

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 1 of 26

- 1- Groton Ford ad
- 1- Recycling Trailers in Groton
- 1- Today's Information
- 2- Fjelstad selected for HOBY Seminar
- 2- Professional Management Services New Years Ad
- Ad
- 2- McKiver Collision New Years Ad
- 3- Logos added to Groton signs
- 3- Olson Backhoe New Years Ad
- 3- Howie's Fitness Center New Years Ad
- 4- Missing dogs
- 4- Groton Coffee Cup Bowling
- 4- Conde National Bowling
- 4- Weber Landscaping New Years Ad
- 4- Harry Implement New Years Ad
- 5- Schwan's to give to SD Destination Imagination
- 6 - Today in Weather History
- 6- City Dog License Ad
- 7- Local Weather Forecast
- 8- National Weather Map
- 8- Local Weather
- 9- Daily Devotional
- 9- Olde Bank Floral Ad
- 10 - News from the Associated Press

Wednesday, December 30

No School

Senior Menu: Hearty vegetable beef soup, chicken salad sandwich, mandarin oranges, oatmeal raisin cookie.

Birthdays: Alec Oleson, Alex Graf, Breslyn Hinman

7:00am: United Methodist Men's Bible Study

12:00pm: Kiwanis meets at the Community Center

Thursday, December 31

No School

New Year's Eve

Senior Menu: Chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes and gravy, corn, frosted brownie, whole wheat bread.

Anniversaries: Paul & Tina Kosel, Jake & Tiffany Unzen, Ralph & Virginia Breitreutz

Birthdays: Jill Cutler • Braiden Craig • Brian Koens

Friday, January 1, 2016

No School

New Year's Day

Anniv: Kevin & Sharolyn Jondahl

Birthdays: Lauren Harrison, Patricia Larson, Stephen Duncan, Tyler Kolb.

Open: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located at 10 East Railroad Ave.

The cardboard/paper

recycling trailer at the school is **Open**

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GROTON
Ford

GROTONFORD.COM 605-397-2311

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 2 of 26

Fjelstad selected for HOBY Seminar

Jenifer Fjelstad was selected as the Groton High School ambassadors for the Hugh O'Brien Youth Foundation Leadership Seminar (HOBY). The purpose of HOBY is to motivate and develop future leaders. Students are prepared for positions in their school and helped to expand the talents that will serve them into the future by working with today's leaders.

Each spring HOBY Leadership Seminars are conducted in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Canada, and Mexico. One young man and one young woman are selected from each of these state seminars to attend the HOBY World Leadership Congress, which is held in the summer of 2015.

Jenifer's selection was based on leadership ability, sensitivity and concern for others, and the desire to learn and share knowledge and experience. The Groton Kiwanis Club annually sponsors sophomores as HOBY Ambassadors.

Jenifer is a sophomore at GHS and is the daughter of Clint and Tara Fjelstad. Her awards include JFK Firecracker, Show Choir Director's Choice (freshman), 4.0 honor roll and being selected as Student of the Month for December. She is involved in Destination Imagination, Oral Interpretation, Show Choir, Cross-Country and Cheerleading. Her volunteer activities include St. Paul's youth group, Adopt-A-Grandparent and Tutoring. Her future plans are undecided at this time.




Jenifer Fjelstad



Thank you for your patronage and we look forward to serving you from our downtown location!




happy new year



On the road, the rule is to always look ahead. May you reach your destination safely, but if you happen to have a mishap, let Allen at McKiver Collision get the dents and dings out of your vehicle.

Happy New Year!



Allen McKiver, Owner - 605-397-4747

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 3 of 26



Logos added to signs

Pictured is the new Groton highway signs, at four locations around the city.


This was a project of the Lions Club, and the Groton American Legion, and Groton Kiwanis Club paid for their individual logos.

Chris Frost, Lions president, erected all the signs.

Happy New Year

Thank God for this day.
As we continue this renewed journey of
Hope and Faith on this Earth,
may God, in His infinite mercy, grant
us the comfort we need to strengthen
our Hope and Faith in order to steady
our balance,
as we embark on this
wonderful trip round the
sun once again.
Meanwhile, let's celebrate our victory
over last year.
HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!!

Olson Backhoe & Trenching
397-8262



**It's time to put the squeeze on
for the new year!**
24-hour access to
Groton's fitness center is just
a phone call away.
Call Caitlin at 605-290-9719.
Happy Fitness New Year!

HOWIE'S
TRAINING STUDIO
24 HOURS PERSONAL TRAINING



Downtown Groton

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 4 of 26

**Missing one red male lab Buddy and one black female lab Lucy.
Call Franne Sippel 397-7949 or Marc 397-7950.**

Groton Coffee Cup League

Team Standings: Jungle Lanes 4, Ten Pins 2 1/2, James Valley 1 1/2, Kens 0

High Games: Penny Stolle 187, Gert Erickson 184, Sue Stanley 181.

High Series: Penny Stolle 486, Sue Stanley 482, Joyce Walter 478.

Conde National League

Team Standings: Mets 31 1/2 winners of first half, Giants 27, Cubs 26, Braves 26, Colts 23 1/2, Pirates 22

Men's High Games: Troy Lindberg 210; Chad Furney 197, 195; Topper Tastad 181; Lance Frohling 181

Men's High Series: Chad Furney 532, Troy Lindberg 531, Lance Frohling 452

Women's High Games: Mary Larson 174, Vickie Kramp 172, Michelle Johnson 165

Women's High Series: Vickie Kramp 459, Joyce Walter 439, Michelle Johnson 436



HAPPY NEW YEAR

This New Year,
Wish you a happy smile,
Hope you get through that
extra mile,
Wish you peace and prosperity,
May you excel in every path
with verity!

Happy New Year!

Weber Landscaping

Setting Higher Standards

Jeremy Weber • 605/380-7811



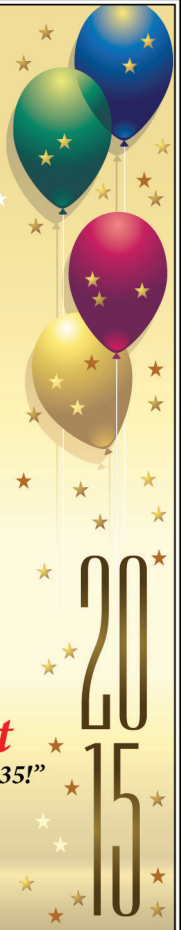
Let there be peace
on Earth in 2016 and
may peace be with
you and your family
throughout the year!

Harry Implement

"Family Owned & Operated Since 1935!"

(605) 395-6421 ~ Ferney

CASE II
AGRICULTURE



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 5 of 26

Here is how the Schwan's fundraiser works.

Customers phone in the order or order online
They use the code. 25179

If they regularly order online they are asked if they want to contribute to a fundraiser

That is when they put the code in.

Between Dec 2 and Jan 16,

we will earn 20% of sales
If a customer orders an ecertificate-and online gift card we get \$10 for the \$25 ecertificate.

When you get an ecertificate, you can go in and purchase right away or you can print it out
if you want to give it as a gift or save it for later.

Customers are limited to one ecertificate...BUT if you use an alternate email address you can purchase more than one

If you are not a regular Schwan's customer, when you place your order they will tell you what day
And approximate (2 hour) time they plan to deliver.

You can be a one time customer and support us.

If you order online you must give them a credit card number, however you can switch payment at the door.

It took me a few fundraisers to realize that if I purchase during the first 45 days I contribute 20% and save my ecertificates for after the Jan 16 date, duh! Before that I was purchasing ecertificates and using them right away.

Our greatest income will be during this 45 day period.
After that we will earn 5% until April 16.

Schwan's
Cares™
A Fundraising Network



Support Us

*Giving back to your community
never tasted so delicious.*

Schwan's Home Delivery offers over 350 delicious foods, flash-frozen at the peak of freshness and conveniently delivered to your door. Through Schwans-Cares.com, you can order from Schwan's Home Delivery and help our organization meet its fundraising goals. When you order by **January 16th, 2016**, 20% of product and 40% of eGift Card sales will go back to the organization.

Here are two ways to support us!

Order Online:

1. Visit Schwans-Cares.com
2. Enter Campaign ID: **25179** into the search box located in the upper right hand corner then click to open campaign.
3. Click "Shop to Give" and then select either the "Buy Now" or "Shop Now" option.
4. Select team member, if applicable
5. Start shopping!

Order by Phone:

Call 1-855-870-7208 and provide Campaign ID: **25179**

Thank you for your support!

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Shop online at Schwans-Cares.com
or call 1-855-870-7208



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 6 of 26

Today in Weather History

December 30, 1985: Winds gusted to 40 to 50 mph over northern South Dakota through the day and into the southern part of the state by late afternoon. The strong winds lowered visibilities to near zero at times between Lemmon in Perkins County and Faith in Meade County. The strongest wind gusts were to 63 mph at Mitchell. At 9:33pm CST, the strong winds blew a semi-tractor trailer off the highway one mile east of Aberdeen.

