



RED OAK ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

THE *Heart* OF SOUTHWEST IOWA

By the Red Oak Heritage Foundation

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RED OAK ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

2002 Red Oak Graduate Kate Honeyman Engel

Kate Honeyman Engel, RO class of 2002, has been named executive director of the Nebraska Innovation Campus Development Corporation. NICDC is the 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation that oversees Nebraska Innovation Campus.

Engel assumes the permanent role after serving one year as interim executive director. She succeeds founding executive director Dan Duncan, who retired in April 2023.

Sherri Jones, interim vice chancellor for research and economic development at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, said Engel brings deep experience in building relationships with NIC’s current partners and leading operations and marketing. “Kate has been a key contributor to the campus’s incredible growth during that time.”

Kate joined NIC in 2011 and became director of strategic partnerships and communications, facilitating recruitment and retention, marketing and public relations, space buildouts, workforce development, and resources and programs for NIC’s partners.

NIC is home to more than 70 companies that include private businesses and University of Nebraska entities. Private-sector businesses occupy two-thirds of the campus’s 570,000 square feet of constructed space.

NICDC is owned by the University of Nebraska Board of Regents and led by a board of directors that includes private-sector members and university representatives.

Engel holds a bachelor’s degree in fine arts from Nebraska Wesleyan University, a Master of Arts in management from Doane University, a Master of Science in leadership from Nebraska and a graduate certificate in public relations and social media from UNL’s College of Journalism and Mass Communications.

Under Engel’s leadership, NIC received the 2023 Outstanding Research Park Award in recognition of the partnerships, collaborations and spaces that have supported industry growth, commercialization and resources for entrepreneurs at the university and within the broader community. NIC also received AURP’s Emerging Research Park Award in 2017.

Engel received the association’s Rising Star Award in 2019 and serves on the AURP board of directors.

Engel said she is excited about NIC’s continued growth and development, including projects such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Center for Resilient and Regenerative Precision Agriculture. When completed, it will be the only federal center in the U.S. focusing on climate-resilient, sustainable and technology-driven precision agriculture.



Photo by Samantha Williams

Written by: Joey Norris



RED OAK BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

DREAM FORGE, LLC

JOEY NORRIS

Dream Forge™ was founded in 2015 by Red Oak native and class of 2008 graduate Joey Norris. Dream Forge is an engineering firm that focuses on empowering entrepreneurs by designing and developing the everyday products of tomorrow. The company offers a range of services to bring ideas to reality, including product development, engineering analysis, computer-aided design (CAD), and various prototyping and 3D printing solutions. They draw experience from diverse fields such as aerospace/defense, consumer electronics, farm equipment, and software. Dream Forge is dedicated to guiding inventors and businesses through the entire journey from concept to manufacturable product.

Dream Forge was founded on the

belief that innovation is not limited to large cities or high-tech campuses. The company actively seeks opportunities to work with local partners, developing products that are both practical and imaginative. This approach led to a partnership with Red Oak Fabrication (a multi-generational metal fab shop founded by Red Oak native Ted Fort) on a project for “dreamer” Mark Allen from Newton: the Moose Fireplace Grill™.

“The Moose” is designed for outdoor enthusiasts who enjoy cooking over an open fire. It combines cooking, grilling, baking, tailgating, and camping with the warmth and ambiance of a fireplace, all in one unit. More than a backyard accessory, The Moose it is a centerpiece designed for grilling and gathering.

While the Moose Fireplace Grill has garnered attention, Dream Forge’s impact extends far beyond a single product. The company has helped many early entrepreneurs in Iowa, and around the Midwest, develop their dreams; offering guidance in product design, prototyping, and market strategy. By providing resources and mentorship, Dream Forge empowers local innovators to bring their ideas to life and compete in broader markets.

Dream Forge’s commitment to fostering entrepreneurship is further strengthened through its involvement with the Small Business Development Center’s Rural Business Innovators program. This initiative supports rural entrepreneurs by providing access to expert advice, funding opportunities, and networking resources. Dream Forge collaborates with the SBDC to help startups



The Moose Fireplace Grill was the top finalist in the Iowa Association of Business and Industry’s “Coolest Thing Made in Iowa” contest

navigate the challenges of product development and commercialization, ensuring that innovative ideas from small towns have the support they need to succeed.

The story of the Moose Fireplace Grill is a testament to what can be achieved when local businesses and community members work together. Dream Forge’s mission is to collaborate with innovative ecosystems across Iowa, building partnerships that drive creativity and economic growth, especially in rural communities. By nurturing local talent and connecting entrepreneurs with resources, Dream Forge is helping to establish small-town Iowa as a hub for hardware innovation.

Looking ahead, Dream Forge plans to continue expanding its network of collaborators, supporting new

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RED OAK BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED...

ventures, and celebrating the spirit of community entrepreneurship. The success of the Moose Fireplace Grill is just the beginning. Through ongoing collaboration and a commitment to innovation, Dream Forge is paving the way for a new era of rural business development in Iowa. For more information about Dream Forge call us at 515-497-0207, visit us on Facebook or at www.dreamforge.us.



