



Wheels Across the Prairie Museum

PO Box 1091 • 3297 Hwy. 14

Tracy Minnesota 56175

www.wheelsacrosstheprairie.org

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WHEELS ACROSS THE PRAIRIE

P.O. Box 1091 • 3297 Hwy. 14 • Tracy, MN 56175 • (507) 626-1949

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The relocation of buildings to the east side of the Wheels campus has required an extensive amount of regrading. Garry Hippe, used a Bobcat last fall to grade the ground around the foundations of the Section Foreman's House and the Amiret Post Office.

Progress made re-shaping Wheels grounds

The Wheel's museum's "Big Project" will continue in the coming year.

In 2021, a concrete pathway extending from the Helmberger-Johnston building on the west to the Moline General Store on the East was poured. Several small buildings were renovated. Grading work continued around recently relocated buildings. New concrete aprons were installed off the Main Barn and Helmberger-Johnston buildings, with a concrete slab poured for a future military building.

That construction followed the relocation of six buildings (school house, Norwegian Hut, cottage, summer kitchen, Amiret Post Office, general store) in late 2020.

In 2022, priorities will shift toward renovating a railroad section foreman's house that was moved to the museum from DeGraf in the summer of 2020. Planned improvements, according Board President Jon Wendorff, include a new roof, new siding, two new windows, new doors, and the addition of a kitchen lean-to. Construction of a sidewalk to go past the foreman's house isn't expected to be done until 2023.

The re-shaped museum grounds offer greater highway visibility for the six buildings. The relocation of the structures from low-lying wet ground was also designed to improve a long-standing drainage issue that was damaging buildings and artifacts.

Building improvements completed in 2021 included: country



A new concrete pathway was poured last summer and fall, between the Helmberger building and the Moline General Store. Photo shows a Doug Kass Construction crew smoothing a pour near the depot.

school, new hardwood floor and interior paint; post office, interior paint; cottage, interior repairs and artifacts repositioned; summer kitchen, interior paint, roof repaired; general store, residing.



It was doggone fun visiting the Wheels museum for a family from Omaha, Nebraska last summer. Penney, a Golden Retriever-Cocker Spaniel cross, helped Liam, 3; and Finley, 7; and their mother, Molly, check out the museum's miniature train. Colin, the children's dad, and brother James, 5, were off inspecting other museum attractions.

CN&W buffs to tour May 20

A Chicago & Northwestern Railroad historical group is expected to roll into the Wheels museum this spring.

The Friday, May 20, bus tour is expected to bring 165 railroad history buffs to the museum. The tour group would be the biggest ever for the museum.

The C&NW Historical Society is holding a convention in Mankato that weekend. The group also plans to visit the End-O-Line railroad museum in Currie on May 20, and a railroad attraction in St. James May 21.

The Tracy portion of the bus tour is expected to focus on the museum's 1915 switch engine and freight train, and its remodeled C&NW depot. Tracy was once a bustling division point for the C&NW.



There's always something that needs to be done at the Wheels museum. Board president Jon Wendorff can often be seen tweaking exhibits.

Museum painstakingly upgrades its records

A 2020 Minnesota Historical Society survey estimated that the Wheels museum has more than 750,000 items in its collections.

So how does one keep track of such a voluminous treasure trove?

The Wheels museum has begun an effort to catalog its entire collection onto a digital data base. Using the software PastPerfect, the goal is to attach each museum artifact with a description, number, location acquisition date, and donor information. A photo of each item can be attached.

"Not many people are aware that we are doing this," explains Wheels board president, Jon Wendorff, "but it is really important."

About one-third of the museum's collection has been entered into PastPerfect to date. New museum acquisitions are being entered into the system as they are received.

Some of the museum's collection had previously been recorded into an Excel data base. But many of the museum's old records are still on paper.

