



historically speaking

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM THE HOWARD COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P. O. Box 304 / St. Paul, Nebraska / 68873

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Spring Issue 2000



In 1941, St. Libory melons outgrew the children. Photo of Gary Schwenk with an Early Kansas melon courtesy of Albert and Clara Schwenk.

OUR Family's MELON Patch

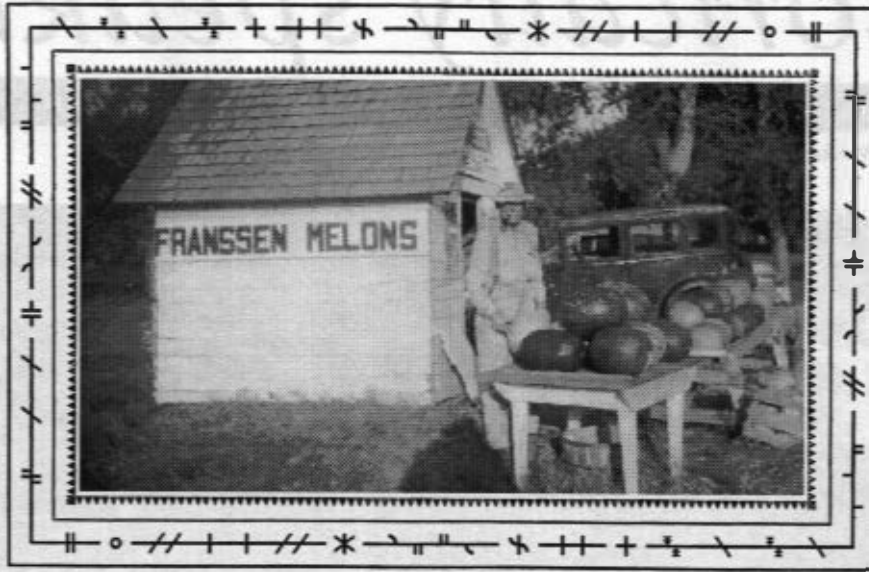


I would spend summer afternoons talking to my grandfather, Albert Schwenk, about the history of the land. I wanted to hear the stories both he and the land had to tell. For one reason or another, we always talked about this wonderful soil around the St. Libory Precinct called sandy loam. The adventurous St. Libory pioneers of the late 1800s (most of whom were of German and Irish descent) understood the potential of this soil. Soon, a group of men and women began the art of proper watermelon growing.

Photo above: unincorporated St. Libory's undeclared mayor, historian and melon grower, Albert Schwenk

By Ron W. Sack
(continued from cover)

My grandfather recalled several names who are considered the "pioneers" of the watermelon growers. These people were the first generation which started raising the melons to be peddled along the roads and in the towns nearby. They were Fred Kosemund, who, along with sons Frank and Ted, constructed the first wooden structure specifically used



Henry Franssen "The Watermelon King" selling some of St. Libory's best melons in 1954. This stand was located two miles south of St. Paul (near the junction of Highways 281 and 92). Photo courtesy of Denise Baker.

to market the melons; Art and John Charais; Walter DeMary; William and John O'Neill; Louis Ambrose; William, Henry and Frank Franssen; Pat Fay; and James Grant. More families soon followed over the years. They were Leonard and Harold Ambrose, Paul and Rosella Ziller, Jerome Hemmer, John Cronin, Gerhard (George) Wissing, Ernest Petzoldt, Ed Dingwerth, Hans Gulzow, Victor Goerl, Howard and Irene Horak and family, William and Lawrence Gerdes, Phillip Kosmicki, Ron Kosmicki, Bill Sr. and Kathryn Placke, Bill Jr. and Marilyn Placke and family, Dave Dzingle and family, Clarence and Roy Brabender, Norman Wissing, Teddy Evers, John Kasel, Lawrence and Ambrose Greenwalt, Paul and Greg Kowalski, Pearl Robinson, Louis Mathis, Louis and Rose Marie Helgoth and family, Charles and Emma Schwenk and family, Albert and Clara Schwenk and family, and Marvin and Russ Schwenk. (This could be an incomplete list, and we apologize if we omitted anyone.)

