

Mineral County



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Mineral County's first state Senator, Orville G. Willett, and his wife, Elsie, in front of the special compound built for the couple by Mineral County, by Mineral County Museum Archives.

Orville Grant Willett, the first Senator elected to represent the newly-formed Mineral County in 1915 was also responsible for suggesting the name of the new county in 1914 when citizens voted on the matter. During Senator Willett's second term in Helena in 1917, he was diagnosed with Hansen's Disease, commonly known as leprosy, having been exposed to the disease during the Spanish-American War. Living in Alberton, MT, at the time, local residents were concerned but also appreciative of his service to Mineral County. In February 1918, County Commissioners voted to lease a parcel of land from the State of Montana for a period of five years and construct a home on the property for the benefit of Senator Willett and his wife, Elsie. The Willetts moved to the property two and a half miles west of Alberton and by the end of the summer had a new home in which they were quarantined until 1927. An article from *The Missoulian* in 1923 states that, "...the Willetts are not lonely, as they had been given a radio that would receive broadcasts from distances of up to 2,000 miles." Mrs. Willett also had a piano and a Victrola and they gardened and did as much as the weakened Willett could do. You can visit that very site today along I-90 eastbound at the St. Johns Rest Area, west of Alberton.

Suddenly, 2020 doesn't seem quite so bad.

In Times of Pandemic, Demand for Local Foods Increases

Superior Meats has been growing at a fast clip of 10 to 15% yearly, and gross sales have tripled in the last five or six years. Jerry Stroot, its entrepreneurial owner, knew he had a great operating and sales team, but without a bigger and better location, Superior Meats growth would end. They were flat out of space.

Like good entrepreneurs do, Stroot found some great business partners. The Mineral County Economic Development Corporation and Lake County Community Development Corporation supported the work of finding financing for an expansion, while local contractor MIH Construction did the building work.

An addition of nearly 5,000 square feet in the back will double, if not triple, the slaughter capacity. Specialty meats from deer, elk, antelope, moose and bear will be processed faster as new equipment and more room will allow this portion of the business to operate daily rather than only three days a week. 2,400 square feet of additional space in the front will host a large variety of meats and new products. With more grocery stores and restaurants carrying their products every month, Superior Meats is back on an impressive path of growth.

Business as Usual (with a few small adjustments)

Throughout 2020, life continued its march ever forward. Despite a global pandemic and restrictive health precautions, crops and livestock still needed tending, community leaders still needed guidance, and 4-H youth and volunteers still needed support. Once more into the breach went MSU Extension in Mineral County.

This year did not seem all that different for Extension in Mineral County. Organized programmatic instruction has never been a major need of the community, but more the demand for the individualistic approach to instruction and information sharing. This was more evident this year, with many people working from home or self-isolating, especially early in the year, there was a marked increase in the need for horticulture resources and instruction, but online instruction platforms do not appear to be popular in Mineral County. A casual survey of constituents identified limited bandwidth, unfamiliarity with technology, and unease to be recurrent issues with virtual instruction. This information supports the individualistic approach by Mineral County MSU Extension to best serve the needs of Mineral County.

The Mineral County event that did not take the virtual route was a special 4-H Fair in August. When the Mineral County Fair, like so many others in the state, was cancelled by the Fair Board in June, Mineral County MSU Extension stepped up and planned a “4-H only” event with approval by County Commissioners and the local Health Department. Safety guidelines established by the Montana 4-H Center for Youth Development provided a clear and easy framework within which local 4-H youth and adult volunteers could still exhibit projects, display knowledge and skills, and receive feedback and recognition for their efforts. One benefit of this year’s event and the absence of other activities during the fair: 4-H youth and families were able to spend more time preparing and helping each other than is usual during a normal year. One parent remarked, “It’s nice to see the kids able to focus on their animals and spend more time practicing in the show ring. Normally, with the rodeo and concerts, we don’t get the time.”

Perhaps there are some good things that come out of a quarantine.

Oh, and former state Senator Orville G. Willett? Unfortunately, his condition deteriorated and in 1927, along with his wife Elsie, he traveled by train to a leprosarium in Carville, Louisiana. He died there on January 10, 1928. No one seems to know what became of his endearing wife, Elsie. Perhaps she returned to her home state of Kentucky or changed her name; it remains a mystery.



Top: Jerry Stroot, owner of Superior Meats, inside the expansion funded through the efforts of Mineral County MSU Extension, by Clark Fork Valley Press/Mineral Independent, Monte Turner, published 26 March 2020; **Bottom:** A 4-H member prepares to show a cat during the Mineral County 4-H Only Fair in August 2020, by Emily Park

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Montana State University Extension is an ADA/EO/AA Veteran’s Preference Employer and provider of educational outreach.

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