



News

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SWOSU-Sayre History Professor Creates Civil Defense Display



Southwestern Oklahoma State University history professor Landry Brewer recently created a visual reminder of a time when western Oklahomans prepared for nuclear war. The display is available for the public to see on the SWOSU-Sayre campus.

Southwestern Oklahoma State University (SWOSU) history professor Landry Brewer created a visual reminder of a time when western Oklahomans prepared for nuclear war.

Last November, Brewer helped Elk City's City Manager, Tom Ivester, transfer several of the city's decades-old Cold War civil defense items to the Oklahoma Historical Society. Using some of the remaining artifacts, Brewer created the display "Preparing to Survive Nuclear Attack: Western Oklahoma Cold War Civil Defense" in Mackey Hall on the SWOSU campus in Sayre.

The display features items that the federal government provided to Elk City, including water barrels, food, sanitation kits from the 1960s, radioactivity monitoring devices, and part of a civil defense siren that would have warned locals of a nuclear attack.

“While researching Oklahoma civil defense a few years ago for my book *Cold War Oklahoma*, I learned of the steps that western Oklahoma cities took to survive nuclear war, and I wanted to share some of this visually as we approach important Cold War anniversaries,” Brewer said.

This summer marks the 60th anniversary of the 1961 Berlin Crisis war scare, which began when President John F. Kennedy met Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna, Austria, that June. Khrushchev issued a six-month deadline for the United States presence in the western portion of Berlin to end, or the result would likely be nuclear war.

According to Brewer, President Kennedy sent a request to Congress the following month asking for a massive spending increase for civil defense.

“The federal government began a nationwide program to identify existing buildings to be used as fallout shelters and stock them with supplies,” Brewer said.

Brewer also said that shortly afterward the federal fallout shelter sign was created to be placed on buildings that met the federal government’s criteria, and these would be stocked with survival supplies.

The Elk City fallout shelter supplies that Brewer used for his display were a result of this program.

October 2022 will be the 60th anniversary of the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, when President Kennedy learned that the Soviet Union was placing missiles in Cuba capable of reaching the United States with nuclear bombs.

“This was the closest that the United States and the Soviet Union came to nuclear war, and newspapers in Elk City and Altus and even the SWOSU student newspaper in Weatherford carried stories about civil defense measures being taken to survive,” Brewer said.

As with the rest of the nation, fallout shelters were identified and stocked in western Oklahoma’s cities, including eight on the SWOSU campus in Weatherford. Brewer’s display includes a 1966 photograph of campus shelter Stewart Hall, which shows the federal fallout shelter sign on the building’s exterior.

When the Cold War ended after the Soviet Union disbanded in the early 1990s, many civil defense supplies were placed in storage and, over time, thrown away.

“I’m pleased to be able to preserve some local civil defense artifacts and share them with students and the public and remember a time when fear of nuclear war was part of daily life for western Oklahomans,” Brewer said.

The public is invited to view the display.

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