The Window

Official Newsletter of the Brookings County Historical Society

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Because of the COVID-19 pandemic

Brookings County Museum closed through July 2020

The Brookings County Museum has cancelled its traditional season opening date of Memorial Day, May 25.

The culprit is the coronavirus that is coursing across the world.

Because of that, for the first time in its 50 years of existence in Volga, the Brookings County Museum is adjusting its summer season.

Its governing board has decided to close the museum through July when it will reassess and decide what the remainder of the museum season will be, according to Phil Wagner of Brookings, museum president.

"Perhaps we'll be able to open in late summer and extend our season beyond the normal Labor Day closure date," Wagner said. "We certainly hope that is the case."

Wagner said reaching a decision to set back the museum season has been difficult. "But considering that nearly all of our volunteers and museum visitors are in the most vulnerable category, I believe the board made the correct decision."

He noted that Governor Kristi Noem has predicted the peak of the virus will hit South Dakota in June.

While the threat of the disease is the prime factor in the temporary closure, Wagner said, the need for social distancing for the past several months has also impacted the winter work for the complete change-over in the main museum layout that was started last fall.

"We've managed to get considerable work done early on, but we've fallen far behind as the spread of the virus advanced to our area," he said.

Wagner noted that the opening of the museum's new web site was, in a way, timely and will help keep the museum electronically available to visitors. "I would encourage everyone to tour the site (see the address below) and the historic information it contains," he said.

The website features hundreds of full-color photographs of museum facilities and of items on display, as well as copies of recent Window newsletters with stories and photos about museum activities.
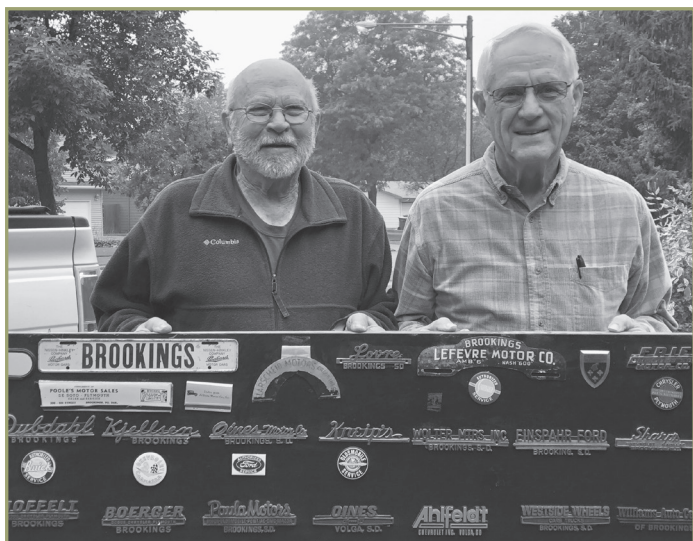
The site also has two unique time-lapse maps of South Dakota State University and the Brookings community. "They show the physical growth and development of both entities through the years," Wagner said.

Museum officials will reevaluate the July closure decision and inform the public of a decision later that month.

Stay home and tour the museum

brookingscountymuseum.org

COVID-19

A Remarkable Collection of 6s

A rare collection of South Dakota license plates with the Brookings designation "6" has been donated to the Brookings County Museum in Volga.

The late Dennis Johnson, who was a long time mechanic and auto body repairman in the Brookings area, amassed the 85 plates beginning with the first one issued in 1925.

Brookings County was assigned the "6" designation because its population at the time was the sixth largest in South Dakota. While county populations have changed since 1925, counties still have their original 1925 numbers on the plates sold in that county.

Johnson also gave the museum his collection of logos of nearly every Brookings automobile dealership since dealerships existed in the community. These logos were usually attached in the trunk area of new vehicles sold by that dealership.

Johnson was a native of Estelline. His interest in South Dakota license plates and Brookings dealer logo collections began about the time he started his hobby of restoring vintage automobiles.

South Dakota first issued licenses, actually permits, for motor vehicles in 1905. James F. Biglow of Flandreau became the first vehicle owner to sport that unusual license, or permit. It wasn't a colorful license plate, but a non-descript, round metal disc.

Biglow's automobile was a four and one-half horsepowered Oldsmobile. The small metal disc about the size of a silver dollar carried assigned vehicle numbers.

And at that time, every vehicle owner was required to make the disc themselves, stamp on the assigned number, and display it on the rear of the vehicle, fastened with wire or a metal strap. It wasn't until 1912 that the state issued actual license plates.

Interestingly, in 1939 Flandreau area farmer Frank Weigel gave his 1912 Model T Ford which still sports a replica of that 1912 license plate, to South Dakota State University. The future Bummobile became an iconic symbol of the university's Hobo Day homecoming that was also started in 1912.

