SPECIAL ISSUE COMMEMORATING JOHNSON COUNTY’S 160TH YEAR

FEATURE STORY

WHAT BROUGHT SO MANY PEOPLE TO JOCO FOR 160 YEARS?
This month we celebrate the birth of Johnson County 160 years ago, one of the first counties and now the largest in our state. A look back reflects on how far we’ve come, how we got here, and what made us who we are today.

The early years were difficult times for the Native Americans relocated to the area in the 1820s, as well as for ambitious settlers who came to the area. The namesake of our county, Rev. Thomas Johnson, a Methodist minister arrived in 1830 and nine years later helped open a school for the Indian tribes located in present-day Fairway, thus providing a strong educational focus for our future — a priority then, as well as today.

In 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Act opened the northern part of the Indian Territory for settlement, laying the foundation for Johnson County (incorporated in 1855) and the State of Kansas (established in 1861). While the county’s name is the same, today’s county organization bears little resemblance to the structure of the 1850s. Over the years, Johnson County Government has evolved to meet the growing demands of an increasing population serving more than 570,000 residents in 2015, over five times the entire Kansas population at the time of statehood.

For the first 86 years, Johnson County was known as producing the best vegetables in the Kansas City area, generated from the hundreds of truck farms working the fertile soil. All that changed with World War II. With it came the decisions to build the Olathe Naval Air Station and the Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant. Following the war, the pace of development exploded, triggered by the return of veterans in need of housing, a college education, and well-paying jobs. Construction of interstate highways, expansion of Johnson County Community College, development of commercial centers and outstanding neighborhoods, and creation of a world class K-12 public education system led thousands to locate in Johnson County.

Today, our success extends beyond our tremendous education and job growth, to include a quality of life that earns Johnson County a 97 percent satisfaction rating in our most recent community survey. Our parks and trails, libraries, public safety and human services, and so much more, help to make this a community our residents are proud to call home.

As you read through some of Johnson County’s significant historic milestones highlighted in our magazine this month, you will see why we are proud of our forefathers’ foresight for helping to bring us the success we have today. Happy 160th birthday to Johnson County!
Johnson County: How a settlement in a new territory became a great place to live for more than 160 years
Johnson County attracted its first settlers 160 years ago and they’re still coming.

Johnson County through the years
Some milestones and interesting facts about Johnson County from past to present.

Q4C: Question for Commissioners
Board of County Commissioners reflects on changes over the years.

Three Questions
County employees reflect on four decades of public service.

Help JCPRD celebrate 60 years of fun on Sept. 20
The Beatles are back! Not quite, but Liverpool is joining the big event.

Senior roundtable
Longtime residents share memories about changes in Johnson County.

Ten Things
Interesting things to know about Johnson County.
Do you have a Blue Thumb?

What you plant in your yard affects our water quality.
Go native and plant with a Blue Thumb.

Native plants can:
- Conserve water and slow erosion.
- Reduce pollution in local streams and rivers.
- Reduce the need for mowing, fertilizers and pesticides.
- Improve wildlife habitat and air quality.

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Spanning 479 square miles and home to many different cultures and people, Johnson County is the most populous county in the state of Kansas. Today we attract 8,000 to 10,000 new residents per year. Since 2006 our population has increased by 60,000 residents. To put that in perspective, that's the population of Manhattan, the eighth largest city in Kansas.

What attracts people to Johnson County, Kansas, virtually the geographic center of the United States? Why did they come 160 years ago, and why do they still come today?

The birth of Johnson County
As the Shawnee Indians and other tribes moved to this area through a series of federal treaties, Christian missionaries followed. Rev. Thomas Johnson, a Methodist minister, came to the Shawnee Indian Reservation in 1830, and soon after his arrival, he established a school to serve many Indian tribes, opening the Shawnee Methodist Mission and Indian Manual Labor School in Fairway in 1839.

The Shawnee Indian Reservation included all of what is now Johnson County, and totaling about 1.6 million acres, stretched all the way to Topeka. Those lands were reduced to 200,000 acres with a new federal treaty on May 10, 1854. Twenty days later, the U.S. Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, establishing the Nebraska and Kansas territories, and opening up the areas for Anglo settlement.

Johnson County was created as one of the original 33 counties founded on Aug. 25 by the Legislative Act of 1855 in the Territory of Kansas. Rev. Johnson was elected president of the state’s first territorial legislature and Johnson County was named in his honor. Bitter fighting broke out, known locally as the Border Wars, as settlers located in the new Kansas Territory were left to decide their fate. Would Kansas enter the Union as a free or slave state?