Having the museum's entire collection on an easily accessible computer data base, Wendorff feels, will allow artifacts to be tracked more easily, whether they are in storage or on display, and help prevent duplication. For example, if the PastPerfect inventory lists three identical manual typewriters in the museum's collection, volunteers would be alerted to not accept the offer of a fourth.

Anna Johnston, a 2018 TAHS graduate who is now a senior art major at Lawrence University, has been working on the PastPerfect inventory as a summer project. The effort requires painstaking attention to detail as information is entered onto a digital notebook.

Some of the paper records being converted date from the 1970s, when museum founders first began collecting items.

Johnston, while sifting through a box of donated items this summer, said that she has enjoyed the work.

But she acknowledged that when trying to decipher hard-to-read handwriting, her work has sometimes required making an educated guess about a name.

The PastPerfect software also has the capability for documenting anecdotal information about each item, Wendorff notes. Such background information, which can otherwise become lost with the passing of time, adds meaning to museum displays today.



Anna Johnston spent her summer break from college cataloging museum artifacts with the software PastPerfect.

For example, a 1950 photo of a passenger train at the Tracy depot would have extra poignancy, with a narrative from the person who took the photo.

To enhance its mission, museum looks to future

Wheels Across the Prairie board members are exploring innovative new ways of using social media and the Internet for spreading the word about museum offerings and programs.

The museum has long had a web page and a presence on Facebook. But thanks to a federal grant obtained by the City of Tracy, the Wheels has an opportunity to work with experts on new strategies for improving its marketing. Wheels Across the Prairie is one of 20 Tracy businesses and organizations selected for the program.

Consultant Doria Drost has been working with Wheels board member Nikki Hippe in developing a plan for the museum. The two met with the full Wheels board in December.

Drost emphasized the importance of building a consistent "brand" in all of its marketing. Updating the museum's familiar locomotive logo, she suggested, could be one aspect of this branding.

Attracting more visitors and expanding the museum's network of volunteers and members are among the marketing plan's objectives.



Nicole Hippe (left) and Doria Drost shared ideas for new logos at a recent board meeting.

Museum displays recall real people, real events

Every object at the Wheels Across the Prairie Museum has a story.

Consider, the vintage fire truck displayed in the Helmlinger-Johnston building. Each time Carol (Dahl) Grinde sees the 1923 Luverne pumper, she can see her father, Ole Grinde, behind the wheel, speeding to a Tracy Fire Department fire call in the 1950s.

"My Dad always drove that truck," the 1964 Tracy graduate recalls. "And Frank Kelley was always in the passenger seat beside him."

The fire truck didn't even have a windshield to protect the men as they motored along in the open cab. Other volunteer firefighters stood on the truck's side boards or rear bumper, hanging on as best they could.

Dahl remembers her father relating how chilly it could be for firemen riding on the truck during the winter. To give men a break from the brutal cold, Grinde would sometimes stop the fire engine, and give those standing on the truck a chance to switch places with other firemen trailing the truck in their own vehicles. Grinde and Kelley, somewhat protected by the windshield, remained in the open front-seat.

Grinde, who managed the Tri-County Co-op Oil gas station on the northeast corner of Fourth and Morgan, had a reputation as a heavy-footed driver.

A story passed from father-to-daughter, tells how Kelley once asked Grinde to slow down while driving to a fire call in Amiret.

When they were making the turn from Hwy. 14 onto the Amiret Road, Kelley turned to the driver and laconically remarked, "Ole, slow this thing down. We didn't start this fire."

The 99-year-old fire engine sparks many other memories.

In the 1950s, Dahl recalls that Tracy firemen depended upon an outdoor siren to summon them to a call. To learn where the fire was, firefighters sometimes called the downtown telephone switchboard, where lights let operators know who was placing the call. Local operators were trained to answer calls from firemen, she explains, but ignore those from nosy busybodies.

"I can still see all of those businessmen running off to the fire hall from their stores and offices when the siren sounded," she adds.

