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Sooner State Civil Defense: Oklahoma Community and College Campus Cold War Preparedness, 1960-68

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Abstract

As the Cold War moved into the nuclear age and tensions with the Soviet Union heightened, all Americans, including Oklahomans, learned to live with the threat of nuclear war. To increase the likelihood of survival if nuclear war came, national, state, and local civil defense organizations took steps to protect the public. As “preparedness” became the nation’s watchword, the state’s communities and college campuses prepared for the worst during... [Read More](#)

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Sooner State Civil Defense: Oklahoma Community and College Campus Cold War Preparedness, 1960-68

The Reaction
America's cities, shocked by the explosion of atomic bombs in China for years, have been prepared for a possible atomic attack since 1945.

The Weather
Oklahoma's 1960 weather was generally a disappointment, with too much rain in the north and too little in the south.

ALTA, OKLAHOMA, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 23, 1962

POTENTIALLY HOT SHOWDOWN NEARING; RUSSIA CLAIMS U.S. SETS STAGE FOR WAR

U.S. Forces Over World Are on Alert

Soviet Cancels Leaves, Calls Red Bloc Talks

Reporters Shown Buildup Photos

First Test Of Blockade May Come Tonight

OAS Supports Call Session

Quick Action By UN Urged

Alta Base Sets Its Activity

Screening Unit Cuba Forces Placed On War Footing

Civil Defense Plan Reviewed

CIVIL DEFENSE meeting was scheduled by Lt. Col. Richard Griffin, USAF, at the Altus Air Force Base, Okla., today. The meeting was held in the main mess hall of the base. Griffin, who is in charge of the base's civil defense program, was joined by several other officers and a number of civilian members of the base's civil defense committee. The meeting was held to review the base's civil defense plan and to discuss the latest developments in the civil defense program. Griffin said that the base's civil defense plan is being reviewed and that the base is being prepared for a possible attack. He said that the base is being prepared for a possible attack and that the base is being prepared for a possible attack. He said that the base is being prepared for a possible attack and that the base is being prepared for a possible attack.

By Landry Brewer*

As the Cold War moved into the nuclear age and tensions with the Soviet Union heightened, all Americans, including Oklahomans, learned to live with the threat of nuclear war. To increase the likelihood of survival if nuclear war came, national, state, and local civil defense organizations took steps to protect the public. As "preparedness" became the nation's watchword, the state's communities and college campuses prepared for the worst during the Cold War's most frightening years.

After the Soviet Union broke the American atomic monopoly and acquired an atomic bomb in 1949, Congress passed, and then President Harry S. Truman signed into law, the Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950, creating the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA). To protect Americans against a Soviet attack, the FCDA envisioned "a three-stage shelter program which would (1) locate existing shelter, (2) upgrade potential shelter, and (3) construct new shelter in deficit areas

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in the Nation's 'critical target cities' as designated by the FCDA and the Department of Defense."¹

Once President Dwight D. Eisenhower assumed office in 1953, civil defense policy shifted from federal to local control. He believed that, while the federal government could provide guidance for civil defense, the bulk of those responsibilities lay with state and local governments. However, after learning of the extremely dangerous "blast and thermal effects" of the American hydrogen bomb detonation in 1952, the Soviet Union's hydrogen bomb detonation in 1953, and "the March 1954 BRAVO hydrogen bomb explosion," American policymakers became concerned about "the lethal hazard of long-range radioactive fallout." Many in the American government recognized the danger posed by the spread of nuclear fallout over thousands of miles after a nuclear explosion, which moved Chester "Chet" Holifield, chair of the House Military Operations Subcommittee, to scrutinize the Eisenhower administration's civil defense policy. Representative Holifield sponsored House Resolution 2125, a bill to elevate civil defense to the cabinet level, emphasizing the primacy of the federal government's civil defense role and establishing "a nationwide shelter system." The FCDA followed suit and proposed a \$32 billion national shelter program.²

President Eisenhower assigned a committee to study the FCDA shelter plan in April 1957. The Security Resources Panel of the Science Advisory Committee was chaired by H. Rowan Gaither and was known popularly as the Gaither Committee. The committee made several recommendations to President Eisenhower and the National Security Council, including improving the Strategic Air Command forces, hastening development of intercontinental and intermediate-range ballistic missiles, fortifying intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) locations, enlarging American military forces, and diminishing the vulnerability of American cities. The committee suggested a "passive defense" strategy featuring a \$25 billion national program for nuclear fallout shelters to save lives in the event of a nuclear war. Pressure on Eisenhower mounted, caused by two momentous events that year. In August the Soviet Union launched the first ICBM. Then, in October the Soviets launched the first artificial satellite, Sputnik, into orbit. Eisenhower responded by merging the FCDA and the Office of Defense Mobilization to create the Office of Civil Defense and Mobilization. The administration called on state and local governments to coordinate in creating a national shelter system while merely receiving "advice and guidance" from the federal government.³

Eisenhower was loath to spend the huge sums of money necessary for a nationwide shelter program, even as policymakers in Washington

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considered the value of “passive defense” versus “active defense.” Delivered to President Eisenhower in November 1957, the Gaither Committee’s report, *Deterrence and Survival in the Nuclear Age*, declared that by 1959 the United States would be extremely susceptible to a Soviet ICBM offensive and called for a \$44 billion increase in defense spending over the next five years, which was “more than the entire defense budget for 1958. Half the money would go for more missiles and bombers . . . and half for a massive fallout shelter building program and other civil defense.”⁴