December 30, 2010: A strong upper level low pressure trough and associated surface low pressure area moved across the region bringing the first of two consecutive blizzards to central and northeast South Dakota. Snowfall amounts of 3 to 6 inches combined with bitter cold north winds of 25 to 40 mph caused widespread blizzard conditions across central and northeast South Dakota from the late morning until the evening hours. Near zero visibilities caused dangerous travel conditions resulting in the closing of Interstates 29 and 90 along with several highways across the region. Several hundred people were stranded as a result of the storm. A group of fishermen had to be rescued in Day County when they became stranded on the ice. The snowfall began across the area anywhere from 7 to 11 am CST and ended between 10 pm and 1 am CST.

1880 - The temperature at Charlotte, NC, plunged to an all-time record cold reading of 5 degrees below zero, a record which was equalled on the 21st of January in 1985. (The Weather Channel)

1917 - A great cold wave set many records in the northeastern U.S. The mercury plunged to 13 degrees below zero at New York City, and to 15 degrees below zero at Boston. Temperature readings dipped below zero at Boston five nights in a row. Berlin NH hit 44 degrees below zero in the "Great World War I Cold Wave," and Saint Johnsbury VT reached 43 degrees below zero. (David Ludlum)

1933 - The temperature reached 50 degrees below zero at Bloomfield, VT. It was the coldest reading in modern records for New England. The temperature at Pittsburgh NH reached 44 degrees below zero. (David Ludlum)

1955 - Anchorage, AK, reported an all-time record snow depth of 47 inches. (30th-1st) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A storm in the western U.S. produced heavy snow in Utah, with 28 inches reported in the Mount Holly and Elk Meadows area. Strong winds prevailed ahead of a cold front in the central U.S. Winds gusted to 46 mph at Dodge City KS, and reached 80 mph at Ruidoso NM. Strong northerly winds, ushering arctic cold into the north central U.S., created blizzard conditions in western Minnesota and central and eastern South Dakota. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Unseasonably cold weather prevailed in the southwestern U.S. A week of subfreezing temperatures in southern California claimed the lives of five people. Redding CA was blanketed with four inches of snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Extreme cold continued across northern Maine. Milo ME was the cold spot in the nation with a morning low of 38 degrees below zero, and the low of 31 degrees below zero at Caribou ME was a December record for that location. Freezing rain spread across much of Lower Michigan, knocking out electrical power to 1.9 million customers in southeastern Lower Michigan. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm

Data)

2008 - Severe to extreme drought was observed across parts of the Hawaiian Islands, the western continental U.S., and parts of Georgia and South Carolina. Meanwhile, severe to exceptional drought conditions were present across southern Texas. (NCDC)

2016 DOG LICENSES

AVAILABLE NOW!!

Licenses due by Dec. 31, 2015

Fines start after Dec. 31, 2015

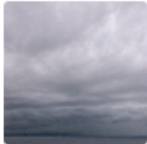

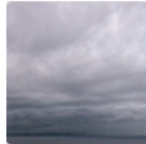
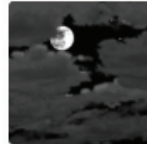



Dogs CAN NOT be licensed without providing updated rabies shot information, please bring records for each dog to City Hall


Please contact City Hall as soon as possible if you no longer have any dogs

Spayed or neutered dogs are \$5 per dog, otherwise \$10 per dog

Groton Daily Independent


Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 7 of 26

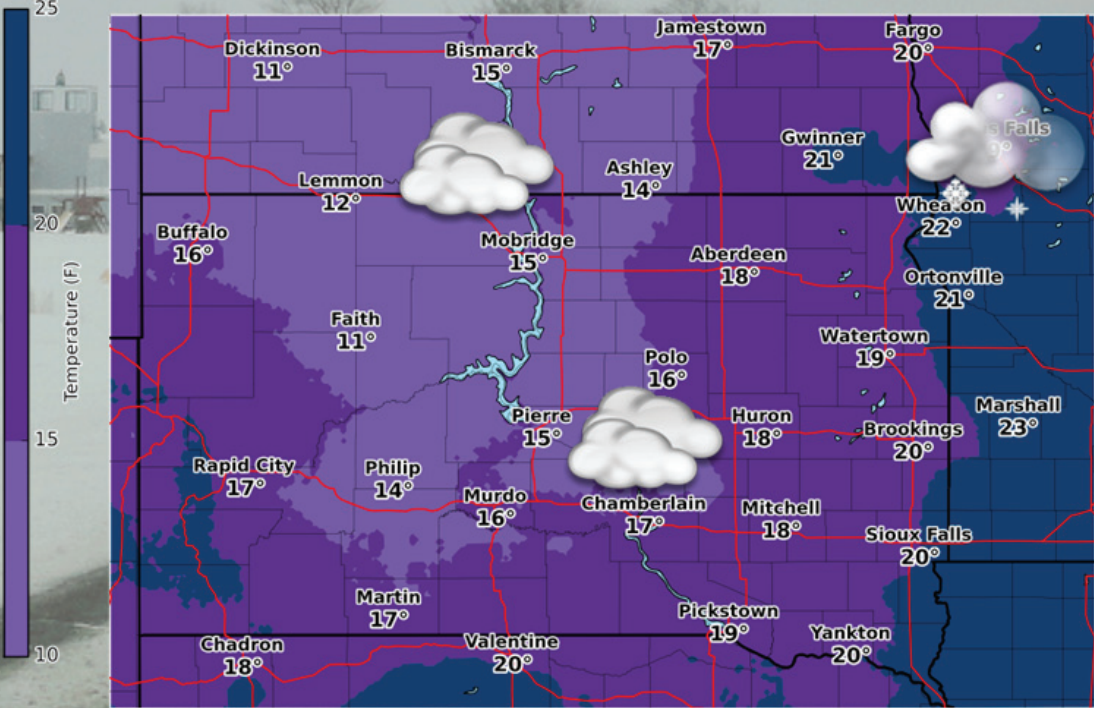
Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	New Year's Day	Friday Night	Saturday
						
Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Cloudy	Decreasing Clouds	Sunny	Clear	Sunny
High: 18 °F	Low: 2 °F	High: 18 °F	Low: 8 °F	High: 27 °F	Low: 10 °F	High: 27 °F






Cool & Cloudy

Light snow possible through the morning -- mainly for parts of far NE SD and west central MN





National Weather Service – Aberdeen, SD

 weather.gov/Aberdeen
 National Weather Service Aberdeen
 @NWSAberdeen
Updated: 12/30/2015 3:43 AM Central

Published on: 12/30/2015 at 3:49AM

Light snow is expected through Wednesday morning, although total snow amounts should remain under 3 inches across the area. The heaviest snow will remain south and east of the region. Otherwise, expect dry conditions and temperatures slightly below normal through the remainder of the workweek.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 8 of 26

Yesterday's Weather

High: 18.7 at 1:44 PM

Low: 13.2 at 12:12 AM

High Gust: 12 at 5:13 AM

Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 52° in 1980

Record Low: -34° in 1917

Average High: 23°F

Average Low: 3°F

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.50

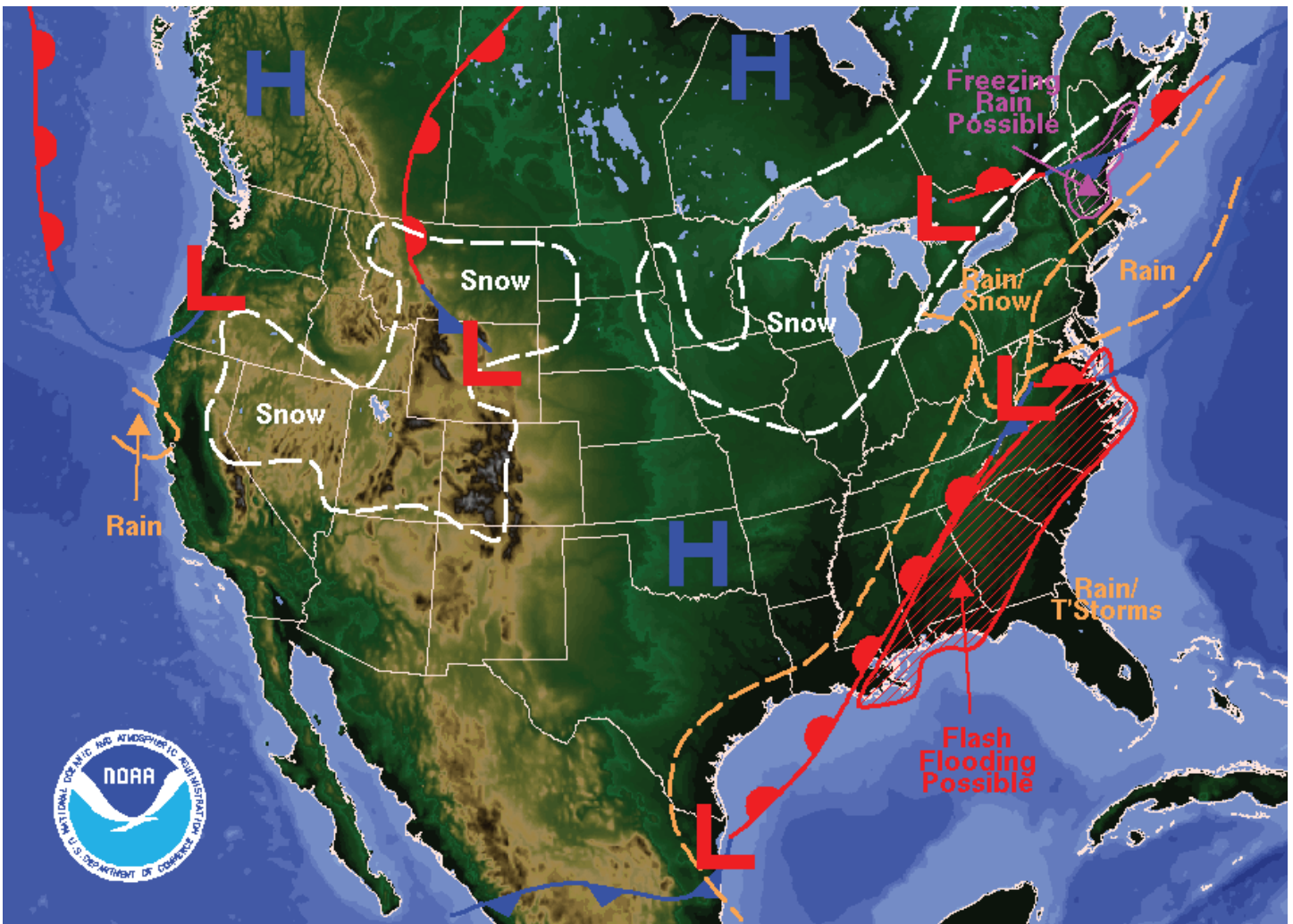
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.55

