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A passion for pioneer life

Betty & Bob Hermann
have shared their love
of history for 35 years
by volunteering at the
Forest City Stockade





Sharing a passion for pioneer life

PHOTO BY JULIANA THILL

Bob and Betty Hermann of Forest City have a love for history and a passion for sharing it with others. For 35 years, they've helped visitors at the Forest City Stockade feel like they've stepped back in time as they experience life in the 1860s. The Hermanns also visit classrooms, bringing their own historic items for display to educate children about the past. The couple, along with more than 100 volunteers, are preparing for the 19th annual Pioneer Christmas, which will take place from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Dec. 6 at the stockade.

**Bob and Betty
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volunteer countless
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City Stockade and
visit classrooms
to educate others
about what life was
like in the 1860s**

By Juliana Thill
EDITOR

Bob and Betty Hermann wear their love for the Forest City Stockade on their 1860s-era sleeve.

For 35 years, the Forest City couple have rolled up their sleeves and worked hard behind the scenes to help preserve the Meeker County landmark. They also are busy helping during the stockade's summer Rendezvous and winter Pioneer Christmas events, which allow visitors to feel like they've stepped back in time and experience life in the 1860s.

Betty's love for baking lefse, homemade bread and gingerbread cookies for visitors is seen on her sleeves, which

become dusted with flour as she rolls out dough in the stockade's bakery. Bob's love for the stockade shows on his billowy shirt that collects dust and dirt as he helps wherever needed on the stockade grounds.

"This (the stockade) is our life when we're not living this life," Bob said.

The Hermanns became involved and stayed involved with the stockade for one simple reason, Betty said, "Our love for history."

They share their passion for history with others by devoting countless hours to the stockade, so visitors can see, hear, taste, smell and touch items from the past.

In addition to the summer and winter celebrations, the stockade draws about 1,000 school children from

across the state each year for historical tours that Bob and other stockade committee members lead.

The Hermanns also give classroom presentations at local schools, bringing their own collection of historic items for children to have a hands-on look at history.

The Hermanns' dedication to sharing history impresses even their daughter, Tami Watt of Forest City.

"One of my dad's favorite quotes is, 'If I can teach one student about history, I've done my job.' And that's how he lives," Watt said.

"Yet, it's thousands and thousands of kids they've come in contact with (at the schools and stockade). Dad puts his farming on hold in the spring because he's arranging for all these school kids to come to the stockade (for a tour). He knows in May, that's when the school kids can come out, so he might not cut hay because he's at the stockade," Watt said. "Anyone who's willing to listen, he'll tell you the story. My Mom will, too, but my dad is more the driving force with the tours. I always say he was born in the wrong era. This is his passion. He eats, sleeps and thinks the stockade."

The Hermanns are happy to share their love of history because it's something they enjoy, and they think it's important for others to know.

"The best part of life is being able to give back to the people and community we love," Bob said.

Their passion for the pioneer way of life was sparked in the 1970s, when Meeker County led an effort to rebuild the Forest City Stockade, which was originally built in 1862 during the U.S.-Dakota Conflict. The restoration of the stockade was a bicentennial project for the county in 1976. The stockade and the two-story cabin museum within its walls were constructed as a memorial to the pioneers who settled in Forest City and sought safety within its walls more than 150 years ago.

"I've loved stockades since I was a sixth-grader. So, when they were talking about building this one down here, I thought, 'Life doesn't get any better than that, to have a stockade in your backyard,'" Bob said. "It had such momentum going when they put it up that we enjoyed going down there to visit. About three years into it, we wondered what their long-range plan



FILE PHOTO

Bob Hermann, right, helps attach the American flag to a wood pole before its raising at the Forest City Stockade during a summer Rendezvous.

really was. We were at that stage in life when your head is full of ideas."

Sharing a love of history

The Hermanns joined the stockade committee, shared their ideas and soon moved into more of a leadership role. In 1979, "that's when we got started with the Rendezvous. That's been going on for 31 years," Bob said.

"The first year we worked with the Rendezvous, we had 200 people come, and we thought, 'Man, did we have a crowd,'" Betty recalled. "We were so excited."

Through the years, the stockade committee has expanded the Rendezvous experience, adding new food items, new activities and new buildings to tour. Just as the stockade and its activities have grown, so have the crowds that attend.

