

# NEBRASKA LIFE

KIMBALL  
WELCOMES YOU!



As seen in the March/April 2008 issue of *Nebraska Life Magazine*.



# WELCOME TO KIMBALL

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HOPE THAT THE FOLLOWING feature story, pictures and ads will be helpful in familiarizing yourself with Kimball and our citizens. Since 1889, the town of Kimball has welcomed both travelers and settlers into the warm embrace of its friendly and welcoming community nestled in the far southwestern corner of Nebraska.

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*Kim Baliman, Executive Director  
The Kimball-Banner Chamber of Commerce*



If there is anything you would need to know about the area, or if you have comments regarding the same, please visit or contact us.

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Cover photo by Alex Blanche

## WHILE IN KIMBALL

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Fax: (308) 235-3269  
tunzick@panesu.org  
<http://kimball.k12.ne.us>

### City

#### City of Kimball Administrator

Harold Farrar  
223 S. Chestnut St.  
Kimball, NE 69145  
(308) 235-3639 or 235-2971  
ckimball@megavision.com  
[www.ci.kimball.ne.us](http://www.ci.kimball.ne.us)

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(888) 274-6004  
econdev@megavision.com

#### Kimball Area Foundation

Dr. Doug McConnell  
PO Box 483  
(308) 235-3829 or 235-3601  
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# Kimball

## Ready for the Next Big Break

Story and photography by CHRISTOPHER AMUNDSON

**K**IMBALL was practically deserted one Saturday night back in 1954 when most able-bodied residents made their way southwest of town to Seth Torgeson's farm. Rumors had spread that the drilling crew was close and "touchdown" could happen any time.

The secret was already out. Seismograph crews had been surveying Kimball County for months. Others had already had luck in Cheyenne County to the east. "Black gold" was underfoot.

The evening turned to dark at Torgie's farm and eventually the onlookers headed home none the wiser. But the news came with morning light. Touchdown! The oil boom had come to Kimball County!

This would be the beginning of big changes in Kimball and everyone knew it. Samples of the oil were brought into town and

dripped onto the *Western Nebraska Observer* as it rolled off the press that week. Within two years pumping units pulling light sweet crude became a fixture of the landscape – both in and out of Kimball. The city was divided into 40-acre sections and drilling rigs moved into backyards, vacant lots and alleys to get at the oil 6,000 feet below the city. Landowners shared in the revenue and the city financed new building and improvement projects. Workers poured new wide streets that gave the city a look of readiness for success.

Kimball became known as Nebraska's oil capital but more importantly it became a hub for servicing a huge area of oil fields in eastern Wyoming, northeastern Colorado and western Nebraska. New buildings for drilling and service companies, parts stores and oil companies like Standard filled High-



OUR  
KIMBALL  
TOWNS



**Boomtown** Left, when community leaders began to feel the oil industry slump in the 1960s, they recruited Ken Risk's dad, George Risk, to Kimball with a \$150,000 investment and a promise that George would employ five people at his electronics manufacturing plant. Today, George Risk Industries employs nearly 300, including 38-year veteran Marcella Baack, 87, who works as the order "expediter." "If the orders aren't getting out on time she gets out there and cracks the whip," Ken said, with a smile. Above, Kimball's main drag, Chestnut Street, is full of hometown businesses.





way 30 and Chestnut Street downtown. As many as 30 drilling rigs operated from Kimball with thousands employed on roustabout crews, maintenance crews and as engineers and geologists.

This little town on the Lincoln Highway became an oil boomtown. The population climbed from 1,700 to 4,300 by the late 1950s. Good fortunes had come to Kimball.

Marion Abramson and her husband John were at Torgie's pasture that night in 1951, as were George and Edith Haines. We visited and had a supper of chili soup with George, Edith and Marion at the new Vista Villa retirement center in Kimball as they remembered the excitement that night south of town.

"I had put a pumpkin pie in the oven and we were going to be back in time to take it out," Marion said. The atmosphere at Torgie's farm was contagious and they were among the last to leave. Fortunately, Marion's oven ran on bottled gas.

"We came back and I thought 'Oh, my pumpkin pie,' " Marion said. "But the gas ran out just in time and the pie was just right."