Though fiscally conservative and wishing to avoid increased spending based on principle, Eisenhower also had another reason to avoid increased defense spending: the U-2 spy plane had provided the president proof that the Soviet Union was not increasing its nuclear arsenal or airplane fleet in preparation for war. Because it was a top-secret program used by the United States to spy on the Soviet Union, Eisenhower did not want to reveal this information or its source, and pressure on Eisenhower to catch up to the Soviet Union mounted. Yet, Eisenhower also wanted to avoid falsely giving the impression to the Soviet government that the United States was preparing for war by building fallout shelters, which could thereby increase the likelihood of war.⁵

However, widespread American fears of a Soviet nuclear attack spurred civil defense officials to prepare for that possibility by training Americans to respond through simulated bombings. This included Oklahoma’s participation “in a nationwide civil defense mock attack in May 1960.” The *Altus Times-Democrat* reported that, as a result “of the fictional hydrogen bomb attack, only 10 percent of Altus-area residents remained alive, and more casualties were expected among those survivors due to radiation exposure.” The Altus newspaper also reported that a fictional nuclear bomb “hit near Martha.” And, referring to one of the Atlas F ICBM sites then under construction near Altus Air Force Base, the newspaper also reported that “another [hit] southwest of Altus near the missile site not yet built.”⁶

President Kennedy appeared to view civil defense differently than President Eisenhower. In a May 25, 1961, “Special Message to Congress on Urgent National Needs,” President Kennedy articulated his desire to strengthen the nation’s civil defense and enhance the federal government’s role in providing it:

One major element of the national security program which this Nation has never squarely faced up to is civil defense. In the past

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decade we have considered a variety of programs, but we have never adopted a consistent policy. . . .

This administration has been looking very hard at exactly what civil defense can and cannot do. It cannot be obtained cheaply. It cannot give an assurance of blast protection that will be proof against surprise attack or guarantee against obsolescence or destruction. And it cannot deter a nuclear attack.

We will deter an enemy from making a nuclear attack only if our retaliatory power is so strong and so invulnerable that he knows he would be destroyed by our response. . . .

But this deterrent concept assumes rational calculations by rational men. And the history of this planet is sufficient to remind us of the possibilities of an irrational attack, a miscalculation, or an accidental war which cannot be either foreseen or deterred. The nature of modern warfare heightens these possibilities. It is on this basis that civil defense can readily be justified—as insurance for the civilian population in the event of such a miscalculation. It is insurance which we could never forgive ourselves for foregoing in the event of catastrophe.⁷

To fund his new civil defense initiative, Kennedy followed this message by sending a July supplemental appropriation request of \$207.6 million to Congress, which virtually doubled the civil defense requests made during Eisenhower's presidency. Signaling its agreement with President Kennedy, Congress fully funded the request. The newly established Office of Civil Defense (OCD) replaced the Eisenhower-era Office of Civil Defense and Mobilization, in which the federal government merely played an advisory role and looked to the states to lead. Reflecting President Kennedy's desire for a federally-driven civil defense program, the OCD utilized the funds and initiated a nationwide survey to identify existing structures to be used as fallout shelters and to stock them with supplies.⁸

The August 1, 1961, edition of the *Altus Times-Democrat* carried a United Press International (UPI) story about Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's appearance before Congress that day in which he reported that "perhaps several tens of millions" of Americans could be killed if the country were attacked with nuclear weapons. Under a directive from President Kennedy the same day, McNamara had assumed control of national civil defense. He appeared before a US House

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of Representatives subcommittee to appeal for funding for President Kennedy's civil defense program to identify and mark enough "community shelter space in existing buildings" to accommodate 50 million Americans, which was approximately 25 percent of the country's population in 1962. McNamara used the hearing as an opportunity to not only ask Congress for the above-mentioned supplemental appropriation for the OCD within the US Department of Defense, but also to criticize previous inaction by saying that President Kennedy was eager to "revitalize this long-neglected program."⁹

Fallout shelters were intended to protect citizens from radioactive nuclear fallout, which is what lingers in the air after a nuclear explosion. "This dust is made radioactive by the nuclear explosion, and is blown miles downwind until falling back to earth. It then releases radioactivity until it decays." If the Soviet Union had attacked the United States with nuclear bombs, even Americans who avoided injury or death due to an explosion would have needed protection from drifting radioactive fallout until it decayed and no longer posed a threat. Shelters were intended to provide that protection.¹⁰

When President Kennedy embarked on a national fallout shelter program in light of the Berlin Crisis in 1961, Stillwater, Oklahoma, had been on the forefront of civil defense preparedness for a decade. In 1951 Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State University) "was the very first school" in the nation "to teach Civil Defense courses. The school taught technical training in two-week courses" beginning July 30, 1951. "The Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) gave quotas to Midwestern Civil Defense directors who assigned trainees to attend the school." This training "included health, welfare, rescue, police, fire fighting, and other services." The school was made available to the general public in 1952, and students could choose to attend the full two-week sessions or classes that met as few as five days and cost \$18. Though the FCDA closed it in August of that year, the state Civil Defense Agency reopened it. In 1957 the school began offering classes for women to learn "practical rescue work." The school's popularity increased throughout the decade and served approximately four thousand students by 1959.¹¹