Average Precip to date: 21.70

Precip Year to Date: 20.37

Sunset Tonight: 4:59 p.m.

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:13 a.m.



Weather Forecast for Wed, Dec 30, 2015, issued 2:17 AM EST
DOC/NOAA/NWS/NCEP/Weather Prediction Center
Prepared by McCreynolds based on WPC, SPC and NHC forecasts



WITH GOD, ALL THINGS...

During a family conference, one small son was confused. He did not fully understand the discussion, so in his innocence he asked, "What's going on here?"

Might that same question have been on Mary's mind and in her heart as she looked at the Baby Jesus? Could she completely understand all that God had in His plan for her son, herself and Joseph? Perhaps as she looked in the face of her child, she was filled with questions. No doubt she knew the Scriptures of the Old Testament and was able to catch a glimpse of God at work. Surely she had a faith that would surpass that of most. Indeed her trust was larger than life. But for her to know what God was

planning was something that would have been humanly impossible.

Certainly the question, "What's going on here" would have surfaced. We can begin with the fact of a virgin giving birth to a child, let alone the Messiah, that had been promised and long awaited. But it happened when God was ready for it to happen, as He planned it.

As we come to the end of this year and look forward to the one that is fast approaching, let's pause and review our "impossibilities" that are now miraculous events exposing God's power and plan in our lives.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, give us the faith we lack to see Your presence and protection at work in our lives. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture for Today: Luke 1:37
For nothing will be impossible with God."

Major Inventory Reduction Sale!

BIG SALE

Going on NOW!

50%

ALL Christmas Decor
ALL Kids Merchandise

30%

ALL Cold Weather Head & Hand
ALL Silk Florals

20%

ALL Everyday Home Decor



Fresh flowers, home decor, Dark Canyon Coffee & so much more
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www.oldebankfloralsd.com



Olde Bank
Floral



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 10 of 26

News from the Associated Press

Governor appoints Olson To Game, Fish And Parks Commission

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Dennis Daugaard has appointed Russell Olson of Madison to the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Commission.

Daugaard says Olson is an avid outdoorsman who is committed to conservation, and he appreciates Olson's willingness to serve in the important role.

Olson served in the state House of Representatives from 2007-09 and the state Senate from 2009-13. Also He served for three years as senate majority leader. Olson is currently chief executive officer of Heartland Consumers Power District, based in Madison.

He says he looks forward to making sure that the next generation of outdoor enthusiasts is able to enjoy the outdoors as he has.

Olson replaces Duane Sather of Sioux Falls, who is retiring after four years on the commission. Olson's term ends January 2020.

Region's taxidermists headed to Watertown for 2016 gathering

WATERTOWN, S.D. (AP) — Taxidermists from the Midwest will be traveling to Watertown for the South Dakota Taxidermist Association's 2016 competition and convention.

The event starts on March 18 at the Watertown Event Center.

Kyle Schlessor is president of the South Dakota Taxidermist Association. He says he expects between 80 and 100 taxidermists to attend the event, adding up to as many as 140 different mounts to display.

The gathering is also a competition featuring prizes. The convention's species challenge is the bobcat.

Schlessor says he enjoys meeting people and says the event is a good way for new taxidermists to learn what it's about.

He says the event will attract people from Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska and the Dakotas. The public can attend the gathering.

Tuesday's Scores **The Associated Press**

BOYS' BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 52, Rapid City Stevens 42
Canistota 58, Flandreau 51
Corsica/Stickney 92, Alcester-Hudson 62
Eureka/Bowdle 69, Northwestern 53
Findlay Prep, Nev. 94, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 50
Irene-Wakonda 58, Sully Buttes 47
Lausanne Collegiate, Tenn. 58, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 45
McCook Central/Montrose 53, Scotland 31
Minneapolis Henry, Minn. 104, Bridgewater-Emery 74
New England, N.D. 62, Lemmon 52
Pierre 64, Watertown 57
Platte-Geddes 50, Aberdeen Christian 43
Sioux Falls Washington 70, Mitchell 53
Sisseton 44, Elk Point-Jefferson 30
Solen, N.D. 62, McLaughlin 40
St. Thomas More 54, Aberdeen Roncalli 42
Tea Area 61, Vermillion 57

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 11 of 26

Todd County 92, Bennett County 53
Winner 47, Bon Homme 40
Wynot, Neb. 65, Ethan 43
Dakota Holiday Tournament
Edgeley-Kulm-Montpelier, N.D. 62, Leola/Frederick 34
Ellendale, N.D. 40, Britton-Hecla 39
Milbank Tournament
Langford 50, Milbank Area 39
Ortonville, Minn. 62, Webster 45
Northern State Wolves Classic
Redfield/Doland 65, Fargo Oak Grove Lutheran, N.D. 63
NSU Wolves Classic
Harding County 58, LaMoure-Litchville-Marion, N.D. 33
Parkston Classic
Dakota Valley 79, Parkston 57
Snowball Classic
Burke/South Central 63, Hot Springs 61
Colome 86, Centerville 54
Swiftel Classic
Deuel 53, Lake Preston 38
Gregory 70, Estelline 28
Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 58, Wilmot 44

GIRLS' BASKETBALL

Elk Point-Jefferson 55, Viborg-Hurley 51
St. Thomas More 33, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 27
Watertown 62, Pierre 59
Winner 67, Bon Homme 22
Chadron Tournament (Invite)
Spearfish 61, Valentine, Neb. 35
Dakota Holiday Tournament
Edgeley-Kulm-Montpelier, N.D. 59, Leola/Frederick 31
Ellendale, N.D. 41, Britton-Hecla 28
Huron Holiday Classic
Bison 51, Iroquois 27
Chester 42, Jones County 34
Hitchcock-Tulare 42, Mitchell Christian 32
James Valley Christian 54, Potter County 41
McIntosh 55, Marty Indian 52
Marshall Tournament (SMSU)
Sioux Falls Washington 55, Marshall, Minn. 38
First Round
Fulda, Minn. 58, Wilmot 43
Milbank Tournament
Waubay/Summit 40, Milbank Area 37
Waverly-South Shore 54, Ortonville, Minn. 49
Snowball Classic
Platte-Geddes 52, Wall 46
Swiftel Classic
Belle Fourche 37, Sisseton 34
Winner Tournament
Waubay 40, Milbank Area 37

Custer city planner arrested on rape, child porn charges

CUSTER, S.D. (AP) — A planning administrator with the city of Custer is in custody on a more than \$1 million bond after authorities accused him of raping a child and possessing child pornography.

Pennington County Jail records show Scott Simianer faces three charges including first-degree rape of a child younger than 13, and possessing, manufacturing or distributing child pornography.

Custer County State's Attorney Tracy Kelley tells the Rapid City Journal Simianer was arrested on suspicion of rape Dec. 21, and the pornography charge was added after authorities searched Simianer's home and computer.

An initial hearing on the pornography charge was held Monday. A preliminary hearing on the rape charge is scheduled for Jan. 5.

It wasn't immediately clear Tuesday if Simianer has an attorney. A message seeking comment left at a number listed as Simianer's in a public telephone listing wasn't immediately returned.

Sioux Falls surpasses snowfall total for last winter

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — It's not quite the new year, and Sioux Falls already has more snow than it had all of last winter.

The National Weather Service says the latest storm dropped 5.4 inches of snow on the city, pushing the season total to about 34.9 inches. Last winter's total in the city was 32 inches.