Kimball's story is not unlike the story of Nebraska itself. Our quiet patch of prairie



in mid-America saw towns exploding with progress and wealth – fueled by the railroad, cattle, crops and commerce (Kimball had all of these and more). But like Cain vs. Abel or the "other shoe dropping," *bust* almost always followed *boom* in one way or another. Such is the case in Kimball.

BRUCE EVERTSON was five years old when oil was found in Kimball County. He grew up on a farm and ranch north of town. Agriculture has been an important part of Kimball ever since the early days as a railroad town, and it became easier to make a living on these arid high plains

# Oil and Big Mamou

Tim Wistrom tends to maintenance on "Flying Eagle Number 1" at the Kleinholz oil field west of Kimball. Below, Morgan Williams' dad named their steakhouse on the west edge of Kimball "Big Mamou" after a Hank Williams song. He named a drink "Morgan Nicole" after Morgan. And as for her brother Lance, well, he gets to work as the bartender "so he feels important."

after local residents completed the Oliver Reservoir irrigation project in 1911. Today long trains of Union Pacific grain cars haul wheat from the Kimball Co-Op elevator toward foreign ports. Every fall, sugar beets wait in giant mounds off Highway 71 for processing into sugar at the sugar beet co-operative in Scotts-bluff. But as a teenager, Evertson saw the downside and uncertainty of production agriculture.

"Hail devastated my dad seven years in a row. I said enough of that and I went to work in the oil fields," Evertson recalled.

He learned the oil business from the ground up as a basic laborer – a rough-neck – digging trenches, laying pipe and whatever else he could do to get oil on his hands. He worked in Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and of course Nebraska. He loved the oil business and worked nights, weekends and whenever he could get away from school.

There was a saying an old crew supervisor – a "tool-pusher" – used when Evertson and his crew of roughnecks would strike oil. "You know what this is boys?" he would say. "This is Cadillacs, diamond rings and good looking women."

Today, Evertson owns Nebraska's largest oil company, Evertson Oil. He has another company in South America drilling wells for the big multi-national oil companies. Evertson also owns Castronics, a Kimball company on the east edge of town that keeps 50 employees working two shifts threading pipe – called casing – for oil wells around the country. A long-time pilot, he flies his Cessna Citation jet to business meetings. The day we visited, he was leaving the next morning for Venezuela to check on progress of drilling operations there.

There's still money to be made in the oil industry but it's a glimmer of the



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# Learning by doing

Students learn best by actively participating in the process. Kimball Public Schools teach by experience as well as classroom learning. Activities in the community, volunteering, sports, music and the arts round out the educational program.

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heydays in Kimball. The oil market crashed in the 1980s and oil dropped to \$6 a barrel. Businesses evaporated and never returned. Today, besides Evertson's interests, there's Z & S Construction, Eatmon Well Service and a handful of other oil-related businesses in Kimball.

But while other oil businesses were failing during the '80s, Evertson spied an opportunity. He'd already learned from his father and from agriculture not to be caught with too much debt.

"A lot of our competitors aren't here anymore because they had debt and when you couldn't hardly buy a job because oil was six, eight bucks a barrel, we were fortunate to be able to go out and buy existing wells from producers who were in financial trouble or from major oil companies like Exxon Mobil who didn't like the area anymore," Evertson said. "So we bought what they had and expanded on that."

His company now pumps half a million barrels of oil annually from about 70 wells.



WANTING TO GET OIL on our hands like Evertson, we headed out to the Kleinholz oil field where we found Tim Wistrom and his trusty Newfoundland/St. Bernard dog, Hank – a *black* dog, of course. Wistrom is a "pumper" like his father before him. He accompanied his dad on weekends as a child then as an adult returned to Nebraska after college in California to help in the oil fields. As a pumper, Wistrom tends to the wells and accounts for every barrel of oil they produce. He's like a dairyman – of oil wells.

Fueled by natural gas from the well itself, the pumps run 24 hours a day pulling a steady flow of crude oil, raw natural gas and water from the earth. Tall narrow tank units with a smoke stack and internal heater separate natural gas and water from the oil. A collection of larger tanks – called tank batteries – store the oil until semi-tankers truck it to refineries in Denver. Other than the semi-tankers and the pumpers like Wistrom, the oil fields practically operate on their own.