President Kennedy's 1961 call to the nation to find and provision fallout shelters was answered by Stillwater's Civil Defense Director Bill Thomas. Survival supplies arrived in Stillwater in March 1963 for the shelters that Thomas and the Stillwater Civil Defense Agency surveyed and marked as meeting the government's criteria. "Water barrels, carbohydrate supplements, survival crackers, and sanitation kits rolled in to Stillwater for volunteers to store in their homes." Local

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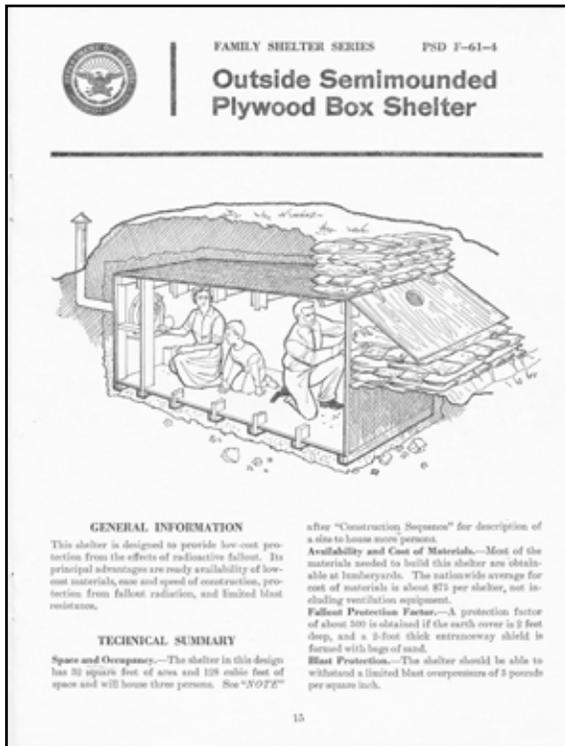
preparedness efforts expanded as a “mobile hospital was stocked and staff prepared.”¹²

To qualify as a public shelter, a space had to accommodate a minimum of fifty people, “include one cubic foot of storage space per person, and have a radiation protection factor of at least 100.” The Defense Supply Agency within the US Department of Defense provided supplies to local governments that assumed responsibility for stocking the shelters in their area. The Department of Defense created the federal fallout shelter sign in December 1961, and one was placed on each shelter that met the federal government’s criteria.¹³

The OCD created a handbook for citizens in January 1962 with instructions for building eight different types of home fallout shelters to be placed in basements or backyards to accommodate people who either lacked public shelter access or simply preferred to shelter at home. The smallest shelter would accommodate three people and cost less than \$75 to build, and the largest would accommodate ten people and cost approximately \$550 to build. Each shelter was designed to be built as inexpensively as possible, which meant that most of the shelters required the homeowner to perform the construction. The eight different shelters were the “Basement Sand-Filled Lumber Lean-To Shelter,” the “Basement Corrugated Asbestos-Cement Lean-To Shelter,” the “Basement Concrete Block Shelter,” the “Outside Semimounded Plywood Box Shelter,” the “Belowground Corrugated Steel Culvert Shelter,” the “Outside Semimounded Steel Igloo Shelter,” the “Aboveground Earth-Covered Lumber A-Frame Shelter,” and the “Belowground New Construction Clay Masonry Shelter.” The last shelter was designed to be added to a new house under construction.¹⁴

Following the national pattern, Elk City in Beckham County formed a local civil defense contingent in December 1961, and this body included a twenty-three-man board. Elk City’s civil defense unit included four directors in the 1960s: Welbourne Wood, Julius Pierce, Pat Patterson, and Kirk Noakes. Though the Cold War was a dangerous time for all Americans, the danger was heightened for Elk City’s residents because nearby Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base in Burns Flat was presumed to be a target if the Soviet Union attacked. The Washita County US Air Force facility, fourteen miles southeast of Elk City, had been designated as a Strategic Air Command (SAC) base, and it operated fifteen B-52 bombers. Those B-52s carried nuclear bombs and, according to protocols then, “were in the air much of the time, flying to and from the Arctic Circle” in case offensive action against the Soviet Union was needed. “SAC strategy called for twelve armed B-52s to be in the air constantly, prepared to bomb the Soviet Union should war come.”¹⁵

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First page for the Outside Semimounded Plywood Box Shelter from the US Department's Office of Civil Defense's Family Shelter Designs, January 1962 (image courtesy of the Civil Defense Museum, www.civildefensemuseum.com/docs/FamilyShelterDesigns.pdf).