On Jan. 29, 1861, President James Buchanan signed a bill admitting Kansas into the Union as the nation’s 34th state, as a free state.

Rev. Johnson did not live long afterwards to enjoy his notoriety as the county namesake. He was shot and killed on Jan. 2, 1865, at his home near Westport, Mo., many believe based on his role in the Border War.
Johnson County Government was officially organized on Sept. 7, 1857. Newly elected commissioners established townships, approved requests to build roads, licensed new businesses, and set fees for ferries to cross streams. By 1860, the first federal Census of Johnson County listed a population of 4,364.

Towns living and dying
The first railroad in Johnson County was built in 1869. Within the next decade, four railroads crossed the county, and towns sprung up near track lines.

A railroad could make or break a town as Gardner, Spring Hill, and Olathe grew while pre-rail towns such as McCamish, Lanesfield, Ocheltree, and Monticello faded off county maps entirely.

A different type of rail came with the start of the 20th century when William B. Strang Jr., founder of Overland Park, founded the Missouri and Kansas Interurban Railway, nicknamed the “Strang Line,” from Olathe to Kansas City, Missouri. The interurban railroad line opened in 1906.

By 1921, when Strang died, he had also platted several subdivisions, which became the core of Overland Park when the city incorporated in 1960. The Strang Line closed in 1940.

Growing with farming economy
Prior to 1940, farming was the economic mainstay in Johnson County. Fields along the floodplains of the Kaw River, near towns like De Soto, created prize farmland for Irish potatoes, cantaloupes, watermelons and sweet potatoes. Shawnee excelled as a truck farming town, supplying vegetables, fruits, and flowers to local markets. Lenexa became the “Spinach Capital of the World.”

A strong farming foundation and expanding communities helped to build slow-but-steady growth in the first 90 years of Johnson County’s history. The county had an almost eightfold increase in population from 1860 to 1940 when the Census stood at 33,327.
Booming in World War II and the post-war era

Johnson County’s population boom began in the early 1940s in the midst of a world that was at war when the Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant near De Soto was commissioned and activated.

Opened in 1942, the plant produced smokeless powder and other propellants for the nation’s military. The plant attracted waves of new citizens searching for better jobs who flocked to the facility for the unheard of wages it offered — more than $1 per hour. At its peak employment in 1945, the plant had 12,067 employees and operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Dropping anchor by ‘Prairie Navy’

At the same time, the Olathe Naval Air Station was created at the edge of Gardner to train “Prairie Navy” fighter pilots during the war and for several years after. During its heyday, the military complex was a beehive of activity and was commissioned to house approximately 2,000 enlisted men and 100 officers.

Both military-related facilities attracted tens of thousands of plant workers along with military personnel and their families, who made their homes in Johnson County and then stayed after the fighting ended.

The era of the 1950s, which has often been called “the Fabulous ‘50s,” was a time of increased economic prosperity, locally and nationally. Following WWII, the population in Johnson County almost doubled between 1940 and 1950, and more than doubled again in the following decade.

The GI Bill stimulated an unprecedented building boom by providing housing and educational benefits to returning veterans; buying a home was more affordable than ever before and families flocked to new housing developments in Johnson County.

Incorporating cities

Many of the new residential neighborhoods and developments were located in northeast Johnson County. Prairie Village was originally platted in 1941 by J.C. (Jesse Clyde) Nichols, a Johnson County native and well-known Kansas City developer of the Country Club Plaza and Mission Hills. As communities grew in unincorporated Johnson County, communities sought to incorporate as cities for better services. Eleven cities were incorporated in Johnson County from 1948 to 1972.

The quality of life was enhanced in Johnson County in the 1950s with a focus on organizing and building a countywide park system and community libraries to benefit a growing population.
Putting education at the head of the class

If you look back to the 1880s, Johnson County children were being educated in roughly 100 original common school districts, mostly in one-room schools scattered throughout the county.

By the mid-20th century, the population grew in the northeast part of the county and rural populations declined.

Forming new districts

In 1963, the Kansas Legislature passed the School District Unification Act which reduced the number of independent school boards statewide from 2,794 to 311. The legislation created the Blue Valley, Olathe, De Soto, Spring Hill, and Gardner-Edgerton-Antioch (later shortened to Gardner-Edgerton) school districts. Shawnee Mission School District was formed in 1969.

