



STEELE COUNTY Times

STATE CHAMP
SPECIAL SECTION

Inside

HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS
A3 & B SECTION



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Bloming Prairie, Minnesota

Lighting up Steele with holiday cheer



STAFF PHOTOS BY RICK BUSSLER AND HOWARD LESTRUD

A weekend of holiday fun in Steele County began Thursday night in Owatonna with a holiday lighted parade lighting up the downtown. The festive parade featured 72 units of mostly lights and lots of Christmas cheer. Top: Manke's Outdoor Equipment decked out a Toro lawn mower with lights, a flag and a Santa sleigh. Bottom left: You're never too old or too young to play a little holiday bingo. Liam Peters, 6 months, shows off his pretty Christmas outfit for his great-grandmother, Myrtle Peterson of The Oaks assisted living facility in Ellendale, during the Christmas in the Country in Ellendale Saturday. Peterson will turn 100 on Jan. 27, 2020. Bottom right: Bloming Prairie kicked off the holidays with its annual Holiday Dazzle Friday night. Santa Claus drew the most traffic of any activity during the festivities. While being the guest of honor at Farmers and Merchants Bank, Santa met up with 5-month-old Cleo Ehmke and Laurel Ehmke, 3. See page 3A and various pages in Section B for more holiday celebration photos and stories.

Brothers sentenced in Ellendale armed home invasion

Ring leader gets 30 years in federal prison

BY RICK BUSSLER
PUBLISHER

More than a year after a violent home invasion in Steele County, the people responsible for the crime have been sentenced to federal prison.

On Dec. 3, Lennie Dwayne Brooks, 34, Randy Lorenzo Brooks, 24, and Autumn Marie Nichols, 21, were sentenced in U.S. Federal Court in Minneapolis for their roles in a string of violent home invasion robberies around the state, including a private residence in Berlin Township near Ellendale on Sept. 23, 2018.

Senior Judge David S. Doty sentenced Lennie to 30 years in prison while Randy got 20 years and Nichols 10 years. On Nov. 5, another co-defendant, Esperanza Cardenas, 30, received 4 years.

During the Steele County invasion, the brothers broke into a home and held two victims at gunpoint while Lennie searched the house for money and valuables. They stole about \$40,000 in cash, which was the business proceeds of Holland Auction Company. Cardenas waited near by in the getaway car.

The brothers also broke into a private residence in the Twin Cities where one of the victims went into cardiac arrest and died.

They were also connected to other home invasions around the state.

"Lennie and Randy Brooks carefully planned and carried out multiple violent home invasion robberies, one resulting in the death of a victim," said U.S. Attorney Erica MacDonald. "Although nothing can replace the lost sense of safety and security of one's home or the loss of a loved one, today's sentencing offers some measure of justice for the victims."

Special Agent in Charge of the ATF Field Division in St. Paul Terry Henderson said, "After more than a year of investigation and court proceedings, the Brooks brothers' victims have justice."



Lennie Brooks



Randy Brooks

SEE BROTHERS SENTENCED, A4



BP Medallion hunt marches on

We're heading into the third week of the hunt for the illustrious BP Medallion hidden some place in Bloming Prairie.

This week's clue is:
Walk the path
Do the math
The medallion is near
If you find it we will cheer!

Previous clues were: **Clue #1-** 2019 Medallion hunt is here. Whether working or playing, the medallion could be near. Go out and look and have no fear; **Clue #2-** Big or small, short or tall, the entrance to the hunt is open to all.

The winner will receive \$50 in BP Bucks and a subscription to the Steele County Times.

Best wishes in your hunt for magical holiday treasures!

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Rough housing at home spurs killer attack on the gridiron

BY RICK BUSSLER
PUBLISHER

Ever since Mitchell Fiebiger began rough housing around home as a child with two older brothers, football has become a big part of his life.

Mitchell's brothers, Alex and Weston, played football during their high school days at Bloming Prairie. But, at least according to their father, Jim Fiebiger, the best was saved for last. "They all played football, but Mitch is the best," Jim says. "Mitch is a really good football player. He's a rough and tumble player."

Jim attributes Mitchell's success as a linebacker on this year's state championship Awesome Blossom team to

"I said it six years ago that this team would win state."

Jim Fiebiger
Football Parent

his upbringing with two older brothers. "I don't want to say they abused him, but they were very rough with him," Jim said. "He was taught very early on. They got him ready. He is very competitive."

As one of the main clogs on BP's defensive attack this year that held opponents to just 119 points, including four shut outs, Mitchell, who is a junior, loves the physical aspect of football. "He loves the contact. Mitch has

SEE ROUGH HOUSING, A2



STAFF PHOTO BY HOWARD LESTRUD

It was non-stop cheering for Jim Fiebiger of Bloming Prairie as he watched his son and other Blossoms cruise to a state championship on Nov. 29 at U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis.

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AREA DEATHS

Randy Matejcek, 55, Crosby

Serving
Bloming Prairie
and Steele County
since 1893

OUR VIEW

Celebrating Christmas in small-town America

What a show throughout Steele County to kick off the holiday season over the past week.