Concerned about regional civil defense preparedness, students and faculty at Southwestern State College, now known as Southwestern Oklahoma State University (SWOSU) in Weatherford, worked in tandem to educate the public about communications needs during a disaster. The February 6, 1962, edition of the student newspaper, the *Southwestern*, carried the story “Students Ready For Emergency,” advertising ham radio operation classes on campus. The classes, scheduled to be taught by faculty members Grant Hendrix and Perry K. Jones with assistance from student ham operators Kenneth Bell and Bob Hill and student physics club president Richard Bates, would instruct participants in “elementary theory and code for amateur operators” and cost \$2 per student. The news story relates that ham radio operators would be vital if regular communications were



Student ham radio operators featured in a story about civil defense at Southwestern State College in the February 6, 1962, issue of the Southwestern campus newspaper (image courtesy of the author).

disrupted during an emergency, and it emphasized their importance to the area's civil defense.¹⁶

The October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. State and local civil defense organizations prepared themselves for attack and encouraged the public to maintain vigilance during the crisis. Elk City's residents received the scare of their lives during this tense thirteen days due to a technical malfunction of the city's emergency alert sirens. The Thursday, October 25, edition of the *Elk City Daily News* referenced Herman Johnson, who oversaw the city's siren system, and explained to the city's residents that its emergency sirens sounded false alarms the previous Tuesday and Saturday in the midst of the crisis because of "an apparent short-circuit." Johnson said that Southwestern Bell's telephone specialists were brought in to fix the problem. He also explained that, in an actual emergency, "the siren system will be blasted for 8 seconds then be off 4 seconds and then be repeated for a total of 3 minutes." The article

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related that the false alarm the previous day resulted in many parents simultaneously rushing to schools to collect their children and creating “near panic conditions.”¹⁷

The same edition of the Elk City newspaper carried a UPI story about increased state civil defense activity during the crisis. Oklahoma Civil Defense Director Jerry Ragsdale even released a statement “to 355 local directors” in which he said, “We urge that you update and review your local disaster plans as soon as possible and make them current so as to coincide with present world conditions.” Built to provide protection from a bomb blast and nuclear fallout, the bomb shelter under the State Capitol in Oklahoma City, on track to be completed in just over a month, would be used as state government headquarters if necessary in the event of an attack. Public shelters also were available at several locations on the State Capitol grounds, including the cafeteria and other areas inside the building itself. According to the story, “between 800 and 1,000 public buildings in the state” were available as public shelters, and public shelters in Oklahoma City were scheduled to receive emergency supplies beginning that night. The story also relayed that civil defense sirens in Sand Springs would be tested each day for the duration of the Cuban crisis.¹⁸

The Friday, October 26, 1962, edition of the *Elk City Daily News* reported that the city’s civil defense committee met that morning to establish “certain rules for the protection of local citizens in the event of an enemy attack” and to announce that the city’s warning sirens would be tested the following Tuesday evening. Committee chairman Welbourne Wood also announced that, in the event of an attack during the school day, children would remain at school until their parents collected them—unless parents had granted written permission for their children to leave. However, in an apparent attempt to avoid chaos among panicked parents frantically fetching their children at those schools, the newspaper relayed Wood’s suggestion that a school building was “perhaps one of the safest places for children to be in the event of a nuclear attack.”¹⁹

The same story in the Elk City newspaper announced that the basements of the city’s First Baptist Church building and the Casa Grande Hotel had been approved by the US Army Corps of Engineers as the city’s two public fallout shelters. A third shelter was being planned, and its location would eventually be made known to the public. Wood reminded the public that these shelters were intended for people who were away from home during an attack, and he encouraged families to prepare their homes as shelters to avoid overcrowding the public shelters. The story relayed the information that Wood conveyed, that “in



Casa Grande Hotel in Elk City, 2018. The hotel was one the public fallout shelters designated in Elk City (photograph courtesy of the author).

the event of an alarm, that families” should do the following: “1. Draw as much water as possible. 2. Find shelter in or near the home and then stay there. 3. Be sure to have a small stock of canned goods . . . enough [sic] for one or two days. 4. Have on hand medical supplies. 5. After an alarm has sounded, do not look in the direction of Clinton-Sherman air base.” The article ended with Wood’s hope that these preparations would help Elk City’s residents survive a nuclear attack.²⁰

City, county, and US Air Force civil defense officials in Jackson County also coordinated efforts during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The October 23, 1962, edition of the *Altus Times-Democrat* featured a front-page story about a meeting between Lieutenant Colonel Richard Maffry, Altus Air Force Base Civil Defense Director; Jackson County Civil Defense Director Tal Oden; Altus Civil Defense Director Rex Bailey; and Frank Wimberly, general manager of KWHW Radio. The story relayed that Oden encouraged Jackson County residents to prepare for a possible nuclear attack and provide shelter for family and even employees. Oden said that local media would inform the public with updates about international tensions, and Altus residents

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would be warned of an attack through the city's emergency sirens. Oden "said a warning is two 3-minute blasts on the local siren and this indicates all citizens should inform themselves by radio and-or TV of the existing situation." He also said that if an attack was imminent, "the siren will wail continuously, warning the citizens to take the best shelter available immediately." He encouraged the public to stock their shelters with adequate food, water, and medical supplies while also encouraging citizens to avoid "excess anxiety" that "might result in hampering effective and prompt survival action." He went on to remind the public in Altus that KWHW Radio was "under a 24-hour alerting system through joint responsibility of the Defense Department and the United Press International." In light of this, the radio station would quickly provide the public with "alert information."²¹

