



Photos by TOM DORSEY / Salina Journal
Shirley Towner looks through a file cabinet at the Smoky Valley Genealogical Society for a copy of the eighth-grade test from 1895.

1895 Saline County exam continues to raise interest

By DAVID CLOUSTON

Salina Journal

The tide of letters ebbs from a flood to a trickle and back again:

"Hello! I am a student at Virginia Tech and I'm minoring in history ... a friend of mine emailed me your 8th grade exam ... he refuses to be convinced of the test's authenticity without seeing a scanned copy of the original."

"I would like to verify a Web posting ... this posting purports to be a rather challenging 1895 eighth grade final exam ..."

"This is Theresa Walla with the Chicago Tribune and we are interested in running the 8th-grade test ..."

"Here is my column as it will appear in the Boston Globe tomorrow. I saw that on several Web sites the 1895 test is reproduced ..."

"I am a doctoral student at the College of Education at Cleveland State University ... I came across the graduation examination from 1895 that appears on your Web site ..."

These are just a sampling of excerpts from letters that Shirley Towner, past president of the Smoky Valley Genealogical Society, keeps in a file concerning the 1895 Saline County eighth-grade graduation exam — a subject in which public interest has never waned.

The test originally caused a ruckus after some of the test questions debuted in the Salina Journal in February 1996, the same year the genealogical society first published the test on its Web site.

Through the years, the test has gained national notoriety from mentions by Rush Limbaugh, National Public Radio and other media. Still, detractors claim the difficulty of the questions suggests the exam was a hoax.

Not so, say genealogical society officials, who have staunchly maintained the test's authenticity.

"I thought about taking it off the site. But then, I thought, would that be the same as giving up? It just didn't feel right to take the test off," Towner said.

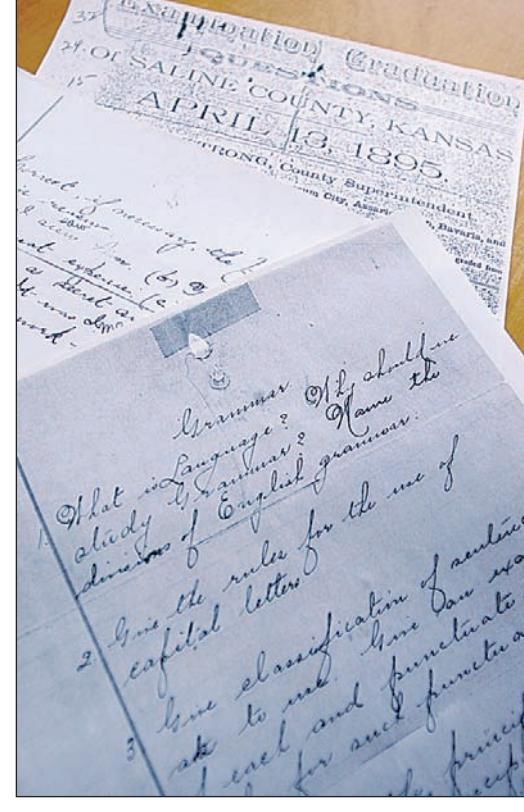
Though records indicate that the exam in question was given only one year, a typeset copy was discovered almost a century after its creation by local historian Helen Crawford. Afterward, descendants of J.W. Armstrong, the former county school superintendent and test creator, discovered the handwritten draft of the grammar part of the test piled amid some of their grandfather's papers.

"If we had a nickel for every e-mail or phone call or letter that the genealogical society gets about that test, we'd be rich," said current society president Mary Jane McIntire. Between e-mails and handwritten letters, the society gets anywhere from three to four inquiries a week, she said.

"Some are more complimentary than others. (If they suspect it's a fraud) they don't hesitate to tell us that, either," McIntire said.

Seven years ago, Bob Hardison, Post Falls, Ind., then 67, thought he'd try his hand at taking the exam. The answers he posted are visible on his Web site, at www.barefootworld.net/1895examcomp.html.

"I realized I already knew about half the answers. I just had to dig a little in the memory of a 67-year-old to pull it all together, hopefully to educate some of the current crop (of students) and their parents," said the 74-year-



Copies of the 1895 eighth-grade graduation test and the handwritten notes for the grammar portion of the test are in the files of the Smoky Valley Genealogical Society.

