

Passport to the Past

Members of Ox Cart Trails Historical Society volunteer time in pursuit of history

By Christine Jensen

“The past remains integral to us all, individually and collectively. We must concede the ancients their place...but their past is not simply back there, in a separate and foreign country, it is assimilated in ourselves and resurrected in an ever-changing present.” David Lowenthal

In 1999, a group of Drayton area residents came together to develop a historical society that would cover Kittson and Marshall counties in Minnesota, and Pembina and Walsh counties in North Dakota.

After several meetings within an eight month period, Ox Cart Trails Historical Society was incorporated on May 30, 2000. Since that time, members of the society have collectively logged more than 2,000 hours of volunteer work every year.

Derived from the ox carts that plied the prairies in the early to mid 19th century throughout the Red River Valley, the society has grown to include 87 paid members and five lifetime members. The passionate efforts of members to preserve history has led to significant accomplishments.

According to the society’s president, Marlys Boll, from the beginning dedicated members went to work creating the by-laws, obtaining non-profit status through legal avenues, and raising funds to begin work on various projects. The group continues to log many hours each year in the pursuit of historical remembrance.

One of their first major projects was the formation of a museum in Drayton. The purchase and restoration of the old Eagle Point Baptist Church from rural Robbin, Minn., began and has developed into a storehouse chronicling decades of historic artifacts. But, it didn’t come without hard work.

The society’s treasurer Earlene Lasch of Drayton said they organize various fund-raisers each

year to help pay for restoration projects and general upkeep of the museum.

During the community’s annual Riverfest celebration, Lasch said the group sponsors a Pie and Ice Cream Social, volunteering their time and donations. They also hold an annual spaghetti dinner in the fall, working cooperatively to make it successful.

“If there is an auction sale or curling bonspiel, we usually volunteer to serve food,” she said. “And we have been involved with activities at school, such as variety shows to raise money.”

Another event the society organizes involves award winning author Lauraine Snelling, who penned the “Red River of the North” series, among other well-known works. Snelling has made several trips to Drayton and occasionally leads writer’s sessions, one of which is scheduled for April 27, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., at the H.G. Memorial Hall in Drayton. Cost for the writer’s session, which includes a noon meal, is \$25. To register contact Boll at 701-454-6103 or president@oxcarttrails.net

In conjunction with Snelling’s visit, the society will also host a special banquet with Snelling as guest speaker on the topic, “Recognize Your Talent.” Cost for the banquet is \$10 and will begin at 5:30 p.m., with a silent auction.

In addition to coordinating various fundraising events, members of the society continue to keep busy making updates to the museum, including logging every item that comes in whether it is donated or loaned to the group.

“Everything about each item is written down and the item is numbered for reference,” Boll said. “Our next project is to purchase a program to categorize the items.”

Boll said they have received items such as dresses from the military, an old safe from St. Edward’s Catholic Church, and an antique pump organ on loan from a local family, among numerous other items. The society also likes to receive written artifacts such as historic newspaper articles and communion, graduation or baptismal certificates.

She said the museum can be opened at any time for those interested in looking through the area’s history.

“We don’t have set days, but we will open anytime,” she said.

Members of the society try to revise the museum every year. During the summer celebration last year Lasch said they had an old fashioned kitchen set up inside.

“We try to change things from year to year,” she said.

Diligent Progression

According to the society’s website at www.oxcarttrails.net, the group’s purpose is “To bring together people interested in the history of northeastern North Dakota and northwestern Minnesota and to promote public education by the discovery, collection, restoration and/or preservation of historical sites, records, articles, and artifacts and the study of history.”

Members of the society have an immense passion for history and their greatest enjoyment is witnessing the positive feedback they receive from community members and visitors alike.

“It means so much to those who come back to visit,” Lasch said. “They are happy someone is taking care of the history.”

Although it can sometimes be an uphill battle according to Boll, there are many dedicated members who work hard to keep the society evolving.

“When you have something going on in an organization like this everyone has an input,” she said. “We need people not only to do the work but also to come and enjoy the companionship at the events we organize.”

Both women said they take pleasure in working with other community members towards a common goal. The society holds work nights that always include a social time where members often enjoy a homemade meal.

“You get to know other people and it’s fun,” Lasch said.

During a time when small rural communities are too often on the decline, working together through positive cooperation helps highlight the significance within a community's borders. For members of the Ox Cart Trails Historical Society, part of that significance is keeping history vibrant.

"We hope to be appreciated by the community," Boll said. "We have to keep alive what we had and build into the future."

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