The city of Sioux Falls has issued its fourth snow alert of the season, telling residents to get vehicles off the streets so they can be plowed. City Street-Fleet Manager Galynn (GAY'-lihn) Huber says there are 3,000 miles of street lanes that need clearing.

Alex Ferguson with the National Weather Service in Sioux Falls says another inch of snow could accumulate in the city between 2 and 8 a.m. Wednesday.

Members of state's new mental illness task force appointed

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — More than 20 people will make up a task force proposed by the state's top judge to study how mental illness is affecting the court system.

The members of the Task Force on Community Justice and Mental Illness Early Intervention were announced Tuesday. The group includes sheriffs, prosecutors, mental health professionals and others.

Chief Justice David Gilbertson will co-chair the group, which he proposed after The Argus Leader newspaper in Sioux Falls reported that a backlog of mental competency evaluations of criminal suspects is taxing county budgets and raising concerns about the rights of defendants. There were 147 requests in state court for mental competency exams in fiscal 2015.

The group will analyze why and how individuals with mental illness come into contact with the criminal justice system. It will also examine the detention of those individuals in county jails.

Fall River residents say no to Edgemont soil farm

DIRK LAMMERS, Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A tally of ballots held in locked boxes for more than a year shows that Fall River County voters rejected a company's plan to take in and clean oil-contaminated soil near Edgemont.

Election officials counted the votes Tuesday, and unofficial results show residents defeated the ordinance 53 percent to 47 percent. The official results were being canvassed late Tuesday morning, but the decision was not expected to change, said Fall River County State's Attorney James Sword.

The South Dakota Supreme Court ruled earlier this month that Fall River County acted within its jurisdiction when it rescinded a resolution approving the High Plains Resources soil farm project before passing a nearly identical one.

The second resolution was referred to a public vote, but a judge ruled in October 2014 that commissioners

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 13 of 26

did not have the authority to rescind the original resolution and ordered that referendum votes should not be counted. The state Supreme Court on Election Day 2014 ruled that the county could count the ballots, but some of the commissioners opposed tallying the votes and the ballot boxes sat dormant, Sword said.

The state Supreme Court earlier this month ruled that the ballots should be counted.

"It kills it for now," Sword said. "One more case is pending."

The issue is again headed to court, as a second lawsuit filed by High Plains Resources challenges whether the ordinance should have ever been referred to a public vote, Sword said.

High Plains attorney Brad Gordon declined comment Tuesday.

The county commission in March 2014 approved the soil farm, in which contaminated soil would be delivered to the site and repeatedly turned over to gradually remove toxins. The commission later sought to rescind its decision because residents were not given proper notice that the issue was being considered. Residents also complained that a single printed copy of the ordinance was available for commissioners to share, and no copies were made available to the two residents in attendance.

The question came up again in June 2014, with the commission giving the public a chance to comment before rescinding its March resolution and passing one that was nearly identical. Unhappy residents collected petition signatures to refer the resolution to last November's ballot.

Iowa trio arrested in prostitution sting in South Dakota

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Three people from Sioux City, Iowa, have been arrested in a prostitution sting in Sioux Falls.

The man and two women were arrested Monday at a hotel after police responded to an online ad.

Sioux Falls Police spokesman Sam Clemens says officers arranged a meeting, discussed prices and arrested the women when they agreed to a deal.

Clemens says 23-year-old Brittany Leners and 28-year-old Amanda Meyer are each facing one count of prostitution.

Clemens says 26-year-old Rashad Lee was arrested on one count of pimping after police found out he had driven the women to Sioux Falls.

It wasn't immediately clear Tuesday whether the individuals have attorneys.

This is the second set of prostitution-related arrests in Sioux Falls since Sunday, when a pair also from Iowa was arrested after police found an online ad and arranged to meet a woman.

Asian stocks mixed, with some cheered by overseas rally

YURI KAGEYAMA, AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Asian shares were mixed in early Wednesday trading, with only some markets cheered by an overseas rally.

KEEPING SCORE: Japan's benchmark Nikkei 225 gained 0.3 percent in the morning session to 19,037.31, but trading was muted on the last trading day of the year ahead of the New Year's holidays. South Korea's Kospi dipped 0.3 percent to 1,960.75. Hong Kong's Hang Seng fell 0.2 percent to 21,957.97, while the Shanghai Composite added 0.2 percent to 3,570.78. Other regional shares were also mixed, rising in Indonesia but dropping in Taiwan and Singapore.

WALL STREET: Technology and health care companies led a broad rally in U.S. stocks. The Dow Jones industrial average rose 192.71 points, or 1.1 percent, to finish at 17,720.98. The S&P 500 index gained 21.86 points, or 1.1 percent, to 2,078.36. The Nasdaq composite added 66.95 points, or 1.3 percent, to 5,107.94.

US ECONOMY: The latest batch of U.S. economic data added to the upbeat sentiments. The Conference Board said its consumer confidence index increased from the previous month, reflecting positive views on the economy and job market. Separately, a key gauge of home values indicated that U.S. home prices climbed 5.5 percent in October from a year earlier.

THE QUOTE: "This year's Santa rally is doing what many of its predecessors have done. The stock market continues to push higher on thin volume and with no need for a macro catalyst. At the moment, the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 14 of 26

market is all about sentiment and perceived value," said Ric Spooner, chief market analyst at CMC Markets. He warned that caution could set in after the new year comes.

ENERGY: Benchmark U.S. crude fell 67 cents to \$37.20 a barrel on the New York Mercantile Exchange, losing some of the overnight price recovery. Brent crude, used to price international oils, slipped 49 cents to \$37.30 a barrel in London.

CURRENCIES: The dollar rose to 120.50 yen, up from 120.37 yen late Tuesday. The euro slipped to \$1.0927 from \$1.0977.

How the Dow Jones industrial average fared on Tuesday

The Associated Press

U.S. stocks are closing broadly higher on Tuesday as traders were encouraged by a pickup in consumer confidence and rising prices for energy. The gain pulled the Standard & Poor's 500 index back into positive territory for the year.

On Tuesday:

The Dow Jones industrial average rose 192.71 points, or 1.1 percent, to 17,720.98.

The S&P 500 index added 21.86 points, or 1.1 percent, to 2,078.36.

The Nasdaq composite gained 66.95 points, or 1.3 percent, to 5,107.94.

For the week:

The Dow is up 168.81 points, or 1 percent.

The S&P 500 index is up 17.37 points, 0.8 percent.

The Nasdaq is up 59.45 points, or 1.2 percent.

For the year:

The Dow is down 102.09 points, or 0.6 percent.

The S&P is up 19.46 points, or 1 percent.

The Nasdaq is up 371.88 points, or 7.9 percent.

US stocks are ending 2015 mostly flat, capping volatile year

ALEX VEIGA, AP Business Writer

The U.S. stock market took investors for a wild ride in 2015, but in the end it was a trip to nowhere.

Despite veering between record highs and the steepest dive in four years, the stock market is on track to end the year essentially flat. That means if you invested in a fund that tracks the Standard & Poor's 500 index, you have little to show for the past 12 months.

"It's been mildly disappointing," said Michael Baele, managing director at the Private Client Reserve at U.S. Bank. "Any time that you come in toward the end of the year close to flat you always want a little bit more."

Markets overseas had their own challenges.

China's market surged in the late spring and then fell sharply in the summer despite several efforts by China's government to stem the decline, while Japan's market was on track to end moderately higher for the year after that country's government stepped up its economic stimulus program. In Europe, Britain's market was headed for a decline for the year, while indexes in Germany and France were on their way to big gains.

In the U.S., the market got 2015 off to a slow start as investors worried about falling crude oil prices, flat earnings growth and when and how quickly the Federal Reserve would begin raising interest rates.

By May, the major indexes were hitting new highs. Even the Nasdaq bested its dot-com high-water mark set in March 2000.

The market didn't stay in milestone territory for long, though.

Worries about slowing growth in China and elsewhere gave reason for the Fed to pause and for investors to fret, even as the U.S. economy continued to create jobs and consumer confidence improved. Weak company earnings, largely due to the strong dollar and falling oil prices, didn't do much for the market's confidence.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 15 of 26

By August, the anxiety had deepened and the market dropped sharply. The three major U.S. indexes went into a correction, commonly defined as a loss of at least 10 percent from a recent peak, for the first time in four years.

That slide didn't last long, either.

Within several weeks, the market had mostly bounced back. The Nasdaq composite returned to positive territory for the year, while the Dow average and S&P 500 remained slightly in the red until December.

In the weeks that followed, the S&P 500 inched back into positive territory, leaving the Dow as the only major market indicator negative for the year.

Including dividends, the S&P 500 is on track to return 2 percent, following a return of 13.7 percent in 2014.

"There was a lot of news that kept hitting the market and the market kept shrugging it all off and hung in there," said J.J. Kinahan, chief strategist at TD Ameritrade. "I'd say, given all that the market faced this year, it was pretty strong."

These were some of the key factors driving U.S. markets in 2015:

WAITING FOR THE FED

Wall Street watched few things more closely this year than the Federal Reserve. Traders had been predicting early on that the central bank would begin raising its benchmark interest rate as early as March. When that didn't happen, investors turned their focus to June, only to be disappointed again.

