

# Seeking salvation from the drought

**By Bill Snead, Senior Editor F**  
*Editor's note: The following article featuring St. Francis was taken from the Lawrence Journal-World.*

St. Francis — Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate. — Isaiah 62:4.

For 20 consecutive nights, people had gathered in the city park here to pray for rain.

"This is our act of faith," Bethany Bartlett said as she took a seat on the front row of concrete benches facing the park's band shell, her umbrella in hand.

On July 20, she and husband John Bartlett, both 70, along with Bonnie Cram, 76, organized the first of the prayer meetings. Anyone could join to pray for rain. Since then, various area ministers had taken turns leading a group that varied in size from nine to more than 100 hopeful souls.

They gathered to pray for relief from persistent drought that has gripped this part of the state for more than two years, devastating not just farmers, but the businesses and communities that rely upon them. Some of the impacts are easily seen:

- The wheat crop just harvested was the state's worst since the 1970s.
- Fall crops are in bad shape, with about half the corn crop, nearly 60 percent of sorghum and about 40 percent of soybeans rated poor to very poor.
- Some 39 public water suppliers in the state have imposed water-use restrictions.
- Fifty-eight Kansas counties have been declared federal disaster areas, making family farmers eligible for emergency government loans.
- The drought is causing wind ero-

sion, reducing soil fertility and depleting native grasslands.

## Parched Prairie

Fifty-eight drought-stricken Kansas counties have been declared federal disaster areas. Kansas Gov. Bill Graves has put the losses to the state agriculture economy at hundreds of millions of dollars.

## And the drought persists.

Journal-World senior editor Bill Snead spent six days recently visiting areas of Kansas hit hardest by lingering drought. He covered nearly 1,600 miles and interviewed farmers and ranchers, merchants, local officials, retirees and people from many walks of life who've been living with extreme heat and very little moisture.

- Lakes and streams are drying up, and groundwater levels are dropping.
- Some counties now are drier now than they were during the Dust Bowl, which turned the air black with blowing topsoil, bankrupted farms and chased Kansans from the land.

In St. Francis, rainfall during the past 2 1/2 years has been nearly 11.5 inches shy of the annual average. And unless another 9 inches of moisture falls before the end of the year, 2002 will go down as the driest 12 months here since 1913, the first year rainfall totals were recorded.

## Umbrella of faith

On the night of the 20th prayer meeting, the Bartletts arrived 30 minutes early — each carrying an umbrella. John Bartlett is the retired minister of St. Francis' First Christian Church.

He got busy setting up a microphone and a few folding chairs.

The skies were cloudy as people drifted in, laughing and chatting as they



**Less than an hour after 31 St. Francis residents prayed for rain in City Park, heavy lightning hit the area. Later 33/100 of an inch of rain was recorded. The St. Francis Co-Op Elevator is in the left foreground.**

Photos by Bill Snead/Journal-World Photo

took their seats. Outside the band shell, children oblivious to the serious business of the prayer meeting raced bicycles across the park's parched grass and hung upside down on playground equipment.

Garnet Miller, 99, and her sister Esther Walter, 86, took front-row seats. One of the regulars asked the nattily dressed Miller why she wasn't wearing her high heels.

"I tripped the other day when a heel got caught in the vacuum cleaner cord," she said, laughing, "but I haven't given them up."

John Bartlett tapped the microphone and said, "I'm not sure what time it is but we're all well aware that God's always listening so I'm going to begin."

With head bowed in prayer, he said, "We try to do what you wish, Lord, but one thing we can't do is make rain, so we're asking you again in Jesus' name, for a little rain. Amen."

He asked the 30 worshippers how many believed God would send rain. Thirty hands went up.

"Then where are your umbrellas?" he challenged, holding his high for all to see.

## Lightning, then rain!

Rebecca Wiley and her guitar led the group through a few hymns, including "Showers of Blessings" and "Shout To The Lord."

After reading a Bible passage from the book of Isaiah, chapter 62, Bartlett softly said, "If we substitute northwest Kansas for Jerusalem it sounds like our plight."

In prayer, he thanked the Lord for all the rain "sent us in the past" and "for all of the rain in the future."

It was nearly dark, and faint lighting was twinkling on the horizon as the group held hands and sang, "Let Us Praise You."

At 8:45 p.m., with some looking over their shoulders at the gray, flashing sky, they headed to their cars.

At 9:45 p.m. the lightning bolts were directly overhead, dancing around the top of the Co-op Elevator. The rumble of the thunder shook windows.

At 10 p.m. it began raining — hard.

The next morning the clerk behind the register at Sainty's Super Market



**Russell Moore, left and Larry Carmichael both Cheyenne County farmers bow their head with others who attended an evening prayer service in St. Francis City Park earlier this month. 33/100 of an inch of rain fell an hour after the service.**

said "a quarter of an inch" of rain had fallen.

A woman behind her corrected the clerk with a more precise measurement:

"We got 33/100ths of an inch last night," she said.

## Proof of prayer

Downtown, Mrs. Miller was seeing her dentist about a lost filling. She scoffed at the naysayers who made light of the evening prayer sessions.

"I was one of 10 children and we were all raised by my mother after my father died in 1915," she said proudly.

"We made it through all of those hard times in the '30s selling butter and cream in town, door to door."

She talked about her mother's strong belief in prayer and how she and her brother and sisters would pray together on their knees first thing every morning and again at bedtime. After breakfast, "every morning," her mother would read a chapter from the Bible as they gathered around the kitchen table.

"We always thought she picked the longest chapters, and we told her once while she was reading that we'd be late

for school," she recalled. She said her mother told them "we'd just have to get up earlier."

"My mother always said, 'the Lord and prayer will get us through anything', and it surely has."

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**After another hot day the sun sets behind an old windmill on dry farmland north of St. Francis in Cheyenne County. With rainfall being 9 inches below normal, the area could experience its dryest year since 1913.**

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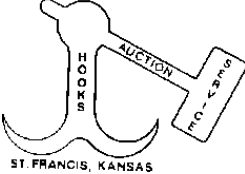
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