Two years ago, the stockade had 5,000 people walk through the gates during the two-day Rendezvous. The winter Pioneer Christmas has drawn as many as 1,700 visitors on its one day.

The committee added the Pioneer Christmas 19 years ago, and it is similar to the Rendezvous but offers a few different activities such as holiday crafts and visits with Santa.

The summer Rendezvous, which is on the third weekend of August, and Pioneer Christmas, which takes place on the first Saturday of December, are designed to be enjoyable, educational events for all ages. After paying admis-

sion, visitors are free to roam the stockade grounds and tour all the buildings, including a general store, gunsmith store, blacksmith shop, woodwright shop, newspaper office, U.S. Land Office, chapel and schoolhouse.

Volunteers dress in 1860s-era clothing and offer pioneer activities such as horse-drawn wagon rides (sleigh rides in the winter if there's snow), kids games, as well as a variety of demonstrations such as blacksmithing, candlemaking, horseshoeing, ropemaking, wheat weaving, yarn spinning and pottery throwing.

An assortment of food and beverages are served, including buffalo beef sandwiches and sweet corn in the summer or stew and lefse in the winter, as well as buffalo jerky, pickled eggs, fry bread, homemade ice cream, and apple cider. Each year, the Hermanns drive to Ipswich, S.D., to buy the 400 pounds of buffalo meat needed to make the buffalo sandwiches served at the Rendezvous.

Visitors also can listen to live musicians, whether it's a bagpiper or Christmas carolers, and visit the buck skinners, a group that the stockade committee invites to set up camp outside the stockade to do demonstrations and sell various wares.

Betty, 71, who has volunteered in the kitchen or where needed at the stockade, now can be found in the bakery,

which was built about five years ago. There she rolls out dough, cuts out gingerbread men, bakes them and gives out free samples of warm cookies.

"That I really like," she said.

Meanwhile, Bob, 72, ventures around the stockade grounds in his pioneer clothing — donning a long, brown wool coat and fur hat in the winter — checking on the volunteers, chatting with visitors and giving out free bear hugs.

"They truly step into that era. When they put their (stockade) clothing on, they're living it," Watt said smiling because she knows this is what her parents live for each year.

"I've always told my kids, 'Grandma and Grandpa are not defined by the car they drive or the house they live in. They live their life serving and helping others,'" Watt said.

Family ties to the area

The Hermanns' family history in the area goes back to just after the original stockade's construction.

Bob grew up four miles east of the two-story farm house he and Betty live in, and Betty grew up about four miles south.

"My mother's family came in the 1860s, and my dad's family came in the 1880s when my great-grandpa came," Betty said.

Bob's side of the family has lived in the Forest City area almost as long, with his mother's family settling in the 1800s, and his dad's family arriving in the late 1930s.

"We both have a pretty long history," Betty said. "Our families have always been here. We've always stayed right here. We like it. This is home."

Bob and Betty attended country school together and then Litchfield High School, with Bob graduating in 1960 and Betty in 1961.

"We rode the same school bus. We were good friends all through high school, but never dated," Betty said, not until a few years later.

The two reunited after Bob returned from Texas, where he completed basic training with the Air National Guard.

While in Texas, "a tornado hit the base at 10:30 in the morning. I remember very plainly. I thought I'd never see Minnesota again. We had no basements. I was just sitting in the classroom. It got dark out, and you could



FILE PHOTO

Betty Hermann keeps busy in the bakery at the Forest City Stockade, rolling and cutting out gingerbread dough, baking cookies and giving away samples to visitors. Learn about the stockade online at www.forestcitystockade.org.

hear the howl of the tornado. I thought, 'any minute, it's going to lift us up in the air.' It didn't," he said, recalling how scared he was at the time.

"You go through a thinking process, and I said, 'If I ever make it to Minnesota again, farming would be my occupation, and I would look very seriously for a wife,'" he said, getting choked up thinking back on the frightening time and realizing how quickly life can slip away.

He returned to Forest City, "and began to check who was available," he said breaking into a laugh. "I had gone to a party Betty was at. One of my buddies put on a little party after I got home from the service. I had gone (to the party) with another girl that evening, but shortly after that started dating Betty."

"And that was history," Betty said with a smile.

They married in 1966, and moved into a "rundown, rickety old farm house," Bob said, where they still live today, after having fixed it up from top to bottom.