Included in Johnson's number "6" plate collection are exact copies of the paper plates that were issued by the state in 1944 and 1945 during WW II when metal was in demand for the war effort.

These paper plates were displayed on the inside of the windshield.

Johnson's collection also includes the first plate on which Mt. Rushmore's likeness was inscribed. It was issued in 1939, but it wasn't until 1952 that the state made the "four faces" logo a permanent part of the plate.

The Johnson collection also includes the first plates that were treated with a reflective material that was developed by the 3M Company in 1957.

TOP: The late Dennis Johnson, left, and Brookings County Museum President Phil Wagner pose with Johnson's collection of mostly chrome dealership logos that were attached to new cars sold by dealerships in the Brookings area. Below Wagner's hand is the LeFevre Motors logo, and down from that to the bottom of the board is the Ahlfeldt dealership logo. Harry Ahlfeldt started his business in Volga and later expanded to Brookings. The logo collection came with Johnson's Number 6 license plate set, given to the museum shortly before Johnson's death.

BOTTOM: The rare collection of all Number 6 South Dakota license plates donated by the late Dennis Johnson are now displayed on the Vintage Farm Equipment building wall at the Brookings County Museum's six building complex in Volga.

Toy Tractors Appeal to Children of all Ages

A retired Deuel County farmer has donated his remarkable collection of toy tractors to the Brookings County Museum.

Before Marlyn Christopherson died at age 88 in September, 2019, he told his wife Mary that he wanted his beloved collection of 1/16 and 1/64 scale, die cast replica tractors given to the museum in Volga.

Marlyn and Mary moved to Volga a few months earlier to be near their son, Scott, and family. One of their first stops after getting settled was to tour the Brookings County Museum.

"He was impressed," said his wife Mary. "He wanted his collection to be a part of the museum."

What Christopherson collected over about 20 years includes so many tractors of various makes and models, plus accompanying equipment, that it will more than fill the new case the museum has purchased to hold it all.

If just his tractors were piled nose to tail, the stack would be almost as tall as the 165-foot tall campanile at South Dakota State University.

"We're honored to have this incredible display as part of the Vintage Farm Equipment Building where five antique tractors and a 1940s threshing machine are also displayed," said museum president Phil Wagner of Brookings.

Wagner and museum volunteers have been busy this winter sorting the collection and determining how to properly display the tractors. "It's a challenge," said museum board member Marvin Hope of Volga, the museum's farm equipment curator.

Christopherson was born in 1931 to Ingbert and Minnie Christopherson on a farm two miles northeast of Brandt, S.D. In his youth, Marlyn helped operate, repair and work with the tractors on the farm. He graduated from Astoria High School and then enrolled in engineering at South Dakota State University.

His plan for a degree in engineering was changed when he decided his life's work should be what he loved to do the most, farming. He moved back home to help his father. That career was interrupted when, during the Korean Conflict, he was drafted into the army in 1952.

He was honorably discharged and returned to the farm. In 1956 he married Mary Klapprodt and they bought the farm from his parents.

One day in about early 2000, a friend invited him to go to a toy tractor show and sale in Hendricks, Minn. He was enthralled with the tiny tractors he saw there, his wife recalled.

He spotted a tractor that he remembered one of his farming neighbors used. So he bought it. He was hooked, and for the next 20 years attended numerous sales, returning home with a tractors that replicated machines other neighbors owned.

He knew that what he was collecting were toys, but he also saw the history of farming in what he collected. In buying the replicas, he was able to rekindle memories of his old friends who operated specific makes and models of tractors.

"Sometimes he would come home with an entire box of tractors and equipment," Mary remembered. He preferred the older model tractors, not the fancier ones of recent years," she said. "At one time he had each machine identified, but unfortunately the small pieces of identifying paper he had under each machine were lost during the move from the Brandt farm to Volga.

Not only did he buy toy tractors, but he also ordered plans for wooden model tractors, or worked from memory to build tractors and other farm equipment. He even made a couple of small Model T Fords. His larger wooden models, some more than a foot long, remain with the family. His wife still doesn't know how he managed the exacting detail despite advancing rheumatoid arthritis, especially in his hands.