The lifelong Tracy resident has fond memories of the fire department's



A 1923 Luverne fire engine is more than an old machine for Carol (Grinde) Dahl. The fire truck brings to life vivid memories of her father, Ole Grinde, who once drove the vehicle on Tracy fire calls.

annual summer picnic, which included wives and children, held at the Boy Scout Camp on Lake Shetek,

"We looked forward to that all year. We kids knew that we could have all of the watermelon, ice cream and pop that we wanted."

...

The decommissioned fire engine, built in Luverne, MN was placed into service in September of 1923, four years before "Lucky Lindbergh's" transatlantic flight and Tracy's first Box Car Days. It's cost? \$4,750.

The Tracy Fire Dept. added a similar, open-cab Luverne fire engine in 1937. That fire engine is still running, making an annual appearance in the Box Car Days parade with a Miss Tracy candidate waving from a seat topside.

Your support is important

By Jon Wendorff

Wheels Across the Prairie Museum President

Thanks to everyone who has financially supported the museum this past year.

Maybe you paid our \$6 admission and spent an afternoon at the museum.

Perhaps you wrote out a check to become a member, or answered the call when the museum had a special need. Perhaps you are someone who gives an annual gift to the museum.

You understand that it takes more than goodwill and hard work to keep a museum open and protect valuable historical collections.

But occasionally, visitors wandering

through museum grounds, are surprised, and even a little offended, if we ask them to pay our nominal admission charge.

The Wheels museum has many on-going expenses, even though not all are obvious.

Keeping the lights on isn't free. The museum's average monthly electric bill is \$434. Heating our Main Barn costs about \$1,500 annually.

Property and liability insurance for 19 buildings and their contents, averages \$240 a month.

The museum's septic tanks needs to be pumped out every two years. Our lawn mower needs gas and oil changes. Trees need to be trimmed, and mulch bought for flower gardens.

Leaky roofs and drafty windows all need to be kept up, and walls occasionally need new paint.

Some maintenance projects—like mouse-proofing an old building—are relatively inexpensive. But future needs, such as repainting our signature 1915 steam switch engine, will require tens of thousands of dollars. Bringing exciting future dreams to reality, such as the construction of a new military building and refurbishing a 19th-century railroad house, also require big investments.

Get the picture?

Your support of the Wheels Across the Prairie Museum is very much appreciated. This museum wouldn't exist without you!

John's RX billboard moved to museum

For decades, a John's Drug billboard greeted travelers approaching Tracy from the south along the "Currie Road."

Today, the iconic signage has a new home at the Wheels Across the Prairie. Board member Jeff Meyer, working with property-owner Gerald Seehusen, relocated the billboard from its roadside spot 1.5 miles south of Tracy last summer.

The billboard was patterned after the distinctive, chalet-style John's Drug storefront, which was a fixture in downtown Tracy for more than five decades. However, it is uncertain precisely when the billboard was erected.

John Schleppenbach opened his Third St. drug store in 1966. Its doors closed at the end of 2018, after the opening of a new Lewis Family Drug store on west Morgan Street. Schleppenbach's daughter, Maria, who



The John's Drug billboard was a landmark for decades south of Tracy, before being moved to Wheels Across the Prairie last summer.



The John's Drug sign was located south of Tracy on County Road 11.

grew up in Tracy in the 1970s and '80s, and succeeded her father as pharmacist in the business, said the roadside billboard existed "as long as she can remember." Many longtime Tracy residents have similar long memories of the landmark.

The billboard was located near the former Eddie McCoy farmstead.

Public TV to spotlight museum's 'AutoBug'

The Wheels museum and its prized 1906 AutoBug will be featured in a future Pioneer Public Television segment.

Tim Bakken, Production Director for the PBS station in Granite Falls, gathered information and video about the museum's vintage "horseless carriage" during a November visit. The AutoBug was restored by the late Merrill Firebaugh, who drove the car with his wife, Alice, annually in the Tracy Box Car Days parade from 1949 into the late 1980s.

Bakken interviewed

Firebaugh's daughter, Marcy Schramm, for the segment.

