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Few People Know Kansas Was The First State To Discover Natural Helium In America

By [Lisa Sammons](#) | Published April 05, 2023

When you think about helium, it's likely that you picture balloons floating high in the sky, or maybe the way your voice gets high-pitched after you inhale some. But have you ever thought about where helium comes from? It's a naturally-occurring element, and it's actually the second-most abundant element in the entire universe. However, it's pretty rare on Earth, and it's becoming even rarer – which makes the fact that there is helium in Kansas even more amazing. Did you know that the first discovery of natural helium occurred in Kansas back in 1905?

Helium has a variety of uses, including filling up the famous Goodyear blimp.



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A more consequential use of helium is in MRI machines. Each scanner requires about 2,000 gallons of liquid helium in order to function.



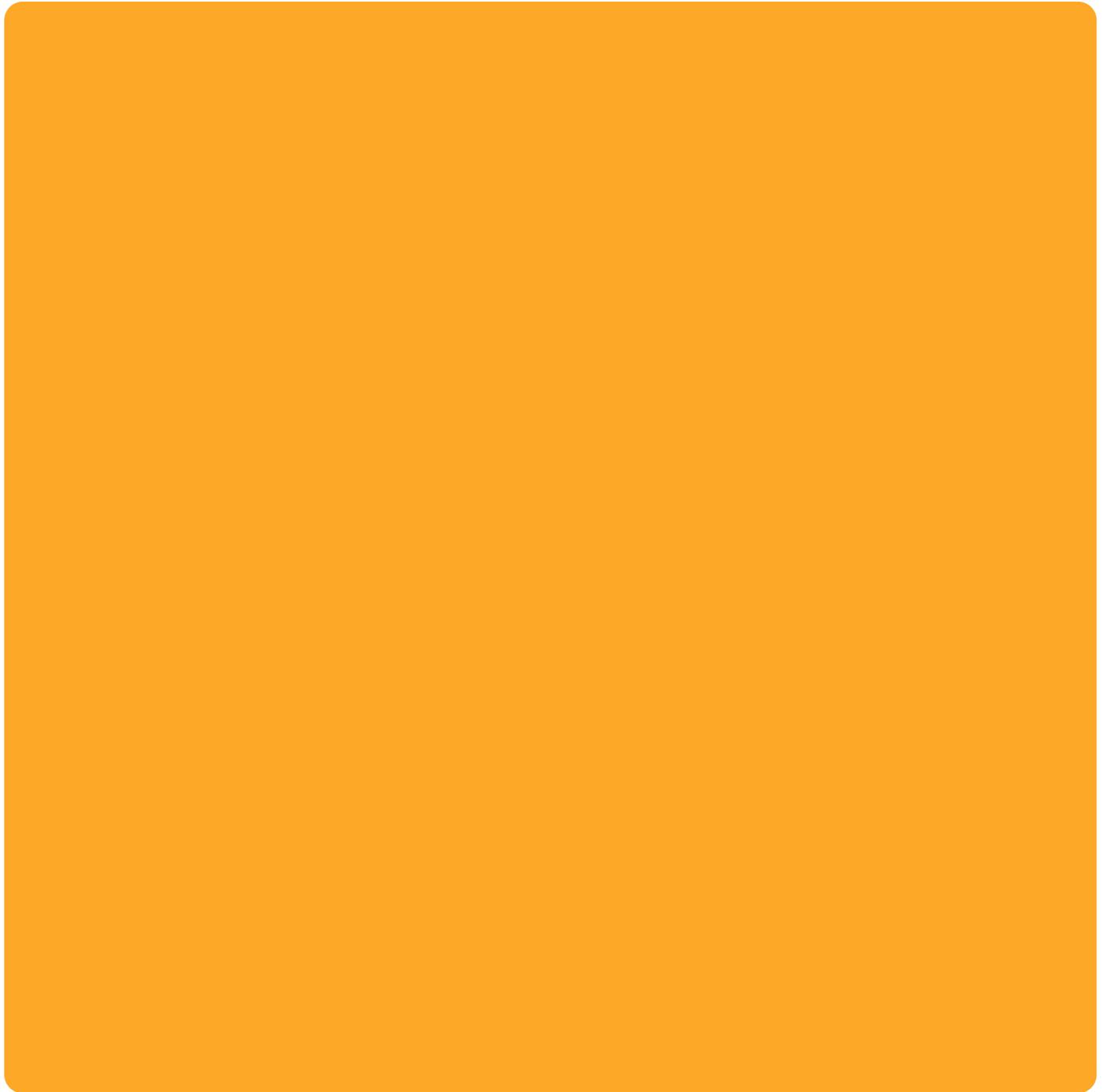


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But where does helium come from?



