

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

www.wheelsacrosstheprairie.org • info@wheelsacrosstheprairie.org



Museum targets May 22 opening



Wheels Across the Prairie visitors often make a bee-line toward the museum's 1915 steam switch engine and freight train.

Author to keynote annual meeting

Weather and ground-conditions permitting, the Wheels Across the Prairie Museum will open for its 37th season on Saturday, May 22, and Sunday, May 23. After its initial opening, the heritage center will be open five days a week, Wednesday through Sunday, through Labor Day weekend. Hours are 1 to 5 p.m.

Daily admission is \$6 for adults, \$4 for children 5-17, and free for 4 and under. Members (\$40 for a married couple, \$25 single) have free admission all summer, except for Labor Day Weekend, when a Box Car Days button is required for admission.

The Wheels Across the Prairie's annual meeting is planned Sunday, May 22, at 2 p.m. Anyone interested in the history of Tracy is invited.

Author Patricia Lubeck will be the keynote speaker. She will discuss her recent book "Victims of Foul Play."

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2021 will be a year of transition for the museum.

Efforts will continue to reshape the Wheels village following the relocation of six small buildings onto new foundations last fall. The museum's country school, general store, summer kitchen, Amiret Post Office, cottage, and Norwegian hut were moved from poorly drained sites behind the Main Barn, to new foundations east of the depot.

Repairs and modifications were needed on many of the structures following the relocations. Some improvements, such as the installation of a new wood floor in the country school, are finished.

Other refurbishments are still underway. Since each building had to be emptied last fall, displays still need to be set up again, or in some cases, be rearranged with new artifacts. Some structures need touch up paint.

New volunteers are always welcome, even if just for an hour or two.

Fresh landscaping is envisioned around newly-moved buildings, and areas left bare by old foundations.

Plans also call for walkways to connect the new streets of buildings, possibly with small light poles lighting the way. It is uncertain when underground electrical services can be brought to the buildings.

The restoration of an 1883 Great Northern Railroad section foreman's house is also in the mix. The railroad house was moved from Swift County last summer and positioned east of the depot. However, the rising cost of building materials since 2020 has suspended renovation work on the structure, which needs a new roof, new siding, several new windows, and a reconstructed lean-to.

Plans to construct a new building for the museum's military artifacts are also on hold. Space has been left for the military building between the general store and Norwegian hut. But construction has been postponed until more money is raised, and until the cost of building materials eases. Plans are to climatize the space with air conditioning and heating.

The six relocated small buildings, plus the under-construction foreman's house, will be closed to public viewing throughout the summer.

Windmill is due for repairs

The museum's vintage windmill is upwind from some badly needed maintenance in 2021.

Last summer, one of the windmill's metal blades blew off, and a portion of a second has broke off. It is hoped that the windmill head can be repaired this summer.

An Iowa firm has been contacted, but has a backlog to work through before tackling the Wheels project.

The museum's iconic windmill is a vestige of a bygone era. Once virtually every Minnesota farmstead depended upon a windmill to pump well water to supply household and livestock needs. Wind towers began fading from the landscape once electric power lines and rural water systems were extended to the country.

The museum's windmill was originally located at the Archie Blanchette farmstead in Amiret Township.



A classic windmill has towered over the Wheels museum for more than three decades.



Karen Peterson's affinity for flowers was reflected at the museum and at her home, which was featured in a summer garden tour several years ago.

Karen Peterson remembered as steadfast volunteer

Long-time museum volunteer Karen (Hill) Peterson died on Christmas Day, 2020, at age 74.

But many of her contributions to the Wheels museum are still evident, from the flower beds she helped tend and exhibits she helped create.

"Karen did so many things for the museum," reflects Jon Wendorff, museum president.

"She was such a sweet person," says Carol (Grinde) Dahl. "I knew her since we went to grade school together."

Packing up historical collections at St. Mark's Museum, in

preparation for the former Episcopal church's relocation to the Wheels campus, was among her first big projects.