In the immediate aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Southwestern State College student newspaper announced that civil defense "radioactivity monitoring" classes—began the previous spring "in cooperation with the state and national civil defense authority"—would continue. The October 30, 1962, edition of the *Southwestern* explained the classes, which would be "of interest to Southwestern . . . students . . . in light of the recent developments in Cuba," would continue to be taught by campus chemistry professor Dr. Donald Hamm. The \$2 enrollment fee would cover all costs, and students would receive instruction in using Geiger counters. The intent "of the program at Southwestern" was "to instruct college students and individuals in the southwest area of the state concerning the action and dangers of radioactivity and methods of detecting and measuring it."²²

Located in northwest Washita County, Canute is eight miles east of Elk City. As Cuban Missile Crisis tensions were continuing to relax, the November 4, 1962, edition of the *Elk City Daily News* announced that "Family Survival courses" would begin the next day at the Canute High School building "for all area families interested in learning how to survive a nuclear attack," according to Canute Public Schools Superintendent A. D. Castle. The twelve-hour course, "sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education," was divided into four separate nights throughout November. In addition to teaching strategies to survive a nuclear war, the classes were advertised as addressing "the nature of modern weapons of war, their effects and the civil defense effort." Another goal of the class was to create informed local civil defense leadership groups.²³

Elk City added more fallout shelters in the 1960s. In addition to the Casa Grande Hotel and the First Baptist Church building, fallout shelters were designated in the basements of Community Hospital and, in 1966, the city built a basement shelter behind the facility that housed

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Radiological survey meter and dosimeters found in civil defense storage in Elk City (photograph courtesy of the author).

both the police station and fire station. The shelters were stocked with provisions to last occupants two weeks. Additionally, Elk City “had sixteen civil defense monitoring stations that would send information concerning radioactive fallout conditions, and each station had two or three trained monitors. Stan Young was the radiological monitoring officer of the city’s civil defense unit.”²⁴

The water drums provided by the federal government for local community shelters held 17.5 gallons of water. Each drum was intended to provide five people one quart of water per day for up to two weeks. Drums were made of either fiberboard or, later, steel, and each included two “plastic liners inside and stood about 22 inches tall and was about 16 inches in diameter.” One liner held water, and the other liner was an extra to be used if needed. When filled with water, the polyethylene liners were either sealed with heat or tied. In normal conditions, the metal drums and polyethylene liners were expected to have a storage life of more than ten years.²⁵

The Office of Civil Defense issued food guidelines in June 1964 for federally-stocked fallout shelters. Though 1,500 calories consumed per

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day was determined to be sufficient to sustain daily activity for an individual, the government believed “that healthy persons can subsist for periods up to the maximum anticipated confinement of 2 weeks under sedentary conditions on a survival ration of 700 calories per day.” The government considered seven requirements in determining appropriate fallout shelter foods:

The food be palatable or at least acceptable to the majority of the shelter occupants; have sufficient storage stability to permit a shelf life of 5 to 10 years; be obtainable at low cost; be widely available or easily produced; have high bulk density to conserve storage space; require little or no preparation; and produce a minimum trash volume.²⁶

In light of these criteria, the Armed Forces Food and Container Institute chose four items with which to stock shelters: the “Survival Biscuit,” a “wheat flour baked product containing small amounts of corn and soy flour developed by the National Biscuit Co. for the New York State Civil Defense Commission”; the “Survival Cracker,” a “wheat-corn flour baked cracker, similar to the survival biscuit, except that it contains more corn flour and no soy flour, developed by the Midwest Research Institute for the State of Nebraska”; the “Carbohydrate Supplement,” which had been modified “from a standard product in accordance with a military specification” and contained “sucrose, glucose, and flavorings”; and the “Bulgur Wafer,” “[a] wheat-based cereal product developed by the US Department of Agriculture for the” OCD, it was “parboiled, puffed, dried, and compacted into wafer form.” They were packaged separately in sealed cans with an estimated shelf life of between five and fifteen years.²⁷

In addition to stocking shelters with food and containers to hold water, the federal government also stocked each community shelter with a medical kit, which was first developed in the 1962 fiscal year and slightly altered after the 1966 fiscal year. According to the *Federal Civil Defense Guide*, the fallout shelter medical kit was intended to address emergency medical needs. The OCD included this explanatory statement with the guide:

Medications are provided for preventing disease or limiting its transmission, for treating disease symptoms to alleviate suffering and avoid complications, and for controlling emotional stress. Medications and devices requiring a high degree of professional

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Clockwise from top left: a fallout shelter sanitation kit stored at the Elk City Municipal Airport; water drums provided by the US government for use in fallout shelters; a crate of civil defense medical equipment stored at the Elk City Municipal Airport.

competence and those intended for the treatment of mass casualties caused by heat and blast effects are not provided.