Many growers saw the potential of this business and, in 1932, a group of men banded together to form the

St. Libory Watermelon Growers Association. Kathy Horak Woitaszewski found an article from the June 29, 1932 issue of the *Howard County Phonograph* which included the following, "The St. Libory Watermelon Association held a meeting in the St. Libory Hall on Saturday night. The meeting was called to order by W.F. O'Neill, temporary chairman. A Board of Directors was elected, consisting of W.F. O'Neill, Ben McNair, Theo. Kosemund, Gerhard (George) Wissing, and Henry Franssen. The purpose of this organization is to advertise St. Libory watermelons."

What began as a simple way to make some extra money has resulted in giving St. Libory statewide notoriety.

Here are a few of their stories.

FRANSSEN MELONS

By Denise Dierberger Baker

In the late 1890s, Henry Franssen and his wife Elizabeth began the family business of growing and selling

St. Libory watermelons. The sandy soil in the St. Libory area was perfect for growing sweet, dry land melons. Henry never irrigated his watermelon crop. He always said that melons grown on dry land would produce the sweetest melons. Henry ordered his melon seeds from a mail order catalog from Texas.

During the early years, the Henry Franssen family would haul their produce with a

team of horses and a lumber wagon. They would pick the melons way into the darkness of night in order to have them ready first thing in the morning to sell in Grand Island and St. Paul. As times changed and technology progressed, Henry would fill up the back seat with melons and drive to the roadside stand near St. Paul located at the junction of Highways 281 and 92.

Many newspaper articles were published about the Franssen watermelons. Henry was quoted as saying in a 1952 newspaper article, "It's sure a lot different today than in the old days. Back in the late 1890s we thought nothing of working way into the night in order to fill the wagons and haul them to Grand Island or St. Paul over a sandy trail."

Henry and his family never did market the larger watermelons. When the melons ripened, Henry would carve the word "Seed" into the rind, and save the seeds to use for their new crop the following year.

Henry Franssen was a proud man, and staked his good name and reputation on the quality and sweetness of his melons. He and his wife continued to

raise and sell water melons, and other produce until his death in 1956. His legacy continued on through three more Franssen generations, his son, Frank Franssen, and granddaughter, Rita (Dierberger) Franssen, and great

grandchildren, Denise, Diane, and Darin Dierberger until the year 1986. His granddaughter, Rita and her husband, Virgil

Dierberger, to this day still raise a few melons for enjoyment, and for the sake of the family tradition. More than 100 years after the first Franssen melon was sold, Henry Franssen's legacy of being "Watermelon King" of St. Libory is still remembered.

When we were children, I remember the hard work put into raising and selling watermelons. We would get up very early in the morning to beat the hot sun, and we would spend hours hoeing those long rows of melons. Most of the time the rows were anywhere from 1/8 of a mile to 1/4 mile long.

By the end of the morning, you would be soaked from the dew, and your pants and shoestrings were coated with sandburs which took forever to pull out, and your hands eventually became callused.

We had many wonderful times out in the melon patch. My grandpa, Frank Franssen, would go out and "thump" the melons to check and see if they were ripe and ready to sell.

Grandpa would get out his trusty pocketknife and slice the melon in two. He'd cut out the ruby-red hearts, and we all got to sample the first



Louie Helgoth's patch near St. Libory in 1964. Louie is shown holding a 40-pound Black Diamond watermelon (deep green rind with juicy red flesh and large black seeds). Photo courtesy of Louie and Rose Marie Helgoth.

sweet melon of the season. With the juice dripping down our chins, we had a feast! The first melon always tasted the best.

The first Franssen watermelon stand that I really remember was located on the Howard County-Hall County line under a big, old cottonwood tree along Highway 281, about four miles south of St. Libory. Grandpa and Grandma Franssen had an old orange pull camper they parked in the shade of the tree. We had two huge feed bunks that sat out in front of the camper that we filled with watermelons.

Grandpa taught us how to "plug" a watermelon to show our customers that it was ripe. We'd take a butcher knife and cut a square through the rind, deep into the melon, making sure to reach the heart. We would push the square in just a little to loosen the "plug," then we'd grab it with the tip of the knife and pull it out, revealing a slender wedge of red. At this point, the customer usually asked to have a bite, and sample the sweetness.

