

From the archives of Liberal's hometown newspaper since 1886. Researched and compiled by A.J. Coleman, L&T Reporter



1963

## **Fires cause destruction near Liberal, Beaver**

Summer is just around the corner, but it does not feel that way, with snow predicted on Thursday. People all over the Southwest Kansas area are holding their breath waiting for the heat of summer. Warmer temperatures sound great, but last year showed once again that with the heat also comes a danger of grass fires. There were more than 30 small grass fires in the Liberal area last year. Kansas, with a dry, windy climate and flat land, is a perfect place for a grass fire.

While everyone hopes for sunny days, people are also hoping for a lot of moisture this summer although it is not in Kansas' nature to rain or give very much moisture.

Back in 1963, a weekend held two major grass fires in Liberal's vicinity. "Big grass fires north and south of here over weekend," read the Times' headline. Fires were fanned by high winds and feeding off of the rain-starved Kansas grasslands. The fire burned off hundreds of acres of ranch land both north and south of Liberal over the span of three days.

Beaver County was hit the hardest by the fires. The small town lost a fire truck to the flames. A fireman, Roy Henry, was hospitalized after being overcome by smoke. He was not the only responder in danger. All the fireman fighting the fire were exhausted after the 22 hours it took to finally contain the burn.

In both areas, ranchers, farmers, oilfield crews and many other volunteers joined in to fight fires. They plowed fire guards and hauled water. The scene must have been very similar to the one outside Satanta a few years ago, when volunteer firefighters saved the town from destruction by doing exactly the same thing.

During that dangerous weekend in 1963, one of Liberal's fire trucks was put out of commission by pump damage and another truck was damaged in the fires. There was a great deal of damage to crops, houses and many other types of property.

Now as then, it's important to remember to practice good fire safety and if there is a fire ban, to obey the rules.

The Rock Island Depot stands as a reminder of an era that has come and gone. In 1963, the Rock Island Depot was still in use and had its own rail line as well. However, it had been rumored that there was a merger in the near future. That May, suspicions were confirmed.

“UP and Rock Island merger agreement official,” read the Times’ front-page headline. The Union Pacific Railroad Company and the Chicago, Rock Island Railroad Company & Pacific Railroad Company agreed to merge. The deal included that the Rock Island Railroad Company would sell its lines south and southwest of Kansas City to the Southern Pacific Company at an unspecified price. This meant, the article said, “that the Rock Island Depot will not be home to the Rock Island Railroad but ... under the ownership of the Southern Pacific Railroad.”

These days, the trains that travel through Liberal are still UP owned and operated. The depot, which went through a long period of neglect, is now restored and displays the name of its original railroad connection.