Johnson County also saw the need for higher educational opportunities with the opening of Johnson County Community College in 1967 with classes taking place in various locations in Merriam. Classes at the current campus in Overland Park began five years later.

Many suburban residents point to high quality schools as a primary reason for choosing to live in the suburbs — forty years ago, and today.

Blue Valley’s 2014 graduates posted the highest ACT and SAT composite scores of Kansas City metropolitan area school districts.

Olathe School District is the fastest growing district in the area.

Ever since 13 individual school districts unified in 1969 to become the Shawnee Mission Unified School District No. 512, the district has consistently been ranked among the finest school districts in the nation.

De Soto, Spring Hill and Gardner-Edgerton are award-winning schools as well.

Winning blue ribbons

Johnson County now has 46 schools on the elite list of National Blue Ribbon Schools identified by the U.S. Department of Education. That’s approximately 40 percent of all the Blue Ribbon Schools in Kansas.

All six public school districts are providing Johnson County students with quality and innovative educational opportunities, and continue to be one of our community’s most important assets that attracts thousands of new residents each year.
Johnson County remains a county rich in history and full of vibrant communities for those new to the area and residents who go back multiple generations.

While old towns and schools have disappeared, military facilities closed for new beginnings, and urbanization of Johnson County has spanned to approximately 60 percent of the land as cities have grown and expanded; some of the past footnotes in history are still very present.

Naming legacies
The Shawnee Indian Tribe and railroad legacy is embedded in the history of Johnson County and some of its cities.

Olathe is the Shawnee Indian word for “beautiful.” Shawnee changed names from Gum Springs to Shawneetown and later shortened to its present name in honor of the Indian tribe. Lenexa was named after Na-Nex-Se, a Shawnee Indian woman and wife of Chief Black Hoof.

The cities of Edgerton (originally named Martinsburg) and Merriam (originally called Campbellton) were renamed after railroad officials.

‘Seeking the Good Life’
The Johnson County Museum, currently located in Shawnee and slated to move into the Johnson County Arts and Heritage Center (the former King Louie building in Overland Park) in 2017, offers long-term and changing exhibits, including the “Seeking the Good Life” exhibit, which explores Johnson County beginnings to its rise as one of the nation’s more successful suburban counties.

A collaborative website between the Johnson County Museum, Johnson County Library and other partners is JoCoHistory.net, which offers a wealth of easily accessed information about the history of the area. More than 40,000 photographs, maps, and other materials document the history and heritage of Johnson County.
Johnson County through the years

1839

1855
Johnson County is created in the Territory of Kansas.

1857
Johnson County Government is formed. Olathe and Spring Hill are incorporated.

1859
Kansas becomes 34th state in the Union.

1860
Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant near De Soto begins operation during World War II. Olathe Naval Air Station near Gardner opens to train “Prairie Navy” fighter pilots during WWII.

1861
First railroad comes to Johnson County. Lanesfield School is built in Edgerton.

1869
Edgerton is incorporated.

1883
Gardner is incorporated.

1886
Federal Census lists 18,104 residents in Johnson County.

1900
De Soto is incorporated.

1901
Mission Hills, Westwood Hills, Fairway, Mission Woods, and Westwood are incorporated.

1906
Missouri and Kansas Interurban Railway, nicknamed the Strang Line, operates from Johnson County to Kansas City, Mo. until 1940.

1907
Shawnee is incorporated.

1922
The subdivision of Missionhill Acres, which later became the city of Mission, was platted.

1926
Construction began on Gardner Lake, a Works Progress Administration project.

1935
The first Johnson County park – Antioch Park, opens in Merriam. The first public library in Johnson County also becomes operational in Merriam.

1948
Leawood is incorporated.

1949
Prairie Village, Mission, and Roeland Park are incorporated.

1950
Federal Census lists 62,783 residents in Johnson County. Merriam is incorporated.

1951
Johnson County’s population boomed to 451,479.

1956
The first Johnson County park – Antioch Park, opens in Merriam. The first public library in Johnson County also becomes operational in Merriam.

1957
Federal Census lists 4,364 residents in Johnson County.

1958
Johnson County Government is formed. Olathe and Spring Hill are incorporated.

1960
Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant near De Soto begins operation during World War II. Olathe Naval Air Station near Gardner opens to train “Prairie Navy” fighter pilots during WWII.