Selling melons was a learning experience. We learned to make change, and

we became very knowledgeable about our produce. We knew which watermelon had the big, black seeds, and we could identify all the different varieties—knowing their names by heart. We got to meet a lot of people, and we learned how to deal with the "shake and squeeze" testers, who thought they knew more about watermelons than we did. We treated our customers well and they always came back year after year.

HELGOth MELONS

By Dan Kolar and Louie Helgoth

Louie Helgoth never set out to be a melon vendor. Given a choice, he likely would have been a corn farmer. He probably could have been one too, except the weather wouldn't cooperate with him. The first season he tried growing corn in 1954, during the summer after he returned home from the Korean War, it didn't rain, and all his corn dried up, and blew away. And, if this were a hard-luck story, there would not be much more to tell.

One thing kept the first season from being a fiasco; corn wasn't the only crop Louie planted. He had the good fortune of paying attention one day when his neighbors were discussing the imminent watermelon planting. And, because Louie had the sense to plant \$5 worth of seed, after mid-July he was stumbling over the big Black Diamond melons in his half-acre patch.

Those melons were huge, weighing as much as forty pounds each. Helgoth

hadn't really even been trying to grow watermelons. Pure and simple, he had just been lucky.

That first season was a good one. So good a season, Louis and Rose Marie Helgoth decided that they could afford to get married. Then, the next spring, they planted corn again. The only real difficulty was, during that following summer, it didn't rain. Nor did it rain for the whole year thereafter.

Between 1954 and 1957, there wasn't too much rain, nor much corn. Just melons, the big Black Diamonds, that's all that grew for Louie and Rosie. Without the watermelons, the young family might not have ever made it through those years. In 1958 they started selling the melons in St. Libory (Ziller's stand).

Although those first few seasons are now more than four decades removed, they still hold some immediacy; Louie Helgoth clearly hasn't forgotten them. Today, as he stands beneath the shingled roof of the family's fifth roadside stand, as he spins up tales about peddling watermelons from a pickup's tailgate, a quiet wisp of smile slowly gathers. Then that little smile swells, and it spreads, until it fills his face just the way an insignificant wisp of white cloud can capture the whole Platte Valley sky on an August evening. Helgoth's smile is a spectacular sight, but there's weather back of it.

Some folks might call his smile "sanguine," but such folks have seldom stood alongside the road, peddling



*Horak's Melon Stand in the late 1960s on the corner of the Hall-Howard County line.
Courtesy of Kathy Horak Waitaszewski*

melons to passers-by. Louie doesn't use words like "sanguine," but he is a plain speaking man: a fellow who won't waste a big-word when a little one will do. And, if asked, Louie would just call his smile happy.

A forthright, relaxed style, however, doesn't sell melons. Two other factors are indispensable. The first is enterprise; the other is expertise. From the beginning, as Louie is quick to admit, they didn't know much. On the other hand, they were young and tough. The vigor and vitality allowed them to hold on until they learned the melon business.

For the Helgoths, Louie and Rosie, and their five children, and now their nine grandchildren, the business has proven to be far more than simply a living; it's a way of life.

The year's work begins before the frost is out of the ground in spring; it continues through the holidays of Easter, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day; then operations finally conclude around Halloween. And once Louie gets to talking about the ins and outs of the melon business, there's only one possible conclusion: there's no

better choice.

In 1976 the Helgoth's moved south of the pole shed. 1987 saw them build a new and larger building which a tornado "took down" in March of 1990.

When Highway 281 was expanded, they moved and built a larger stand at the present location. "When it was divided and built to four lanes past St. Libory in 1994, we were forced to move our third stand one and 1/4 mile north. We

then extended it to 72 feet," explained Helgoth.

When asked why they raise melons near St. Libory, Helgoth's explanation was quite simple "Suitable soil, nice sideline, extra good quality, and satisfied customers who appreciate good quality."