Serving the museum board as its Historian, Karen was responsible for helping evaluate artifacts and creating displays. The 1964 THS graduate was also an avid flower gardener and helped develop and care for the museum's numerous flower beds.

Karen served on the museum board for many years with her husband, Art, who is a past-board president.

Quilt remembers Sodus women

A handmade quilt with the names of women living in Sodus and Custer Townships 115 years ago is among the new museum exhibits this summer.

The quilt was made in 1905-06. Women living in Sodus and Custer Townships at the time each made a square, with each stitching her name into the piece.

David Engesser, whose grandmother, Pearl, made one of the squares, gave the quilt to the museum. The quilt had been bequeathed to him by his uncle, Jerry Engesser.



The quilt with names stitched into fabric pieces.

More HVAC space needed

High-humidity, temp swings put artifacts at risk

By Seth Schmidt

How many historical artifacts are housed at Wheels Across the Prairie?

A State Historical Society preservationist pegs the Wheels collection at "over 750,000" items.

"I don't think I have ever seen (a community museum) with such an extensive collection of materials," Nicole Grabow told Wheels museum board members at a May, 2020 meeting. "You have some really interesting materials"

Grabow, director of Preventive Conservation for the Midwest Art Conservation Center in Minneapolis, conducted a two-day on-site assessment of the museum in May 2020, and then briefed the board on her findings.

A 36-page written report makes detailed recommendations for preserving fragile historical artifacts and structures, improving displays, digitally cataloging artifacts and alleviating potential safety hazards. A \$6,700 Minnesota Legacy grant funded Grabow's report. It is hoped that Grabow's report will help the Wheels qualify for state grants to fund recommended improvements. (See related story).

The historical preservationist offered many accolades about the museum. "I really enjoyed being here...you have a lot of amazing stuff," Grabow said. The layout of the museum village—which includes a four-unit steam freight train and depot—is very appealing for visitors, she said.

But Grabow also said the Wheels faces multiple challenges in fulfilling its mission of preserving and sharing Tracy's heritage.

A shortage of climate-controlled space for museum collections is a major shortcoming, Grabow asserted. Only one museum building—the Main Barn—has air conditioning and heat. Items exhibited or stored in other museum spaces are at risk from excessive summer heat and humidity, year-around temperature swings, low winter humidity, and lack of ventilation.

Only three of 16 humidity and temperature readings taken at various museum locations fell within recommended ranges, according to Grabow.



Preservationist Nicole Grabow believes the museum could benefit from having more climate controlled display and storage spaces.

"With few exceptions, collections materials should be displayed and exhibited in climate-controlled spaces in order to protect them... Without climate control, degradation occurs more quickly." This deterioration can include mold growth, fading, discoloration, warping, cracking and breakage.

Grabow noted that the Wheels displays many items in historic buildings that lack heating and air conditioning. Yet upgrades to some structures, such as a 19th century log cabin, would be anathema to its historical characteristics, she said.

Become a new member or renew for 2021

Wheels Across the Prairie 2021 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. With your help the Wheels museum can continue its mission of preserving our priceless heritage. 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.

2020 Board Members: President Jon Wendorff, Vice President Jane Muedeking, Treasurer Carol Strand, Historian Marcy Schramm, Secretary Linda Rykus. Board members Garry Hippe, Ron Boje, Jeff Meyer, John Meyer, Becky Averill, Seth Schmidt, Muriel Coulter.

Name: _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip: _____

LEVELS OF MEMBERSHIP

(Due annually on May 1)

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



Wish List

Want to help museum operations this summer? Donations of the following would be appreciated:

- 50 bags of cedar mulch.
- Ink cartridges for an HP Desk Jet F243D printer and Canon 210 & 211
- Small bottles of drinking water.
- Wooden plate holders.

HVAC sought for exhibit building

Thanks to a state grant, Wheels Across the Prairie is one step closer to its goal of installing a HVAC system into its Helmberger-Johnston building.