Often, on special holidays, he would give tractors he'd purchased or made to his many grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Now, because of his generosity, his love of tractors lives on. Children of all ages will enjoy what he so meticulously collected and made. ▨

An impressive collection of more than 600 toy tractors and farm equipment was recently donated by the late Marlyn Christopherson.
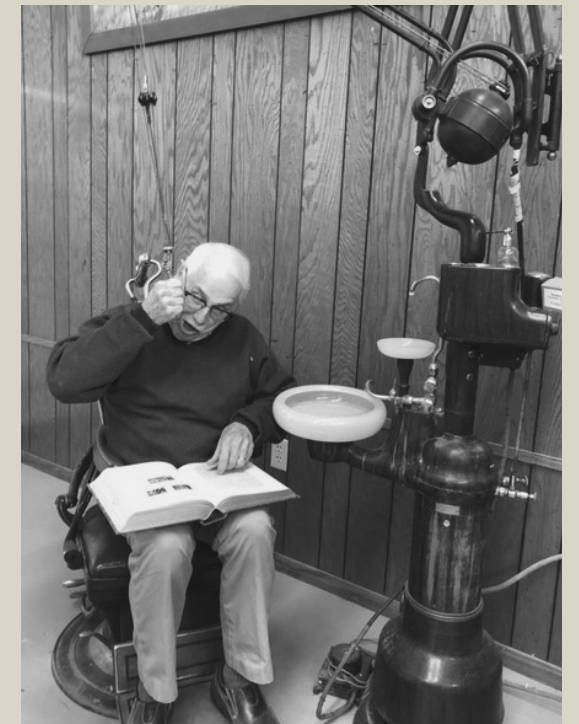

The huge collection of toy tractor models are sorted and await placement in a new display case.

The main museum is and has been a mess since last fall's efforts to rearrange things to make better use of the floor space. Here board president Phil Wagner, at right, guides a heavy piano into place as, from top to bottom at left, Shirley Deethardt of Aurora (top), Bob Buchheim and Mark Hope, both of Volga, lend a hand.

This old piano lacked a rear right wheel which made its movement during the museum's work day a difficult one. From left to right, Phil Wagner, Bob Buchheim, Marv Hope, Darla Strande and Shirley Deethardt.

While most volunteers were busy moving displays and cases hither and yon, Chuck Cecil took time for a do-it-yourself root canal using the old dental equipment that is one of the museum's displays.

Hard Work & *Elbow Grease*

There appears to be seven volunteers at work in the major re-staging of the Brookings County Museum main building that started early last winter. But look closely. One of the volunteers is actually one of the manikins. Darla Strande of Brookings is next to the non-volunteer, then Scott Petersen, rural Tyler, MN, Marv Hope, Phil Wagner of Brookings, Dennis Hanson, Volga, and Shirley Deethardt, Aurora.

Phil Wagner and Marv Hope give a veteran of World War I assistance as volunteer workers re-staged the Brookings County Museum floor plan.

Moving new $800 display cases takes patience, time and strength. From left, Phil Wagner, Bob Buchheim and Marv Hope.

Museum Inspires New Book by Local Author

An old ox yoke scheduled for display in the new Trygve Trooien Horse-Drawn Museum on the Brookings County Museum campus in Volga inspired a book that has now been published by Arcadia Publishing's History Press.

Author and museum board member Chuck Cecil writes in the book's introduction how his book, "Bull Trains to Deadwood", came about.

Cecil wrote that as a museum volunteer, he was washing a century of dust off one of the museum's old ox yokes and it came to him that he knew nothing about the role the ox played in the early settlement of Dakota Territory.

He discovered that not only did many pioneers use oxen for transport to their new homesteads, but they also put them to work farming until enough cash was acquired to buy a team of horses.

Cecil also learned about the old Fort Pierre to Deadwood Trail over which from 1876 to 1886 ox trains for a decade traveled, bringing all that the miners and others in the Black Hills needed to survive. He had never heard of that era of our state's history, he said, so he set aside a book he was then working on called "Grandpa's Horses", and started to research oxen in the Dakotas.

"I found a part of early Dakota history that I had never before heard about," he said.

Millions of tons of everything from booze, church bells, bodices and baby carriages, dynamite and even mine train rails and locomotives, were transported by teams of 20 oxen pulling three freight wagons loaded with tons of supplies over the 200-mile trip.

The growth in the Black Hills, although illegal, could not be controlled after Custer found gold there in 1874, and thousands sought fame and fortune in the Hills," Cecil said, "and especially around Deadwood, then considered the gold epicenter."
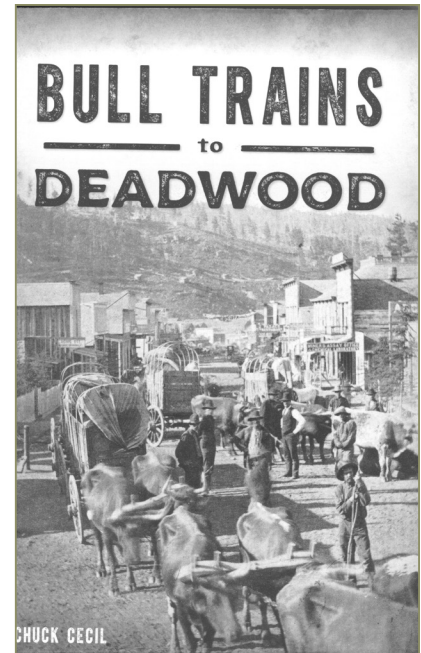
"That era was remarkable, creating stories and characters that remain a part of our history today," he said.