Top finalist in the Iowa Association of Business and Industry's "Coolest Thing Made in Iowa" contest

RED OAK COMMUNITY HEART & SOUL

Written by: Samantha Williams, Project Coordinator

Red Oak Community Heart & Soul convened a dynamic workshop in July 2025 with local organizations, civic leaders, and volunteers to prioritize action ideas gathered directly from residents throughout the year. This collaborative session marked a pivotal step in Phase 3 of the Heart & Soul process, transforming community input into actionable strategies for Red Oak's future.

Participants reviewed dozens of ideas submitted during listening sessions, surveys, and neighborhood conversations. From enhancing public spaces to supporting youth engagement and environmental stewardship, the workshop focused on identifying initiatives that align with the town's shared values and long-term vision.

The prioritized ideas will guide upcoming projects and funding efforts, ensuring that community driven solutions remain at the heart of Red Oak's development. A Community Action Plan will be presented to the public at our "Growing Ideas Into Action" event on November 19th at the Wilson



July 2025 Prioritizing Action Ideas Workshop
Photo by Janis Bowden

Performing Arts Center from 6:00pm-7:30pm. If you would like to get involved or learn more, there are many opportunities to volunteer, donate, or help spread the word. Please visit our website at www.roheartsoul.org or send us a message on Facebook or Instagram @roheartsoul.

MONTGOMERY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THE ODYSSEY OF THE AXE

As recounted by Dr. Epperly (Retold by Dave McFarland, Director of the Montgomery County History Center)



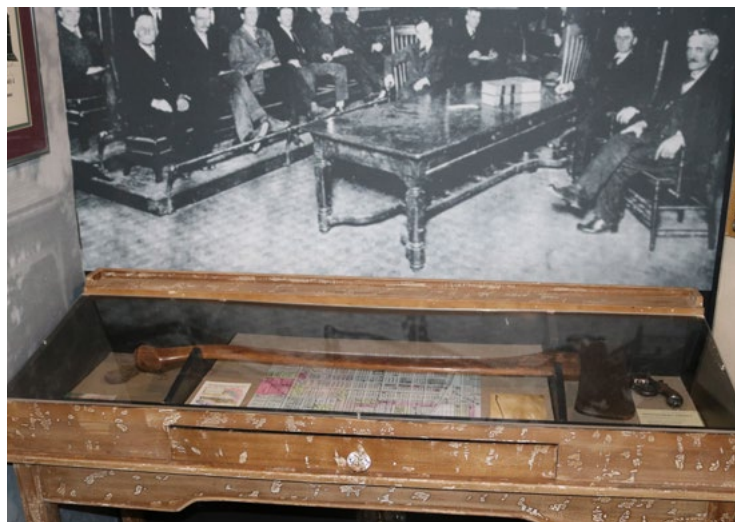
June, 1912 shall ever remain a black day in our history. There was the great loss of life from the Titanic Disaster. However, there was a tragedy with fewer deaths but much closer to home. I would ask, "Ever been afraid of the dark?" Maybe there is good cause to fear the darkness. One might not think after 113 years an event that took place in a small, rural Iowa town could have such grip a community. The people who lived it are gone now, but the terror and morbid curiosity still draws huge numbers of people to Montgomery County, Red Oak, and Villisca.

Villisca is a small, quiet town in Southwest Iowa and yet it draws people from all over the world. Why? Nothing like a mystery, especially one that is unsolved. Only a few tangible things remain; a few grave stones, the house where it transpired, and the murder weapon.

On a warm summer night in June of 1912 a 'fiend' entered the Moore House in Villisca with evil and murderous intent. He used an old worn axe to murder Joe and Sarah Moore; their four children. Plus, two young girls, who were spending the night and should not have been there. The two girls were supposed to spend the night at their grandmother's house nearby. If you can rationalize it, they stayed at the Moore House, because they said they were afraid to walk on to Grandma's with the street lights being off.

There is not enough space or time to point out all the theories and "what if's" here. We shall focus on the horrible instrument and its history. The crime was discovered that Monday morning. The Moore Family was found upstairs, victims of their fate. Lena and Ina Stillinger, the guests, were downstairs in a back bedroom along with the axe. The killer had washed up and wiped down the axe, but blood still remained on it. Sheriff Oren Jackson took possession of the axe and took it to the jail in Red Oak. It was said he carried the axe in a gunny sack to Red Oak and placed it in a closet at the jail.

The axe remained in the custody of law enforcement and the District Court until the trial of George Lyn Kelly, one of the most identified suspects, in Sept. of 1917.



