

# Local women preserve history of country schools

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Since 2004, the Vermillion High School Library was home to more than one dozen evocative black and white framed photographs depicting some of the remaining Clay County schoolhouses.

Those pictures now will be housed permanently at the W.H. Over Museum, and the women behind them could not be happier.

“I think it’s great – especially since they told us they would put them on display, not just hide them away somewhere,” said Fern Kaufman. “I think that will be good for the community and students to come up there for field trips and see them.

“It was the kind of project that was fun doing, but when you’re done, you want to find a good place for it,” she said.

Donna Gross agreed, saying, “It’s the right place for it to be now. It had been in the high school long enough and was enjoyed there, but now it needed to have a more secure place.”

Not only will the museum eventually have the photos on display, but it also has all the other information accumulated by the women over the course of the project.

It all began nearly a decade ago, when Gross, a former school administrator, and Kaufman, a former school board member, were discussing what to do during their respective retirements.

“It just kind of came to mind that we both had attended a country school or a small school, and this might be something worth keeping in people’s minds,” Kaufman remembered.

After consulting the book, “Clay County Place Names,” the pair set out to find the remaining schoolhouses.

“It was a fun project,” Kaufman said. “We got to meet a lot of people, and they were always interested in showing us the school or telling us where they thought it was.”

Gross said the buildings they eventually found were “in all states of repair.”

“They ranged from almost falling down to being slightly remodeled to being used as granaries to being used as little art galleries,” she said. “And then in some cases, they were used as – there was at least one that had been completely remodeled as a beautiful home. That was interesting to see that kind of evolution of them.”

“(Some) schools were in such bad shape they didn’t appear to look like a school anymore,” Kaufman added. “It happened occasionally where we would go there and find nothing at all. We read the history of some schools that had burned and were rebuilt up to three times.”

Along with their states of preservation, the architectural styles of the buildings varied, as well.

“Often they would have a bell tower in the older schools, but they didn’t last in this part of the country because of hail, wind or rain,” Kaufman said.

When possible, the women would investigate the interior of the schools.

“Sometimes we were pretty cautious in going in, because we didn’t want to get into a problem with the (floor) giving way,” Kaufman said. “Some of them were sturdy enough. There were a couple we could walk in.”

The pictures were taken nine years ago by Kaufman’s sister Beth.

“It had been our intention to develop a little driving brochure that could be given out free from the library or the museum,” Gross said. “We did not get that completed, but we had a lot of the groundwork laid for that to happen.”

Part of that groundwork was laid by a Vermillion High School literature class who collaborated on the project by finding information about the schools, or by interviewing parents and grandparents who attended a country school.

“It was fun for them and kind of fun

for us, too,” Kaufman said. “We thought it was important for them to know what those schools were like, since they had never gone to one. I think their parents and grandparents got a kick out of telling them about them.”

The information gathered by the students also was donated to W.H. Over Museum.

Gross said she has not visited the school buildings in years.

“There were some that were in bad enough repair that it’s possible they no longer exist,” she said.

It is for this reason and others that the pair feels their project has important historical value for the area.

“It’s a part of our history, and something that was very important to a lot of people who went to country schools,” Kaufman said.

“The *Plain Talk* in the very early part of the project did a very nice story, because we were working with the high school kids,” Gross added. “That sort of woke up some people around the county that had attended the schools and they’d call in and want to help ... or just let us

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know that they’d gone to such-and-such place and they were really excited about (the project).

“People who went to country schools feel such loyalty to the schools. It’s just unbelievable,” she said.




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