

Huffing and puffing won't blow this area museum down

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Carthage - The town of Carthage lies tucked away between the beaten paths of state Highway 34 and US Highway 14.

With its scenic lake and endless horizon of farm land and prairie, Carthage is a picture-perfect example of South Dakota's beauty. Besides its aesthetic charms, Carthage is home to a very interesting museum; The Campbell Original Straw Bale Built Museum, which was built of straw bales.

"When we started, people in the community said, 'Are you guys nuts?' Now we're about 96 percent done," says Barb Hurne, secretary of the Carthage Museum and Historical Society.

Plans for the unusual museum started in November 1998 when a group of Carthage area residents organized the Carthage Museum and Historical Society. A historic building on main street, which was the first city hall, was purchased from the city to house a museum. Unfortunately, the old building, which had already been in use as a museum since 1976, was found unsafe to open to the public, so the society began looking for a new building to house the museum.

No vacant buildings large enough for the museum existed in Carthage. As a result, plans for a new building quickly emerged.

Pete Miller, vice president of the historical society, read an article about Straw Bale buildings (a popular pioneer structure in Nebraska) in *Mother Earth*. He thought a new building should be built using this unorthodox con-

struction method.

Straw bale buildings were a popular structure in the Sand Hills region of Nebraska where trees and sod were scarce items. The method created durable structures well suited to the weather extremes of the Northern Plains. Many of the original straw bale buildings are still standing.

The Carthage Museum and Historical Society members read information, watched videos and made trips to visit straw bale buildings in Nebraska.

An old barn was donated to be used as lumber for the new museum's frame. The barn, known as the Gudahl barn, was built in 1912 by volunteers in the old "barn-raising" fashion.

Donald Stroud, president of the historical society, and Miller used their own pickups and equipment to tear down the old barn and haul the materials to Carthage.

"Pete and I went out during the winter time and took down what we could when we could," Stroud says. "We did all the work other than we hired some people to take the roof and very top of the barn off. The old barn was set to be burned."

Like the old barn, the museum has been built solely by volunteer labor, with more than 39,000 volunteer hours logged on the project.

The funds for the museum have come almost entirely from private donations. An anonymous donor provided the museum with a

check for \$10,000.

“That’s what really got this project going,” Miller says. “I got a letter that I had to sign my name three times for and inside was a letter from an attorney who said his client wanted to remain anonymous and a check for \$10,000.”

Another \$10,000 donation was made by the museum’s namesake and Carthage native, William Campbell.

“We only have a little over \$90,000 tied into this building,” Hurne says.

And that’s impressively low for a 6,385 square-foot museum.

“Senator Daschle visited the museum on Aug. 13 of last year and said it was like an old-fashion barn raising,” Hurne says.

Daschle was the first person to purchase a Straw Bale Certificate. The certificates cost \$20 with funds going towards the cost of the museum. Those who purchase a certificate will have his/her name inscribed on the wall of the museum.

Open for visitors

Although the final touches are still being added to the museum, it’s been officially open since Memorial Day. Hurne says the museum attracted 52 during the holiday weekend. For the last 15 months, the museum has kept a visitor’s record that boasts more than 3,000 signatures.

The museum’s goal is to recreate Carthage’s past and pioneer life. Along one wall sits the town’s old main street, complete with the sign from the old café. Other areas in the building display items from the old high school and church.

The museum has hand-on displays. Hurne says the idea is to preserve “how things were done in the old days out on the prairie.” Items like a rope-maker and a corn-sheller are out for the public’s use.

The Campbell Original Straw Bale Built Museum has very visitor friendly hours of operation.

“If you visit the museum and we’re not open, just give one of us a call and we’ll come and open it,”

Hurne says. “Just give me about 10 minutes to get ready.”

Straw bale buildings are both environmentally and cost-friendly to build. Straw is a resource that can be renewed every year and is in over-abundance. Straw is so prevalent that millions of tons are burned each year. The cost of building a straw bale building can be as low as \$10 a square foot. Straw bale buildings also offer excellent sound and heat insulation.

“Our walls have an R-50 insulation value,” Hurne says. The recommended R-value for a home in South Dakota is R-24.

The Campbell Original Straw Bale Built Museum is a symbol of pride in the small community of Carthage.

With a population of 186 people, Hurne was told by many people that Carthage was a dead community. She says that the community now has 14 active businesses and an elementary school that’s still open, something that many towns larger than Carthage lack.

“Carthage is here to stay,” she says. “We will fight to keep it alive.”