An \$8,900 Minnesota Historical Society Arts & Cultural Heritage grant has allowed Wheels to hire a Minneapolis engineering firm to draft recommendations for heating, air conditioning, ventilation improvements in the 5,632-square foot building. Insulation needs would also be studied.

Erected in 2015, the 44x128-foot building, is one of the Wheels' major exhibit spaces. However, sticky summer humidity and wide winter to summer temperature swings in the building have become problematic for fragile museum artifacts. (See related story). Temperature and humidity controls would reduce mold, rot and rust risks to collections, and also provide more comfortable conditions for summer tours and programs.

The Wheels distinctive hip-roofed Main Barn is now the museum's only climate-controlled space. As a result, many especially frail objects are moved from locations around the museum to the Main Barn each fall. Installing HVAC in the Helmberger-Johnston building will greatly expand the number of museum artifacts that can be stored in optimum conditions.

The study will also evaluate the suitability of adding an elevated display shelf along the building's 16-foot sidewalls, or if a second-floor could be built for storage.

The Helmberger-Johnston structure is of wood-frame construction, with corrugated steel walls and roof, and two overhead doors. The floor is reinforced concrete.

Major displays include an early 20th-century doctor's office, a 1923



Michael A. Fischer, a structural engineer with LHB Inc., met with several board members, including Garry Hippe and Marcy Schramm.

Studebaker, a 1950s era kitchen, Tracy Public School memorabilia, a restored 1950s Allis Chalmers tractor and pull-behind swather, and a Red Rooster Cafe and booth.

The barn is also used for large group events, such as the Box Car Days pork chop fund-raiser.

Two LHB representatives inspected the building in April, after meeting with several Wheels board members.

Once the engineering evaluation is complete, the museum plans to apply for a second state grant, to help with the expense of installing the system.

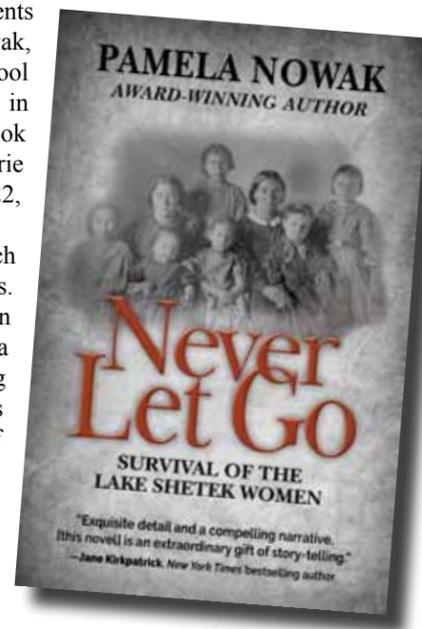
New book tells saga of 1862 Shetek tragedy

Historical fiction author Pam Nowak is offering a fresh perspective of the people events of the 1862 Dakota Conflict near Lake Shetek.

Her new book, *Never Let Go*, tells the stories of five women who survived the horrific events of August 20, 1862. Nowak, a 1982 Tracy High School graduate who now lives in Wyoming, will discuss her book at the Wheels Across the Prairie Museum, Sunday, August 22, at 5 p.m.

Nowak uses new research to tell the women's stories. Dakota Indian attacks on August 20, 1862, devastated a settlement of 34 people living near Shetek. Fourteen whites and an unknown number of Dakota died near Shetek on that day.

The program was postponed from last summer due to the pandemic.



A new hardwood floor was installed in the country school house this spring, thanks to monetary donations from museum supporters. BT Quality Construction did the installation.



After more than a century of use, a rotting wooden floor finally gave way last fall from the museum's country school when the structure was moved to a new location.



Space has been left between the Moline General Store and the Norwegian hut for the future construction of a new building to house.



Marcy Schramm working in summer kitchen

Many small projects follow Big Move

The big job is done. Now comes the painstaking small tasks.

With the help of Their Moving Company crews, six small museum buildings were moved easterly to new foundations last November before the snow flew.