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Helium was first discovered by a French astronomer who was observing a total solar eclipse in 1868. He noticed an unusual yellow line in a chromosphere spectrum and it ended up being what we now know as helium. The element's name was derived from

the Greek word for "sun."

Discoveries of naturally-occurring helium on Earth first took place in the late 1800s in Europe, but it wasn't found in the United States until 1905 in Kansas.

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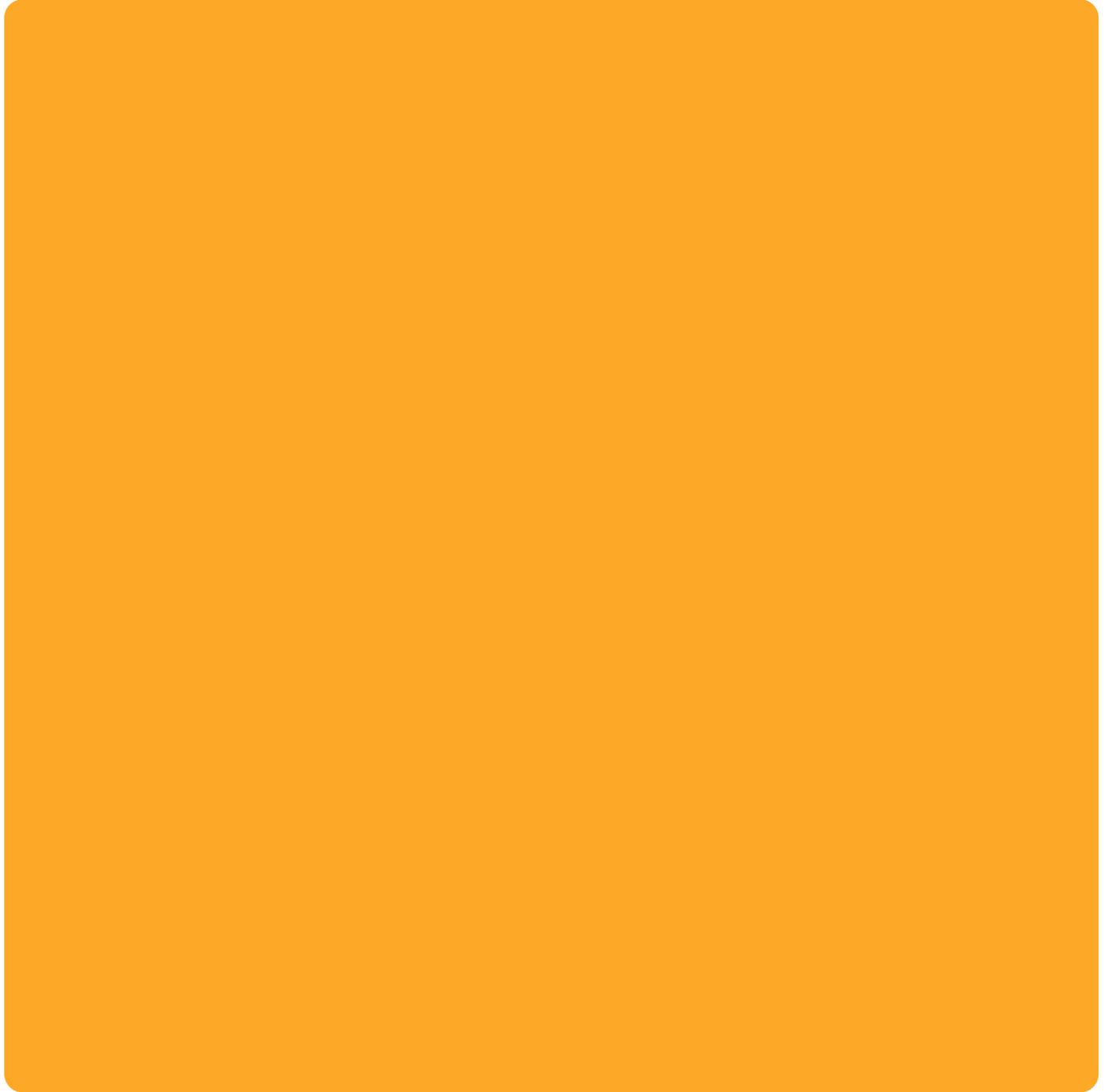


The Fascinating Archaeological Discovery That Put This Kansas Town On The National News



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In 1903, the little town of Dexter, Kansas was thrilled. A well had been drilled in a field that was now releasing massive quantities of natural gas. The town thought this was the start of a new era, perhaps one which would turn the little town into a bustling metropolis.