Eventually, in December, the Fed took action. It nudged its benchmark overnight borrowing rate higher, its first increase in interest rates in nearly a decade.

The Fed made it clear that it was expressing a vote of confidence in the U.S. economy by doing so and that future increases would be gradual. That helped reassure investors that the Fed wouldn't raise rates too quickly and thereby stunt the economy's growth.

"It really was central banks looming large over the market," Baele said. "The market had a fair amount of fear that the Fed raising rates was a risk to the market. It's turned around now."

CORRECTION ARRIVES

The bull market had racked up six years of annual gains by the time the calendars turned to 2015. The last time it had a correction was 2011. Historically, that's an unusually long time for the market to go without a meaningful pullback. That plus a string of record highs in late 2014 led many to think the market was overdue a drop.

The long-awaited correction finally arrived in August. Late in the month indexes dropped sharply as investors worried that a slowdown in China's huge economy could spread to other countries.

Yet after an 11 percent plunge between Aug. 17 and 25, and another, less steep drop in late September, the market began to struggle higher. By late November it had recouped all the losses from its late summer swoon.

Once investors determined that China's slowdown would not spillover to the U.S. and European economies, "then we had a very rapid recovery from that very sharp decline," Jeremy Zirin, chief equities strategist at UBS Wealth Management Americas.

EARNINGS DRAG

A big reason why the market finished flat in 2015 is that company earnings growth has also been largely flat.

That was due primarily to the impact of falling oil prices on energy sector earnings. Also, the rapid appreciation of the dollar constrained earnings for companies that do a lot of business overseas, including Procter & Gamble, Tiffany, Gap and Avon.

As a result, earnings growth for companies in the S&P 500 index went from 7 percent in 2014 to essentially zero in 2015, Zirin said.

Excluding energy, earnings for the rest of the S&P 500 would be up about 7 percent this year, Zirin said.

With so few companies producing meaningful growth, investors homed in on those that did. Among the biggest gainers: Facebook, Amazon, Netflix and Alphabet, Google's parent company.

"There's only been a handful of really strong performers on a market cap-weighted index that have driven us to performance while the majority of the indices and the majority of the stocks are actually negative

for the year," said Darrell Cronk, president of Wells Fargo Investment Institute.

SLOW-GROWTH ECONOMY

The U.S. economy didn't do the stock market any favors in 2015.

It expanded at a slight 0.6 percent annual rate in the first three months of the year, depressed by unusually severe winter weather and disruptions at West Coast ports. The economy revved up in the next quarter, growing at an annual rate of 3.9 percent, but slowed to a gain of 2.1 percent in the July-September quarter.

Consumer spending remained a bright spot, however. That's one reason why consumer discretionary stocks, a category that includes big retailers and car makers, were the biggest gainers in the S&P 500.

DuPont moves ahead on job cuts ahead of Dow merger

SARAH SKIDMORE SELL, AP Business Writer

DuPont will cut 1,700 jobs in its home state of Delaware and thousands more globally as it prepares for its merger with Dow Chemical.

Dow and DuPont announced earlier this month that they would join to create a giant chemical producer that will eventually be split into three independent companies.

At that time, DuPont announced a \$700 million cost savings and restructuring program but did not specify how many jobs would be impacted or where. DuPont CEO Ed Breen sent a letter to employees Tuesday informing them that approximately 1,700 Delaware positions would be eliminated in the beginning of the year.

DuPont, which has been based in Delaware for 213 years, said it would have preferred to let affected employees know of the news first. But it made the announcement now, amid the holidays, because it is legally required to inform the state by the end of the year of the local job cuts. The company has approximately 54,000 employees worldwide and the restructuring program will ultimately affect about 10 percent of that workforce.

Delaware governor Jack Markell said the announcement of the job cuts is "deeply disappointing."

"DuPont's number one asset is its people, and the innovations that the company has produced during its storied history are a testament to the quality of those people," Markell said in a statement.

The combined company, called DowDuPont, will split into three separate entities that will focus on material science, agriculture, and specialty products.

That specialty products company, which would combine DuPont's nutrition and health, industrial biosciences, safety and protection, and electronics and communications segments with Dow's electronic materials business, will be based in Delaware.

The combined Dow-DuPont business will have dual headquarters in Delaware and Michigan, where each company is based, until it separates into three independent publicly traded companies focused on agriculture, material science and specialty products.

The Dow, DuPont deal, if it goes forward, would be among the largest in an unprecedented year in mergers and acquisitions. The value of buyouts proposed and completed this year has reached a staggering \$5.03 trillion, up 37 percent from just last year, according to Dealogic.

It is the first time that takeovers have exceeded the \$5 trillion level, fueled by extremely low interest rates. The Federal Reserve raised interest rates for the first time in nearly a decade less than two weeks ago.

Dow and DuPont expect their combination will cut annual expenses by \$3 billion.

A look at past car accidents involving N. Korean officials

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea's announcement that the country's top official in charge of relations with South Korea died in a traffic accident gave few details, triggering questions about the death of a man who was dubbed as a close associate of absolute leader Kim Jong Un.

He's not the only senior North Korean official reported to have died in a car accident. While information in the secretive, authoritarian state is often impossible to confirm, outside observers use the officials' reported feuding with their political opponents to guess who might have been behind their demise. They

also speculate the officials might have been driving after overnight drinking parties.

A look at past high-profile, mysterious car accidents in North Korea:

— June 3, 2010: KCNA says Ri Je Gang, first vice department director of the Workers' Party's Central Committee, died in a traffic accident at age 80 the previous day. Ri reportedly bickered with Jang Song Thaek, a powerful uncle of Kim Jong Un, who was eventually executed by his nephew for alleged treason in 2013.

— Dec. 26, 2009: KCNA says Ri Chol Bong, chief secretary of the Workers' Party's Kangwon provincial committee, died in a traffic accident at age 78 the previous day. There was little speculation on Ri, who was relatively little known to outsiders.

— September 2006: Years before he was executed, Jang survived a car accident, according to South Korean media reports. Foreign analysts believe Jang was sent to a labor camp for two years in the mid-2000s in what was seen as a move by then-leader Kim Jong Il, the late father of Kim Jong Un, to clip his wings.

— October 2003: KCNA reports Kim Yong Sun, a senior North Korean official involved in reconciliation efforts with South Korea, died of injuries sustained in a traffic accident four months earlier. Kim Yong Sun was a close aide to Kim Jong Il. But Kim Jong Il's military, which traditionally favors a hard-line stance on South Korea, had reportedly tried to hold him in check. Kim Yong Sun was the only senior North Korean official who sat in at the historic summit between Kim Jong Il and then-South Korean President Kim Dae-jung in 2000.

China finds storm caused sinking of cruiser that killed 442

LOUISE WATT, Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese authorities blamed freak weather for the capsizing of a cruise ship that killed hundreds earlier this year, but also recommended that the captain be further investigated and representatives of the shipping company and local authorities be punished for management flaws, state media announced Wednesday.

The disaster on the Yangtze River on the evening of June 1 killed 442 people and left just 12 survivors. The Eastern Star was carrying many elderly tourists on a 10-day cruise from Nanjing in China's east up-stream to Chongqing.

The official Xinhua News Agency said the Cabinet's investigation team concluded that the Eastern Star was brought down "by strong winds and heavy rains" associated with a downburst, a strong downdraft that is "a very rare weather phenomenon."

The conclusion backs up the initial finding that the disaster was caused by strong winds, although passengers' relatives have raised questions about whether the ship should have continued its voyage despite a weather warning.

Xinhua said the investigation team found that 36 local government and Communist Party officials and seven people from the shipping company should be given administrative punishments for flaws in management, which would likely include demotions and firings.

The seven included the captain and the officer in charge at the time, who died in the disaster. The investigation found the pair responded inadequately to the emergency and had not properly ascertained the threat posed by the dire weather conditions, Xinhua said.

It recommended that the ship's captain, Zhang Shunwen, have his license revoked and his contract terminated, and that his case be sent for further investigation to determine whether he should face criminal charges.

The captain was arrested after he was rescued from the river, with investigators looking into why he chose to sail into the storm instead of dropping anchor. Investigators had also been expected to focus on alterations made to the ship. A government agency had earlier cited the ship for safety violations.

Qin Meiping, who lost her 73-year-old father and 49-year-old brother, questioned whether the modifications to the vessel had been safe.

"If you blame it on the weather, why were the other two boats that were also traveling at that time safe? Why was this boat modified three times before? Were the modifications done properly?" asked Qin, who

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 18 of 26

said she has had “tears in my eyes every day since” the sinking. “We are not experts, but is the report by the experts the truth?”

She pointed to other deadly disasters in China in the past year, including a stampede in Shanghai on New Year’s Eve 2014, explosions at a chemical warehouse in Tianjin and the toppling of a mountain of construction waste that buried a large area in Shenzhen.

“It will happen again if people do not face the truth and don’t admit there are management problems,” she said.

