



Raccoon burns up main substation

By **KIMBERLY DAVIS**
k.davis@nwkansan.com

A furry little critter left Oberlin in the dark early Monday morning when it got into the main substation at the city's north edge, causing a fire that put the substation out of business.

At first the animal was thought to be an opossum, but now city officials think the offender was a raccoon. It got on top of the transformer about 4 a.m., causing a short that set equipment on fire. Some areas, including the schools, had power by 4:30 a.m., but it was nearly 11 before most downtown stores and offices had power.

City Administrator Karen Larson said the short and resulting fire burned up the transformer, leaving the city without power.

As city crews worked on the problem and looked more extensively at the damage, she said, they discovered that the substation had burned, not just the transformer.

City Foreman Dan Castle said in the past 30 years, he's never seen a mess like this one. It ruined around a third of everything at the substation. The transformer was a 1984 model, he said, and the city doesn't have a spare.

He added that he doesn't know how long it will take to get another transformer or where it would come from.

Mr. Castle said he's been told that people who live near the substation could see the fire.

While the city system is connected to lines of Prairie Land Electric, the cooperative serving rural parts of the county, an automatic protection switch shut down to prevent any damage. That cut off one potential (See CREW on Page 5A)



AT THE CITY POWER PLANT on Monday morning, Foreman Dan Castle (right) got things going so the entire town could have power. Other linemen from Oberlin, Sunflower Electric and Prairie Land Electric helped the city get power on after its main substation burned early Monday morning.
— Herald staff photo by Brandi Diederich

Businesses open in the dark Monday

By **BRANDI DEDERICH**
obherald@nwkansan.com

"Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse," Monday morning after a power outage left downtown Oberlin businesses cold and mostly empty.

What do you do without lights, Internet connections, phones or cash registers? Many businesses remained closed until the electricity came back on, but several waited on customers using the light of candles, the sun and flashlights.

The Decatur County courthouse stayed open with the sunlight shining through the windows. Everyone stayed warm, and the jail and dispatch office on the fourth floor had power from an emergency generator.

R & M Service Center also was open with a few lights on because of a generator. Ward Drug Store stayed open, but of course couldn't run any transactions through its computer. The workers, bundled in their coats, were enjoying coffee in the chilly store as they waited for the electricity to come back on.

J.W. Smith and Sons, Custom Trophy and Traer Traders Antiques also stayed open in their dark, cold stores. Stanley Hardware was open and checked out customers manually. No flashlights were bought, but batteries for flashlights seemed to be a popular item.

Home Range Real Estate down the street was very cozy with the light of many candles. Rocking 'R'

stayed open for Angel Tree pickups. Owner Karen Chambers said this is the worst possible time to lose power, during the busy Christmas season.

The LandMark Inn was also open, but light was once again a problem. Worried about having no electricity for lunch, owner Gary Anderson said he would heat up a bowl of soup for a customer, and of course, if you could handle a delicious hot-fudge sundae in this cold weather, he would make one for you.

"It was very inconvenient to work on the paper," said society editor Mary Lou Olson at The Oberlin Herald, "and it was greatly appreciated when the electricity came back on."

By 10:48 a.m., the businesses had electricity and could get back to business.

Susan May said her family lost power at 4 a.m. and didn't get it back until after the kids needed to be ready for school. She said they lighted candles everywhere and used flashlights to get ready. It was hard for the kids to get ready for school, she said.

The high school and grade school had power, but had problems with their Internet and phone systems. Neither was consistent until after 3 p.m., said Superintendent Duane Dorshorst.

Almost everyone had to deal with the inconvenience. What a start to a busy week before Christmas!

Postal Service to wait on closings

By **KEVIN BOTTRELL**
kbottrell@nwkansan.com

Just one day after a contentious public meeting in Colby, the U.S. Postal Service announced it will hold off on closing any mail processing plants or post offices until May, giving Congress time to act.

The meeting in the Colby Community College student union Monday was to discuss moving Colby's mail processing from Salina to Denver. Roy Reynolds, senior plant manager in Omaha, said all local mail — even letters going across town — would have to go to Denver and back, with the delivery standard to slip from overnight to two or three days.