1969
Navy announces closing of Olathe Naval Air Station with decommissions completed in mid-1970.

1972
Lake Quivira is incorporated.

1973
Johnson County Airport Commission acquires Olathe Naval Air Station site, naming the complex the Johnson County Industrial Airport.

1980
Johnson County’s population grew to 270,269.

1987
Johnson County Museum assumed operation of the one-room Lanesfield schoolhouse, repairing and opening the Lanesfield School Historic Site in 1989.

1992
The U.S. Army announced that it would end ammunition production at Sunflower Ammunition Plant.

1994
Johnson County Industrial Airport renamed as New Century AirCenter.

2000
Gardner residents vote to annex land selected for a BNSF intermodal project.

2003
Countryside merged with Mission.

2006
Federal Census lists 574,272 residents in Johnson County.
Rev. Thomas Johnson opens the Shawnee Methodist Mission and Indian Manual Labor School in Fairway. 1839

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- Edgerton is incorporated. 1883
- Shawnee is incorporated. 1886
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- Federal Census lists 18,104 residents in Johnson County. 1901
- Lanesfield School is built in Edgerton. 1906
- Missouri and Kansas Interurban Railway, nicknamed the Strang Line, operates from Johnson County to Kansas City, Mo. until 1940. 1907
- Shawnee is incorporated. 1922
- Lenexa is incorporated. 1960
- Overland Park is incorporated. 1969
- Navy announces closing of Olathe Naval Air Station with decommissions completed in mid-1970. 1970
- Johnson County's population grew to 270,269. 1972
- Lake Quivira is incorporated. 1972
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- Federal Census lists an estimated 574,272 residents in Johnson County. 2020
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**What’s the biggest change you’ve seen during your time in Johnson County?**

*Chairman Ed Eilert*

“When I came to Johnson County 50 years ago, there was much open space between 95th Street and the city of Olathe. Today few people know when they have crossed boundaries of Overland Park, Lenexa, and Olathe.”

*First District Commissioner Ronald L. “Ron” Shaffer*

“Rev. Thomas Johnson, our county’s namesake, would certainly be amazed with the changes that have occurred since he founded the Shawnee Methodist Mission. Our county enjoys a proud past of 160 years, a proud present, and most importantly, a proud future for generations to come.”

*Second District Commissioner James P. Allen*

“As a lifelong Johnson County resident, I’ve noticed the consistent growth the county has had. With this growth how well the county, cities, and school districts have managed it. We are one of the premier counties in America today.”

*Third District Commissioner Steven C. Klika*

“Johnson County has long placed education as an important priority throughout its 160-year history, beginning with our one-room schools and continuing to our present nationally-recognized school districts educating more than 90,000 students.”

*Fourth District Commissioner Jason Osterhaus*

“The growth throughout the county — not only development, such as we have seen in south Overland Park and Edgerton with the new Intermodal, but also in population adding about 5,000 new residents a year.”

*Fifth District Commissioner Michael Ashcraft*

“In the last 15 years, both the cities of Lenexa and Olathe have become dynamic, influential and welcoming communities representing Johnson County and the heart of America well. I’m proud to be a supporter of both as well as all of Johnson County.”

*Sixth District Commissioner John Toplikar*

“The highway system and interchanges, road improvements and elevated railroad tracks that bridge over busy roads, especially the BNSF overpass on Santa Fe Street in Olathe. These types of innovations are crucial in keeping traffic moving as the population — and number of vehicles on the roads — grows year after year.”

**At work**

with the Board of County Commissioners

How did we end up with seven commissioners?

By GERALD HAY

Johnson County Government was officially organized on Sept. 7, 1857, with three appointed members serving as the “County Tribunal.”

Further meetings involved the “Board of County Supervisors” with appointed representatives from nine townships.

The first official mention of the “Board of County Commissioners” (BOCC) occurred on April 2, 1860.

The BOCC had three elected, at-large members until Nov. 25, 1871, when the county was divided into commissioner districts by townships.

The BOCC expanded to five district commissioners in 1983.

In 2000, voters approved the county’s Home Rule Charter, the first of its kind in the state of Kansas. The charter added two members to the BOCC, including a sixth district commissioner and an elected at-large chairman.

Since 1857, Johnson County has had 129 commissioners serving on the various governing bodies, including the seven members of the current board.
Treating Pain: Drugs and Surgery are not Your Only Options

Living with pain and arthritis can feel like a crippling experience. Nothing's worse than feeling great mentally, but physically feeling held back from life because the pain just won't go away.