☞ HORAK MELONS ☞
By Kathy Horak Waitaszewski

St. Libory has a long history of being the "Watermelon Capital of Nebraska." One resident who has lived the last eighty years of that history vividly remembers events that occurred during the history of the Horak melon stand.

Howard Horak grew up with watermelons when his parents, Clem and Mary, began raising and peddling melons along the St. Paul highway just south of St. Libory about 1930. In those days they sold 25-30 pound Kecklee Sweet, long striped melons for ten cents each.

Howard remembers that a hay dealer from Cozad would notify them that

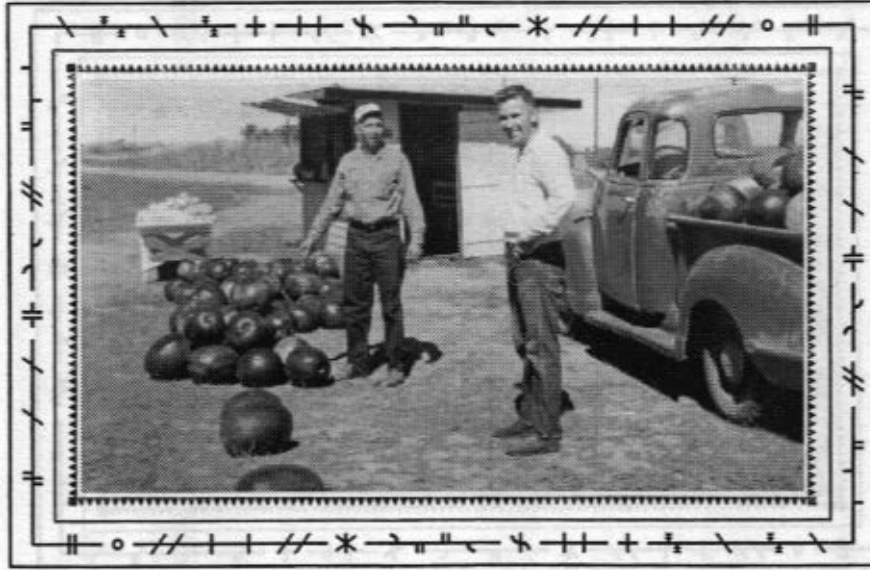
he was on his way home from hauling hay to Lincoln and Omaha and would be arriving at about 2:30-3:00 a.m. to pick up a load of melons

In the late 1930s when Howard was still a young man, he expanded the Horak melon business by purchasing Charlie Tueng's 1-ton Model T Ford honey truck.

The truck was a means of hauling melons to Grand Island businesses. Howard remembers hauling the first load of melons purchased by George Martin, owner of O.P. Skaggs. He regularly traded melons at the Henry Fuss and Alex Fuss grocery stores in Grand Island for cases of canned vegetables.

A customer from Kansas would arrive with his truck, pull out a cot, and sleep in the shade while his truck was loaded with melons. About 6-7 layers of melons, each with the stems pointed toward the back of the truck, would be stacked between layers of cushioning straw. Appearance was of great importance.

Trust in offering credit seemed to be commonplace. Howard had a gentleman come from Omaha in a Dodge touring car. The man had no money, yet the car was loaded with 30-40 melons. The Omahan would travel the countryside peddling the melons. When the load sold out, he would return for another load, with payment for both the load on credit and the present load. It was common for him to haul two loads a week during melon season. Once, when his car broke down, Howard allowed him



Bill and Don Placke at an early Placke melon stand in 1965. The operation has grown dramatically over the past 35 years since this photo was taken. Photo courtesy of Marilyn Placke.

to borrow his Model T truck for one of his runs.

Another time Fred Bosselman and his two brothers Charles and Norman, who lived north of Worms at the time, had just put down an irrigation well and wanted to have a watermelon feed. They came to Howard and asked whether they could have about 25 melons on credit as they had no money to pay for them. They made a promise that their aunt in Omaha would send the money. The Bosselmans had their watermelon feed and payment was received by mail from Omaha a few days later.

Over the years, the Howard and Irene Horak family grew, and the watermelon and produce business grew along with it. When Highway 281 was completed, the Horak melon stand moved from the St. Paul highway to the northwest corner of the Hall-Howard county line.

