

How Conserving More Than Just Land Preserves Our History

By Alex Lynott: Park Ranger– Big Sioux Rec. Area

It would be quite entertaining to ask a kindergartener today how much they think it would cost to build a new school and what tools and equipment they think would be used to build it. How many teachers would there be in your school? How many kids would be in your class? Then, at the expense of their young age and lack of history knowledge, show them a photo of horses, a wagon, some lumber, hammers, a few saw, and nails. Follow that photo with one of a small building, with one small room, a handful of students, and one teacher. Now ask how “old” they think these photos are and let their imagination run wild on how they think school would have been in this small building. Children’s grasp of time, distance, and money is not very well established at this young age and this little game is surely setting the kindergartener up for failure. Comparing a multi-million dollar school today as to a \$150 dollar school almost 130 years ago may be of very little interest to them. However, the outhouses and four mile walks to school every day might grab their attention, for a second!

If you are a Hawarden native or surrounding area local, you may have used the old white school house with a teal roof as a land marker to tell someone where to look for their turn at the B46 and Highway 10 North intersection. If you are a “ocal local”, you would better know this location as Bob Hodoway’s place. Well, we stole your land marker and we’re coming for the outhouses too! Now, you will notice the rubble of foundation left behind. We made off with the building and are keeping it in hiding until we are ready for its big reveal!

The Buncombe Township Schoolhouse was built in the 1890s for \$150. Materials for the building were purchased down in Sioux City and delivered to the site on a wagon pulled by a few horses. I wonder if the horses complained that their journey was uphill both ways. A kindergarten through eighth grade education was served here and after the Buncombe students finished eighth grade, they went to high school at the Hawarden High School.

Sioux County Supervisor Vice Chairman and former Buncombe Township student John Degen says going to country school is nothing like what going to school is now. “I had about three or four students in my class at a time. The teacher would call your age class up to the front of the room and you would all race to and slide down the long bench, always trying to sit next to your buddy. The other students in the room would stay in their desks and work on homework.” Degen started his kindergarten year at the Buncombe schoolhouse in 1955 and graduated from eighth grade there. He has lots of fond memories of his time as a student and says he absolutely loved country school! With no running water on site, every morning the older boys took a pale and headed over to the neighboring farm of Bob Hodoway’s. There they would fill the pale with water from a hydrant in order to provide drinking and hand washing water for all of the students. After lunch, the younger kids would take naps on the rugs they were required to bring with them. Can you imagine? Don’t forget your lunch and your rug, John! I just had to ask John about the outhouses. He said they were anything, but comfortable and very cold in the winter time. “If you had to use the restroom and knew it would be quick, you would raise one finger for the teacher to see. If you knew you might need to be in there a little longer, you would raise two fingers for the teacher to see.” I think we all get the gist here. One time, one of John’s classmates raised his hand to use the restroom on a cold and windy day. His friend got the teacher’s permission and headed out to the two-holed boy’s outhouse. After a



while, John realized his friend had been gone for a while. He looked out the school window and saw a long string of toilet paper blowing in the wind out of a knot hole in one of the boards. He thought that was very bizarre. "I raised my hand and said, 'Mrs. Janssen, I think Doug might need some help.'" He pointed out the window, everyone stopped working, turned in their desks to look, and only then did everyone see Doug's toilet paper signal for help. It turned out that the door had slammed so hard on Doug that the outside latch fell and locked him in! Only in country school!

Before the building could be moved to its new permanent location here at the Big Sioux Recreation Area, there were a few major and minor things that we had to do for prep work. The chimney was knocked out and down. Sarah Davelaar, one of our naturalists, and I boxed up the original school books, chalk, student art work, and student homework to ensure nothing was damaged during the move. All of the homework and artwork we came across were from the year 1937. For whatever reason, there was a significance in keeping work from that particular year. As we boxed things up, we could not help but read some of the homework assignments and quickly learned who the star students were and which ones maybe were not the teacher's favorite. There was one particular student who could not for the life of him find the correct answer to $2+3 = X$ on several homework sheets and you could feel the teacher's frustration in her red inked comments!

This school house project will be the epitome of a work in progress. One or several may even question our decision to accept the building project versus declining, letting it get bulldozed, and building a replica. What fun is a replica? She has great bones for being around 130 years old! Yes, I'm still talking about the school house. It currently sits on its new foundation here at the Big Sioux Recreation Area in a part of the park that is not yet open for traffic, but you can definitely see the big white structure through the trees near the Screech Owl head trail. Its location is very secluded and separated from the rest of the park traffic. The backyard is a very dense forest where visitors will be treated with a wide variety of wildlife viewings. There is no end date in mind, especially as we fight the winter extremes to even get a good start on it. Please be patient with us while we do the construction and designing ourselves. I promise the end result will be epic!

Our vision for this project is to result in a family size rentable cabin. It will have a finished basement, 1.5 to 2 bathrooms, 2 to 3 bedrooms, a full kitchen, laundry, and has the potential for a lofted bedroom. Many of the original items such as the school books, chalkboards, school desks, benches, cabinets, doors, etc. are going to be incorporated into the final project. The goal is to keep the history aspect still very much a conversation piece for those staying in it! Of course, the memory filled outhouses will also be moved to the Big Sioux Recreation Area as well and incorporated into the park. We wouldn't want to leave Doug's most embarrassing memory behind!

Can you imagine all the stories this building could tell? Even the American Elms and Silver Maple trees on the property must have seen so much history and change over the hundred years. That's why we didn't tear it down and "replicate." It's for the memories of the past and the memories in the future it will create for many more families to come!