The service has been losing \$9 billion a year, partially because of a major decline in first class mail, Mr. Reynolds said.

"2006 was the heaviest year," he said, adding that until that time,

the service had grown each year for decades. "We've lost 40 billion pieces of mail since then. We've seen ups and downs over the years. We don't expect it to come back up this time."

To combat this, Mr. Reynolds said, the service plans to cut back from nearly 500 mail processing plants to fewer than 200 by 2013.

Mr. Reynolds said the remaining mail centers would be those that are already big hubs, centrally located cities and with good access to transportation routes and airports. The plan would save \$3 billion a year and reduce postal service jobs by 35,000.

However, Tuesday's announcement could signal a change. The service said it will delay any plant or post office closures until May 15 to allow Congress time to work on a plan for its future.

(See MAIL on Page 5A)

Voters say no way to recreation tax

A little over half of the ballots were returned in a mail election last Tuesday, with a slim majority of the voters saying no to an increase in taxes to pay for a new recreation commission's program.

There was no comment from the recreation commission.

The tax increase, which would have given the recreation commission up to one mill of tax on property in the Oberlin School District, would have brought in about \$29,000 this year. The commission

wouldn't have actually had an operating budget until 2013, although taxes would have gone up next year. That's because taxes are assessed one year and collected the next.

County workers mailed 1,776 ballots to registered voters in the Oberlin School District, said County Clerk Colleen Geishler, who serves as the county election officer. Of those, 439 cast a yes vote and 471 a no vote.

The 910 returned ballots represented (See VOTERS on Page 5A)

Stores to stay open late

Oberlin stores will reopen late for a Men's Shopping Night from 9 to 11 p.m. Thursday.

This is the third year for the event, sponsored by the Oberlin Business Alliance. Businesses will have individual specials

for the holiday season and offer refreshments and snacks to shoppers.

Don't forget to be on the lookout for a green paper Christmas tree hanging in each store. This (See MENS on Page 5A)



ON SATURDAY, Oberlin Herald Publisher Cynthia Haynes handed Rev. Marshall \$1,000 in scrip money she had just won in the Oberlin merchant's annual Christmas on Us giveaway.
— Herald staff photo by Kimberly Davis

Woman wins \$1,000 scrip in giveaway

Four tickets were pulled before someone matched the number to win \$1,000 scrip in the Oberlin Merchant's annual Christmas on Us giveaway.

Around 300 people crowded around the gazebo in Centennial Park on Saturday morning for the drawing. Over the previous six weeks, shoppers had been picking up red tickets at the sponsoring businesses for a chance to win some of the \$1,500 in the giveaway. The first ticket drawn out of a large grey bin by Millie Brown was No. 201248 from Ward Drug Store. No one claimed it.

Then Trevor Bruhn picked ticket No. 199683 from Raye's Grocery.

No one claimed it, either.

Ticket No. 728110 was drawn given out at Ward Drug Store. Again, no one claimed it, and the suspense mounted.

Finally, ticket No. 199008 was drawn. After a few seconds, Reva Marshall produced the matching red ticket. She had around 50 or more stapled to a spiral notebook.

Mrs. Marshall received the ticket at Raye's Grocery Store.

The winner said she planned to use the money to pay some bills.

Ten shoppers collected instant money of \$50 in scrip each during the promotion. The last three winning numbers were turned in this week, with the last one being

claimed five minutes before the 5 p.m. deadline on Friday.

This week's instant winners:

- Nikki Murray, with ticket No. 861220 from Stanley Hardware. She said she planned to use the money on Christmas presents.
- Carol Brown brought in ticket No. 880575, which she received from R&M Service Center. She, too, planned to use the money on Christmas presents.
- Judy Shirley with ticket No. 199179 from Raye's Grocery, the last person to claim the instant money. Mrs. Shirley said she planned to spend the money on an Angel Tree kid.