In 1886 the Fremont, Elkton Horn and Missouri Valley Railroad entered the Black Hills, Dakota Territory from the south through Buffalo Gap, Cecil said. "That ended the era of bull trains over the trail from Fort Pierre, but the use of oxen to haul large loads to Black Hills communities continued for several years."

"Bull Trains to Deadwood" is for sale through the museum's on-line book store that is a feature of the new website. Cecil is donating a portion of the book's sale to the museum. ▧

The ox yoke that inspired Chuck Cecil's latest book

The cover of the book inspired by the Brookings County Museum

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21st Century Television Meets 20th Century Radios

The Brookings County Museum now has technology that enables users to zip around local history at the speed of light.

Thanks to the technical and financial support of Brookings businesspersons Al Rogers and Ginger Thomson, the Brookings County Museum has launched its comprehensive website and touch-screen TV kiosk.

The combination greatly expands the museum's educational outreach, displaying photos and information to viewers around the world. Users at computers or while visiting the museum campus in Volga can view pictures of the museum's many displays, read stories about county history and history makers, meet museum directors, or watch vignettes of horses being harnessed or at work plowing, yarn being spun, among other educational enactments.

Also included is the detailed work of retired Brookings Boeing Company software engineer Doug Olesen's evolution, time-lapse maps of the South Dakota State University campus and the City of Brookings. More maps of area entities will be added later.

Thomson, owner of Website Spice in Brookings, created the programming to allow all this to happen.

Rogers assisted the museum in working through the technical aspects of the undertaking and provided the touch-screen television set, according to Phil Wagner, museum president.

He said Rogers teamed with museum board member Chuck Cecil in determining content and areas of visitor interest.

The system was launched January 1, 2020. The Brookings County Museum joins several county and city museums in South Dakota that have this exciting new capability, Wagner said.

Cecil agreed. "I think our county's museum will have by far the most comprehensive website of any," he said. "This is a huge step forward into what museums of the future will include." He said the website will eventually include the capability of receiving donations to the museum through electronic transfer.

Rogers is the former co-owner of Central Business Supply in Brookings. Thomson has extensive on-air radio and television experience. In addition to her website business, she also teaches Mass Communication at SDSU.

"Costs to the museum for this exciting new venture have been minimal, thanks to the generosity of Thomson and Rogers," Cecil said.

Museum president Phil Wagner, Brookings, center, accepts a donated touch-screen television amidst the museum's collection of early 1900 radios. At left is Ginger Thomson of Brookings, owner of Website Spice and creator of our new website and its use in the touch screen system. The computerized TV set is a gift of Brookings businessman Al Rogers, right. The museum's website can be viewed at brookingscountymuseum.org.

The installation of the new touch-screen television in the Brookings County Museum last fall has attracted the attention of the South Dakota Historical Society.

A story and photograph about the touch-screen technology at the museum was one of the feature articles in the State Society's January-February Hoofprints publication.

Now that's a big deal!

Time-lapse maps

brookingscountymuseum.org

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Hauxhurst House needs you!

The refurbishing of the first floor of the historic 1884 James Hauxhurst house that is part of the six-building complex of the Brookings County Museum has been put on hold due to lack of funds.

This is the second delay in the expensive efforts to update the former home of the county commissioner's first clerk. Hauxhurst served as clerk when commissioners supervised the move of the county seat from Medary to Brookings.

Hauxhurst built the handsome house on Third Street where the Brookings City-County Governmental Services building now stands across the street south of the Brookings Public Library.

In 2011, as the city block for the new government services building was cleared of homes and businesses, a group of interested Brookings citizens stepped forward to save the Hauxhurst house from destruction.

They requested that the Brookings County Museum board accept the building and preserve it for future generations, which the museum board did. The Brookings group paid for the building's foundation and for the move to the county museum site.

Since then, several fund drives by the county museum have resulted in cash sufficient for many improvements in the 1884 structure, but there remains a need for gifts to get the project over the top so that it can be opened to the public when the museum reopens later this summer.

This 2011 photograph shows the site where the City-County Governmental Services building in Brookings is now located across the street south of the Public Library. The Hauxhurst House is shown as the only one left standing at the cleared site, awaiting its move to the Brookings County Museum in Volga. Funds are needed to complete the refurbishing of the ground floor.

DID YOU KNOW: It costs us $1.50 if you don't let us know when you move. Please provide address changes!

History Comes Alive at the Brookings County Museum

Join us and become a member today!