

Creating a destination

A pair of Garden City residents have an ambitious goal: Revitalize the county fairgrounds by giving people plenty of reasons to visit the community

By Robert McConnell Free Press Staff Writer

GARDEN CITY - Don't be misled by the name Garden City. A city it isn't. In fact, to call this unincorporated little community 15 miles south of Mankato a village would be generous.



John Cross

Roxie Brandts (right) and Jan Roelofs have devised a plan to put the small town of Garden City on the map with an array of entertainment weekends they hope will bolster use of the Shady Oak campground, proceeds of which help fund the Blue Earth County Fair.

Its population can't be much more than a couple of hundred. There's one part-time business establishment - a community eating and gathering place in a converted hardware store. And there's a seasonal business - the campground at the Blue Earth County Fairgrounds.

Throw in a couple of churches (one with about a dozen active members), and that, other than several blocks of modest homes, is pretty much it as far as civic presence goes.

But although Garden City has been around a long time - the community was platted in 1858 - and has seen better days, it isn't ready for life support yet. And it won't be as long as Roxie Brandts and Jan Roelofs have any energy left. These two Garden Citians are leading a campaign to breathe new life into the community and give a financial boost to the county fair and fairgrounds.

A slew of activities are planned for this year, with events stretching from Memorial Day weekend almost to Christmas. Among them are a car show and dance, two demolition derbies, drive-in movies, a bluegrass music festival, a hog roast and a Christmas pageant with a human and animal cast.

And that list doesn't include the 143rd Blue Earth County Fair in August (the oldest county fair in Minnesota). Besides the usual demonstrations and crafts and livestock competitions, this year's fair will include a half-dozen new events, such as a battle of bands, motocross, a musical comedy act, a compact car race and a ceremony honoring active members of the armed forces.

Some of the year's events are free, and the rest have modest admission prices. There's a strategy behind the pricing: Brandts and Roelofs say they hope that people attracted by the events will use the campgrounds (and pay campground fees, which help support the fairgrounds). They also hope those who visit Garden City before August will be likely to return for the county fair (and camp again).

How did these two women get involved in leading the revitalization effort?

Roelofs' responsibility comes with her role as president of the Blue Earth County Agricultural Society, a nonprofit group that runs the fair and maintains the buildings and grounds.

The society gets annual financial support from the County Board (about \$35,000) and occasional help with special needs. But the fair's budget is about \$140,000, so the rest has to be generated by camping fees, rental of winter-storage space and whatever profits can be gotten from events and other sources.

The revenue usually manages to cover the yearly costs of running the fair, Roelofs said. But since 1996, there only has been an average of about \$3,500 left in the fair's account at the end of the year, she said. And last year, with fair attendance down by about 3,000 for the second year in a row, the fair went into the red by about \$1,900.

Meanwhile, maintenance is becoming a growing problem because the fair's skinny profit margins have meant that much of it has had to be postponed.

"The problem is, our grounds are so old, our buildings are so old, we're getting to the point that we can't patch them anymore," Roelofs said. Hence the attempts to bring in more revenue.

"We're trying to find more activities, and doing more things, in order to cover the extra costs to keep the grounds going," Roelofs said.

Two of the buildings in the worst shape, the open-class exhibit buildings, are at least 70 years old, she said. Their

roofs leak and rotten wood is visible. Roelofs said they need to be replaced. But first the money has to be found.

The involvement of Brandts in the revitalization effort seemingly springs from a more purely personal motive: a passion for preserving tradition.

Her passion is most readily apparent in what she's done with a century-old, two-story brick building near the heart of Garden City. The building was occupied by Crane's Hardware Store until the late 1980s, but then the store was closed and the building stood vacant for several years.

Brandts didn't want to watch what she calls "the last building in Garden City, pretty much" crumble and disappear. It's "one of those nostalgic things - that you hate to see everything gone."

So she bought it, restored it to a usable condition with help and opened a cafe. She named the place, logically enough, Formerly Crane's. Little food preparation is done on the premises, but patrons can buy breakfast every morning except Sunday and lunch on Thursdays and Fridays. There's space for about 60 people ordinarily, but many more have been squeezed in for special events.

Formerly Crane's has bargain prices. A lunch "special," for example, is just \$3.50. But the cafe's real purpose isn't to serve food. What prompted Brandts to do so much work and spend an untold amount of her own money restoring it (she wouldn't say how much, lest her husband find out) is that Formerly Crane's serves as a community gathering place and an informal museum. In the dining room is a collection of Garden City memorabilia, to which Brandts is still adding.

Mostly to give the community "something to do - to come together and have fun," Brandt said, she has sponsored various activities. A new one this year is Sir Henry's Car Show and Street Dance, which is named for Garden City's favorite son, Sir Henry Wellcome. Wellcome, a pioneer of the pharmaceutical industry, grew up in Garden City, where his father ran a drug store.

The car show and dance, like the other community events, are planned with the campground in mind. "We're trying to tie events in," Brandts said, "so if people come to camp in little Garden City, they have other things to do," and "something different" than what the usual camping place offers.

"You can go to the campgrounds where they have swimming pools and stuff," she said (Shady Oaks

Campground at the fairgrounds doesn't have a pool), "but we're hoping maybe to find a little niche where people think, oh, once a month maybe we'll go out to Garden City for something."

Brandts and Roelofs are doing their best to make the trip worth your while.