

People of Hoxie, state mourn loss of sheriff

By JAN KATZ ACKERMAN
Colby Free Press

If you'd dropped a pin in downtown Hoxie during the funeral procession for Sheridan County Sheriff Jim Johnson last Tuesday, it might have echoed for the entire 25 minutes.

Only two cars sat on Main Street after the funeral, which drew about 1,000 people, including more than 350 law enforcement officers from across the region, plus state and local officials.

"Freedom is not free," Gov. Kathleen Sebelius told the group. "It comes with a price, as we are seeing here today."

Talking about service and sacrifice, Mrs. Sebelius said the size of the crowd showed Sheriff Johnson was "truly respected." She asked people to focus on that.

"Sheriff Johnson leaves behind a loving wife and large family," she said. "Please wrap your arms around them and show them you care."

Mr. Johnson, 54, known for trying to use counsel and reasoning before force, was killed Thursday while interviewing a Hoxie man in his office about a voluntary commitment for mental health care.

Witnesses said Steven Reitcheck, 35, pulled a gun and shot and killed the sheriff. Mr. Reitcheck was shot and killed by part-time deputy Brandon Fenner, who was in the office.

Calling Deputy Fenner "courageous," Attorney General Phill Kline said Sheriff Johnson and his deputy are among those public servants willing to put their lives on the line for another.

"Jim Johnson led with his heart," Mr. Kline said, "and he had a big heart and as such, he was vulnerable to those he served."

"I do not understand the mysteries of life, but I know there will be a day of rejoicing for Johnson's willingness to lay down his life for his brother."

A flag-draped casket sat between a Kansas Highway Patrol honor guard and mounds of flowers. Charles Liles of Wichita and Joseph Henre of Kansas City played bagpipes as Johnson's family walked to the front of the 750-seat Hoxie High School auditorium.

Seated behind the immediate family were other relatives and friends. About 350 law enforcement officers and political dignitaries from across the state sat at the back. The overflow was seated in the high school gymnasium, where they watched on a large-screen television. An untold number watched through closed circuit television broadcast throughout the community.

Sally Cameron, a Hoxie resident and former classmate of Sheriff Johnson, played the piano. Adriane Moss, a distant cousin, and Garrett Kaiser, a family friend, sang solos.

Pastor Derek Slack of the Hoxie Christian Church officiated. Casket bearers were Clint Dobbs, Jeffrey Irwin, Ryan January, Mark Hartman, Jarrod Knoll, John and Richie Cahoj and Brandon Rietcheck.

Honorary casket bearers were Jerry Bull, J.R. Kaiser, Brandon Carver and Mitch and Joe Moss.

"Today we mourn, we honor and we celebrate the life of officer James Johnson of Hoxie, Kansas," Mr. Slack said.

Calling him a friend to many, Mr. Slack encouraged the Johnson family through prayer, scripture and two hymns, "Rock of Ages" and "Little

Church in the Wildwood."

"Oh my goodness," Hoxie Mayor Lori Horesky said. "Where do I begin? Jimmy was such a huge asset to this community. We've lost a great friend."

Mayor Horesky said those who knew Sheriff Johnson knew he "liked to bark orders," but those who knew him well knew his bark was bigger than his bite.

"He was the most honest man I knew," she said, "until you started listening to his fishing stories. He was a big man with an even bigger heart."

Quoting from the Bible, Mr. Slack said Romans 8 verses 35 to 39 tells us God's word assures people not even death can separate them from His love in Jesus Christ. He said as pastor, he has answers to many questions, but one he cannot answer is why the sheriff's life ended in violence.

"This afternoon we do miss a good man, a man who had a good relationship with God," he said. "We are going to hurt of this loss for many weeks, months, years, but maybe God is saying 'Not now, but maybe later.'"