10 Things to Know for Today

The Associated Press

Your daily look at late-breaking news, upcoming events and the stories that will be talked about today:

1. HOW ‘AFFLUENZA’ TEEN SAID FAREWELL

Eighteen-year-old Ethan Couch had something “akin to a going-away party” before traveling to Mexico with his mother, as authorities in Texas were investigating whether he had violated his probation, the sheriff says.

2. IRAN ACCUSED OF CONDUCTING ROCKET TESTS NEAR WARSHIPS

The U.S. says the tests were conducted in the Strait of Hormuz as an American aircraft carrier and other vessels were nearby.

3. FEARS MOUNT AS MISSISSIPPI RIVER RISES

Hundreds of homes could be threatened by rare winter flooding already blamed for 18 deaths in Illinois and Missouri.

4. WHERE AMERICANS DRAW LINE ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

They place a higher priority on preserving the freedom of Christians than other faith groups — and rank Muslims as the least deserving of the protections, an AP-NORC poll shows.

5. NORTH KOREA SAYS SENIOR OFFICIAL KILLED IN TRAFFIC ACCIDENT

The lack of further detail about the wreck feeds speculation in South Korean media that Kim Yang Gon’s death was suspicious.

6. CHICAGO POLICEMAN PLEADS NOT GUILTY IN SHOOTING OF BLACK TEEN

Jason Van Dyke, who is white, wants to tell his side of what happened so he’s not seen “as this cold-blooded killer” of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald, his attorney says.

7. FORMER CHILEAN SOLDIERS CONFESS TO ATROCITIES

The recent public confessions may be a sign that military pacts of silence are coming undone 40 years after Pinochet’s bloody dictatorship.

8. HILLARY CLINTON STIFFENS RHETORIC AGAINST EXTREMISTS

She says there’s now enough evidence to label as “genocide” the Islamic State group’s persecution of Christians, Yazidis, and other religious and ethnic minorities in the Mideast.

9. WHY SNOOP DOGG, OTHER ENTREPRENEURS ARE STARTING OWN LINES OF MARIJUANA

As the fast-growing industry emerges from the black market and starts looking like a mainstream business, there’s a scramble to brand and trademark pot products.

10. WHAT LED TO CHIP KELLY’S FIRING IN PHILADELPHIA

The head coach made a number of splashy moves after gaining full control of the Eagles’ personnel decisions last offseason. But several of the moves backfired.

Pinochet dictatorship pacts of silence unraveling in Chile

LUIS ANDRES HENAO, Associated Press

EVA VERGARA, Associated Press

SANTIAGO, Chile (AP) — One former Chilean soldier said he shot 10 people in the head and then blew up their bodies with dynamite. Another said his platoon drenched two teens with gasoline and set them on fire.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 19 of 26

Both confessions made publicly this year have shocked Chileans with details of crimes committed during the Andean nation's bloody 1973-1990 dictatorship. Human rights groups and families of victims believe they are a clear sign military pacts of silence that have hushed up many of the atrocities committed during the rule of Gen. Augusto Pinochet may finally be unraveling.

"Criminals can't take the guilt any longer," said Veronica de Negri, whose 19-year-old son, Rodrigo Rojas, was burned to death at a 1986 protest against Pinochet. "They're going to continue coming out. It's a domino effect. More and more will talk."

For nearly three decades, many perpetrators enjoyed impunity. But after a former soldier testified this year about Rojas' killing, in July a judge charged seven ex-soldiers with the attack, which also severely burned another teen, Carmen Quintana.

U.S. documents published this year indicated Pinochet covered up the military's role in the slaying of Rojas, who was a U.S. resident visiting his native Chile. The case drew worldwide condemnation and strained the regime's relationship with Washington.

The latest confession came early in December and took Chileans by surprise: It happened during a radio show that usually focuses on personal anecdotes, some humorous, some serious.

Using the name "Alberto," the caller first said he wanted to share a love story. He then launched into a much darker tale. He said he was an army veteran and recounted taking several people to the desert, shooting them in the head and blowing up the bodies.

"Not even their shadow was left," said the man, who expressed regret about killing at least 18 people in various incidents.

Days after the 25-minute call, the man, identified as Guillermo Reyes Rammsy, was arrested. A judge ordered him held under house arrest while the case is investigated. Attempts to reach Rammsy were not successful.

"These people carry feelings of guilt," said Giorgio Agostini, a forensic psychologist. "Speaking about it, in this case publicly, gives them some sort of release."

At least 3,095 people were killed during Pinochet's dictatorship, according to government figures, and tens of thousands more were tortured or jailed for political reasons. Pinochet died in 2006 under house arrest without being tried on charges of illegal enrichment and human rights violations.

Retired Gen. Guillermo Garin, who was the army's second-in-command under Pinochet, says the number of victims has been exaggerated. He also denies the existence of any pacts of silence.

"I was very close to General Pinochet," Garin told the AP. "The president was busy governing the country and was not involved in anti-subversive fights or combatting clandestine organizations."

But ample evidence points to Pinochet's involvement and to his orders for cover-ups.

U.S. documents published recently show Pinochet covered up the military's role in the burning death of Rojas. Declassified State Department cables from 1986 cited a source within Chile's national police force who said a report on the attack was presented to Pinochet, who refused to take it and rejected ordering an investigation.

At the time, Pinochet accused Rojas and Quintana of being terrorists who were burned by firebombs they planned to use against barricades.

Punishment for dictatorship-era crimes has been sparse. The government's human rights program says 1,373 former and current military members have faced trial. Of those, 344 have been convicted, and most of them were sentenced to house arrest or some other form of non-jail punishment.

While the trials have led to some revelations about the regime's abuses, human rights groups believe there is much more to learn.

Former Supreme Court President Sergio Munoz, who oversaw special judges handling hundreds of dictatorship cases, says members of the military have gone to great lengths to remain silent about the crimes.

He hit roadblocks in some investigations and often there was "deficient cooperation among institutions," Munoz told The Associated Press.

"Chile would benefit a lot from say, choosing 20 former military draftees and letting them go unpunished in exchange for information," said Marta Lagos, a political analyst.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 20 of 26

Fernando Mellado, who heads a group of former recruits who served during the dictatorship, said more ex-soldiers would be willing to provide information if they didn't fear being jailed. He said many young soldiers were "just kids" taking orders.

Attempts by some former military recruits to reach an immunity-for-information deal with the Ministry of Justice have failed.

"If the state frees us from responsibility, I think we'll talk without a problem because we are not the only ones responsible," Mellado said.

19 levees in Illinois, Missouri monitored for flooding

JIM SALTER, Associated Press

ALAN SCHER ZAGIER, Associated Press

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Federal officials were monitoring 19 vulnerable levees on the rising Mississippi River and its tributaries, warning that hundreds of homes in Illinois and Missouri could be threatened by a rare winter flood that already forced the partial closure of interstate highways and widespread evacuations.

As the swollen rivers and streams pushed to virtually unheard-of heights Tuesday, an unknown number of inmates were transferred out of an Illinois state prison threatened by flooding and Missouri's governor activated the National Guard to help divert traffic from submerged roads.

Record flooding was projected in some Mississippi River towns after several days of torrential rain that also caused sewage to flow unfiltered into waterways.

The Meramec River near St. Louis was expected to get to more than 3 feet above the previous record by late this week.

At least 18 deaths over several days in Missouri and Illinois were blamed on flooding, mostly involving vehicles that drove onto swamped roadways.

The river on Tuesday spilled over the top of the levee at West Alton, Missouri, about 20 miles north of St. Louis. Mayor William Richter ordered any of the town's approximate 520 residents who had not already evacuated to get out of harm's way.

Across the river, in Alton, Illinois, dozens of volunteers helped place sandbags ahead of where water is expected to rise.

Mayor Brant Walker said in a statement that "even with our best efforts of sandbagging and pumping," flooding was expected at least in the basements of the downtown business district.

In another eastern Missouri town, Union, water from the normally docile Bourbeuse River reached the roofs of a McDonald's, QuikTrip and several other businesses. The river reached an all-time high Tuesday, nearly 20 feet above flood stage.

Interstate 44 was closed near the central Missouri town of Rolla, and a 10-mile section of Interstate 70 was shut down in southern Illinois before it was reopened late Tuesday afternoon. Hundreds of smaller roads and highways were also closed across the two states, and flood warnings were in effect.

Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon activated the National Guard to assist with security in evacuated areas and to help keep road closure sites clear.

In southern Illinois, the Department of Corrections transferred an unspecified number of inmates from a state prison to other locations because of flooding risks. The facility houses nearly 3,700 inmates.

In St. Louis, more than 500 volunteers turned out in blustery, cold conditions to fill sandbags where a flooded waterway threatened hundreds of homes.

The city later trucked 1,500 of the sandbags south to a nearby county to fortify a wastewater treatment plant threatened by the swollen Big River.

The Mississippi River is expected to reach nearly 15 feet above flood stage on Thursday at St. Louis, which would be the second-worst flood on record, behind only the devastating 1993 flood.

Alderman Larry Arnowitz said up to 500 homes could be threatened if the River Des Peres — a man-made storm sewer channel that flows through south St. Louis into the Mississippi River — rises much more than projected. But he was confident that with no rain in the forecast for the next several days, and

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 21 of 26

with the help of the thousands of sandbags, everything would be OK.