The events of one weekend on Highway 281 will forever remain in Howard's memory. The family began picking cantaloupe on a Friday evening

with a flashlight, continued picking cantaloupe, watermelons, and tomato slicers all day Saturday and all day Sunday until mid-afternoon. That weekend the Horaks sold 131 bushel baskets of cantaloupe, 150 watermelons, and 144 pounds of slicer tomatoes for a grand total of \$500. The traffic was unbelievable with 21 cars parked at the stand at one time. Howard remembers this as the best weekend ever for the

Horak melon business.

Gradually the Horak children grew up and left home to pursue their own lives. With the decreased workforce came the end of a long-standing tradition. The Horak melon stand opened its last season about 1967.

This author's memories as a young child are of lunches eaten in the field and hot sand burning the bottom of my feet as I ran through the melon patch.

PLACKE MELONS

By Marilyn Placke

Placke's Melons and Produce, located one-half mile north of St. Libory, Nebraska, along Highway 281, was established fifty-seven years ago when William A. Placke and his brother, Norbert Placke, took out a load of watermelons on their little coaster wagon. They sold what they brought out to sell, which encouraged them to continue. Their parents, William, Sr. and Kathryn Placke, sold some produce from their farm which involved

all their family

For a few years Plackes sold out of a pickup truck on a corner at four crossroads north of St. Libory. After Bill, Jr. married, Marilyn Matousek, she became involved in the business. They then built a melon stand. All their seven children helped with the operation at one time or another. Later, because of the road expansion, they moved one quarter mile south where the business is still located.

A variety of home-grown fruit and vegetables is sold at Placke's watermelon red and green colored stand. They also sell produce in Grand Island at Ace's parking lot. Watermelons, cantaloupe, pumpkins, sweetcorn, squash, peppers, onions, tomatoes, cucumber, fruit, and autumn decor are among the items they sell. They wholesale to grocery stores and wholesale houses in many cities in Nebraska, and to some out of state.

St. Libory is famous for its melons because of its sandy soil with loam underneath.

William A. Placke, Jr., (Bill) and wife Marilyn owned and operated the melon business since the 1950s. William, Jr. passed away in 1998, leaving the business to his wife Marilyn, who turned it over to her boys who were farming at the time, with the eldest, Jerald Placke, to manage. Jerald, Rodney, and Darin Placke, with their wives and families, are now involved in the family business.



Charlie Schwenk marketing his pride and joy: St. Libory melons. This photo was taken in the late 1950s. His sons and grandson would carry on the tradition until 1975. Photo courtesy of Albert and Clara Schwenk.

SCHWENK MELONS

By Ron W. Sack

In the late 1920s, Charles, Albert and Marvin Schwenk began the art of proper watermelon growing. With only rainwater and the sandy loam plains of southern Howard County, they produced some of the finest melons ever grown. Kecklee Sweet. Early Kansas. Round Stone Mountain Black Diamond. Dixie Queen. Halibat Honey.

Schwenks' connection to raising melons started in 1926. Charles and son Albert began to plant their first watermelons. They created "hills" on which they planted five melon seeds. Albert remembers a poem about the importance of planting five seeds on the hills, "One for the worm. One for the crow. One to rot. And two to grow."

Prices in 1926 for watermelons were around one cent per pound. Schwenks planted their "sweet gems" in the Northwest Quarter of Section 17 in the St. Libory Precinct. Over the years their patch varied from five acres to 15 acres.

In 1927 the Schwenks sold the melons along the "main" road using the Model T Ford.

Besides Charles and son Albert, others in the Schwenk family assisted in preparing the melons for market. Children Lenore, Lois and Marvin spent many days in the sun hoeing the hills for weeds and taking the melons off to sell and market throughout the season.

Albert remembers other sellers as being "very competitive." Some growers would fight for the best locations along the road.

Albert and Clara Wissing Schwenk's family became actively involved in the watermelon business in the 1950s. Their children—Gaty, Kay and Jan—helped out as well. Albert and Gary continued to raise melons until 1964. Their patch was located in the Northwest Quarter of Section 19 in the St. Libory Precinct.

