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County struggles to

By Karen Krien

The Saint Francis Herald
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Like so many in rural areas, Cheyenne County is struggling to maintain population, businesses, schools and medical facilities, but it's hard.

In the last 50 years, the population has dropped around 2,057 people, from 4,705 in 1960 to an estimated 2,651 in 2010.

The county organized in 1886, and by 1890, the census numbers found Cheyenne County with 4,401 people. Early on, there were two cities: Bird City, in the eastern part of the county, and Wano, the middle of the county. Wano was established in the late 1870s with A.M. Brenaman opening a store and post office. A school and church followed.

However, when the railroad decided to run to the south of Wano, the town was moved and renamed St. Francis. A depot was built in 1888 and the first passenger train arrived at St. Francis on July 8, 1888. The railroad was supposed to continue to Colorado Springs but that never became a reality. Today, cars are brought in to ship out grain, but that is basically the only use of the line.

The courthouse, established in Bird City, was moved to St. Francis in 1889 after an election was held naming St. Francis as the county seat.

Much of the population was made up of German-Russian immigrants who arrived from the late 1880s to around 1920. They came to the new country to farm and today,

Cheyenne County Population

Population now – 2,651
Population one year ago – 2,700
Population five years ago – 2,968
Population 10 years ago – 3,168
Population 50 years ago – 4,708
Trend – Dropping on the average of 42 people a year.

much of the population comprises descendants from these immigrants.

Tobe Zweygardt, St. Francis, now 94, said his father, Jacob Zweygardt, came from south Russia with his parents in 1894. Tobe was born in Cheyenne County and well remembers the county's recorded history, having spent his entire life here and lived through three-fourths of that history.

When he was in his 20s, about 75 years ago, stores and farms were bustling, he said.

"We came to town about once a week to sell our eggs, milk and cream," he recalled. "That was generally on Saturday night because that was when everyone else came to town."

"The stores were open until 10 and 11 at night. People bought their groceries and other things they needed, then we would spend the time visiting."

By 1930, Cheyenne County population peaked with 6,948 people. An article in the May 15, 1930, issue of *The Saint Francis*

Loss of people sends ripples out

By Karen Krien

The Saint Francis Herald
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Dropping population leads to less businesses, fewer people to buy things in town, fewer students in the schools, fewer people to pay taxes — and the domino effects of decline continue.

The towns of St. Francis and Bird City face these challenges every day. However, several organizations in Cheyenne County are trying to make a difference.

The Cheyenne County Development Corp. was established 1979 and has been promoting businesses in the county ever since. Its budget comes from tax money, with the county paying \$10,100 a year, the St. Francis City Council, \$5,000 and the Bird City council, \$1,200.

"Cheyenne County is a good, safe place to live," said Chuck Krebs, who co-coordinates the corporation with his wife Diane. "Everyplace we go, especially on the Front Range of Colorado, we promote what the county has to offer."

Krebs says they've made contact with a lot of people and organizations. They have met business owners who could easily move their operations or expand to the county where it is cheaper to live and operate.

The coordinators also work with existing businesses, such as Callicrate Feed Yard, which recently had a mobile slaughter unit come in for a demonstration.

"I want to constantly promote new businesses and Cheyenne County," Krebs said

They also talk to people who are of retirement age. Cheyenne County is just 180 miles from Denver, he said, and it costs a lot to live in the city. People can sell their homes in the cities, come to St. Francis or Bird City, buy a nice house and still have money left. The cost of living is lower, so their retirement checks will go farther. Then, if they want to go to the theater, see a game, go shopping or visit friends, it is less than a three-hour drive to Denver.

He said he hears people saying they want to either buy or rent a small acreage in the country. There are lots of unoccupied farmsteads that could be fixed up and made livable, he said.

Cheyenne County, he said, has so much to offer, including hunting, golf, scenic sites, fair and a carnival, along with good schools, a hospital and clinics, an improved airport, swimming pools, the museum and the Tri-State Antique Thresher Show, Bird City, just to name a few.

Bird City has its own foundation, Century II, which was created by several benefactors and now has over \$10 million to work with.

Cathy Domsch is the executive director and the board comprises nine residents.

Through Century II, the Bird City Community Foundation has been established. Under a business incubator program, the foundation makes low-interest loans to small businesses