My name is Dr. Michael Green of Renuva Back & Pain Centers and I want to help you determine if our CoreCare treatment protocol is right for you.

Many back and neck pain sufferers struggle to find lasting relief with physical therapy, chiropractic, acupuncuture, or pain management alone. Plus, many patients experience harmful side effects from medications or failed surgical procedures.

The problem is that back & neck pain are symptoms of a medical condition, not a diagnosis. Often, these symptoms are treated but the biomechanical and physiological conditions causing the pain are not.

For this reason, Renuva developed CoreCare, a comprehensive non-surgical and drug-free approach that addresses both the symptoms and the cause of your pain.

CoreCare uses innovative FDA approved technologies such as Class IV Laser Therapy to address three areas that are key to achieving lasting pain relief:

1. CoreCare treats the source of the pain to achieve relief as fast as possible.

2. CoreCare improves structure to fight against and prevent degenerative related conditions that cause pain.

3. CoreCare restores function so the body can heal properly and fight against disease related conditions that cause pain.

Finally, You Have an Option Other than Drugs or Surgery.

So, what is CoreCare with Laser Therapy? New research in a treatment called Deep Tissue Laser Therapy, is having a profound effect on patients suffering with chronic pain from low back to arthritis.

Unlike the cutting type of laser seen in movies and used in medical procedures, Deep Tissue Laser Therapy penetrates the surface of the skin with no heating effect or damage.

Laser Therapy has been tested for 40 years, has had over 2000 papers published on it, and has been shown to aid in regenerating damaged tissue, decreasing inflammation, relieving pain, and boosting the immune system.

This means that there is a good chance Laser Therapy could be your pain solution, allowing you to live a more active lifestyle.

Professional athletes and sports doctors rely upon Laser Therapy to treat sports-related injuries. These guys use the Laser Therapy for one reason only - It Promotes Rapid Healing of the Injured Tissues.

Before the FDA would clear Laser Therapy for human use, they wanted to see proof that it worked. This lead to two landmark studies. The first study showed that patients who had Laser Therapy had 53% better improvement than those who had a placebo. The second study showed patients who used the Laser Therapy had less pain and more range of motion days after treatment.

If Laser Therapy can help these patients, it could help you too.

Could this Non-Invasive, Natural Treatment be the Answer to Your Pain?

For a few weeks only, we're running a special offer where you can find out if you are a candidate for CoreCare with Laser Therapy and receive two treatments with your initial evaluation.

What does this offer include? Everything we normally do in our New Patient Evaluation. Just call by Sept. 30th and you will receive the following:

- An in-depth consultation about your problem where we will listen (really listen) to the details of your case.
- A complete neuromuscular examination.
- A full set of specialized x-rays (if needed) to determine if arthritis or degeneration is contributing to your pain.
- A thorough analysis of your exam and x-ray findings so we can start mapping out your treatment plan. If you’re not a candidate for CoreCare, I promise to tell you.
- Plus two treatments so you can experience this amazing treatment and learn if this could be your pain solution, like it has been for so many other patients.

Call by Sept. 30th and you can get everything I’ve listed here for only $59. The normal price for this type of evaluation including x-rays is $257, so you’re saving over $200.

Remember what it was like before you had these problems - when you were pain free and could enjoy everything life had to offer? Don’t lose hope - it can be that way again. Don’t neglect your problem any longer – don’t wait until it’s too late and the damage is irreversible.

Call by Sept. 30th and let us know you would like to come in for the CoreCare Evaluation.

Our office is located at: 10787 Nall, STE 110, Overland Park, KS 66211.

We look forward to helping you!

Sincerely,
Dr. Michael Green, D.C.

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- Dave Donohoe

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Exam Includes: Consult, X-Rays & 2 Treatments (normally $257)
Carolyn Moody has worked for Johnson County Park and Recreation District (JCPRD) for 40 years.

**How did you get started working for JCPRD?**
I started here with Special Olympics, teaching kids with special needs how to play sports. I also did registration, then was in charge of the rose garden at Antioch Park before becoming a permanent park worker.

**How have things changed at JCPRD since you started your career?**
It was a lot different back then. All of Park and Rec was here in Antioch Park and there was only a total of three parks.