The last Schwenk to raise melons for sale was Marvin's son Russ. His final year of operation was 1975. This ended nearly 50 years of melon raising by the Charles and Emma Schwenk family.

Albert attributes the success of raising watermelons to two things—the sandy loam soil and his wonderful family.

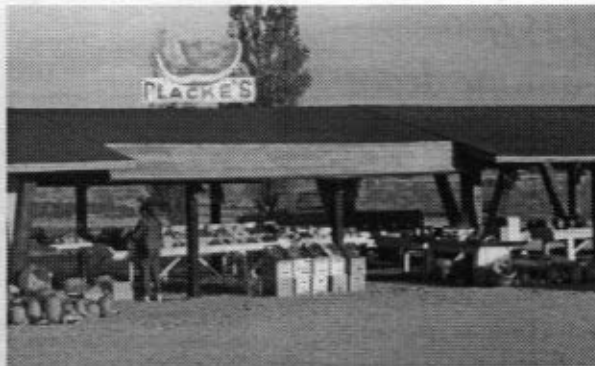
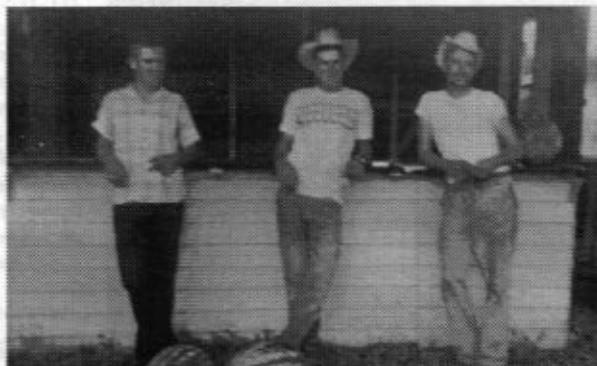
No place in the state has ever offered such superb conditions for growing melons. And no place probably ever will.



Top row: Henry Franssen hauling his melons off to market around 1900. Top right: Rita Dierberger, Tommy Kiser, Betty Lou Kiser, and Freddie Franssen pose around the melons. Middle left: Franssen's stand near St. Paul Middle right: Tommy, Freddie, Betty Lou and Rita pose with the award-winning melons at the Platte Deutsche. Bottom: St. Libory shows off its best produce at the Platte Deutsche fair in Grand Island. Photos courtesy of Denise Baker



Top row: Louie Helgoth stacks those melons worthy of being called "Helgoth's Best." Top right: Rose Marie and Louie pose in front of the extensive melon stand complex in 1995. Middle left: Helgoth's stand along Highway 281. Middle right: Louie Helgoth with a load headed for David City. Photos courtesy of the Helgoths. Bottom: Louie Ambrose's melon stand titled "The Shack." Courtesy of Leonard and Phyllis Ambrose.



Top row: Plackes relax at the melon stand in 1956. Top right: Placke's also became great marketers of melons and other produce. Their current stand reflects this growth. Middle left: Plackes begin sorting and boxing the melons. Photos courtesy of Marilyn Placke. Middle right: Janice Winters Anderson has a little fun on Grandpa Charlie Schwenk's melon rack. Bottom: the Schwenk family melon patch complete with scarecrow. Photos courtesy of Albert and Clara Schwenk.

Department of Roads awards \$125,000 grant for historic depot restoration.

By Marion Bahensky

We count on getting grant money to make some of our dreams into reality. Reality is most often hours and hours of picky labor with zero returns. You create paragraph after paragraph of tightly worded, judicious (and passionate) pleas about how desperately this money is needed, what great things we can accomplish for the Society/Town/County, and grant after grant application is rejected. At least the rejection usually takes long enough so that you forget the hours stuck in a basement office turning out aforementioned judicious/passionate prose—because you have transferred your allegiance to the next application on which you focus every ounce of judicious passionate prose.

Finally, in December 1999, we succeeded in winning a \$125,000 grant from the Department of Roads. Society Directors had to first get the support of the County Commissioners over the summer. They were new to this process. The procedure built slowly from a critique by the grant administrators of the first, tentative pre-application submitted in August. Grant administrators met with a large group of local supporters in late August. A seemingly insurmountable obstacle struggled with all through September was the requirement that the Depot become a Transportation Museum, with regular opening hours and a paid, professional director. Finally we submitted our application with proposed open hours of 10A.M.-5P. M. Tuesday through Sunday, to be staffed by none other than our professional grant writer, at a salary of \$1/year.