"I was all fired up because Dad helped me buy this farm," Bob said of their 400 acres, where he grows corn

and soybeans and raises 100 beef cattle.

After buying it, Bob brought Betty over to show her the farm, but she didn't share his enthusiasm for the house.

"It was bad; it was really bad," Betty recalled. "Filthy, filthy dirty. The hardwood floors were coal black. We didn't know if it was wood or linoleum. Every single ceiling hung. There were cracks and big pieces of plaster hanging down. Cracks on every single wall."

It wasn't until eight years later that Betty told Bob what she really thought of the house.

"I said to Bob, 'I knew I loved him, but I really questioned whether I loved him enough to live in that house,'" she said laughing.

However, after spending years refurbishing their house, which is 130 years old, "we've love it," she said. "We've raised our kids here, and this has been our home. It's not our house, it's a home for us."

"That's why it works so good to be at the stockade because we've lived in a house that's almost as old," Bob said.

Their appreciation for history and beauty of the area extends to the Crow River that winds its way through Forest City. For about 40 years, the Hermanns have owned Forest City Canoe Rental, which is operated out of Riverside Store in Forest City. The Hermanns rent canoes so people can paddle along the Crow River.

"It introduces a lot of people to canoeing," Bob said. "Everybody always talks about going up to northern Minnesota to go canoeing, and I always felt that people should have the opportunity to go canoeing on the Crow River because it's such a neat river. There's so many beautiful things to see there. And you don't know when you're back on the river, are we way up north or are we in Meeker County?"

Generations involved

Volunteering with the stockade has become a family affair for many, Betty said, with several volunteers having three generations participating.

"It's a neat way to keep the program going," Bob said, because that appreciation for history is handed down to the younger generations.

Such is the case with Bob and Betty's daughter, Tami, and her children, Dylan and Sophie, who grew up at the stockade and continue to volunteer

during the two annual celebrations. While Dylan works in the blacksmith shop, Tami and Sophie staff the old-fashioned root beer stand in the summer, and make lefse in the cabin's kitchen in the winter.

The Hermanns' son, Todd, also was involved at the stockade for a number of years.

"He was the first rope-maker," Betty said. "He bought that first rope-maker out of his own money. He had seen it at a flea market, and he asked, 'Is that something I can do (at the stockade)?' He was probably 12, 13 at the time."

Todd enjoyed showing visitors how to make rope, but he also was a competitive person and organized pioneer kid games, from two-people wheel-barrow races to pie-eating contests. He also was an excellent black powder shooter and craftsman. He helped construct some of the buildings at the stockade, and made tomahawks, bows and arrows. His involvement in the stockade was cut short, though, when he died in a motorcycle accident in 1997.

Following Todd's death, "the first

couple Rendezvous were very difficult for me," Betty said, "because Todd was such a big part of it. To watch the rope-maker, to see somebody else do that, and to hear the black powder guns go off ...," she said, her voice trailing off as tears welled up in her eyes.

However, as more time has passed, Betty views the stockade differently. "Now, I'd say, it's more of a comfort because I knew his love for it," she said.

Early on, "there were thoughts, 'Should we quit and give it up,'" Bob said, choking up as he recalled how difficult it was coping with the sudden loss of their only son. But Bob sees their involvement as continuing something Todd loved.

Todd's memory lives on in various parts of the stockade, and his family keeps him close at heart. The bead necklaces Bob, Betty and Tami wear during stockade events were ones Todd made.

Keeping history alive

Bob and Betty are quick to point out

that it's not their efforts that have made the stockade successful, but rather the work of hundreds of volunteers. Stockade committee members volunteer and are responsible for all of the design, construction and reconstruction, fundraising and maintenance at the stockade. Those who work behind the scenes, as well as the volunteers who work during the stockade's two events are key to keeping the stockade open for visitors.

"The volunteers are a big part of our program. If it weren't for them, we wouldn't have a program. They are who make it happen. We have the utmost respect for them," Bob said.

The Hermanns are pleased with the success of the Rendezvous and Pioneer Christmas, as well as the community's support through the years.

Keeping history alive and relevant is important to the Hermanns.

"Unless history lives in the present, it will not live in the future," Bob said. "If we wouldn't be doing this now, it wouldn't carry on into the next generation." ■