

A GIVING SPIRIT



COURTESY PHOTO: THE CLAY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The community of Vermillion has always had a giving spirit, willing to step up and help those in need. Pictured is a Red Cross auction held in February of 1918.

The Charity That Started It All

BY SARAH WETZEL
For the Plain Talk

Those who have visited the Civic Council in downtown Vermillion might see just a typical thrift store.

What they might not realize is this establishment is actually a charitable organization that has been around for close to a century and has been a corporation for 50 years last summer.

"It was started by Mrs. Andrew Lee whose husband actually ended up being the governor of South Dakota," said Wess Pravecek, current President of the Civic Council board. "She along with a lot of other women in the community could see here were areas in town where there was a gap where people needed help, children needed food. So they started by just having these garage sale type things, maybe in somebody's church basement. They would raise some money and it just got moving from there through many years. Sometimes you don't even really get to see the difference you make but it can happen. That's what happened with the Civic Council. These women knew they could make a difference so they volunteered their time and then it just kept going."

"Mrs. Geppert said the original idea for a Council should be credited to Mrs. Andrew Lee, who carried on the work on a personal basis," reads a Plain Talk article from February 3, 1972. "The Vermillion Art Club and the Federated Women's Club were responsible for the first active organization in 1920. The Council was incorporated in 1965 for the express purpose of buying a building in which to operate a thrift shop six days a week, instead of the once a week sale that had previously been held. Up until that time it was an informal organization without any rules or regulations – just dedicated women interested in helping the community and those in need."

According to the Sioux City Sunday Journal, in 1966 the Civic Council decided to buy a former church building at 109 National St.

Donations at that time were gathered from various collection boxes throughout the city which were picked up by the Boy Scout members of Explorer Post 214.

"By 1972 the council was ready to expand again," reads a Plain Talk article from 1985. "The building which they now occupy on Market St. was purchased. They paid \$50,000 cash for it. Their hours of operations were increased and the store is now open all day, six days a week."

Eventually as the business grew, Pravecek said the building next to it was also purchased and the store expanded.

While the location has changed, the basic operation has remained the same, relying on the giving hearts of those in the Vermillion community.

"All of the items in that store are donated by people in the community," Pravecek said. "The merchandise comes in the back door, is purchased and taken out the front door and that money is used to benefit the community by hiring five to seven almost full time people. Then we also pay taxes and pay our utilities and our garbage bills and things like that but then the money goes back into the community."

The first paid employee around 1970 was Mrs. Ruth Brookman according to the Sioux City Sunday Journal.

Back then shoes sold for 50 cents, a dress for \$1 and a man's suit for \$1.50.

According to Pravecek, the organization exists to fill needs which is another thing that has not changed for 90 years.

"We get requests from organizations and individuals," she said. "We take a look at what does this need and can we fill that void somehow just like it started in 1920. It's one of those things that if it wasn't for the generosity of the people in the community who support the store by donating their gently used items and then coming back in the front door and shopping, that's how this thing keeps going."

The Sioux City Journal on April 26, 1970 shared how the Council made a difference back then.

Mrs. Ruth Brookman was President of the Vermillion Civic Council at the time.

"With the money from the clothing sales, the council has always helped with the immediate needs of the poor," it reads. "When the council was established, Mrs. Brookman said, there was no welfare committee in the city and thus no place where the needy could go."

The 'Meals on Wheels' program was started by Civic Council, buying the necessary equipment including Pyrex plates, stainless steel covers and heated carts.

"They have helped with things such as glasses, dental care, warm clothing and hospital bills," reads a Plain Talk article from

February 3, 1972. "The milk program in the schools was first initiated by the Council. Various health clinics have been sponsored by the Council. These functions were later taken over by other organizations, but the initial need was met by this unique organization...The Council did welfare work before the welfare office was established."

Along with continuing to fund various things the Civic Council currently holds periodic drawings and discount days to benefit those shopping there.

