

SATURDAY, JANUARY 22, 2000

Meat loaf isn't antique

Garden City cafe is more about memories, not money

By Brian Ojanpa

Free Press Staff Writer



John Cross

Volunteer worker Earl Hansen keeps the coffee cups filled at Formerly Crane's cafe in Garden City.

GARDEN CITY — Earl Hansen draws no pay. Ditto for Til Brandts, Evelyn Belgard and anyone else who works in Garden City's sole business — a memorabilia-filled cafe staffed entirely by volunteers.

“We're all very proud of this, because the town doesn't have very much to offer anymore,” says school bus driver Ken Siebels over a bottomless cup of morning coffee in Formerly Crane's, where vintage eye candy abounds.

Mounted on one wall is an old red ladder once used by the Garden City fire department. The period light fixtures come from local churches.

There are antique toys, aging Garden City High School graduation photos, and rusty signs from Ray's Standard, the gas station that served as the town's de facto coffee spot before it became defunct.

The cafe in the tiny Blue Earth County town takes its name from Crane's Hardware, which went out of business in 1987. Lifelong Garden City resident Roxie Brandts couldn't bear to see the 100-year-old building go to seed, so she bought it in the early '90s.

“To be honest, when I first bought it, I didn't know what I wanted to do with it,” says Brandts, who deployed her antiques and vast amounts of elbow grease to create a business where meat loaf coexists with museum pieces.

With the help of local **Baptist minister Harvey Hallada and Brandts'** brother, Barry Mell, the two-year renovation project was completed last summer.

The cafe, which opened in August, has settled into a schedule: open 7-10 a.m. Monday-Wednesday, until 1 p.m. or so Thursday and Friday, when lunches are served.

The \$3 meals are catered. Brandts plans for 20 to 30 meals a day. During the Christmas holiday season, the cafe averaged about 17 diners a day, but lately it's been slower. On Thursday, eight people from a Mankato nursing home had a lunch outing there.

Brandts says she's been toying with the idea of opening the cafe on selected evenings and some Saturdays, when local musicians would entertain.

Except for the Crane's Hardware sign that still hangs out front, there is no exterior signage to call attention to the cafe. There's also no need, now that Highway 169 bypasses the community.

“We're pretty much word of mouth right now,” says Hansen. And in a town of 200 residents, that's advertising enough.

Brandts harbors no illusions of business success. Then again, that's not really the point. **The community needed a communal gathering spot, and if it has coffee and pie to boot, all the better.**

“We have enough money to pay the bills,” she says. “We knew from the start it wouldn't make any money.”