Work continues this spring to make repairs and refurbish the country school, the Norwegian hut, summer kitchen, cottage, Amiret Post Office and the Moline General Store which were moved from poorly-drained spots behind the Main Barn.

A new wooden floor has been installed in the school, but the floor in the Post Office needs to be reinforced. The cottage has plaster board that needs to be replaced, and siding on the general store needs to be redone. Several buildings can use some fresh paint.

Future plans call for the installation of electrical cables, so lights and security cameras and lights can be hooked up. Walk ways will be built connecting the buildings.

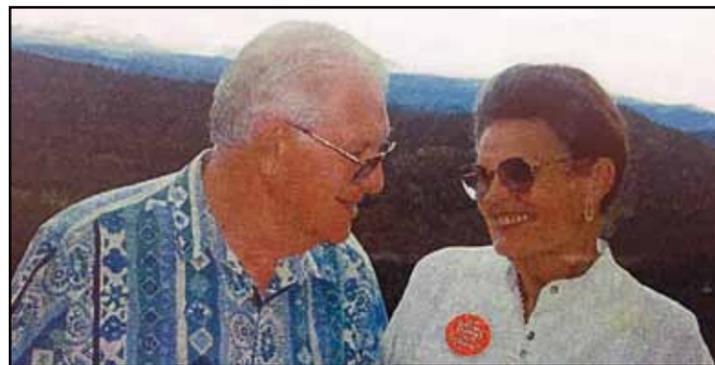
Renovations on the railroad section foreman's house that was moved to the museum from DeGraff last summer have been suspended because of the high cost of building materials.

A spot has been left between the general store and the Norwegian hut for the future construction of a new building to house all of the museum's military artifacts.

Concrete work planned this spring includes an apron off the north side of the Helmberger-Johnston building to make sure water drains away from the building.

New landscaping is also planned around both the old and new building sites.

The six small buildings will remain closed this summer.



John and Evelyn Helmberger reveled in their 50th wedding anniversary in 2004.

Helmberger

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Matching gifts help

Wheels leaders hope that financial support from the Helmberger-Holmberg Fund will continue to help the museum continue its mission.

Messerli explains that future Wheels requests are dependent on whether they meet the guidelines originally set up by Evelyn and John, and whether local funding matches are met. So for example, a \$60,000 qualifying project, \$20,000 could come from local donations, and \$40,000 from the Foundation.

"That's why it is so important for the museum to have local support, and have people pay dues and become a member," Wendorff sums up.

'49 grad legacy boosts museum

By Seth Schmidt

Evelyn Helmberger's childhood nickname, "Tiny," stuck with her throughout life.

Yet the 1949 Tracy High School graduate's impact on the Wheels Across the Prairie Museum has been anything but small.

A foundation established by Evelyn, who died in 2008; and her husband, John Holmboe, who died in 2009; has become a major benefactor to the museum.

Administered by the Community Foundation of Northern Colorado, the Helmberger-Holmboe Fund has given \$237,000 to the Wheels museum over the past decade.

Foundation support has been instrumental for:

- A family history addition onto the Main Barn.
- Construction of a new, 5,800 square-foot exhibit building.
- Paving a main parking lot.
- Moving an 1883 railroad section foreman's house to the museum from DeGraf.
- Re-shaping museum grounds by relocating six small buildings to new foundations.

"The Foundation's support has allowed us to do some big improvements that wouldn't have been possible otherwise," comments Wheels Board President Jon Wendorff. "This generosity is much appreciated."

Elizabeth Messerli, an administrator for the Foundation, explains that John and Evelyn Helmberger "wished to see the development and enhancement of Tracy and wished to see Wheels Across the Prairie Museum become one of the finest regional museums."

The couple, she added, wished to see foundation money "used for the ongoing tracking of their family evolution through a Helmberger family exhibit." An extensive archive of family history information given to the Wheels, tracks Evelyn's Helmberger ancestors to 1790 in Germany. The museum archive also has information on the Stowell and Klein families from Evelyn's mother's genealogy. (John Stowell and Anna Kelin were the parent's of Evelyn's mother, Grace

Helmberger.