It started on Thursday with the Canadian Pacific Holiday Train rolling into Steele County to raise funds for the Steele County Food Shelf. CP presented the food shelf with \$5,000 and hundreds of folks made food donations by the train.

Later the same evening, Owatonna hosted its annual Lighted Holiday Parade with a record number of 72 parade units taking part. It's a spectacular scene to see all the dazzling holiday lights wrapped around the floats in areas one wouldn't even imagine.

The parade's sponsor, MainStreet, began charging an entry fee of \$25 this year as a way to raise funds for purchasing new lights in the downtown area, including the back allies.

On Friday, Blooming Prairie hosted its annual Holiday Dazzle with fun activities and events for folks of all ages. The Blooming Prairie Chamber of Commerce has been hosting the kickoff to the holidays for many years. There was no lack of activities going on as most of the Main Street businesses joined in to offer holiday treats, refreshments and specials.

And not to be left out, Ellendale shared its Christmas in the Country with residents over the weekend. Area folks got the opportunity to play Bingo, enjoy bags of goodies, prizes and of course, a visit from the big fellow dressed in red.

This is definitely a magical time of the year. And it's neat to see each community continue with rich holiday traditions to keep that magic alive.

Small towns offer charming festivals, mom-and-pop stores with one-of-a-kind gifts and cozy spots decked out for the season. These destinations provide the kind of personal, homey touches you can't find in a big city.

It's special to see communities in Steele County committed to making it a Hall-mark Christmas for their residents and share in the excitement of the season.

Small town, big dreams

Something struck me as I watched the Blossoms blaze their way to a state football championship at U.S. Bank Stadium a few weeks ago.

I couldn't help but notice the cheerleaders on the field providing support not only for the players, but also for the thousands of Blooming Prairie fans.



Hot Pursuit
RICK BUSSLER

What's interesting is that BP was without cheerleaders for football for several years until three years ago when Ashley Rye stepped onto the local scene. Rye moved from Austin to Blooming Prairie and decided to resurrect the football cheerleading squad. She was a football cheerleader in Austin for four years.

I'm not sure if Rye knew something big was coming or what, but good thing she made things happen when she did so that BP would have cheerleaders for the 2019 championship team.

Previously a coach for dance, Rye found something missing from the BP gridiron sidelines: cheerleaders. "I never imagined a football team without a cheerleading team," she said from the sidelines of U.S. Bank Stadium as the Blossoms were beating up on BOLD rather handily.

that the cheerleaders have found the fans to be "so responsive" to their cheers, which creates a special kind of cohesiveness.

Cheerleading, Rye says, is not about the cheerleaders. "It's about creating the atmosphere for the players," she said. She has found the players support the cheerleaders just as much as they support them. "We've really created that bond between us," she added.

Blossom pride is contagious, according to Rye. "There is so much pride in it," she said. "We take pride in being a little different," she said referring to the Awesome Blossoms mascot.

Going into the state tournament, especially the state championship game, provided just a little bit of extra anxiety for the cheerleaders. Rye and her assistants coached the girls on being there for the

said. "I'm glad I got to go out with a big bang."

Some of Sorensen's favorite cheers were the "reloads," which cheerleaders are tossed in the air and caught by others. "You get an adrenaline rush," she said excitedly.

If you noticed the Blossoms cheerleaders being a little more noisy than usual, you weren't imagining things. Something new that Sorensen and the other cheerleaders learned this year is how to utilize their diaphragm. "We're using our diaphragm and it increases the volume. It's louder," she explained.

This was Rye's first experience with a state championship game. "It's really a humbling experience," she said. "It's super exciting to be where the big shots play."

Rye credits cheerleading with increasing her overall self esteem. "I was very shy in high school," she confessed. "It gave me the self esteem and confidence that I needed."

What sticks out most for Rye is the caliber of team Blooming Prairie had this year. "I can't think of someone who deserves this more," she said. "They are such good people purely kind and deserve it."

Like most everyone, the cheerleaders have



STAFF PHOTO BY RICK BUSSLER

Blooming Prairie's cheerleaders had a thrill of a lifetime cheering on their Blossom football players at U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis Nov. 29. Here, they are shown on the stadium's scoreboard.

In the first year, Rye recruited eight girls for cheerleading. Since then she has average about 14 girls, including this year's squad of six seniors.

Rye credits Blooming Prairie with having so much community support for its athletes, especially this year's championship run. "Our jobs are to bridge the gap between the fans and the football team," she said. She added

boys. "There is no room for silence in this game," she said pointing to the championship game.

The excitement of the championship game has proven to be a big moment for senior captain Baylee Sorensen. Crazy, busy and exciting are just a few words Sorensen used to describe cheering in the biggest game of the year for BP. "It's really exciting to be here," she

swelled with incredible pride over the past few weeks. "There is a thrill that really can't be described," Rye said. "Our motto is small town, big dreams. We're living vicariously with them."