Tickets that weren't claimed in time were 290499 from the LandMark Inn, 726644 from Ward Drug Store, 292438 from the Carpet Center and 729888 from Raye's Grocery. This year's sponsors included the LandMark, Stanley Hardware, Raye's, Ward Drug Store, the Carpet Center, the Dresser, Home Planning Center, the Bank, R&M and Dale's Fish 'N' Fun. The scrip money given as prizes has to be spent by Dec. 31. It is good only at sponsoring merchants. Stores do not have to give change.



Norcatur gives prizes



HOLDING HER GRANDDAUGHTER, Jade Tuttle, Carol Miller picked a number for prizes given away during Norcatur's annual Christmas Drawing on Saturday. Almost 75 people gathered in the multipurpose room at the former Norcatur School to await a visit from Santa Claus and to draw for hams, turkeys, roasts, craft items and other prizes donated by individuals and area merchants. A benefit soup supper for Loretta (Lawn) Fowler followed the drawing. — Herald staff photo by Carolyn Plotts

*Mail sorting could move west

(Continued from Page 1A)
 "The Postal Service hopes this period will help facilitate the enactment of comprehensive postal legislation," a spokesman said in a statement.

Congress has been considering the 21st Century Postal Service Act, which would reduce operating costs and return \$11 billion in pension overpayments, along with numerous cuts and ways to raise revenue.

Currently, Mr. Reynolds said, incoming mail to Colby comes into Wichita, where it is sorted into delivery order, placed in trays and then sent on to Colby. Once it arrives, carriers can take it right off the trucks and go deliver it. The service is studying moving that operation, along with outgoing mail, which is sorted in Salina, to Denver.

Trucks will go out in the evening as they do now, he said, but processing in Denver won't get started until 8 a.m. the next day. Mr. Reynolds said the service would have a 20-hour processing window. Moving Colby's mail handling would save about \$14,000 after transportation costs are factored in, the service claims. Mr. Reynolds said the number is comparatively low because Colby's processing — and much of the equipment used to do it — has already been moved out.

Express mail from within the 677 Zip code should remain a same-day service, he said. Priority packages that are too large to fit in mail sacks will be handled manually in Colby, just like they are now. Newspapers that are sorted down to a single five-digit zip codes — all for one town — will go out with that day's mail as long as they are brought to the Colby post office by 4 to 5 a.m. Mixed bundles will have to be sent

to Denver to be sorted into delivery order.

Mr. Reynolds said that although the study supports moving Colby's processing to Denver, the service hasn't made a decision.

"Let's be very clear," the release said. "Our studies are still in progress."

From 1970 to 2006, he said, the service expanded its operation. Now with the decline in volume, it has a lot of excess capacity.

While standard mail, which includes advertising fliers and ads, has remained steady, it brings in significantly less money than letter mail. It takes three pieces of standard mail to equal the price of one first-class letter, Mr. Reynolds said.

Public officials have been weighing in on the decision to delay closures. Sen. Jerry Moran called the move "good news," saying the service had told him privately of the delay prior to the announcement. Moran has an amendment in the 21st Century Postal Service Act that would require the Postal Service to develop standards of service that must be considered before closing a post office. National Newspaper Association postal committee chair Max Heath said he still expects the processing centers to close, just later than anticipated.

"But every day a plant remains open is another day we have to persuade Congress of the value of universal service, particularly in small town and rural America, and to look for answers that keep USPS alive without demolishing newspaper mail," Heath said. "Particularly in a world where personal letters and even credit card bills become rarer inhabitants of the mailbox, people will still be drawn to the mail if their local newspapers are in it."

*Voters cast ballots against tax increase

(Continued from Page 1A)
 sented 52 percent of the total possible votes. That compared to 60.2 percent in the last general election in 2010 and 37.8 percent in the primary elections that summer, Ms. Geishler said.

The clerk said 115 ballots were returned because the voter hadn't changed their address or re-registered after moving. Sixteen people

mailed in ballots but didn't sign the envelope, she said, so their votes didn't count. One mailed back the envelope, but not the ballot and five voters refused the ballots.