**What have you enjoyed most about your job?**
I really enjoy the regular visitors — I learn from them and they learn from me. I’ve seen five generations come through here. Also, it’s just a treasure to work here. It is so healthy working outside. The people I work with are like family; I have the best job and can’t imagine retiring.

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David Noyes has racked up 42 years of service working for Johnson County Wastewater.

**How did you get started working for the county?**
I’d just graduated from high school and was cleaning cars at Dennis Chevrolet when a guy I knew, Gene Ward, who worked for JCW, said I should apply for a laborer job with the department.

**What was JCW like when you first began your career?**
The department was very small — probably less than 40 people. And we only had two plants at the time — the Nelson plant and the Tomahawk Creek plant. I did line cleaning and we didn’t have the water trucks like we do today. We used rods down the lines and did it all by hand.

**What would you tell someone considering a career with JCW?**
Be prepared to get dirty. People make their job what it is; just do what you have to in order to get the job done. There’s definitely job security. I don’t see wastewater treatment going away. It’s the only full-time job I’ve ever had. My first day was Feb. 1, 1973 and I plan to be here until I retire.

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Pamela Soper started working for the Sheriff’s Office 41 years ago.

**What was it like when you started with the Sheriff’s Office in 1973?**
Things were entirely different. I was a teletype computer operator when I started; there weren’t any female deputies, and the female clerks were called “matrons.”

**What would you tell someone just starting their career with Johnson County?**
There are lots of different opportunities and variety here at the county. I don’t think many people know all that the county does. Not many other counties offer as many cutting edge services as Johnson County.

**How would you describe your time at the Sheriff’s Office?**
It’s gone really fast! There’s something new all the time — lots of changes and challenges, which makes it interesting. I’ve been blessed with working for four really great sheriffs. I like the job, the people and all the benefits.
Connect with your county community

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Happy 160th Anniversary, Johnson County!
You don’t look a day over 20 – the 1920s that is!

Come experience Johnson County in the mayhem of its youth at Shawnee Town 1929.

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Help JCPRD celebrate 60 years on Sept. 20

You’re invited to help the Johnson County Park & Recreation District celebrate six decades of having fun and making memories during a free special event planned for Sunday, Sept. 20.

JCPRD’s 60th Anniversary Celebration will take place from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. at The Theatre in the Park in Shawnee Mission Park, which has a separate entrance at 7710 Renner Road, Shawnee.

The event will include live entertainment from popular Beatles tribute band Liverpool, as well as local favorites Four Fried Chickens and a Coke, Travis Martin, Mr. Stinky Feet, Stone Lion Puppets, and magicians from Abracadabra Extravaganza. Kids of all ages will also be entertained by the Kansas City Flying Disc Club, The Kansas City Kite Club, and Possum Trot Orienteering.

Family-friendly activities will include animals and Ernie Miller Nature Center park naturalist presentations, hayrides, and a display of emergency vehicles. While admission to the event and activities listed above are all free, there will be charges for concessions from food trucks and for beverages in a beer garden.

For entertainment schedules and all the latest details, be sure to check jcprd.com and follow the 60th anniversary link.

“This is an event to bring our community together and celebrate JCPRD’s 60 years of service to the community,” said Jill Geller, JCPRD executive director. “I hope everyone has a wonderful time and leaves with an even greater appreciation for JCPRD and all that we do. But mostly, our goal for this event is to thank the public for all the support they have provided us over the last 60 years.”

The creation of JCPRD stems from Feb. 7, 1955, when the Johnson County Park Board of County Commissioners appointed the inaugural board for the first (and still only) special park district in the state of Kansas. Initially, established as the Shawnee Mission Park District in 1955, the district’s name changed in 1967 to reflect a county-wide mission to enhance the quality of life in the community by providing high-quality parks, services, and recreation programs.

The agency built its park system slowly, starting with the dedication of Antioch Park in 1958 and Shawnee Mission Park in 1962. JCPRD now has nine developed parks and four future park sites totaling more than 9,700 acres, operates The Theatre in the Park complex and a dozen sports/nature/aquatic facilities or centers, and offers more than 90 miles of trails.

More than 7 million visits and 2.7 million program participants take part at JCPRD parks and recreational facilities each year. Looking to the future, the agency recently completed its Legacy Plan to guide efforts for the next 15-plus years.

“I hope the public agrees that JCPRD’s efforts do indeed enhance the quality of life in Johnson County,” Geller said. “So let’s get together on Sept. 20 and celebrate that!”

