



## Wellington Heat: Week 2

See A10

# WELLINGTON DAILY NEWS

Thursday, June 12, 2025      Serving The Community Since 1901      Volume 157, Issue 24

# THE STEWART FAMILY: Legacy and Letters

By Laura Lombardi

When John Thomas Stewart III passed away last December, family and friends gathered not only to honor his life but also to reflect on the legacy of the Stewart family in Wellington. In the months since, personal stories, historical photographs, and old newspaper clippings have resurfaced—many shared among those who remember the family’s deep roots in the community.

One of the most compelling stories, however, comes from a time before John was old enough to remember it himself. It’s a story that began with a series of threatening letters and ended, years later, with a stranger’s stare at a funeral.

### A Chilling Plot

Eighty-seven years ago, on June 16, 1938, a 23-year-old Wellington man named Grant Silknitter pleaded guilty in federal court to attempting to extort \$10,000 from the Stewart family. Silknitter had been indicted by a federal grand jury after mailing a series of threatening letters to John’s father, Wellington banker John T. Stewart Jr.

At the time, the country was still reeling from the infamous 1932 kidnapping of Charles Lindbergh Jr., which led to the passage of the “Lindbergh Law”

making kidnapping a federal offense. Against that backdrop, the threats against the Stewart family were taken extremely seriously.

Silknitter’s first letter, dated December 3, 1937, began, “I am a good friend of your family and have been for years. I have taken this crude manner of asking for a loan...” It directed Stewart to place a package containing \$10,000 in Roosevelt Park (now Woods Park), promising to repay the amount within a year with 5% interest.

He specified that the Wellington banker: “Have the sum in tens, twenty, fifty and hundred dollar notes. Put in a sack or bundle the night of which you receive this letter and take to Slate Creek dam on the triangle park as you approach the dam. Stop the car and put the sum right in the middle, honk once and head back to town.”

The second letter, dated December 21, shifted the drop-off location to Community Park (now Sellers Park). According to The Wellington Daily News, Silknitter was stopped by two federal agents while riding his bicycle through the park but claimed he was visiting his grandmother, and was let go.

The third letter, postmarked December 24, carried a more menacing tone:

“Don’t be a fool John. The police can not help you. This is your last chance, so if you value the life of your boy and your own more than a few thousands, have the money ready to go tonight at your home on South Jefferson between two and nine and wait for orders from there. Make this a Merry Christmas for us all. I mean it this time.”

The money was to be delivered by a local taxi driver, Herman Myers, who was instructed to take it to the Roadside BBQ on U.S. Highway 81, north of town. Myers initially believed it was a prank—until the FBI asked him to follow through.

Myers waited at the designated location for nearly two hours. As with the two previous drops, no one showed. A few days later, Silknitter casually mentioned to another taxi driver that he’d received a mysterious call about picking up a package.

### A Trail of Clues

After receiving the threats, Stewart worked with federal agents to catch the culprit. When no one appeared at the drop locations, investigators focused on finding the typewriter and the fingerprints left on the letters. Their break came when Silknitter visited the Post Office to claim a damaged package. He filled out a form—giving



John T was just a toddler when his father began receiving threatening letters. Photo provided by Linda Stewart

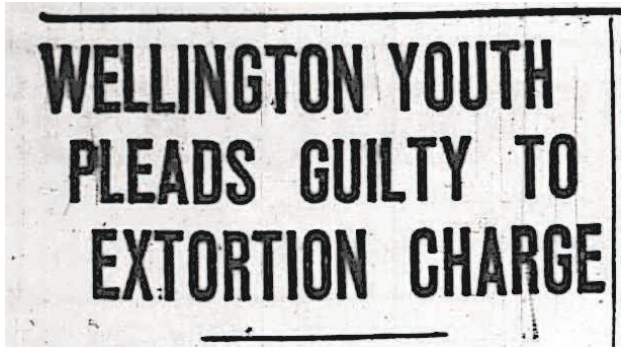


GRANT SILKNITTER  
Grant Silknitter’s 1933 Wellington High School graduation photo.