Evelyn Helmberger-Holmboe, who held a Ph.D in Education from the University of Minnesota and taught at several colleges, died in 2008 in Fort Collins, CO at age 76.

John Holmboe, her husband of 53 years, was a civil engineer who during his career helped develop apartment buildings, shopping malls and community hubs from Minnesota to California. While in the Twin Cities, he managed the construction of stores and regional shopping malls for the Dayton Hudson Corporation, and their subsidiaries Target and B. Dalton Book Stores. A native of St. Paul, Holmboe died in 2009 at age 82.

Tracy roots

Evelyn's family moved to Tracy in 1940 from a farm near Perham when Evelyn was nine. The clanking cacophony of Tracy's rail yards across the street from the Helmberger home at 60 South St. would have

been an everyday part of Evelyn's life. Her father, Peter, worked as a school janitor. Her mother, Grace, worked at Peifer Produce and Orvie's cafe in Tracy, before becoming a USDA inspector at poultry-processing plants in Marshall and Butterfield. Evelyn walked to school at Tracy's imposing 1896 elementary school at Rowland and Fifth streets, before



Left: Evelyn "Tiny" Helmberger graduated from Tracy High School in 1949.



Left: Peter E. Helmberger, Evelyn's father, grew up on a farm. Right: Evelyn's mother, Grace (Stowell) Helmsberger, died in 2003 in Tracy.



Evelyn as a young farm girl.

attending Tracy High School at Rowland and Second.

1949 yearbook photos show Evelyn with carefully coiffed-dark hair, holding cymbals in the high school band, and primly seated with the Teton staff. In business class, the girl with the diminutive name earned a Gregg Shorthand certificate for being able to transcribe 100 words a minute.

"She was an intelligent girl who was well-liked," remembered classmate Harold Deal.

The Twin Cities, where she would meet John, beckoned after high school. The couple "eloped" and got married in Northwood, Iowa, on August 6, 1954. Evelyn and John's no-frills wedding in front of a Justice of the Peace requisitioned a neighbor lady decked out in an apron and the Justice's wife as witnesses. Driving home to St. Paul the next day they called their parents to announce the marriage.



The high school girls who typed copy for the 1949 Teton included Tiny Helmberger (right).

"They were shocked, but soon acclimatized," Evelyn wrote in memoirs written for their 50th Golden Wedding Anniversary.

Evelyn earned her Bachelor's degree in education in 1964, and completed work on

her Doctorate degree in education while teaching and working as a counselor in Moundsview in the 1970s.

Later, she taught business management classes at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Air Force bases in Colorado and Texas, and Sioux Falls College.

In the 1980s, Evelyn and John moved to Los Angeles, CA., where she continued teaching at Pepperdine University. She also joined and became director of South Central Community Service Center, a nonprofit organization that served low-income residents. After expanding the organization to four locations, she retired in 2002.

The couple raised a son, Richard, and a foster son, Richard McCall.

Avid travelers, John and Evelyn visited nearly all corners of the globe. The couple's "Top 15" list of "Wondrous and Awe Inspiring" experiences:

- Killer whales trying to dislodge seals from ice floes in Alaska.
- A cable car ride over a rain forest, jungle, Ayers Rock and a penguin colony in Australia.
- Hundreds of elephants standing in shallows in Botswana.
- An atomic bomb explosion at Ucca Flats seen from the rim of the Grand Canyon.
- A total solar eclipse in St. Paul.
- The stone forest, Great Wall, and terra cotta army in China.
- Bicentennial parade of ships in New York City harbor, seen from the World Trade Towers in 1976.



Homecoming at Tracy High School, in the fall of 1948, had moments like this. Was Evelyn "Tiny" Helmberger, among those looking on?



The Teton yearbook staff, including Evelyn Helmberger (seated, second from right), faced a camera in 1949.

Helmberger: continued on page 6