"It was fun," said Schramm, a 1964 Tracy grad and 2021 museum board member. "Tim was really interested in the car and asked a lot of questions."

Schramm was told the AutoBug would likely be included on a PBS program about "wheels" in May.

Jon Wendorff, Wheels Across the Prairie president, is pleased with public television's interest.

"It is a big benefit for the museum anytime we can get this kind of publicity."



Producer Tim Bakken interviewed Marcy Schramm about the museum's 1906 AutoBug.



Merrill and Alice Firebaugh, and their 1906 AutoBug, were an attraction in the Box Car Days parade for decades.



Author Cindy Wilson presented a program on her new book "Beautiful Snow" at the museum in July. The book offered new perspectives of the Laura Ingalls novel, "The Long Winter," by drawing on contemporary newspaper accounts and railroad records. Wilson concluded her program with a book signing.



There was plenty to talk about during the museum's Box Car Days classic tractor show. More than 60 units were displayed.

Historian to speak of 1862 Dakota trials

A noted author will be presenting an August 20 program about the military tribunals that followed the U.S. Dakota War of 1862.

John A. Hammond will discuss

"The Infamous Dakota War Trials of 1862: Revenge, Military Law, and the Judgment of History."

Time for the museum program will be announced at a later date.



All Aboard!

Untangling a bell rope on the museum's 1915 switch engine became a high-level task for museum worker Mitchell Rolling last summer.

Museum plans military building to better display, preserve artifacts

By Seth Schmidt

Jubilant bedlam swept across Tracy, soon after the telegram arrived. The dispatch announced that a long-awaited armistice had been reached in Europe. Imperial Germany had been defeated. American doughboys, and their British and French allies were victorious. The cataclysmic Great War, which had claimed some 20 million lives over four years, was mercifully over.

Joyous celebrations erupted throughout Tracy. Locomotive whistles wailed triumphantly. Church bells pealed. Excited men grabbed shotguns and fired shells wildly into the air. Fireworks, grabbed from store shelves by celebrating throngs, ignited more to the laudatory sounds.

"Pandemonium broke loose," the editor of the Tracy Headlight wrote in describing the scene.

A hastily-organized parade marched down Third St. from the grade school led by the municipal band and Grand Army of the Republic heroes. Red Cross Good Samaritans, flag-waving school children, city leaders, shopkeepers, railroad workmen and happy townspeople joined in the procession. Celebratory speeches put an exclamation mark on the patriotic groundswell.

Amidst all the hub-up, an enterprising photographer set up a camera near the First National Bank corner to record the scene for posterity.

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The epic, Nov. 11, 1918, Armistice Day photograph can be seen today at the Wheels Across the Prairie Museum. Yet the black and white picture is easy to miss, tucked away on a crowded shelf in a glass cabinet.

The image will likely be displayed more prominently, however, if a dream is realized to build a new military building at the museum.

A concrete slab foundation for the 24x40-foot structure was poured last summer, east of St. Mark's Church. About \$40,000 has been raised for the project to date.

"This building would fill a need," says Garry Hippe, museum board member. "We think we can do it if we get enough community support."

The Wheels museum campus is dotted with numerous themed-buildings. A Chicago &



Tracy citizens took to downtown streets on Nov. 11, 1918, to celebrate the end of World War I. Frank Ives, Tracy studio photographer, may have been the photographer who captured the impromptu celebration on film. The scene looks north up Third St., from near the intersection of South and Third streets. Armistice Day is now observed as Veterans Day.

Northwestern depot spotlights Tracy's railroad heritage. A cottage features century-old home furnishings. Colorful Norwegian rosemaling graces Vi's Hut. A one-room country school is a yesteryear lesson in how children once learned their "three 'Rs.'" Vintage farm machinery stands ready in the Pamp Barn.

A post office, church, summer kitchen, town hall, general store, and log cabin each offer unique stories of the past. A section foreman's house, slated for restoration in 2022, will recall the lives of early railroad maintenance crews.