On the Net

- **1895 test:** http://www.salina.com/www/1895test/test_1895.pdf
- **Bob Hardison's 1895 test answers:** www.barefootworld.net/1895examcomp.html

old Hardison, who attended a one-room school outside of Butte, Mont., from second through sixth grade. He's a retired electrical-mechanical engineer whose 35-year career included working for Douglas Aircraft and Raytheon.

Hardison says he gets a comment from someone about the exam at least once a week, many thanking him for posting the answers.

"I think the thing that's most applicable still today is the data on language, language and the ability to read and absorb an education from the written word," Hardison said. "I watch kids today and they totally stumble."

Hardison said he hasn't owned a television since 1981, and he thinks today's youth spends too much time in front of the tube, to their detriment. When he was growing up on a ranch, the questions on the exam were the kinds of information kids in the school grew up learning.

Does the fact that the fascination with the exam never completely subsides say anything about education then and now? Only that learning styles and the subject matter that educators feel is important for students to learn has changed, Towner said.

One of those intrigued by the exam is Forrest Bishop, a self-employed inventor in Seattle. He believes in the test's authenticity — its style, linguistics and subject matter fit the era it was created in perfectly.

"If I was to take this thing, I'd probably pull about a C+. But it was only (given) one time, one year. That, to me, takes away from its standing as a sort of standard of excellence," Bishop said. "It's almost like it was an experimental test."

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History of Salina not emphasized in public schools

Statewide standards leave little room for such specific instruction

By MICHAEL STRAND

Salina Journal



In the course of their school careers, Kansas students learn about the history of the Greeks and Romans, the founding of the United States, the Civil War, the history of Kansas and other points along the way.

What they don't learn about, at least not in school, is the history of where they live.

"Prior to the state tests, if you wanted to do a unit on local history, you could," said Nancy Presnal, chair of the social studies department at Salina Central High School, and in her 36th year of teaching.

The state tests she's referring to are the ones required under the federal No Child Left Behind law, and what those tests gauge is how well students have learned the set of statewide standards developed for each subject. And those standards don't include local history, for Salina or anywhere else.

"We do teach some Kansas history at the third- and fourth-grade level," said Carmen Flax, principal at Salina's Oakdale Elementary School. "We're so standards-driven."

"That's pretty much the situation, because of the standards," said Dena Hilbig, principal at Salina Meadowlark Elementary School. In her 16 years of teaching in the Salina schools, she can't recall teachers focusing on local history.

That doesn't mean students get no exposure at all, Hilbig

said.

Some teachers, she said, make use of the "A Look Back" section on the back of the Salina Journal's Neighbors section on Mondays, which summarizes local news stories from 25, 50, 75 and 100 years ago.

And when she taught at the former Whittier Elementary School in Salina, Hilbig made sure to point out to her students former Kansas Gov. Bill Graves' boyhood home, which was right across the street.

"We've always done Kansas history, but Salina, specifically, isn't part of that," Hilbig said. "When you look at what the students are assessed on, what they need to know, it's not the local community."

Little bits of Salina

Presnal, too, has seen local history work its way into her class, as well.

An older edition of the history textbook included a vignette on life in Salina during World War II. It recounted the story of some black American soldiers looking for a place to eat in Salina. They came upon a cafe, which was labeled "Whites Only" — and looked in the window to see the locals sharing tables with German prisoners of war.

And when studying the Great Depression, she'll take a few minutes to talk about the Salina pages in the WPA Guide to Kansas. At that time, the area around Sante Fe and Iron streets was the town's hub of activity, while now that's shifted to South Ninth Street.

Cindy Ramsey, who teaches Latin at Salina South High School, also manages to work

a little bit of local history into her lessons.

In teaching the language of the ancient Romans, Ramsey also talks about their culture, including architecture. That includes a tour of the downtown Masonic Temple, which includes many elements of Roman style.

"My goal is for them to see how it relates to today," Ramsey said. "It's a way to connect the present here in Salina to the past."

Those kind of connections are important, said Anita Specht, associate professor of history and chairwoman of the history department at Kansas Wesleyan University.

"I think it's important for the ordinary person on the street because it gives you a sense of place," she said. Knowing local history "makes a place your home, rather than just a place you live, and you become part of that history, as well."

But most students are more interested in becoming part of just about anywhere else.

It's hard to get students interested in studying their hometown, "when 'here' is what they want to get away from," Presnal said.

While having a statewide standard for history means some constraints, it's not all bad, either, she said.

Years ago, she said, there was a teacher who spent most of the year teaching about World War II and didn't get "the big picture."

Having those standards, "means all kids get the same exposure — and aren't spending all year studying World War II."

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