

A History of the History in Gardner

The heritage of Gardner is something quite rich with its roots at the pivotal point on the westward-expansion highway of the mid-19th Century. The history of Gardner Junction, as it was known, may have been taken for granted by all but a few passionate citizens until well into the 20th Century with the incorporation of the Harkey House Historical Society on July 30, 1986.

The Harkey House was formerly the home of Gardner native William C. Harkey (1872-1935), a notable physician in early Johnson County. The Princess Anne style Victorian home had become the object of great interest when, in 1985, it was discovered that gasoline had leaked from the tank of the adjacent filling station and leached into the basement. The EPA shut down the Harkey House until an extensive irradiation had been completed. The repair required the replacement of all the dirt, 14 feet deep, around the entire house parameter. The following year the house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places thanks to the efforts of local preservationist Dave Jackson. The house's historical significance was attributed to its link to Dr. Harkey, but its architectural style also endears it to us today.

In July of 1986, Jackson established the Harkey House Historical Society with a team of Gardner icons including Elberta Harris, Virginia Johnson, Sadie Powell, Sal and Cot Cordell and Harriet Zimmerman among others. The new board elected Jackson their president. Membership grew as like-minded citizens learned of the new organization. The dues were \$1.00 a year. The core group would eventually be joined by heavy-hitters such as Oma Girsh, and Linda Rothwell.

In 1994, the Harkey House Historical Society published *Three Histories from Southwest Johnson County*, thoughtfully researched and lovingly penned by Virginia Johnson and Margaret Gay. It remains one of the most significant documents for local historians and has been reprinted many times.

During a meeting on August 5, 2000 the group decided to be more encompassing of local history and renamed the organization the Gardner Historical Society. They met monthly at the multi-purpose center at 112 S. Elm (currently the public works building) with annual dues of

\$5.00. Their objective, in order, was to create a museum, clean up the Mt. Pleasant Cemetery, compile chronicles on Gardner history, continue to build obituary files and index the records of the Julian Mortuary. The organization's president was Linda Rothwell with Kenneth Kelly as her vice president. Mayrene Morris served as secretary and Naomi Kincaide was treasurer.

Local historian and businesswoman, Shirley Bruce Brown-VanArsdale became the driving force behind the establishment of a museum. She had been on a personal hunt for an early photo of the Sponable house, now the Bruce Funeral Home, and realized that Gardner had no repository for archives due to the lack of a museum and research center. As a side note, she did eventually find the historic image in Paola, of all places.

The obvious choice for a museum location would be the Harkey House. In August of 2001, Brown-VanArsdale and her team launched a campaign known as "Preserve the Harkey House, Build a Museum" with the objective of raising the necessary capital for the purchase.

However, in February 2002 they abandoned the idea for lack of parking at the historic site and started looking for alternative locations. Simultaneous with that event was the formation of the "Gardner Historical Museum, Inc." The new entity absorbed the elements of both the Harkey House Historical Society and the Gardner Historical Society and was spearheaded by chairwoman Karen Angell. The corporation's vice chairwoman was Linda Rothwell with Nancee Rankin as secretary and Mark Burdolski serving as treasurer. Board members consisted of Shirley Brown-VanArsdale, Peggy Cramer, Leone Knabe, Bettie Turner and ex-officio Mayor Carol Lehman.

An opportunity presented itself when a folk Victorian home became available at 204 W. Main Street. The home, previously occupied by Dorothy "Dottie" Segrist Sutton, was built in 1893 in the exclusive "Quality Acres" area on the westernmost edge of town. The builder and original occupant was Herman B. Foster, and family, notable partner of Art Bigelow at Bigelow-Foster Mercantile, the town's largest general store. Rich with architectural details, the house retained its ornate hardware, wood trim, commanding parlor doors, art glass windows and wood cabinetry. The exterior retained its distinctive wood shingles. Immediately, the fundraising

efforts were redirected and energized. The task at hand was to secure a loan, buy the house, raise the necessary funds for restoration, then pay the loan back within twelve years. The loan was procured through Metcalf Bank. The price tag for the structure alone was \$130,000. The original cost of building the house was a hefty \$1,200 prior to the turn of the century.

On May 31, 2002 the purchase was complete. Though in need of extensive restoration, the group set the lofty goal of opening the downstairs to the public the first week of August, simultaneous with the Johnson County Fair. They raced to meet the deadline. Citizens rallied behind the project with tradesmen like Melinda Highfill hanging wallpaper and Holland Construction building a parking lot as a donation. But much of the work was accomplished by supporters generously donating their time, energy and elbow grease. Donated historic furnishings began to pour in as well, and the deadline was met with great fanfare.

That same year, local historian and organization secretary, Nancee Rankin successfully nominated the Herman B. Foster home to the Kansas Register of Historic Places which triggered its acceptance to the National Register of Historic Places. The site's inclusion on the state register was official in August of 2007. The National Register acceptance followed several months later.

In a September 13, 2003 in a Kansas City Star interview with Karen Angell, president of the museum board of directors, she was quoted saying "We are very much connected to this property." Mayor Carol Lehman cut the ribbon on September 16 and kicked off a day of celebration featuring a spaghetti dinner fund-raiser, a period ice cream social and fashion show featuring Bruce-VanArsdale's extensive collection of original Victorian and early 20th century fashions. The Horseless Carriage Club also displayed antique cars at the event.