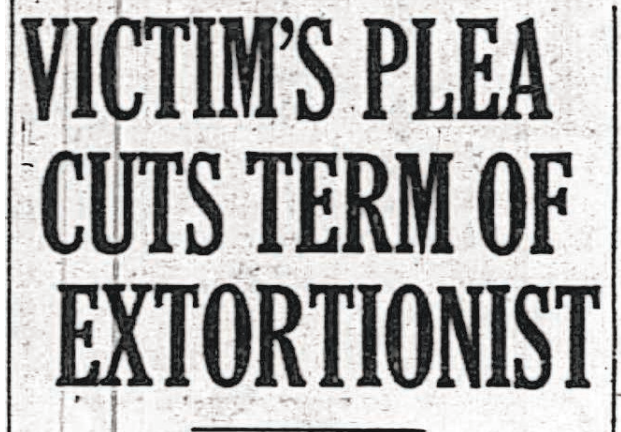
the FBI what they needed. His prints matched those found on the extortion letters.

At the time, Silknitter was working at a local filling station having been a

SEE STEWART A2



Silknitter pleaded guilty to three counts of extortion and was sentenced to three years in prison.



# WDN Brings Home 13 KPA Awards



**CherryRoad Graphic Designer Aaron Gulley holds the 1st Place award for “Overall Design & Layout”, WDN Sports Writer Ace Finch with his 1st Place award for “Sports Pages” and WDN Editor Laura Lombardi with a poster of one of the award-winning front page designs.**

The Wellington Daily News brought home top honors at the Kansas Press Association’s 2025 Awards of Excellence, held last Thursday during the annual KPA Convention in Salina. Competing against hundreds of newspapers across the state, the WDN staff earned an impressive 13 awards—including seven first-place finishes—in recognition of outstanding journalism, design, and



**Former WDN reporter and current Butler County Times-Gazette editor, Nikole Babb, took home a few awards of her own.**

storytelling.

This year’s competition was especially fierce, with more than 2,800 entries submitted by Kansas newspapers of all sizes. For the WDN team, the awards reflected months of meaningful reporting, creative storytelling, and dedication to community news.

Among the top accolades was first place in an Editorial Series for *Justice for Janet*, an in-depth investigative effort that also earned third place for Investigative Story. The piece shed light on a complex unsolved case, sparking local dialogue and awareness around justice, accountability, and community safety.

In the Story/Picture Combination category, *What Are the Odds* took home first place, blending power visuals with a compelling narrative surrounding two sets of Wellington triplets. The WDN

also secured first place in Sports Story with *A Proud and Powerful Tradition*, a piece that captured the spirit and legacy of women in Wellington athletics.

### Other first-place wins included:

- Story from a Public Notice: *Powering the Future, Supporting Community*
- Front Page Design
- Sports Pages
- Overall Design & Layout

“These awards are not only a reflection of the team’s hard work but also of the people and stories that define our community,” said WDN Editor Laura Lombardi. “We are grateful to our readers and sources for trusting us to tell these stories.”

The paper also earned recognition in several second- and third-place categories:

### Second Place

- Love and the Land – Agricultural Story - from the Strnad Land & Cattle farm.
- Local Building First to Install Innovative Energy-Saving Ceiling Tile – Environmental Story - documenting the installation of new Ultima Templok ceiling tile in the Raymond Frye Complex.
- Ace Finch – Sports Column Writing

### Third Place

- An Elite Manufacturing Company* – Local Business Story - covering the

opening of Elite Manufacturing, a custom wire harness and battery cable manufacturer.

*From Williamsport to Wellington, By Way of Australia* – Sports Feature about a Wellington Heat player that played in the Little League World Series.

*Justice for Janet* – Investigative Story From eye-catching design work to meaningful reporting on agriculture, economic development, sports, the environment, and community life, the awards reflect the diverse and impactful storytelling produced by the small but dedicated WDN staff.

“This kind of recognition motivates us to keep striving, keep improving, and keep serving Wellington with news that informs, inspires, and connects,” Lombardi added.



**Brian Bloom, CherryRoad Regional Advertising Sales Manager talks with Michelle Bradley Director of Sales and Marketing for CherryRoad.** Photos submitted

