and are growing but we still need your help.

You can access us by **Paypal** or send us a check at **SCHS, PO Box 2201, Topeka, Kansas 66601**

In this newsletter (p. 7), there is a form you can fill out and return. In addition, if there are people you think would be interested in joining our group, please pass on the form for them to fill out and send back to us. If you have any questions, please call at **785 234 6097** or email us at: shawneecountyhistory@gmail.com

Thank you!



2021 Annual Meeting

Rex Buchanan, the noted expert on **Water in Kansas**, was the speaker for the **75th Annual Meeting of the Shawnee County Historical Society** held **December 5, 2021**. Buchanan updated the members in attendance the history of **Water in Kansas** and what may happen in the future when the commodity becomes even more necessary for farming and communities. In addition, to Buchanan's talk, the finances of the organization were revealed. Thanks to grants from Kansas Humanities, the state of Kansas and the federal government, the society finished the year in the black with a **surplus of \$21,000** more than expected. **Nate McAlister**, the 2021 president of the Society, said the pandemic curtailed a lot of tours of the Ritchie but otherwise left the society in good shape...thanks to the Zoom Seminars held throughout the year.



Students Are Coming Back to the Ritchie House

Students are returning to tour the Ritchie house at 1116 SE Madison. On March 4th, 13 International Washburn students visited the Underground Railroad stop, the one still standing in Topeka. And on March 2nd, Students from North View Elementary in Olathe also make the trek to Topeka to find out about how Bleeding Kansas was the focal point of Topeka in 1856. The Pandemic curtailed most visits to Topeka the past 2 years but bookings for more tours have increased in the past 2 weeks. We are open 9 to 1pm Tuesday thru Thursday and you can call at 785 234 6097 to secure a good time for your group. Normally, without the pandemic, we average about 2500 students a year coming to the houses.



NOTE FROM OUR SCHS LEADER

Telling this community's stories was among the main goals of the people who started the Shawnee County Historical Society in 1946. Now, nearly 76 years later, I think we're doing a pretty good job.

Hello, Historical Society members, this is Tim Hrenchir. When I was just a boy, my mom first got me an SCHS membership. She thought the dozens of bulletins this organization had created sharing Shawnee County's rich history would help satisfy my voracious appetite for reading material. She was right.

Now, more than four decades later, I was recently elected for the second time as this organization's president, having also held that position in 2020. I think this is a good time to reflect on the past year at SCHS and look to the year ahead.

COVID-19 has hurt us, reducing visits to the Ritchie House from more than 2,000 in 2018 and 2019 to a little more than 400 in 2020 and 500 in 2021. We were forced to cancel our 2020 Historic Homes Tour and annual banquet, though we did hold the tour and banquet last year.

Fortunately, executive director Bob Totten secured federal COVID-19 money to offset any losses we incurred. Totten also continued a partnership with Dillon's Foods that enables households to donate directly to SCHS through the Dillon's rewards program. Totten tells me last year was consequently neither good nor bad for us financially, but somewhere in between.

Still, in terms of membership and outreach, we turned a bad situation into a good one. COVID scared people away from the Sunday historical programs we were holding at the Cox Communications Center at 1118 SE Madison, so we started offering them on Zoom. Attendance zoomed upwards. We have offered 38 Zoom Seminars since

2020 and had as many as 90 people viewing a topic.

Totten, program committee chairperson Christine Steinkuhler and others deserve credit for making those Sunday history talks -- featuring local and regional experts -- a resounding success.

These programs have been interesting and fun. The subject matter has been as diverse as the attendees and has covered such topics as the Cherokee and the Civil War, the history of Topeka's Fire Department, the History of Real Estate in Topeka and U.S. Colored Troops in the Civil War. Future topics will include the Transportation History of Topeka, Historic Buildings of Topeka and the Fast Food Standard.

The success of these presentations has helped SCHS increase membership, which leaves me feeling optimistic about its future.

SCHS over the years has witnessed much, including the 1951 flood, the 1966 tornado, the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision and yes, even this pandemic. With an eye toward preserving our past, we look to the future. I eagerly anticipate working with you in the year to come. I also encourage everyone to look for ways in which they can personally help us tell this community's story.