As usual, hopes wax and hopes wane through the months of waiting. Finally, we were told that a panel of about 24 judges would meet with all the applicants in early December. Two people from our group could have three minutes to make a presentation. Roderick Burkhardt, Carl Christensen, Carl Huebet, Ron Sack, and I went down to Lincoln. As we sat watching other groups making their presentations, we looked for their weak points and plotted a whole new strategy in nano-seconds. We won our case! Our plans for hours and staffing were questioned, but held. It won't be easy, but we are pledged to this cause and will succeed.

We had to hire an architect to prepare costs for the grant application. \$45,350 will be spent on a sewer connections, an exterior platform and repair of gutters, fascia, etc. \$80,525 will add electricity, heating/cooling, repair of

In one year, the H.C.H.S. raised \$60,000 to move the depot, build a new foundation, repair the roof, purchase new shingles, paint the exterior, and restore the roof of the Union Pacific depot. Directors, members and supporters volunteered over 6,200 hours in labor.

interior walls, etc. We will be able to restore our beautiful depot to a sound, usable year-round museum, with regular opening hours and exhibits which will attract many tourists.

The problem is, of course, that we have to raise a matching \$31,000 or lose the grant. Since December we

have raised only \$12,000 with nothing coming in lately.

Depot roof restoration project receives award from St. Paul Chamber.

The Howard County Historical Society received the St. Paul Chamber's "Community Project" award for 1999 at the Chamber's annual awards banquet. Board member Carl Christensen was singled out specifically for his heroic efforts in help making this project a reality.

Brighter Holidays.

Special thanks to Setha Zimelman for beading up the team to make the Historical Village look festive—and brighter—over the holidays.

historically speaking

- 556 pages of Howard County history
- Over 500 photographs.
- Hardbound cover and dust jacket.
- 290 family histories.
- A salute to County Veterans.
- Histories of all high schools and churches.
- 20 chapters.

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Number of History Books: _____ x \$75.00 = _____

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Total: _____ \$ _____

Make checks payable to the Howard County Historical Society:
 Send payment to: Howard County Historical Society, P.O. Box 304, St. Paul, NE 68873.

Photocopy or cut along dotted line and send in.

YES, I WOULD LIKE TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE COMPLETION OF THE HOWARD COUNTY HISTORICAL VILLAGE BY HELPING PRESERVE THE UNION PACIFIC DEPOT.

I want to help fund this much needed and final project which will house new exhibits, meeting space, and storage space. I wish to donate:

_____ \$100 _____ \$250 _____ \$500 _____ \$1,000 _____ \$2,500 _____ \$5,000 _____ \$10,000 _____ Other

Name _____

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All donations over \$100 will be remembered on the Donor Board which will be prominently displayed in the restored depot. Donations of \$2,500 or more will receive special recognition.

Name you wished to have inscribed. _____

Your donation, made out to the Howard County Historical Society, is tax deductible. (Be sure to indicate the "Depot Campaign" on your check memo area.)

Send in your tax deductible donation to us at: P.O. Box 304, St. Paul, NE 68873

Questions? Contact the Historical Society at the address above or contact any of the other board members.

Thank you!

IT'S YOUR MEMORY. IT'S OUR HISTORY. IT'S WORTH SAVING.

Historical Society awarded a \$125,000 grant for depot restoration; your help is needed.

From the Board of Directors

Quite a bit has happened since our last newsletter in December. We, the Howard County Historical Society, were awarded a \$125,000 grant from the Nebraska Department of Roads/Transportation Enhancement Grant, but we need to raise \$31,000 in matching funds before December of 2000. If we don't raise enough money, we lose the grant. Your help is needed. We have been able to raise about \$12,000 since the grant announcement. We are hoping all members will contribute to this project to make St. Paul and Howard County a better place to live. For your convenience, a donation form is included inside this newsletter.

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