Generous support continued to grow with a \$40,000 grant from the Johnson County Heritage Trust Fund and a \$10,000 donation from Gardner's Memorial Foundation. TradeNet Publications contributed \$10,000 as well. The latter would eventually donate \$25,000.

Over the next several years, the Museum's calendar was populated with cultural exhibits, student tours, historic reenactments, guest lectures, festivals and interactive events to benefit the community. However reducing the building's mortgage and meeting operating expenses was the looming task for the board of volunteers faced monthly.

The "Stake Your Claim on The Trail" fundraiser was kicked off in the spring of 2005 to address the mortgage debt. This clever and successful campaign, the brainchild of Shirley Bruce Brown-VanArsdale, allowed patrons to purchase elements of the house to honor a loved one or bring recognition to an ancestor. One could purchase a window, door or even an entire room which was then identified by a brass plaque. A later spinoff of this was "The Next Step" campaign that raised money by selling the staircase treads and risers leading to the second floor. The initiative raised over \$12,000. Another act of generosity occurred in 2007 by Joyce O'Connor and her daughter Casey Skinner, both area Realtors, who had arranged for a house in Paola to be donated to the museum for resale. The speedy transaction resulted in a quick \$10,000 to be paid towards the mortgage reduction. The goal of debt-free ownership of the museum finally occurred in December, 2013 when benefactors Barton P. and Mary D. Cohen contributed \$70,000 from their trust fund for the payoff.

In late 2010, the Gardner Historical Museum purchased the property directly north of the Museum deemed The Bray House. Built by Cecil Dolisi in 1953 for Bob and Doris Bray, it is a well-preserved example of a mid-century vernacular house typical of the neighborhood. Its purchase facilitated the organization's expansion and the establishment of a research center and administrative offices. "The board spent an entire year carefully considering this visionary decision," Brown-VanArsdale told *Tri-County Newspapers, Inc.* It wasn't a decision made lightly but it was an opportunity that could not be missed. Again, volunteers were recruited to make improvements and the building was opened in January of 2011. The board continues to whittle at a new mortgage from funds generously made available from the estate of Mildred A. Steed.

Over the two decades since the establishment and opening of the Gardner Historical Museum, the organization has given generously to the community it preserves through a variety of exhibits, exhibitions, performances, tours, festivals and reunions. Their portfolio of publications

is impressive and list of accomplishments extensive. At the helm of the organization are Shirley Brown-VanArsdale and Laura McCarthy as co-presidents. Sandy Hampton serves as secretary and Nancee Rankin serves as treasurer. Board members consist of Mark Burdolski, Connie Epp, Jason Haney, Amy Heaven, Solene Hollingshead, Mary Jochem, Linda Lloyd and Claude Steed. The group is currently planning an addition to the Bray House to facilitate additional office & exhibit space and artifact storage.

During this hallmark year of 2023 for the Museum, special events and exhibits were planned, in addition to revisiting some classic favorites.

The first exhibit, “First Women Trailblazers”, was presented in February and March to commemorate female firsts in a male-dominated society. On Saturday, March 4th the museum hosted the “Big Bargain Bazaar” at the Grange Hall on the fairgrounds. The successful fund raiser offered an opportunity for the museum to clear out some duplicate or unidentified artifacts and overstocked souvenirs. It also included items donated by various Museum supporters. A fundraising painting party, was held on Saturday, March 25th at the Grange Hall.

An exhibit of Leonard Sebring artwork and the intricate timeline mural by Jamie Lavin were the featured exhibit in April and May. An artisan’s Fair was an outside event on April 22nd in the Museum’s parking lot. The Museum also participated in Gardner’s City-Wide Garage Sale, selling items left over from the Bazaar, plus additional items on Friday & Saturday, May 5th & 6th. On May 13th the Museum hosted a bunco tournament at the Grange Hall.

The summer months were bustling with an extensive Quilt Exhibition to include vintage quilts from the Museum’s collection and quilts loaned primarily from the Museum Board. An outdoor exhibit was held on Saturday, June 24th and Sunday, July 16th. The July event also included a Tribute Party with refreshments for long-time Board member and Research Director, Tressa Stone. Another fundraiser for the Bray House Addition Project was the painting of a wooden barn quilt block depicting a sunflower, held at the Grange Hall, Saturday, July 8th.

August through mid-December featured Museum History and Cemetery Walk History. On

Saturday, September 23rd the Museum hosted an Anniversary Celebration and Chautauqua, with Historical Speakers, Santa Fe Trail information, cake and ice cream, Museum & Bray House tours and other activities. Unfortunately, the rain was a deterrent, but several people came by to celebrate with us.

Check the Museum's website (www.gardnerhistoricalmuseum.com) often for details on future exhibits and events or to make a donation to the Museum.

Both the Gardner Historical Museum (204 W. Main St.) and the Bray House (207 W. Shawnee St.), the Museum's research and office facility located directly behind the Museum, are open from 1:00-4:00 on Saturdays and Sundays, during the winter months. We will open again on Friday evenings from 4:00-7:00, when the time changes in March.