Lisa Muxo, 45, said her basement was already taking on water.

"These are our neighbors, our friends," said Muxo, who brought her teenage son and three of his friends to help sandbag. "We need to help each other."

The high water was blamed on the shutdown of a wastewater treatment plant on Monday just south of St. Louis, causing sewage to go directly into nearby rivers and streams. The Metropolitan Sewer District of St. Louis said the Fenton wastewater treatment plant, which is designed for 6.75 million gallons per day of flow, was treating nearly 24 million gallons per day at the time of the malfunction.

One of the two wastewater plants in Springfield, Missouri, also failed, allowing partially treated sewage to flow into a river.

The U.S. Coast Guard closed a 5-mile portion of the Mississippi River near St. Louis due to flooding. Capt. Martin Malloy cited high water levels and fast currents in the river, which is a vital transportation hub for barges that carry agricultural products and other goods.

In central and southern Illinois, flood warnings were in effect two days after a winter storm brought sleet and icy rain. Major flooding was occurring along the Kankakee, Illinois, Sangamon and Vermilion rivers.

In Granite City, Illinois, about 30 residents of a flooded trailer park idled in a Red Cross emergency shelter in a church basement. The park's property manager told Shirley Clark, 56, and other displaced residents that it could be another 10 to 12 days before they're able to return to their homes.

"We need help over here," said Clark, a diabetic who said she left behind her insulin supply. "We're just holding on."

The Midwest wasn't alone. Heavy rain continued in parts of the South, such as Georgia and eastern Alabama, which has in parts seen more than 14 inches of rain since Dec. 21.

US accuses Iran of conducting rocket test near warships

JON GAMBRELL, Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iranian naval vessels conducted rocket tests last week near U.S. warships and commercial traffic passing through the Strait of Hormuz, the American military said Wednesday, causing new tension between the two nations after a landmark nuclear deal.

The vital strait, a narrow waterway between Iran and Oman that is the route for nearly a third of all oil traded by sea, is crucial for ships taking part in the war against the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria. In the past, Iran has threatened to block the strait, which lies at the entrance of the Persian Gulf.

While the United States has complained previously about other Iranian war games and maneuvers there, Saturday's incident comes after a series of weapons tests and other moves by the Islamic Republic following the nuclear deal.

Iranian media and officials did not immediately discuss the tests Wednesday.

Cmdr. Kyle Raines, a U.S. Central Command spokesman, said in a statement that Iranian Revolutionary Guard naval vessels fired "several unguided rockets" about 1,370 meters (1,500 yards) from the USS Harry S. Truman aircraft carrier, the USS Bulkeley destroyer and a French frigate, the FS Provence. Raines said commercial sea traffic also was nearby, though the missiles weren't fired in the direction of any ships.

Raines said the Iranian vessels announced over maritime radio that they'd carry out a live fire exercise only 23 minutes beforehand.

Iran's "actions were highly provocative," Raines said. "Firing weapons so close to passing coalition ships and commercial traffic within an internationally recognized maritime traffic lane is unsafe, unprofessional and inconsistent with international maritime law."

A French military official, speaking to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity as he was not authorized to publicly name, confirmed the rocket fire took place Saturday. However, the official said the French military did not consider it to be a threatening event as the rocket fire clearly wasn't directed toward the Western fleet.

The French frigate is now escorting the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle, which is launching airstrikes against the Islamic State group.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 22 of 26

NBC News first reported news of the Iranian rocket fire.

The Strait of Hormuz is only about 33 kilometers (21 miles) wide at its narrowest point between Iran and Oman. Ships traversing the chokepoint have even less room to maneuver. The shipping lane in either direction is only 2 miles (3.22 kilometers) wide, with a 2-mile (3.22-kilometer) buffer zone between them.

The U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet is based in nearby Bahrain, on the southern coast of the Gulf. It conducts anti-piracy patrols in the greater Gulf and serves as a regional counterbalance to Iran.

While the U.S. didn't retaliate to Saturday's rocket test, the Strait of Hormuz has been the scene of a battle between the two countries' navies. On April 18, 1988, the U.S. attacked two Iranian oil rigs and sunk or damaged six of its vessels, including two naval frigates, in Operation Praying Mantis. That came after the near-sinking of the missile frigate USS Samuel B. Roberts by an Iranian mine.

A few months later, in July 1988, the USS Vincennes in the strait mistook an Iran Air flight heading to Dubai for an attacking fighter jet, shooting down the plane and killing all 290 passengers and crew onboard. The shoot-down of the jet came shortly after the U.S. vessel reported coming under fire from Iranian speedboats.

Saturday's rocket fire comes after Iran and world powers led by the U.S. agreed to a landmark nuclear deal to limit the Islamic Republic's enrichment of uranium in exchange for lifting economic sanctions. While heralded by moderates in Iran, hard-liners have criticized the deal.

In the time since, Iran has conducted missile tests criticized by the U.S., as well as aired footage on state television of an underground missile base. Iran also sank a replica of a U.S. aircraft carrier in February near the strait. It seized a Marshall Islands-flagged cargo ship and later released it in May after earlier surrounding U.S.-flagged cargo ship transiting the strait.

AP-NORC Poll: Religious rights most vital for US Christians

RACHEL ZOLL, Associated Press

EMILY SWANSON, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Americans place a higher priority on preserving the religious freedom of Christians than for other faith groups, ranking Muslims as the least deserving of the protections, according to a new survey.

Solid majorities said it was extremely or very important for the U.S. to uphold religious freedom in general. However, the percentages varied dramatically when respondents were asked about specific faith traditions, according to a poll by The Associated Press and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Eighty-two percent said religious liberty protections were important for Christians, compared with 61 percent who said the same for Muslims. About seven in 10 said preserving Jews' religious freedom was important, while 67 percent said so of Mormons. People who identified with no religion were ranked about even with Muslims in needing support to live out their beliefs.

Charles Haynes, director of the Religious Freedom Center of the Newseum Institute, said the findings reflect deep divisions among Americans about the very definition of religious liberty, which has taken on newly politicized meanings in a time of debate over gay marriage and the threat from Islamic extremists.

"Religious freedom is now in the eye of the beholder," Haynes said. "People in different traditions, with different ideological commitments, define religious freedom differently."

The poll was conducted Dec. 10 through Dec. 13, after Islamic extremist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, California, and during intensifying anti-Muslim rhetoric by Donald Trump and other candidates for the Republican presidential nomination. The furor has led to a spike in vandalism of mosques and harassment of U.S. Muslims over the last month.

In the survey, 88 percent of Republicans said it was important to protect the religious liberty of Christians, while only 60 percent said so for Muslims. Democrats also ranked religious freedom for Muslims as a lower priority. Eighty-three percent of Democrats said the protections were important for Christians, while only 67 percent said so for Muslims.

A Pew Research Center survey last year found an increasing share of Americans believe Islam is more

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 23 of 26

likely than other religions to encourage violence among its followers. Several outspoken critics have emerged who argue Islam itself is a threat to the U.S.

"These numbers seem to be part of a growing climate of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States," said Madihha Ahussain, an attorney for Muslim Advocates, a California-based civil rights group. "This climate of hatred has contributed to dozens of incidents of anti-Muslim violence in recent weeks."

Helen Decker, 65, a West Texas Christian who reads the Bible regularly, believes strongly that religious freedom should be provided to people of all faiths or no faith, including for her grandson whom she said is an atheist. But she said Muslims can only earn the same religious liberty protections "under certain circumstances — that they can show that they are not a radical Muslim."

"Muslims — they need to be protected just like Christians, unless they pose harm to human life," Decker said.

But John Ashford of Chicago, who is retired from the U.S. military and the Postal Service, said "it's not right" to deny religious liberty protections to Muslims. He said officials have been showing too much deference to Christians for political reasons, in what he considers a threat to the separation of church and state.

"There's supposed to be equal protection under the law — that's what the Constitution says," he said. "If you're not doing that, you're doing something wrong."

Public discussion about religious freedom in 2015 focused largely on demands for government accommodation for objectors to same-sex marriage, which became legal nationwide in June. The debate played out most dramatically in the conflict over Indiana's Religious Freedom Restoration Act and in the case of Kentucky clerk Kim Davis, who spent five days in jail for refusing to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples.

Those who oppose steps to accommodate religious objections to same-sex marriage see such exemptions as an attempt to undermine newly won rights for gays and lesbians.

But advocates for broad exemptions, including U.S. Roman Catholic bishops and Southern Baptist leaders, say the requests are in line with the longstanding American tradition of protecting individual conscience.

Greg Scott of the Alliance Defending Freedom, a Christian public interest law firm, said a focus on protecting Christians right now "makes sense in that Christians today are facing mounting threats to their religious liberty by acts of state officials and bureaucrats." AP-NORC polls have found dwindling confidence in the government's defense of religious liberty, with 75 percent in 2011 saying the government was doing a good job, compared with 55 percent who said so this month.

In the latest survey, eight in 10 Americans said it was very or extremely important for people like themselves to be allowed to practice their religion freely.