The supplies fell into three categories: “Medication,” “Dressings,” and “Other.” The medication included aspirin, Eugenol, eye and nose drops, isopropyl alcohol, kaolin and pectin mixture, penicillin, petrolatum, phenobarbital, surgical soap, sodium bicarbonate, sodium chloride, and sulfadiazine. The dressings included bandages, gauze, muslin, purified cotton, and surgical pads. “Other” items included cotton-tipped applicators, tongue depressors, forceps, safety pins, scissors, thermometers, and an instruction manual. The supplied manual provided basic information for nonphysicians about providing medical care for a range of individuals as well as information about administering the medical kit’s medicines. The general storage life in normal conditions for the items was estimated at a minimum of five

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years and a maximum of at least ten years, with all of the dressings and most of the “Other” items listed as having an indefinite storage life.²⁸

Fallout shelters were designated at several buildings on the Southwestern State College campus in Weatherford. The October 13, 1964, edition of the *Southwestern*, carried a story on page two announcing that “eight approved and fully stocked fallout shelters” were available if needed. “Food and first aid supplies” for the shelters had arrived the previous week and had been delivered to the basement in each building. According to Southwestern Dean of Students and Civil Defense Director W. C. Burris, the shelter provisions cost \$4,168.43 and would supply “2,062 persons during a period of two weeks.”²⁹

Southwestern speech and philosophy professor Dr. James Sill was featured in the December 8, 1964, edition of the *Southwestern* because he was digging by hand a dual-purpose storm and fallout shelter at his 1212 North Caddo home in Weatherford. The story’s writer prefaced his piece about the defense-minded professor with information that gives insight into what supplies each campus shelter included: “Campus basements are loaded down with food stuffs, huge water containers, radiation detectors, and first aid kits courtesy of the federal government’s fall-out [*sic*] shelter program.” In addition to being a professor, Sill was also “a lieutenant colonel in the Army reserves” and thought that the project was an excellent opportunity for him to get exercise.³⁰

The story also conveyed that, as campus civil defense director, Dean Burris equipped the eight campus fallout shelters “in the basements of Stewart, Neff and Quanah Parker dormitories, as well as in the student center, old science, education and new science buildings.” The story reiterated that the shelters could hold approximately two thousand students, and Burris emphasized the need for the college to be prepared for an attack because of its location. “Looking at a state map, we see that we are in a rather strategic position. Southwestern is surrounded by military installations at Tinker, Clinton-Sherman, Altus and Lawton.”³¹

Basil Weatherly was an Elk City High School sophomore when public fallout shelters were first designated in that Beckham County city in 1966. A conscientious, civic-minded teenager who was also captivated by the American space program, Weatherly and several other local high school students formed a civil defense support group to aid the adult civil defense unit responsible for guiding the city through a nuclear attack. According to Weatherly in a June 2018 interview, and an undated story from the *Elk City Daily News* pasted in his scrap-

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James Sill, a professor at Southwestern State College, digging his own fallout and storm shelter. This photograph and caption was featured in the December 8, 1964, edition of the Southwestern (image courtesy of the author).

book, the Elk City civil defense support group he was a member of was the first of its kind in Oklahoma.³²

I. A. Patterson was Elk City's civil defense director then, and local pharmacist Kirk Noakes was the assistant director. The high school civil defense support group met each week for classes taught by Noakes in the fallout shelter, which also served as the emergency operations center. It was located behind the building that housed the police station and fire department. "We discussed various nuclear attack scenarios and how to respond," Weatherly said. Classes also were attended by the mayor, police chief, fire chief, city manager, and civil defense director.³³

Each member of the support group was issued a yellow jumpsuit with the words "CIVIL DEFENSE RESCUE ELK CITY, OKLA" stitched on the back. Each member also was issued a dosimeter to detect radiation after a nuclear blast. If a nuclear attack was believed to be imminent, the group was instructed to report to the emergency operations center.³⁴

Another undated story from the *Elk City Daily News* in Weatherly's scrapbook showed that the Elk City civil defense group attended an instructional meeting in nearby Sayre, the county seat of Beckham County. "Observing a disaster training conducted Tuesday at the Sayre

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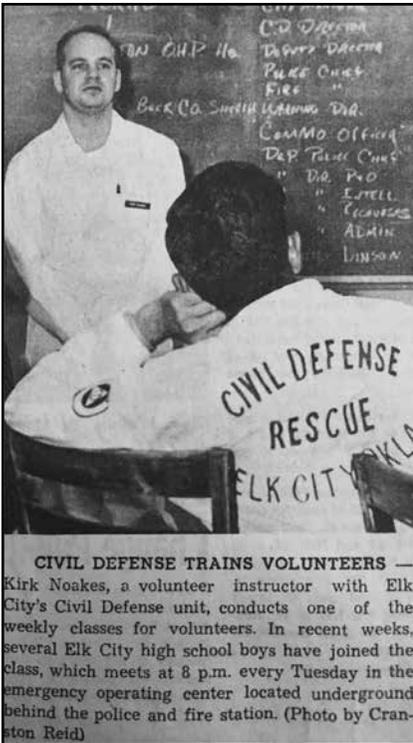
Stewart Hall at Southwestern State College, pictured in the 1966 Bulldog yearbook. It was designated a campus fallout shelter in 1964, and the fallout shelter sign is visible near the doorway (image courtesy of the author).

hospital were I. A. Patterson, Elk City's civil defense director, Danny Storm, Richard Heine and Basil Weatherly, members of Elk City's support team, and Mr. and Mrs. Kirk Noakes and John Owens." According to the story, the training was in conjunction with the Oklahoma Health Department.³⁵

As Weatherly reminisced and spoke of his memories with the civil defense support group in the mid-to-late 1960s, he reflected on the concern he, his friends, and other locals had for their safety. "It was still looking pretty grim then," Weatherly said. His concern, and a desire to help, motivated him and others to help, even though they were just teenagers. "We realized what we could contribute at the local level," Weatherly said.³⁶

Of course, he was still a teenager who was motivated by more than just civic duty. Speaking of the chance to be part of Elk City's civil defense support group, Weatherly admitted that he had a lot of fun. "I relished the opportunity," he said. "It was exciting. It was cool."³⁷

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Clipping found in Basil Weatherly's scrapbook from the Elk City Daily News about the local civil defense group (image courtesy of the author).

