

The Barbed Wire Museum

In 1970, realizing a need for a permanent home to exhibit barbed wire, the La Crosse Chamber of Commerce purchased a small storefront at 611 Main Street and offered the front room to the collectors. News of the unique museum spread like wildfire. In May of 1970, Charles Kuralt brought his *On the Road* crew and filmed a segment in La Crosse at the partially completed museum. In May of the following year, the *Barbed Wire Museum* was officially dedicated. With barbed wire collecting now synonymous with La Crosse, the small western Kansas community became known as *The Barbed Wire Capital of the World™*.

By 1990, it became apparent that more space was needed to house several large collections that had been offered to the museum. The downtown museum had only about 500 square feet of display space and that was already filled to capacity. In January of 1990, a new group of local businessmen had a meeting at the *Family Castle* restaurant in La Crosse to discuss options to house the growing museum. The best alternative was to construct a 60' x 90' metal building in Grass Park adjacent to the *Rush County Historical Museum* and *Post Rock Museum*. Ground breaking was held in May of that year, and exactly one year later the new facility was dedicated debt-free.

In 2004, construction began on an addition to the museum to house collections of the Antique Barbed Wire Society. In May of 2005, the new facility was completed featuring a research center housing the largest collection of fencing-related materials in existence, a community room, and storage facility.

Become a part of the museum...

To become a member fill out this form and mail to:

Kansas Barbed Wire Collectors Assn., Inc.
P.O. Box 578
La Crosse, Kansas 67548-0578

(Name)

(Address)

(City)

(State)

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Check one (Annual Memberships):

- Associate Member \$ 10.00
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Kansas Barbed Wire Collectors Assn., Inc.

History of...

The Kansas Barbed Wire Museum



120 W. 1st Street
La Crosse, Kansas

www.rushcounty.org/BarbedWireMuseum



History of the KBWCA



The story of the Kansas Barbed Wire Collectors Association (KBWCA) actually begins on May 17, 1964 with the dedication of the

Post Rock Museum in La Crosse, Kansas. Displayed on the wall above the model quarry was a small, unassuming collection of 40 barbed fence wires. During the first years, museum workers discovered that a growing number of visitors were inquiring about the small collection. Many of these visitors had collections of their own, some much larger than the museum's meager sampling. A bit of research determined that, not only were there hundreds of varieties of this peculiar fencing material, there were a lot of people who collected it. Opportunity was knocking.

By 1966, the barbed wire hobby, in an organized state, was still in its infancy. A collector's association had been organized in Texas, a few books had been published, and a history professor had recently been interviewed in the "Wichita Eagle." According to the "Eagle", Dr. Ross Taylor, head of the Department of American Civilization at Wichita State University, was a researcher of the history of barbed wire as well as an avid barbed wire collector. The news story brought to light that not only was barbed wire an interesting collectors' item, it was also a credible part of American history.

With all this interest in barbed wire, three visionary La Crosse businessmen decided it was time to seize an opportunity. The men met in the office of a local attorney and, over a cup of coffee, discussed

bringing collectors of this intriguing fencing material together with the intent of establishing a barbed wire collecting organization in Kansas. The men were: Ivan Krug, La Crosse attorney; Roy Ehly, Southwestern Bell Telephone manager; and Bill Robbins, local banker. In December 1966, Krug sent a letter to collectors announcing an organizational meeting to be held in January.

On Sunday, January 8, 1967 a group of barbed wire collectors met at the La Crosse Country Club. There were 68 persons in attendance from throughout Kansas and Oklahoma including "the man who invented the machine to mass produce barbed wire." During the meeting, collectors were given the opportunity to display their collections, discuss the hobby, and swap pieces of barbed wire. Along with ten collections of barbed wire, displays included wire tools, fence tighteners, and what was described as a very special item – a cane made of barbed wire.

That afternoon, the group voted to incorporate the Kansas Barbed Wire Collectors Association, Inc. (KBWCA), the second association of its kind. Plans were also made to host a special swap and sell session in the spring.

The first KBWCA Swap and Sell show was held on May 6-7, 1967 at the Rush County Fairgrounds in LaCrosse. Show hosts had initially planned for 44



display tables, but by 10:00 a.m. Saturday, they were sold out and had to secure additional tables and display space. Before the show was over, the Exhibit Building was overflowing with

displays. Collectors were in attendance from Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Nebraska, Colorado, South Dakota, and several towns in Kansas. Between 1500 and 2000 people passed through the fairground gates.

Two "firsts" took place at the La Crosse show. The *World's Champion Barbed Wire Splicing Contest™* gave contestants a chance to compete against each other to see who could mend a fence in the shortest amount of time with the strongest and tightest splice. J. Delevan Smith, Oklahoma, defeated over a dozen other contestants to claim the title as the first World Champion.



The first Barbed Wire Auction was started as an experiment to show non-collectors the value of some wires. Russell Lohrey of La Crosse was chosen to be the first barbed wire auctioneer. Subsequent auctions set the value of wires for the entire hobby.

In a few years, the KBWCA grew to nearly 350 members from 18 different states. Magazines across the country ran stories about the hobby. In 1969, Ivan Krug, the local attorney whose office has been referred to as the birthplace of barbed wire collecting in Kansas, made an appearance on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* to talk about the hobby and to give Johnny an opportunity to try his hand at splicing barbed wire. Barbed wire, a once prominent industry that had all but faded into the history books, was once again in the national spotlight.