But Eric Rassbach, an attorney with the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, a public interest law firm that takes clients of all faiths, said "people may not realize you cannot have a system where there's one rule for one group and another rule for a different group you don't like."

"No religion is an island," Rassbach said. "If somebody else's religion is being limited by the government, yours is liable to be limited in the same way. Even if you only care about your own particular group, you should care about other groups, too, because that's the way the law works."

The AP-NORC poll of 1,042 adults was conducted online and by phone using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.9 percentage points.

Magnitude-4.4 earthquake shakes Southern California suburbs

SAN BERNARDINO, Calif. (AP) — A moderate earthquake shook an inland area of Southern California near San Bernardino on Tuesday night, giving a start to thousands across a heavily populated area with more than one person comparing it to a rumbling big rig.

There were no immediate reports of damages or injuries, however.

The magnitude-4.4 quake hit in foothills northwest of San Bernardino about 5:38 p.m. at a depth of about three miles, a report from the U.S. Geological Survey said. Aftershocks of magnitude 3.8 and 3.2

came minutes later, and dozens of tiny aftershocks followed in the next few hours.

People reported feeling the earthquake throughout the suburbs east of Los Angeles, which is about 50 miles southwest of the epicenter.

Brenda Torres, 24, a waitress at Papa Tony's Diner in San Bernardino said customers were a bit shook up but kept calm. Nothing in the restaurant rattled or broke and the quake was so short there wasn't even time to take cover under a table.

"At first I thought it was a semi-truck that had hit the building or something," Torres said.

Laura Melgoza, 23, a college student and cashier at WaBa Grill in San Bernardino, said she and her co-workers headed toward the front of the building as the restaurant shook.

"I was just panicking," she said. "It was the biggest one that I've felt."

Tim Franke, a dispatch supervisor with the San Bernardino County Fire Department communication center, said there were no reports of damage or injuries, but the shaking was felt "numerous times" at the department.

"It was like a big truck was coming in," Franke said.

Police in the area also said they had no reports of problems from the quake.

The quake came near the intersection of the San Jacinto, San Andreas and Cucamonga faults, three of the largest in Southern California, but it was too small to determine which fault was responsible, the USGS said.

There have been nine earthquakes above magnitude-4 in the general area in the last 10 years.

"There's nothing particularly different about it that we can see at this point," Lucy Jones, a USGS seismologist, told KNBC-TV.

Traditionally earthquakes of this size are a monthly occurrence in Southern California, but "it's been quieter for the last few years," Jones said.

There is a 5 percent chance that the quake, or any quake, is a precursor of something bigger, Jones said.

Chip Kelly fired after Eagles moves lead to missed playoffs

ROB MAADDI, AP Pro Football Writer

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Chip Kelly went three-and-out — much like his inconsistent offense.

Kelly was fired by the Philadelphia Eagles on Tuesday night with one game left in his third season, completing a dramatic drop for a coach who was heavily recruited and lauded as an offensive genius only a couple years ago.

Kelly was dumped after missing the playoffs for the second straight season and failing miserably in his first year in charge of personnel.

The Eagles entered the season with Super Bowl expectations, but are 6-9. They've lost several games by a lopsided margin and players had lost confidence in Kelly.

Two current Eagles players, speaking on condition of anonymity because the team was not publicly discussing the firing, told The Associated Press late Tuesday night that several players had met in groups in recent weeks to discuss their frustration with Kelly. They said they expressed relief in text exchanges with teammates after the team announced it had fired Kelly, after most players had left the team's practice facility for the day.

Eagles CEO Jeffrey Lurie issued a one-sentence statement to reporters saying he appreciates Kelly's contributions and wishes him success going forward.

Lurie told fans in an email that he decided to make a change after "evaluating the many factors involved in our performance as a team."

The Eagles also fired Ed Marynowitz, who was vice president of player personnel. Longtime NFL executive Tom Donahoe will assume the role of senior director of player personnel.

Kelly gained full control of personnel decisions last offseason, winning a power struggle with then-general manager Howie Roseman. But Kelly tore apart a winning team and several of his bold moves backfired.

Since March 2014, Kelly released three-time Pro Bowl wide receiver DeSean Jackson, traded two-time

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 25 of 26

All-Pro running back LeSean McCoy, didn't re-sign 2014 Pro Bowl wideout Jeremy Maclin, cut two-time Pro Bowl guard Evan Mathis and traded quarterback Nick Foles and a 2016 second-round draft pick for Sam Bradford.

He also gave big money in free agency to running back DeMarco Murray and cornerback Byron Maxwell. Murray has been a bust and Maxwell has underperformed. Kelly even signed Tim Tebow, but released him after he won the competition for the No. 3 quarterback job.

A person familiar with the decision to fire Kelly told the AP on Tuesday night that the team didn't consider only stripping him of personnel control, opting to part with him entirely. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because Lurie will address Kelly's dismissal on Wednesday.

Kelly didn't want players perceived as "me-first" guys. He alienated some of his players, though the only ones who spoke out against him did it after they were gone.

McCoy, the franchise's all-time leading rusher and a fan favorite, made headlines when he said there's a reason Kelly got rid of "all the good black players." Cornerback Brandon Boykin, who was traded to Pittsburgh, said Kelly was "uncomfortable" around black players.

Other players supported Kelly and moves such as signing Murray and Maxwell contradicted McCoy's claim. But Kelly's reputation took a hit anyway.

Shortly after Kelly was fired, former Eagles linebacker Emmanuel Acho tweeted: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Suspended Cleveland Browns receiver Josh Gordon tweeted: "Shady, Maclin, Foles, Djax.. Smh."

Kelly replaced Andy Reid and led the Eagles to an NFC East title in 2013 after they were 4-12 a year earlier. The Eagles lost at home to New Orleans in the playoffs and missed the postseason in 2014 following a 9-3 start.

They were 7-12 in Kelly's last 19 games.

Kelly was considered one of the most innovative coaches in college when the Eagles lured him away from Oregon in 2013. He brought his up-tempo offense and a unique approach that included monitoring players' sleep habits, changing the menu in the cafeteria and playing loud music during practices. Players had protein shakes waiting for them after practice and the team took the field on Tuesdays, which is a day off for the rest of the NFL.

Kelly's offense was dynamic his first season and set several franchise records. It steadily declined the next two years. The defense has been the worst in the NFL for three seasons.

Offensive coordinator Pat Shurmur will coach the team in the season finale at the New York Giants on Sunday.

Lurie told fans President Don Smolenski and Roseman, the executive vice president of football operations, will assist him in the search for a new coach.

Roseman helped convince Kelly to take the job after he initially decided to stay at Oregon. Kelly ended up taking Roseman's job without the title — the Eagles technically didn't have a GM this season. But Roseman is the last one standing in Philadelphia.

Northeast gets snow, ice during its 1st winter storm

PATRICK WHITTLE, Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — A storm brought snow, sleet and freezing rain to the Northeast, but reassured wary residents that winter had actually begun.

Parts of northern New England got 4 to 6 inches of snow on Tuesday, with Carrabassett Valley in western Maine coming in at a high of 10 inches.

Clouds with possibly some light snow or freezing rain are expected on Wednesday, said Eric Schwibs, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Gray, Maine. But he proclaimed: "The big storm is over."

The weather made for a sloppy mess in parts of metro Boston, where memories linger of last winter's record-breaking snowfall. But as Fernando Gonterman waited for a train from Harvard Square to his job at Massachusetts General Hospital, he was unfazed.

"Weather is weather. Just deal with it, right?" he said.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2015 ♦ Vol. 20 - No. 159 ♦ 26 of 26

In snow-loving Vermont, Chassidy Byrd, the assistant manager at a gas station and convenience store in Plainfield, said the storm returned the state to a sense of normal.

Without any snow, "it didn't feel like Vermont," she said.

Meteorologists say the storm that chilled the Northeast is linked to the same system that produced deadly tornadoes in the Midwest beginning Saturday, then brought heavy snow, ice, rain, flooding and blustery winds as it moved toward the Great Lakes. That storm system killed dozens, including many who drowned in floodwaters and others caught up in tornadoes.

Schwibs, of the National Weather Service, said the Northeast storm was "nothing near what we could have had," and those who drove slowly were able to maneuver any kind of vehicle through the snow and slush.

"For an early start, it wasn't that bad," he said.

Forecasters predicted an inch or less in parts of southern New England before the storm turned to rain and sleet, while northern regions would see more. Central New York racked up 1 to 4 inches of snow while northern New York had 3 to 7 inches.

There were no major traffic problems, but some vehicles got stuck in the mounting snow around rush hour. Traffic was mostly light because schools were closed for Christmas vacation and many businesses were closed.

In Andover, Massachusetts, police say a man pulled an unloaded gun on a snow plow driver after nearly crashing into the plow. The man's lawyer said his client was attacked first and pulled out the gun in self-defense.

Portland resident Aaron Lovely said he walked through the worst of the snow for about 20 minutes to get to his job at a downtown record store, which was mostly empty late Tuesday morning. He said the trek through the snow "wasn't the worst," and the winter's lack of weather so far was perhaps more unnerving. "It was kind of weird that there wasn't snow until now," Lovely said. "It's about time."