These wells are what are called secondary recovery projects. The oil pressure in the reservoir has been depleted by pumping so that the oil will not flow on its own to the bore at the bottom of the hole. Unlike water, which usually flows through gravel, oil flows through rock as porous as concrete. So they drill new holes around the wells and pump fresh water into the ground to pressurize the field and force the oil to the hole. Secondary recovery has given new life to the wells and to Kimball's oil industry.

You can see the Kleinholz field just west of town on the north and south sides of Interstate 80. The wells extend 8,200 feet into the ground through layers of soil, gravel and rock to the Wykert formation where there's oil in a layer of rock. The rock is sandstone and only six feet thick.

Wistrom explained all this while we were standing under the first oil well of the day. The oil is trapped in "tiny voids" in the rock, he said. He kicked a piece of concrete with his boot to demonstrate the porosity of the rock a mile and half under us.

"It's amazing to think that you could have a hundred and some barrels of oil a day come flowing out of something like that," he said. (One barrel equals 42 gallons.)

And as he talked, he marveled at dinosaurs and decomposing matter pressed under the heat of 8,000 feet of earth grinding over time to make oil and natural gas. The "putt-putt-putt" of the muffled single-cylinder engine kept tempo next to us, and we marveled at man's ability to coax oil up to the surface.

"How much oil is still down there?" I asked.

He said 16 million barrels were in the field before pumping began. The first wave of production from the '50s to the '80s pulled 20 percent. Secondary recovery through water pumping should get an-



This is the flame pit of the first Atlas E nuclear missile silo built near Kimball. Upon launch, flames would have shot hundreds of feet in the air as a kerosene-like fuel combined and ignited with liquid oxygen. Today, Don and Charlene Zwonitzer call the decommissioned missile silo their home with the flame pit as their greenhouse – growing fresh tomatoes and other veggies year-round. Left, Tim Wistrom and Nebraska crude oil, also "grown" year-round.

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other 20 percent, leaving 60 percent inaccessible – until someone invents a different method of getting to it.

All of this begs the question that nobody knows the answer to: “How much wealth – discovered and undiscovered – is trapped under the soils of western Nebraska?”

Like an October corn crop on the flats of the Platte River Valley, this oil is just waiting for someone to come and harvest it.

KIMBALL was still riding its oil boom when Cold War hysteria gripped America in the late 1950s. The arms race was on and once again Kimball would be graced by another boom literally from under its feet.

The government’s plans to defend us against the Soviets included building a vast network of underground intercontinental ballistic missiles in eastern Wyoming, northeast Colorado and western Nebraska. Kimball would be at the center of the field of nuclear weapons: Missile Center-U.S.A. Today a 98-foot tall Titan 1 missile stands in Gotte Park, absent



Bonnie McNees, the widow of long-time beloved music teacher, Harry McNees, reconnects with his students at the Vista Villa retirement center. “You can’t find a town that supports its students more than Kimball,” she said.

the nuclear warhead.

Edith Haines remembers the first public meeting with officers from F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyo.

“We had many, many meetings out here

where the young men would explain what they were going to do so the landowners would be comfortable with the idea that they were going to have a missile in their backyard,” she said.

“The general consensus was it was going to ruin the country,” George added. “But then it didn’t.”

On the contrary, it was another boom.

The first nuclear missile was an Atlas E located two miles south and one mile west of Kimball off Highway 71. That missile silo is now a private residence owned by Don and Charlene Zwonitzer. Within a few years 150 Minuteman I and 50 Peacekeeper nuclear missiles were in the ground and ready to launch at the president’s command. Getting to that number was an incredible feat of logistics, manpower and construction.

Thousands of engineers and construction workers and their families moved into Kimball. The schools taught classes in the basement of the Methodist church before building a new high school with federal funds and two new grade schools. A

new grocery store was built. George and Edith’s business, an auto parts store and machine shop, grew to 12 employees as they serviced both the oil industry and the missile construction industry.

“We practically had a new city of trailer houses and homes,” Edith said.

Then in the early 1970s another small boom descended on Kimball when the military redesigned the silos to accommodate the newer, quicker and longer-range Minuteman III missiles. Workers and their families came to Kimball again. That lasted for a few years and the boom ended. With the Cold War behind us, there are now 150 active Minuteman III silos in F.E. Warren’s network, with 38 in close vicinity to Kimball.