I leave you with a statement from the first bulletin of the Shawnee County Historical Society in December 1946: "We're here. We hope to stay and live long and prosper."



Tim Hrenchir

Wrecking Ball May Not Be Necessary



There may be hope for keeping five Topeka buildings from the wrecking ball. Relatives of **Nick Childs**, a black Topeka newspaper publisher, were in Topeka in early March planning on acquiring five downtown Topeka buildings near 7th and Quincy as part of a plan to create a school in honor of their great great great great grandfather's brother, **Nick Childs**. **David Lee Brewer** and his cousins, **Steven Sims** and **Raymond Childs**, want to create a school in Topeka to enable some of the world's most gifted youngsters to realize their potential in the arts, culinary arts, entrepreneurship and social empowerment.

The trio were in Topeka in hopes of creating the school called the **Nick Childs Institute**.

The present owner of those properties near 7th and Quincy is AIM Strategies LLC, a development firm led by Topekan Cody Foster. Foster says he planned on tearing down the buildings but will put that idea on hold so that the cousins can obtain financing.

AIM Strategies bought the buildings with hopes of restoring them but decided to demolish them and rebuild at the site after concluding restoration would cost a minimum of \$10 million.

Brewer is an international opera singer and vocal coach who lives in Berlin, Germany. "This is not just pie in the sky," Brewer said. "We're not just coming to Topeka with a dream. We've done a lot of work to see if this is even viable. Nothing is promised, but we've done our homework and we've paid our dues."

Childs is a longtime chef who works privately and professionally in New York City, where he is also a culinary educator. He owns a historic home in the Catskill Mountains.

Sims lives in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and is retired after working in organizational development with government agencies and nonprofit groups.

The actual school at which classes are taught would be located in a different building, which hasn't yet been picked out, he said.

Brewer acknowledged creating the institute will be a "massive undertaking" but said he and his cousins are working with contacts who include highly respected professionals in areas that include government, finance, law, philanthropy, entertainment, and public relations.





Do you know someone who you would like to be a member of the Shawnee County Historical Society?

Just pass this along to a person you think is qualified to be a member.

Have them fill out the following information below and send it to **PO Box 2201, Topeka, Kansas 66601** or send by email to **shawneecountyhistory.org**

We would love to have them join us in preserving the History of Shawnee County.

I want to support:

- Heritage Education for kids \$ _____
- Shawnee County Preservation \$ _____
- Historical Programs/Lectures \$ _____
- Bus Rental Grants for School Field Trip (to help make field trips possible) \$ _____
- Ritchie House restoration and maintenance \$ _____

I also want to renew my annual membership:

- General Membership \$35 \$ _____
- Patron Level Membership \$50 \$ _____
- Renovator Level Membership \$100 \$ _____
- Sustaining Level Membership \$150+ \$ _____

Total \$ _____

Credit Card _____ Exp. ____/____ Plus the CVV Code _____

Historic Lithographs for Sale



The Shawnee County Historical Society continues to offer for sale lithographs from the 1870's. These are Birdseye views of Topeka and Tecumseh as well as a map of the plains in the early 1860's. Copies are available for sale for **only \$15** with members getting a discount. If you would like to know more about these lithographs, please call **(785) 234-6097**.

In addition, we have many requests for past bulletins and they are being sold for \$25.



Contact us also by email: **shawneecountyhistory@gmail.com**



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*Lighting Freedom's Pathway;
Building Heritage Culture*

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Historical Highlights

Mark Your Calendars
Society Events: Mar. - Dec. 2022:

*Plans:
2022*

- Apr. 9** Annual Spring Cleanup of Ritchie House/Cox Center — 9am-Noon
- Apr. 12-14** African American Travel Convention, Topeka
- May 13-14** Topeka Genealogy Gathering, Capitol Plaza Hotel
- Fall** Historic Homes Tour
- Dec. 4** Annual Membership Meeting, Noon, Site to be determined