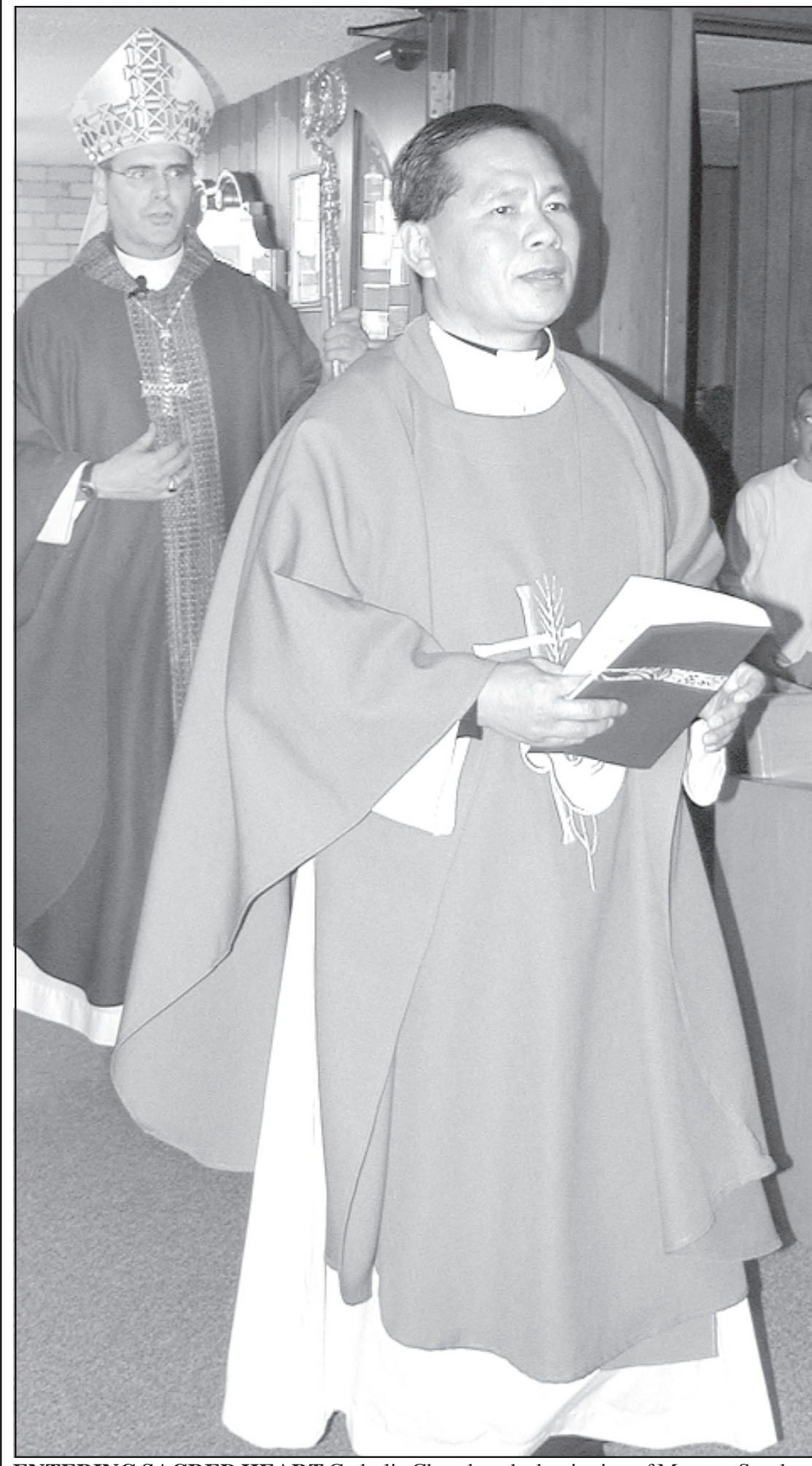
"Seek God for comfort. God is our refuge and our strength. We can turn to Him and know He is here."

In closing, Gov. Sebelius called for a final radio call and retired Sheriff Johnson's badge and radio number.

Through the auditorium's sound system, radio tones used for pager checks rang out from the Sheridan County Sheriff's office dispatch office.

"By order of Acting Sheriff Allan Weber, No. 86 is retired from duty," the dispatcher said.

And there was silence.



ENTERING SACRED HEART Catholic Church at the beginning of Mass on Sunday. Father Henry Saw Lone, the church's rector, was followed by Bishop Paul Coakley, head of the Salina Diocese. The bishop was in Oberlin as part of his annual visit to the Catholic churches in Oberlin, Leoville and Selden. — Herald staff photo by Cynthia Haynes

County signs grant papers

The Decatur County commissioners signed grant applications for a new senior citizens' center and to replace bridges here at their meeting last Tuesday.

Amy Griffey, with Northwest Kansas Planning and Development, brought the paperwork in to be signed for Community Develop-

ment Block Grants.

Mrs. Griffey went over all of the forms, noting that the estimated cost for the county on the senior center is \$35,000.

She said there might be another \$5,000 out of the county budget if something doesn't get covered by the grant.

The final cost to the county for the bridge project is around \$75,000.

Both the grant request for the senior center and the bridges is for \$400,000 each.

The commissioners signed all of the forms and told Mrs. Griffey to mail them out.

Annual business tour set for Sunday

Anyone who wants to go on the annual Business to Business Tour sponsored by the Decatur County Area Chamber of Commerce needs to make a reservation by Thursday. The tour will start at 4 p.m. Sun-

day at the Chamber office, in the Business Entrepreneurial Enhancement Center at Penn and Commercial. Anyone can go on the tour and any business can be open for it. Anyone who wants to attend or

have their business on the tour should contact Chamber Manager Glenva Nichols at 475-3441.

The tour will end at the LandMark Inn with a soup, sandwich and dessert supper for \$6.50 per person.



Wagner Chevrolet, Buick, Pontiac and Cadillac Dealership is proud to introduce their newest salesman to their staff, Alex Louderback.

Alex is a lifetime resident of Oberlin, Kansas and a 1998 DCHS Graduate.

He would like to take this opportunity to invite you to stop by and visit with him about all your automotive needs.

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