Today the population of Kimball is back down to 2,500 – yet the town has the infrastructure and wide streets for 5,000.

Since the end of the last missile boom, residents have been waiting, working and wondering – ready for the next big boom. What will it be, they ask?

Seven wind generators north of town supply electricity for municipal communities in Nebraska, Colorado and Wyoming. Other generators are being built south



Some see road signs, others see goldmines. Kimball sits on two major thoroughfares, and with that the potential for great rewards. I-80 is the nation’s busiest east-west transcontinental highway. If Washington loosens its purse strings to fund a long-overdue project, the “Ports to Plains” transcontinental highway will funnel traffic from Mexico, Texas and Canada over Kimball’s Highway 71.

across the Colorado border. Can Kimball harness the ever-present wind and become the Saudi Arabia of wind energy?

Most locals said “not in my backyard” when an out-of-town company called Waste Tech said it wanted to bring the nation’s industrial waste to Kimball for incineration. After years of community

discussions – which led to the writing of a book about building community consensus – Waste Tech (now called Clean Harbors) was finally built. It employs 100 in well-paying jobs and is the largest property tax generator in the county (Kleinholz oil field is second). Most residents now agree industrial waste was one of the best things

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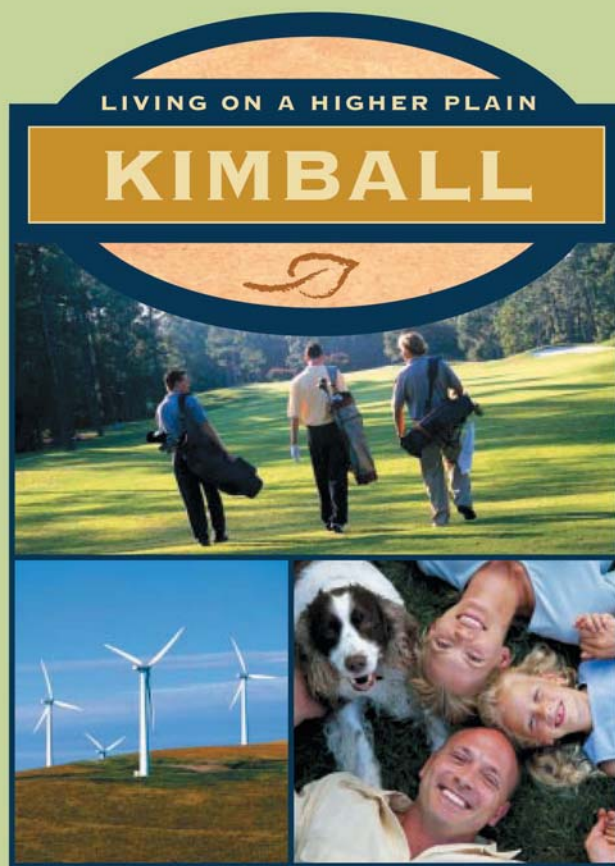
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Will Kimball become the Saudi Arabia of wind energy? That's one idea on the table as locals look for Kimball's next big boom. These wind turbines north of town provide electricity for communities in Nebraska, Colorado and Wyoming. Colorado's booming Front Range is less than two hours away – and getting closer every year.

to happen to Kimball in the last 15 years. Can Kimball now position itself as center for industrial waste disposal? (Don't laugh; it's big business.)

Then there is growth in manufacturing like Bruce Evertson's Castronics and George Risk Industries, an electronics company that forward-thinking businessmen brought to town in the 1960s with a \$150,000 investment and a promise that the company would employ five people (today it employs 225).

And then there's always tourism. With its first-rate airport, its 18-hole golf course, hotel/brewery renovation project, a new destination garden and greenhouse can Kimball become a recreational retreat for vacationers from the Front Range, the East Coast and beyond?

Kimball residents talk about all these developments at morning coffee downtown and at the Kimball Co-Op food store: "Kimball County has gone through a series of booms and busts through the years and we're about to take off again," said Marion Abramson's son, Bob Abramson, who moved back to town to take over his father's accounting business.

"Above all, we need more people," said Jim O'Brien, ambulance-service owner, laundry business owner and past mem-

ber of the local economic development group.