Villisca Axe Murder Weapon
Photo by Dave McFarland

Typically murder weapons are destroyed after two years if not claimed. The axe survived somehow. James Ridsen, a state investigator, for the Iowa State Attorney General asked for the axe. Sometime between 1923 and 1930 the axe was given to Ridsen. Ridsen would become the head of the Iowa Bureau of Criminal Investigation.

Dr. Ed Epperly and his co-researcher Donald Brown discovered a reference to Ridsen having the axe. They decided to try and contact him to see if he still had the axe. Mr. Ridsen had passed away, but his wife said she still had it and would like to get rid of it. She gave it to Brown in 1961. Brown noted that Mrs. Ridsen did not want to take money for the axe. Somehow Brown found out that she liked chocolate-covered cherries. He would later joke he bought the axe for a box of candy.

Brown owned a used book store in Leon, Iowa and the axe was displayed there for ten years. Brown would leave Iowa in the 1970's and decided to leave the axe in Iowa with Epperly. Epperly presented Brown with a box of obligatory chocolate-covered cherries.

Epperly would have the axe until the Spring of 1987. Villisca decided that for the first time the town would

THE ODYSSEY OF THE AXE CONTINUED...

acknowledge the Axe Murder as part of the yearly celebration. He loaned the axe to the City of Villisca. In 2006, Darwin Linn of Villisca launched an effort to reclaim the axe. This resulted in three things on Epperly’s part: first, a legal decision that Epperly had received the axe in a legal manner; second, it was to be stored in a secure manner; third, a plan was made to give it to the newly formed Villisca Historical Society when they were ready. The axe was transferred to the Iowa State Historical Society until the Villisca Historical Society was ready.

Sadly, the plans for the Villisca Historical Society did not work out and in 2024 a meeting was held. Those taking part were Dr. Epperly, the Iowa State Historical Society, and the Villisca Historical Society. It was decided that the axe should come to the Montgomery County History Center. The transfer took place in March of 2024 and is now on display in Red Oak.

Oh! by the way, the History Center sent Dr. Epperly a box of chocolate-covered cherries.



Box of Chocolate Covered Cherries
Photo by Dave McFarland

MONTGOMERY COUNTY FAMILY YMCA

Montgomery County Family YMCA Press Release (Red Oak, Iowa)



The Montgomery County Family YMCA marks 25 years this October at its 101 E. Cherry St. address. In the fall of 1992, a group gathered to discuss the idea of bringing a YMCA to the small town of Red Oak. There were hurdles, to be sure, towns with a population the size of Red Oak are not often the type of sites picked for YMCAs to be built in, but they were a determined bunch. Take a walk through the building and you will find many plaques with names inscribed on them and even outside there is a little area of engraved bricks surrounded by benches. Each donation mentioned on those plaques and bricks



YMCA Mystery Drop Winner Dan Bullington with Executive Director Carrie Shalters

inspired another until that acorn of an idea was buried. Once planted in the fertile soil of those monetary gifts, the acorn began to flourish into a strong tree, casting down its roots for a strong foundation and spreading out branches to catch the sunlight.

It’s important to note that for every visible program or event the YMCA has been involved in, like the unseen roots of a tree or the sap running through the trunk and branches, there are people who have given freely of their

MONTGOMERY COUNTY FAMILY YMCA CONTINUED...

time, energy, and money to make all of it possible. The building has been kept up-to-date and in great condition over the years through the stewardship and generous financial support of the community. After 25 years, Montgomery County and elsewhere have felt the far-reaching impact of what was once a dream for a few. It has been more than just a building or just a place to work out. The Montgomery County Family YMCA has been buffeted by the winds of change, nevertheless its roots have held strong. Its continued longevity is dependent upon the ongoing support of the community. Our next update will be to the Bulkeley Wellness Center which last saw improvement in 2014. For more information on how to help us raise our goal of \$70,000, please contact Carrie Shalters at cshalters@mcymca.com.

The end of the Y's celebratory Birthday Week culminated in our 16th Annual Mystery Drop. Congratulations to the winners who are: \$5000 Grand Prize - Your Real Estate Choice, Dan Bullington, \$1500 2nd Place Prize - Greg and Shelle Brower, and \$500 3rd Place Prize - Red Oak Family Medicine. Thank you to all who participated in this great fundraiser for the Y!!

For more information about the Montgomery County Family YMCA, its programs, memberships, and volunteer/donor opportunities, call us at 712-623-2161, stop by the Y located at 101 East Cherry Street, Red Oak, Iowa, visit us on Facebook, or our website at www.mcymca.com.



Pictured Libby Fridolph, Lawson Fridolph, & Levi Kinnison: Libby Fridolph, her brother Lawson & fireman Levi Kinnison prepare to drop the balls from the firetruck for the Mystery Drop



YMCA 25 Years Ribbon Cutting: The Red Oak Ambassadors and YMCA Staff pose for the 25th Anniversary Ribbon Cutting

RED OAK ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

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Illustration by Red Oak Artist Carroll Danbom

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