WEB EXTRA For more information about the JCPRD 60th anniversary festivities, visit jcprd.com/special_events/60th_anniversary.cfm.
On a recent Wednesday at the Matt Ross Community Center in Overland Park, a group of longtime Johnson County residents enjoyed lunch at the Johnson County Area Agency on Aging nutrition center, and then chatted about what life was like when they first moved here. David Huckett, Bettiane Laughlin, Roma Tomlin, and Dayton Beasley each moved to Johnson County between 1953 and 1960.

How did you end up in Johnson County?
DB: I got transferred from Mississippi. I liked it so I stayed.
RT: We were in an apartment in Kansas City and we needed more room. My husband had heard that Shawnee Mission had a good school district.

What did it cost to purchase a Johnson County home when you moved here?
DH: I ended up assuming a VA loan at 4%. I think the deal was $9,800 for two bedrooms and no basement.
RT: We had a GI loan too, and paid $16,400.
DB: We didn’t have air conditioning — no one could afford it!
BL: Ours was $13,000…with an air conditioner and a dishwasher.

What was your neighborhood like?
RT: Prairie Village was developed when we moved there in ’58. But I thought I was moving to the country! My neighborhood is as pretty today as it was the day I moved in.
BL: When we moved into Prairie Fields it had seven houses in it. Now there are hundreds!
DH: There were no sewers when I moved in — only septic tanks.

What do you remember about Johnson County in the 50s and early 60s?
DH: I lived seven blocks from Metcalf at 75th and Robinson. I walked to get on the bus to go downtown and work. Metcalf was paved. South of 87th was farmland.
RT: The French Market was the only business in the area around 95th and Metcalf. At 75th and Metcalf there was an A&P store, a Katz’s Drug store, and a Falkner’s Western shop where Walgreens is now.

What did you do for fun back then?
RT: We were raising kids!
BL: The women in the neighborhood used to always meet for coffee. After dinner everybody got together and the kids played while we sat and talked.

What places do you remember in Johnson County that aren’t here anymore?
RT: Katz’s had a menagerie on the lower level. My kids loved to go down there and see the cats and dogs. Of course that’s long gone. And I miss Metcalf South. I remember when it first opened you couldn’t find a parking spot.
DH: I remember there was a Skelly filling station at 79th and Metcalf with the big globe on top filled with gasoline. You’d pump your gas and the gasoline would go down.

Why do you like Johnson County?
BL: You are safer here than other areas.
RT: It’s a nice place to live and raise your family.
Most of us know actor/comedians Paul Rudd, Jason Sudekis and Rob Riggle hail from Johnson County. Here are some folks who were born, raised, or temporarily lived in Johnson County who are a bit more obscure.

Interesting facts about 10 famous Johnson Countians:

1. “Wild Bill” Hickok briefly served as a constable for Monticello Township in the mid-1850s.
2. Charles “Buddy” Rogers starred with Clara Bow in the 1927 Academy Award winning Wings, the first film ever honored as “Best Picture.”
3. Lawrin, a horse from Woolford Farms in Johnson County, won the Kentucky Derby in 1938.
4. Ray McIntire invented Styrofoam.
5. Charles Hyer invented the cowboy boot.
8. Eric Darnell co-directed the Madagascar animated films.
9. Tara Down Holland was crowned Miss America in 1997.
10. Victor Rojas is a professional baseball broadcaster and currently the voice of the Los Angeles Angels.

10 Things you might not know about Johnson County’s history

1. Johnson County was formed six years before Kansas became a state.
2. Kansas’ first newspaper was the Shawnee Sun, which published its first issue in 1835.
3. Merriam was where both the first Johnson County library and Johnson County park opened.
4. Of the twenty-four guerrilla raids into Kansas during the Civil War, eight took place in Johnson County.
5. The Lanesfield School in Edgerton, Johnson County’s oldest surviving one-room school house, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988.
6. The first church in Johnson County was established in what is now Shawnee in 1840 and was known as the “Old Log Church.”
7. Johnson County operated a “poor farm” for more than eight decades, caring for residents living in poverty.
8. The Olathe Naval Air Station trained nearly 4,550 cadets, including astronaut John Glenn and former “The Price is Right” game show host Bob Barker.
9. Shawnee Mission is a school district and a postal district, but not a city.
10. Johnson County Park & Recreation District is the official “Bluebird Capital of Kansas.”
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