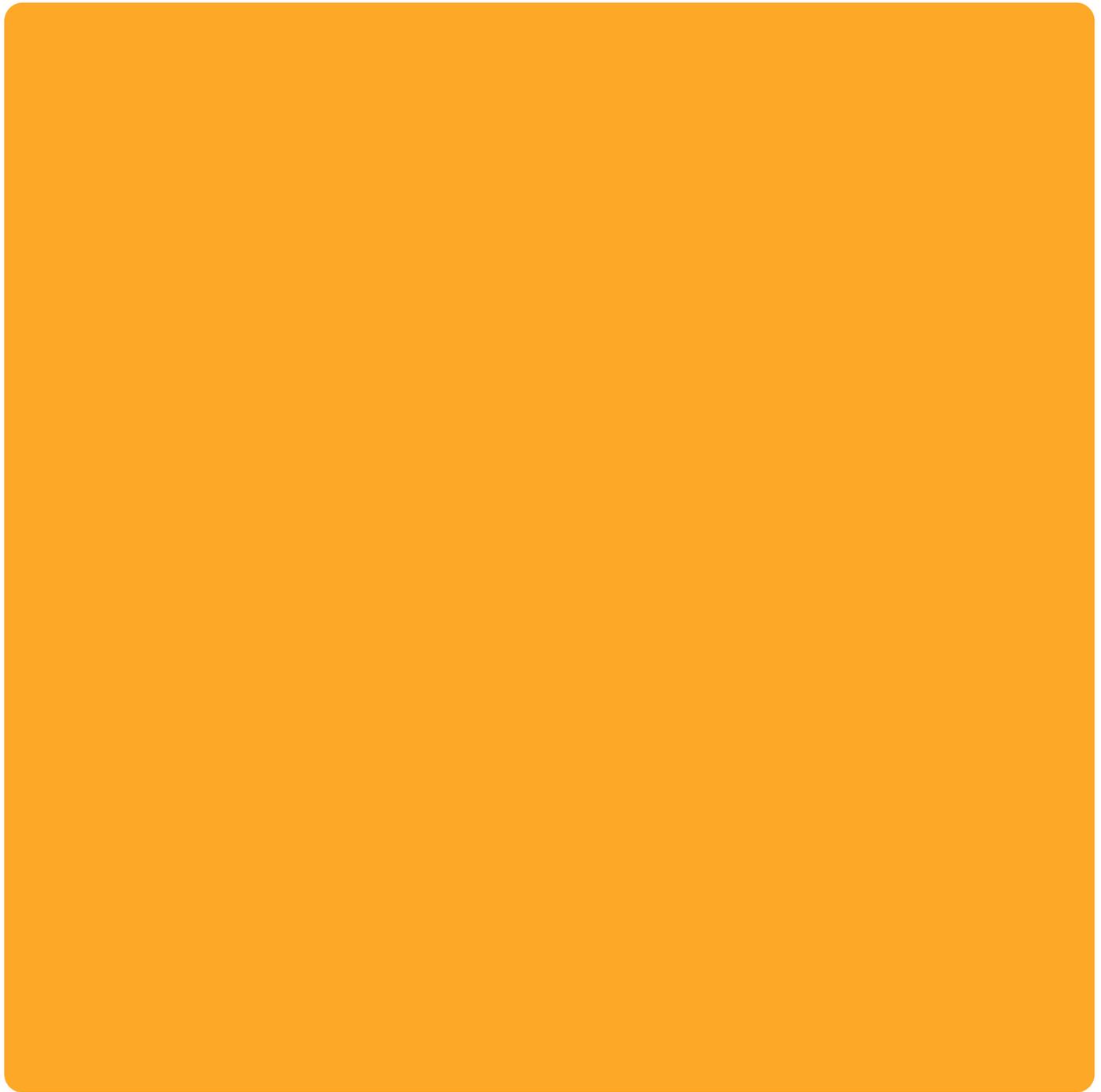
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A massive celebration took place just a few days prior to the capping of the well. At the end of the event, the gas was to be lit on fire as a sort of joyful bonfire. A bale of

hay was ignited and then moved over towards the gas, where the flame was promptly extinguished. Several more attempts were made, and each time, the flame went out as soon as it made contact with the gas. The townspeople went home, confused and disappointed.

A geologist who worked at the University of Kansas was in attendance and he was equally puzzled by the events. He bottled up some of the gas and, along with a colleague, analyzed the contents. It was found that the gas contained nearly 2% of a mysterious substance later identified as helium.