And the teenage civil defense group was not limited to just preparing for a nuclear attack. The team also helped storm spotters track the sometimes violent western Oklahoma spring thunderstorms. A May 8, 1968, story from the *Elk City Daily News* pasted into Weatherly's scrapbook conveyed that the group also helped track severe weather. "Members of the local high school civil defense support team were busy charting the path of the storm that hit the Erick area Monday night." An accompanying photo showed group secretary Gary Barnes, captain Randy Haggard, co-captain Ted Anderson, and liaison officer Basil Weatherly, then an eighteen-year-old senior on the verge of graduating from Elk City High School.³⁸

After graduating in 1968, Weatherly left Elk City and went to college in nearby Weatherford. He said that as the 1960s became the 1970s, and tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union diminished—along with the threat of a nuclear war—the need for the civil defense support team also diminished. The group disbanded sometime in the 1970s.³⁹

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When President Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963, space for 110 million shelters had been identified around the nation, of which 70 million were available for use, and 14 million were stocked with supplies. However, during the first year of Lyndon Johnson's presidency, Congress appropriated only \$105.2 million of the OCD's requested \$358 million. By 1968, the final year of Johnson's presidency, the amount requested fell to \$77.3 million, of which Congress appropriated only \$60.5 million. According to B. Wayne Blanchard's assessment in *American Civil Defense 1945–1984: The Evolution of Programs and Policies*, the lack of support for civil defense from President Johnson and Secretary McNamara—caused by the acceptance of the philosophy of mutually assured destruction, the fear that civil defense preparations would actually trigger nuclear war, and the prohibitive costs of the Vietnam War—influenced Congress to withhold support as well.⁴⁰

A 1964 graduate of Southwestern State College, Bob Klaassen went to work for his alma mater (then recently renamed SWOSU) in 1978 and retired from the university as its registrar in 2010. In a 2018 interview, Klaassen reminisced about his time occupying an office in a building where civil defense supplies were still stored in what had served as one of the campus's fallout shelters. "I have memories of large barrels of water in the basement of the Administration Building," Klaassen said. He also said that after the Cold War ended, the small civil defense fallout shelter signs that had adorned several campus buildings "were removed without any fanfare."⁴¹

The threat of an attack led to the development of the federal emergency Thunderbolt Siren for civil defense in the early 1950s. The design was distinctive, as is its method of operation. Air from a pump is forced through the rotor, called the chopper, and the siren, usually mounted atop a tall pole, emits sound "at full volume throughout the chopper pitch range."⁴² Elk City installed several yellow Thunderbolt Sirens during the Cold War for nuclear attack warning, but the sirens also were used to warn of severe weather. Elk City's Thunderbolt Sirens, like the one mounted atop a wooden power pole behind the Elk City Fire Department, are used solely as storm sirens today, warning residents of an imminent tornado instead of an imminent nuclear missile attack.

Elk City's current Fire Chief and Emergency Management Director Billy Word joined the Elk City Fire Department in February 1989, nine months before the fall of the Berlin Wall—the beginning of the Cold War's end. Today, the civil defense supplies that once stocked the fallout shelter in the Elk City Fire Department basement sit in an unassuming metal storage building at Elk City Municipal Airport. Though

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he cannot say with certainty, Word believes that those supplies were likely moved there in the mid-to-late 1990s, after the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991 and the Cold War ended.⁴³ Like the removal of fallout shelter supplies and signs at SWOSU in Weatherford, the inability to pinpoint when the Elk City supplies were taken to storage speaks to the unceremonious fashion in which the Cold War ended in the United States, and years' worth of planning and preparation for life-threatening nuclear attack became a distant memory for Americans, more difficult to recall with each passing day.

The manner in which fallout shelter signs and supplies were removed in Elk City and Weatherford was emblematic of how the forty-five-year conflict called the Cold War ended in the early 1990s—with a whimper instead of a bang. This belied the danger, fear, and, at times, panic that gripped Oklahomans during the early 1960s as the Cold War entered its most dangerous period, punctuated by the hair-raising Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. The Cold War ethos of civil defense preparedness became part of Oklahoma's "new normal" as the state's communities and college campuses joined national civilian preparedness efforts to survive a nuclear attack during the Cold War's most frightening years.

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Endnotes

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¹ B. Wayne Blanchard, *American Civil Defense 1945–1984: The Evolution of Programs and Policies*, Federal Emergency Management Agency, July 1986, 2–3, www.civildefense-museum.com/docs/AmericanCivilDefense1945-1984.pdf.

² *Ibid.*, 4–6; Homeland Security National Preparedness Task Force, *Civil Defense and Homeland Security: A Short History of National Preparedness Efforts*, US Department of Homeland Security, September 2006, 9–10, training.fema.gov/hiedu/docs/dhs_civil_defense-hs_-_short_history.pdf.

³ Blanchard, *American Civil Defense 1945–1984*, 6–7.