Other towns twice its size would be lucky to have half as many people so smitten with their community as residents we met in Kimball. One of the most enduring is the long-time chamber director, Kim Baliman. In fact, her first and last names combined practically spell Kimball.

She began putting us on her mailing list for her chamber newsletter years ago. Baliman has a knack for refocusing and re-invigorating those around her.

"We need to tell everyone just who we are and that we are not going to back down to urban sprawl, Mother Nature's drought or everyday doom and gloom," she wrote in a recent newsletter. "Kimball and Banner Counties are the best places in the world to live, work, play and raise a family. Frankly I do not understand why everyone in the world would not choose to live where we do."

She concluded another letter by writing: "Kimball is a town with a long history of boom and bust – but we are tough – we are resilient and we are proud. Our town is small but mighty."

Kimballites do seem resilient – they remember the boom times, forget the busts and are ever optimistic of the next big break. These are lessons for us all. ♣

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# Kimball, NE. - A Good Place to Call Home



**W**hether you've only visited once or grew up here and moved away, we invite you to consider moving home to Kimball, Nebraska. Our clean, friendly downtown features businesses that still care about their customers. Have your purchase gift wrapped or get your groceries carried to your car (without asking). Take your kids to the park. Or better yet, let them ride their bikes themselves. Kids still do that in Kimball. Kimball has jobs waiting for qualified applicants. Business incentives are in place to help you get started in your own business if that's what you are looking for. A welcoming business environment waits for you to discover what they already know: Kimball is a great place to live and work.

## Kimball Business Boosters

Kimball-Banner County Chamber of Commerce  
122 South Chestnut Street • Kimball, NE 69145  
308-235-3782 • 308-235-3825 fax • kbccc@megavision.com

## Ensuring our community continues to grow and prosper

The Kimball Area Foundation was created to provide a way for people to give back to their area communities. This vision plays a vital role in the future of the area for generations to come.

The fund is managed by the Nebraska Community Foundation and provides a not-for-profit funding classification to receive tax deductible donations. Contributions made today are invested and the interest is used for community improvements.



### What contributors are saying about the fund:

"I am inspired by our citizens who are being proactive and contributing to the future of our community. These contributions today provide a powerful promise for the vitality of tomorrow."

~ Larissa Thomas

"Kimball is my home, and my wife, Marcie, and I have benefited greatly from the Kimball area people. We have raised our four daughters here and wish to do our part in ensuring future generations have the same opportunities they did."

~ Dr. McConnell

"My wife Lillian and I are new transplants from Colorado to Kimball. We love the town, but most of all we moved here because of the people."

~ Will Brown

"My retirement, after teaching music and art for 40 years in the Kimball School system, now gives me time to donate to the community. My husband, Harley, and I feel this is an excellent progressive foundation for our town and future generations."

~ Merceda Dietz

## Kimball Area Foundation

For more information about the Kimball Area Foundation contact:

Dr. Douglas McConnell, Chairman – 308-235-3601, dmcconnell@embarqmail.com

Larissa Thomas, Secretary – 308-235-8100, thomas.studios@hotmail.com



# A HIGH POINT ON THE HIGH PLAINS KIMBALL, NEBRASKA



Living and working in Kimball County Nebraska has its high points. Available land, access to transportation options, clean air and water all add up to profitable business opportunities.

Outdoor recreational opportunities such as golf, hiking, fishing, nature watching and camping complete the quality of life you seek. All this within a few short hours of the metro areas on the Front Range of Colorado. Here are a few other high points about Kimball County you won't want to miss:

- Panorama Point, the highest spot in Nebraska
  - Kimball Health Services, Nebraska's first basic-level trauma center
- Quaint downtown shopping and dining
  - Beautiful, safe and clean parks
- Oliver Reservoir State Recreation Area
- Kimball Recreation Area and Four Winds Golf Course
  - Excellent school system
- Museums and historical buildings
- Business and professional opportunities abound
  - 3-state corner marker
- Relax in nature at her best

To learn more about opportunities in Kimball, NE, log on to [www.ci.kimball.ne.us](http://www.ci.kimball.ne.us) or call City of Kimball Economic Development **888-274-6004** or Kimball Banner County Chamber of Commerce **308-235-3782**

This ad sponsored by Kimball County Visitors Committee and Kimball Economic Development