"We do drawings all the time," Pravecek said. "You just go in and shop and put your name in the drawing. At Christmas time we'll do a drawing for four gift cards, two from HyVee, two from WalMart. We have half-price days. We have spin-the-wheel days, all sorts of things. We've been pretty proud of the fact that we have kept prices low. We check around. We go to thrift stores in other towns and see how they do it. We're always game for improvements. There's a lot of times when we have to put some money into the infrastructure of the store. But boy, we're thrifty people. We know that we have to be good stewards of the money that's made through that store so we're not frivolous about how we use that money. We want to make sure the community sees a difference."

People from different organizations volunteering their time is actually how the Civic Council got its name.

"It's also taken a whole lot of people who have been willing to serve as representatives from their church or their civic organization that have worked this many years to keep it going," Pravecek said. "To me it's one of the longest lasting super powers of the community, for lack of a better term. Just because it's the goodness of people's hearts and that's what I'm so proud of Vermillion about."

"People in the community need to be really proud of the fact that they have kept this not-for-profit business going. My serving on the board is a joy for me. I just see the benefits that it gives to the community and it makes me feel good doing it."

Pravecek herself has been involved about 20 years.

"I served as a member and a volunteer," she said. "As a volunteer you can go down and wash some of the dishes that come in. I'm going down this afternoon to help assemble Christmas trees so the staff doesn't have to use every minute of their time to do all these things. It's a matter of people who are willing to give their time and the things from their home. It will benefit somebody else by putting it in the store and making it available for somebody to buy. The store is not just for people who are needy and shopping there. The thrift store idea has just taken off and has gotten to be a booming business all over the country. What's different about ours is the money we make goes back to the community."

All things considered, the Civic Council is the community with members and volunteers from dozens of organizations pushing together to run this one project just as other local charities run.

"The Welcome Table is really not a part of the Methodist church," Pravecek used as an example. "It's part of a whole community organization. That church just happens to open their doors and house it. It's like the food pantry. It's not a Lutheran-based project. It just happens to be located in their church and it's community once again that makes that move forward and giving back to the community where there's a need. We're all about two paychecks from being in the same boat sometimes so I think that we're realistic about if you're going to take something from the community then you need to give back. That's kind of what drives me."

Not just the rich heritage of the organization but future generations is another driving force for Pravecek.

"I want my kids as adult women to know what I've made a priority in my life so when they're making it through the turmoil of raising children, getting a foot in the door with their jobs, if they get a chance, whatever community they're in, I want them to think about this," she said. "That's why when we go up and do the scholarship at the high school, I want people to know that the Civ isn't just a funny place you go to to get something for Halloween (however I get the best Halloween costumes I put together ever from stuff I buy there.) There's cool stuff in there. There's great furniture once in awhile, there's stuff you can start an apartment with, there's great clothing in there. Sometimes you just have to look. We're kind of a quiet lot and don't toot our horn too much but we want people to be aware of the difference they can make by donating and shopping."

Piece Of Vermillion History Donated To W.H. Over Museum

BY ELYSE BRIGHTMAN

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On Monday afternoon members of the Verzani family gathered at the W.H. Over Museum to donate the first homestead title granted in the Vermillion Dakota Territories to be put on display.

This document, signed by President Ulysses S. Grant, was issued to Francis Verzani in 1872 under the Homestead Act of 1862.

"I've had custody of it for quite a few years now," said George Verzani, great-grandson to Francis. "My dad gave it to me. And my dad got it from his mother and she lived in Sioux City and my dad lived in Sioux City and I figured the best place for it would be here in the museum so that other members of the family could see."

The Homesteading Act of 1862 allowed immigrants to settle land provided by the government. Living on the land for five years allowed the settlers to acquire the plots free of charge. Immigrants were also allowed to buy the land outright.

"That really marks the beginning of the historic period where you get the whites coming in and settling and you get a whole series of things going on in terms of displacing the people that were here and then opening the area up to homesteading," said Larry Bradley, president of the board of directors of the W.H. Over Museum. "All you had to do was live



ELYSE BRIGHTMAN/FOR THE PLAIN TALK

The Verzani Family gathered at W.H.Over Museum on Monday afternoon this week to donate a piece of their family's history to the community, the original homestead document signed by President Grant.

on it, so they would build a shack on the land, or whatever, and they would live there."