⁴ Evan Thomas, *Ike's Bluff: President Eisenhower's Secret Battle to Save the World* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), 270, 272–74.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁶ “Only 10 Percent in Area ‘Alive,’” *Altus (OK) Times-Democrat*, May 4, 1960, 1, [news.google.com/newspapers?nid=LpWf3qrnWeoC&dat=19600504&printsec=frontpage&hl=en](https://www.google.com/newspapers?nid=LpWf3qrnWeoC&dat=19600504&printsec=frontpage&hl=en); Landry Brewer, “The Missiles of Oklahoma: Southwest Oklahoma’s Role in the American Cold War Nuclear Arsenal, 1960–65,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 95, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 268.

⁷ John F. Kennedy, “Special Message to Congress on Urgent National Needs,” quoted in Blanchard, *American Civil Defense 1945–1984*, 7–8.

⁸ Blanchard, *American Civil Defense 1945–1984*, 7–8.

⁹ “Defense Chief Cites Terrible Nuclear Toll,” *Altus Times-Democrat*, August 1, 1961, 1, [news.google.com/newspapers?nid=LpWf3qrnWeoC&dat=19610801&printsec=frontpage&hl=en](https://www.google.com/newspapers?nid=LpWf3qrnWeoC&dat=19610801&printsec=frontpage&hl=en).

¹⁰ James Gregory, “In the Fallout Shelter: Civil Defense in Stillwater,” *Stillwater Living Magazine*, October 11, 2017, stillwaterliving.com/in-the-fallout-shelter-civil-defense-in-stillwater.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Homeland Security National Preparedness Task Force, *Civil Defense and Homeland Security*, 12.

¹⁴ US Department of Defense, Office of Civil Defense, *Family Shelter Designs*, January 1962, 2–29, www.civildefensemuseum.com/docs/FamilyShelterDesigns.pdf.

¹⁵ Western Oklahoma Historical Society, *Elk City: Rising from the Prairie* (Oklahoma City, OK: Quaid Publishing Company, LLC, 2007), 118; Brewer, “The Missiles of Oklahoma,” 268.

¹⁶ “Students Ready For Emergency,” *Southwestern* (Weatherford, OK), February 6, 1962, 4, Al Harris Library Archives, Southwestern Oklahoma State University, Weatherford, OK.

¹⁷ “Elk Siren Alert System Outlined,” *Elk City (OK) Daily News*, October 25, 1962, 1, microfilm Oct–Dec 1962, 3619-28, 129, Elk City Carnegie Library, Elk City, OK.

¹⁸ “State Civil Defense Steps Up Activity In Face Of New Crisis,” *Elk City Daily News*, October 25, 1962, 7, microfilm Oct–Dec 1962, 3619-28, 129, Elk City Carnegie Library, Elk City, OK.

¹⁹ “Defense Program Mapped: Alert System Test Due Tuesday,” *Elk City Daily News*, October 26, 1962, 1, microfilm Oct–Dec 1962, 3619-28, 129, Elk City Carnegie Library, Elk City, OK.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

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²² “Courses Planned in Civil Defense,” *Southwestern*, October 30, 1962, 1, Al Harris Library Archives, Southwestern Oklahoma State University, Weatherford, OK.

²³ “Classes At Canute: Area Survival Course Will Start on Monday,” *Elk City Daily News*, November 4, 1962, 1, microfilm Oct–Dec 1962, 3619-28, 129, Elk City Carnegie Library, Elk City, OK.

²⁴ Western Oklahoma Historical Society, *Elk City: Rising from the Prairie*, 118.

²⁵ “Community Fallout Shelter Supplies—Water Storage Drums,” Civil Defense Museum, www.civildefensemuseum.com/cdmuseum2/supply/water.html.

²⁶ US Department of Defense, Office of Civil Defense, “Fallout Shelter Food Requirements,” in *Federal Civil Defense Guide*, Part D, Chapter 2, Appendix 6, June 1964, 1–2, www.civildefensemuseum.com/docs/fcdg/FCDG Pt D Ch 2 App 6.pdf.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ US Department of Defense, Office of Civil Defense, “Fallout Shelter Medical Kit,” in *Federal Civil Defense Guide*, Part D, Chapter 2, Appendix 8, July 1967, 1–2, www.civildefensemuseum.com/docs/fcdg/FCDG Pt D Ch 2 App 8.pdf.

²⁹ “Provisions Arrive to Stock Shelters,” *Southwestern*, October 13, 1964, 2, Al Harris Library Archives, Southwestern Oklahoma State University, Weatherford, OK.

³⁰ “Civil-Defense Minded Professor Digging Storm and Fallout Shelter—For Exercise,” *Southwestern*, December 8, 1964, 3, Al Harris Library Archives, Southwestern Oklahoma State University, Weatherford, OK.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Basil Weatherly, interview by the author, June 30, 2018, Elk City, OK.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Blanchard, *American Civil Defense 1945–1984*, 11–12, 14–15; Homeland Security National Preparedness Task Force, *Civil Defense and Homeland Security*, 13–14.

⁴¹ Bob Klaassen, interview by the author via email, May 13, 2018.

⁴² “Federal Sirens—Federal Thunderbolt Siren,” Civil Defense Museum, www.civildefensemuseum.com/sirens/sirenpx2.html.

⁴³ Billy Word, interview by the author, May 16, 2018, Elk City, OK.