A small town in hot pursuit of big dreams. In this case, it wasn't a dream, but rather reality for a town hungry for its first ever state football title.

ROUGH HOUSING: at home spurs killer attack on the gridiron FROM A1

a strong competitive spirit," Jim relates. "It's a gladiator sport. He wants to win at all costs," he added.

Mitchell started as a running back on the varsity team in eighth grade, but he didn't get to catch the ball so he ended up switching to linebacker. "He wanted to run it and catch," Jim said.

This year's championship team, Jim says, has been at least seven years in the making. He remembers back to a sixth grade youth football league in Rochester. At the time, Mitchell was only a fifth grader and had been pulled up to play with the sixth graders—this year's group of seniors.

"They were really good," Jim recalls of the youth team. "I said it all along that we would have a state championship team with that group of kids," he said. "I said it six years ago that this team would win state. There are so many of them that are so athletic."



STAFF PHOTO BY RICK BUSSLER

Jim Fiebiger gives his son, Mitchell, a big congratulatory hug after winning the Blossoms captured the state title.

Besides having talented athletes, Jim was quick to point out the youth coaching efforts of Charlie Wallace and Greg Nirk. "That's where it all starts and gets them prepared," Jim said.

Jim also credits the high school coaching staff for the Blossoms' success this season. "We have tremendous coaches," Jim said, referring to Coach Chad Gimbel and assistant coach Matt Kittelson and the rest of the assistants. "They know how to get the most out of each player," he added.

Another secret to BP's success has been the commitment of the players to prepare off the field. "Mitch had his alarm going off at 5:30 (a.m.) and he was lifting weights by 6 a.m.," Jim revealed. "They thought they would be able to do it last year so they were determined to win this year," he said.

During this year's championship season, both Alex and Weston came to every game to see little brother and other teammates beat up on the competition. It has also been an extra special season for Jim watching his son and the rest of the Blossoms conquer on the gridiron and rack up an undefeated season of 13 victories. "I'd quit my job before I would miss a game. I love football," Jim said.

Jim pointed out that everyone has referred to this year's championship contest against BOLD as revenge from BOLD knocking the Blossoms out of state semi-finals last year. But Jim says it goes back much further. In the mid-1970s, Blooming Prairie lost to Bird Island (the B in the current BOLD) in the state semi finals. "This has been a 45-year grudge match and revenge trip," Jim said.



STAFF PHOTO BY RICK BUSSLER

Smiles were evident on the faces of Blossom players, parents and fans after Blooming Prairie marched to its first state championship ever. Mitchell Fiebiger was congratulated by his parents, Jim and Kristi Fiebiger. Kristi wore a shirt that proudly proclaimed, "That's my #81 Boy!"

GUEST COLUMN

DHS mess continues

BY JOHN PETERSBURG

Costly mistakes. Troubling dysfunction. Admitted lawbreaking.

All of these definitions have been used to describe uncovered actions within Minnesota's Department of Human Services over the past several months.

The agency, which has seen its commissioner and assistant commissioner resign this year, is in chaos.

Among the problems lawmakers have learned about:

- The Legislative Auditor reported on "pervasive fraud" in the childcare system. The DHS inspector general was placed on investigate leave for her role in this – and it still getting paid.
- Employees have been fired, mistreated, or retaliated against for raising concerns about agency practices.
- DHS owes the federal government \$30 million due to overpayments to two tribal governments.
- DHS overpaid chemical dependency providers, which costs taxpayers \$70 million.
- DHS paid out \$3 million for people who were already dead.
- DHS broke the law more than 200 times on contracts totaling more than \$52 million.
- DHS is now being scrutinized for not accommodating employees with disabilities.

And those are just the tip of the iceberg. Two weeks ago we learned 11 counties in Southern Minnesota received a bill for nearly \$1 million from DHS stemming from the mismanagement of funds for substance use disorder treatment. This includes Steele County, which is now staring at a nearly \$128,000 notice.

Keep in mind, DHS has a \$19 billion budget. And now it wants counties to pay for its mistake.

On Dec. 2, the Minnesota House Health and Human Services Finance Committee heard an update from the agency's new commissioner. At the hearing, the commissioner indicated that no one has been disciplined for tens of millions in overpayments to tribes, and was reluctant to endorse Republican calls for a forensic audit of all DHS spending.

It's time we got some answers, and an audit would certainly get to the bottom of this DHS mess.

I'd also like to see Governor Walz take a little more active role in this problem, considering we're hearing negative news almost weekly on DHS and it is his agency. Let's hope that happens before session begins.

John Petersburg is a state representative for District 24A, which includes Steele and Waseca counties. He lives in Waseca.

CORRECTION

On Page 12 of the special section honoring the state champion Blossoms in this week's newspaper, a girl in one of the photos was misidentified. She is Marti Snider, who is cheering on her approval as the Blossoms score another touchdown against BOLD.

The special section had an earlier deadline than the regular newspaper, which explains why we are able to correct it in this section within the same week. We apologize for the error.