Francis Verzani was the seventh applicant for a homestead title, but was the first to receive the grant.

"He had to live there for five years on the land in order to get the certificate," George said. "He got the first certificate in the Vermillion Dakota Territory."

The Verzani's settled on 173.7 acres of land with 160 covered by the land grant and the extra 13.7 purchased outright. His land was located along the Missouri River just southeast of the mouth of the Vermillion River and southwest of the town of Burbank. It now sits under the water of the ever changing Missouri River.

Along with the document, the family also

donated a baby shoe, a pillow and a few small items reflecting that time period for display at the museum.

"I can see an exhibit with some of the objects from that time period kind of linking it together," Bradley said. "We have to pretty careful with some of those documents with the sunlight coming through will fade them if we put it up front."

Bradley is hoping the donation will encourage other families to donate historical items.

"The next generation may not care about them and that's what happens to a lot of things," he said. "The museum is here, essentially, in perpetuity. From now on these objects will be curated and available where a lot of these collections and material get dispersed and people don't take care of them and then disappear and then they're gone."

Prentis

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acres to provide for parking space and enable the construction of Prentis Street along the east edge in 1936," says the NRHP.

Over the next few decades many features were added to the park to make it more recreation friendly to the people of Vermillion. All of these features are still standing today, with the exception of the caretaker's house, and many are going through renovations to improve use for park goers.

The swimming pool, was rebuilt in 1965 and included the addition of a bathhouse and is currently preparing for another makeover. The new amenities will include a lazy river, water slides, floatable water walk, basketball hoop, one-meter diving tower, shade structures and zero-depth entry, water features, bench and shade.

Preparation has already begun for construction set to commence next year.

"If you see right in front of the pool between Plum and the pool, there's kind of a dugout area where we're putting the transformer in there for the new pool so they can start construction for the new pool next year and still have power for the old pool," Goblirsch said. "We're working on the waste water, the sewer systems

are getting ready for the new pool, as well."

The log cabin at the southwest corner of the park has been standing since 1933. The cabin is affectionately known at the Girl Scout hut because of the work Vermillion Girl Scout troops have put in to maintain the cabin and prevent vandalism. The cabin recently had a new paint job and a new roof put on from the city, with help from the girl scouts.

The baseball diamond still stands in its original place thought the football field has been removed. Work is also being done to that area of the park to improve the experience for game spectators, including new restroom facilities.

"Its dual sided restroom facility, one for the park, which will feed over by the playground where people can get into it; it's a unisex handicap accessible facility and the other side, for the baseball field," Goblirsch said. "We are putting a new backstop in for the baseball field, a cement one, so we can have it a little bit safer over there for the public. We weren't pleased with the way the nets were going all the way to ground, so we put a permanent cement backstop in."

The caretaker's house, which stood on the center block of Prentis Avenue, was removed last spring to make way for more parking available to patrons. All other amenities at the

park — picnic shelters, playgrounds, horseshoe pit, basketball courts and band shell — still stand in the original locations and are just some of the activities the park has to offer.

"People might not notice is the amount of Frisbee golf that is played there and just the people who come over and just have lunch there when the weather is nice enough to do so and sit in the band shell just quietly by themselves or with their spouse and the kids do a lot of just hanging out over there," Goblirsch said. "It does get used quite heavily and we get a lot of compliments when we move the snow off the trails and sidewalks and people use it in the winter time, as well. And even if you go over there and there's some fresh snow, we'll see some cross country skiing tracks in there."

Prentis Park is located just blocks from the University of South Dakota and puts it within walking distance from just about anywhere in town.

The park is now maintained by the Parks and Recreation department with help from the city.

"The parks side of it maintains it all, but we're such a smaller department. We don't have (all) the equipment," Goblirsch said. "Light and power and the (city) streets department do a lot of things to help us here to make it what it is today."

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