The Wheels museum's collection of military memorabilia does not have a designated building. Veterans' artifacts instead are displayed in a corner of the museum's Main Barn.

The display is a representation of American military eras from the Civil War to the present. Scrapbooks, uniforms, journals, ration stamps, photographs, posters, and flags tell the story of the local young men and women who have served their country. A .71 caliber Civil

War musket is among the prized artifacts. A well-thumbed scrapbook compiled by Warner "Brownie" Stafford, containing snapshots of more than 700 Tracy service men and women in the 1940s and '50s, is another.

Jon Wendorff, museum board president, explains that the Wheels has much more military memorabilia in storage that he'd like to display, but can't for lack of space.

"A new building would really let us do a better job of letting people see all of the things we have," he says.

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The one-level, insulated facility will be designed for year-around use, with an energy-efficient, HVAC mechanical system. The temperature and humidity controls will follow recommended museum standards for preserving artifacts.

Hippe, a Vietnam War veteran, believes the new military building would complement the

Military building: continued on page 5



A veterans' monument was dedicated at Wheels Across the Prairie Museum in 2000.

Military display

Continued from page 4

veterans memorial that the Tracy American Legion dedicated at the museum 20 years ago.

"We could have a wreath-laying ceremony out there on Memorial Day and invite people out on Veterans Day."

He said the veterans monument now at the museum "probably isn't viewed by the public as much as it should be," but feels that activities at the new military building would increase visibility for the memorial.

By designing a building from scratch, Hippe also feels the museum has an opportunity to create innovative, interactive exhibits that appeal to younger audiences. Wiring, jacks and equipment necessary for new digital exhibits, he observes, can be put in at the time of construction, and minimize the need for unsightly electrical chords.

Hippe envisions as many as 10 television monitors, where visitors can access historical information at digital kiosks.

With 960-square feet, Hippe feels the building will have enough space to house small programs.

Hippe would also like to eventually see an

array of American flags along the walkway leading to its entrance. Funding for the flags, Hippe says, could come from families and individuals wishing to honor a specific veteran. A plaque near each flag will name the honored veteran.

Details will be announced at a later date.

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No target date has been set for the construction of the military building.

"There are a lot of uncertainties about this project," Hippe said, especially because of wide fluctuations in the cost and availability of building materials. "We know we have to raise a lot more money to get it done. But this is important. We have had a lot of people from this area who have served in the military and we want to remember them and keep a military presence in our community."

Additional financial gifts can be sent to: Wheels Across the Prairie, PO Box 1091, Tracy, MN, 56175. Plans are to recognize all donors near the building's entrance.



Thanks to a demonstration from Ron Boje, museum visitors learned how farm families ground corn into cornmeal a century ago.

Below, Wheels board members discuss future events.



Become a new member or renew for 2022

Wheels Across the Prairie 2022 Membership

info@wheelsacrosstheprairie.org

We appreciate your continued support of the Wheels museum. Your membership and other financial gifts help maintain and preserve museum buildings, grounds, and collections.

At this time, we ask that you sustain your membership or join if you are not already a member. Please mail your membership dues to:

WHEELS ACROSS THE PRAIRIE MUSEUM
PO BOX 1091 • TRACY, MN 56175

Thank you for your membership and helping preserve our past for future generations.

2022 Board Members: President Jon Wendorff, Vice President Jane Muedeking, Treasurer Carol Strand, Historian Marcy Schramm, Secretary Linda Rykus, Muriel Coulter, Garry Hippe, Nicole Hippe, Ron Boje, Jeff Meyer, John Meyer, Seth Schmidt, Ken Witt.

Name: _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip: _____

email: _____

LEVELS OF MEMBERSHIP

(Due annually on May 1)

- _____ Individual - \$30 _____ Business - \$100
- _____ Couple - \$40 _____ Other - \$ _____
- _____ Family - \$50