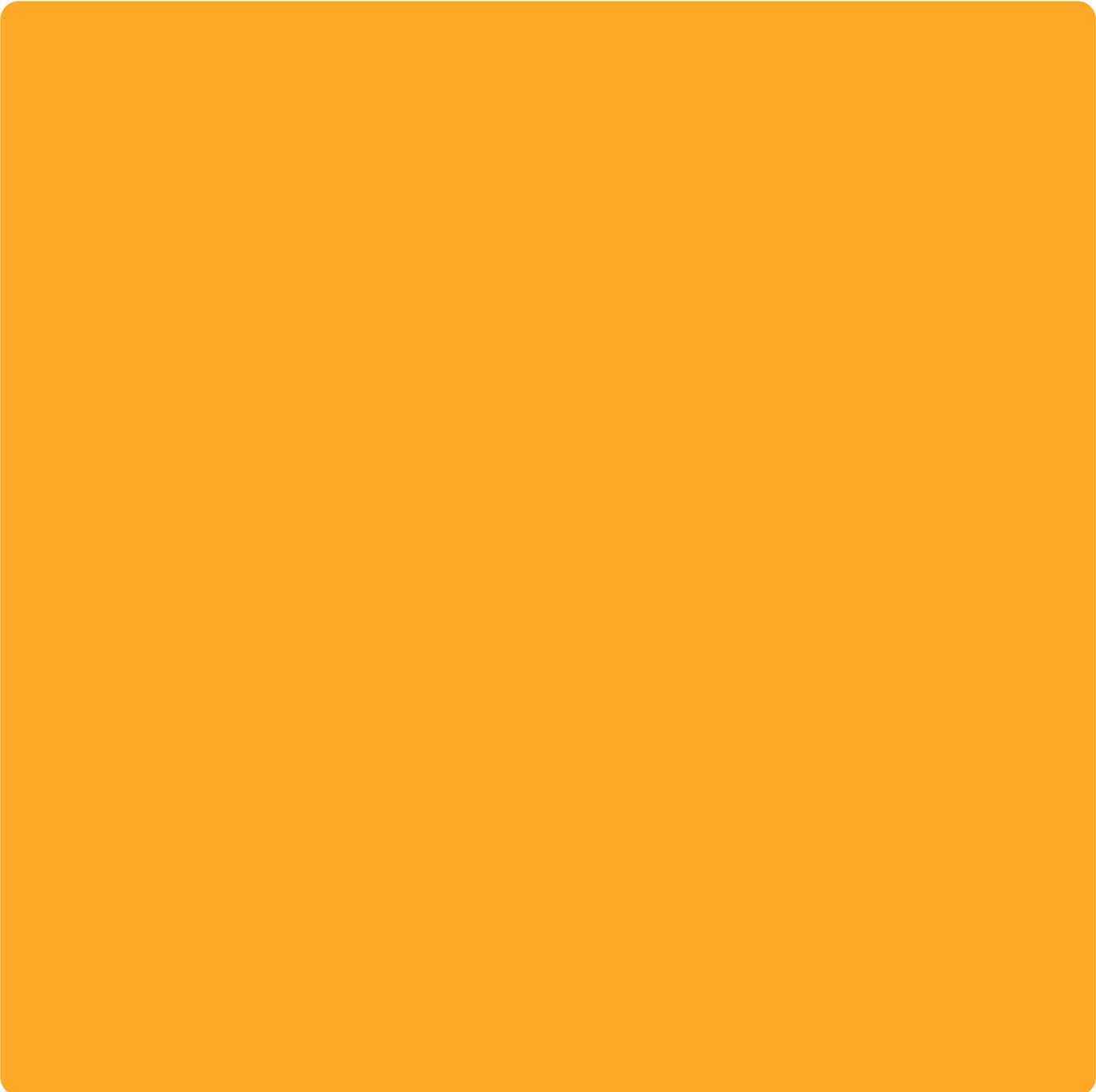




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This was a huge deal, as prior to this, it was not known that there was any helium in the United States. Helium was to play a major role in World War II, when it was used to fill surveillance blimps.

Helium is a truly nonrenewable resource. Over the last few decades, there have been several helium shortages that caused major panic, as the gas is important in both the defense and aerospace industries.



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Helium is created through the radioactive decay of other elements, but it takes thousands of years to create. Because it's incredibly lightweight and has difficulty combining with other elements, it typically rises into space as soon as it hits the Earth's surface. Only a few countries are known to have natural helium reserves, so if there are any production issues, it causes major problems with the world supply.

Did you know we had naturally-occurring helium in Kansas? What other interesting [facts about Kansas](#) would you like to see featured?

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