The county received three late ballots, said Ms. Geishler, but only one would have counted because two weren't signed. The mail election cost \$2,348, she said, with the bill going to the school district.

*Men's shopping night set

(Continued from Page 1A)
 is an "instant" giveaway for people in participating Oberlin Business Alliance stores on Thursday.

If you find the tree, turn it into the Decatur County Area Chamber of Commerce office to receive \$25 in Santa Bucks. A person can only win once.

Member businesses include CMA Distributors, Culligan Water Conditioning, Custom Trophy and Engraving, the LandMark Inn, *The Oberlin Herald*, Prairie Petals, R &

M Service Center, Raye's Grocery, Rocking R, Stanley Hardware, Unger Chiropractic, Ward Drug, the Last Indian Raid Museum, the Dresser and Dale's Fish 'N' Fun. Not all of these businesses will be open.

Kurt Vollertsen, owner of Ward Drug, said he was pleased by the success of the alliance's Ladies Shopping Night last week. He said the merchants are hoping for another good crowd this week.

*Crew turns on plant, restores power

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 source of power, Mr. Castle said, until the switch could be reset.

Several people reported power outages in the country, Mr. Castle said, adding that he didn't know if those had anything to do with the city's problem.

Workers from Prairie Land and Sunflower Electric out of Hays were in Oberlin by 5 a.m. to help restore circuits. Sunflower, a regional cooperative, supplies the rural electric co-ops and municipal systems in northwest Kansas. It owns and maintains the high-voltage lines crossing the area, including the one serving the city substation.

Mr. Castle said DS&O Electric Co-op in Solomon is trying to locate a portable transformer for the city to use, or even a complete replacement. If they can't find one, said Mr. Castle, there might be other places to look.

Until a replacement can be secured and installed, he added, the

city will run its diesel power plant 24 hours a day.

Mr. Castle said he was told that a replacement transformer could cost \$300,000 to \$350,000. There is probably around another \$100,000 in damage at the substation, he said, and that's a conservative number.

City crews were called out right after the 4 a.m. incident, Mrs. Larson said, and they hadn't stopped since. They soon had power flowing to some parts of town.

The city volunteer fire department was called out to douse flames at the substation. Fire Chief Bill Cathcart said they ended up having to spray it down to get the fire out, since the oil was so hot it kept reigniting.

Mrs. Larson said the crew got the power plant up and running and the west side of town back on around 8 a.m. The entire east side came on around 8:30 a.m., but that left much of downtown without power.

While many families had to get ready in the dark Monday morning,

the schools had power and were able to open on time. Most businesses on Main Street were open, though many lacked power until 10:48 a.m., when the lights came on downtown.

Thankfully, Mrs. Larson said, Oberlin still has its power plant and a crew that can run it. The plant is providing power for most of the town.

Mr. Castle said Prairie Land is providing power for the outskirts and might take over the business district. Lights went out downtown about 4 p.m. when Mr. Castle said that switch would be made, then came back on.

Mrs. Larson said she really appreciates what the city crew is doing and has done. They have been working hard and doing what they are trained to do to get the power back on, she said.

Both Norton and St. Francis have closed their power plants, she said, but in Oberlin, the crew can run

the plant and the city has hung on to it for all these years. This is not the first time having the plant has come in handy. It's been run when Sunflower lines were downed by storms and accidents.

The power plant, said Mrs. Larson, should be a priority for the town, adding that she isn't prepared "to sit around in the dark."

Mr. Castle said Mid-States Energy Works, a contractor based in Salina, was sending a crew to check the damage.

The city power crew includes City Foreman Dan Castle, lineman David Perrin and Logan Fortin, a trainee. Mrs. Larson said Ron Solko, another city worker, can run the power plant once it's going.

It would be nice, said Mr. Castle, if people could try to conserve energy and get by with the least amount of power as possible. The city will be cutting back on its Christmas lights for a few days, he said.

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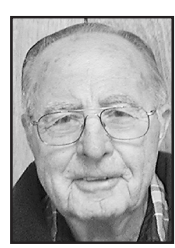
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