

Wakonda 125!



The Clay County Community Celebrates Its 125th Birthday With A Holiday Festival

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This year's Fourth of July celebration in Wakonda will feature dignitaries, ranging from Lt. Gov. Dennis Daugaard to Miss South Dakota USA Emily Miller of neighboring Irene.

Those notables — along with the anticipated hundreds of visitors — are helping the Clay County town celebrate its 125th birthday July 1-4.

Holding the quasicentennial during the holiday seemed natural, said publicity chairwoman Riva Sharples.

"Historically, Wakonda has celebrated the 4th of July, with the first one in 1891," she said. "When it came to planning for the 125th, we took advantage of the three-day weekend."

The initial planning started in March 2007, meaning the upcoming celebration has been nearly 3-1/2 years in the making. Souvenirs have arrived for display and sale at the downtown headquarters. The 125th celebration features a packed schedule of activities but will also emphasize the town's history.

Irene artist Greg Preheim designed the mural depicting Wakonda and its history. The mural hangs on Wakonda's Main Street and was commissioned in honor of Wakonda's 125th anniversary.

Sharples compiled the town's history book, drawing on submissions and her own research.

"We have sections that includes family histories and stories on businesses, Main Street and the school that has undergone changes," she said. "But it's not just about Wakonda. It's a story about the prairie that I think people will find interesting."

Wakonda gets its name from an American Indian word, Sharples said, with the translation of either "sacred and holy" or "wonderful."

Like many neighboring communities, Wakonda started as a railroad town, Sharples said.

"There became speculation about where the railroad would run to Yankton. That's why you saw settlers at Centerville," she said. "In 1884, the railroad depot was built, and people came to settle what is now known as Wakonda."

The railroad location that gave birth to Wakonda eventually became the death knell for neighboring Lodi, Sharples said.

"The railroad sealed the deal. Wakonda started with 300 residents, and it has remained around that number during its history," she said. "The original town was Lodi. When the railroad came through here, Wakonda was established west of Lodi, and Lodi was left out of the picture. They moved some of the (Lodi) buildings to Wakonda."

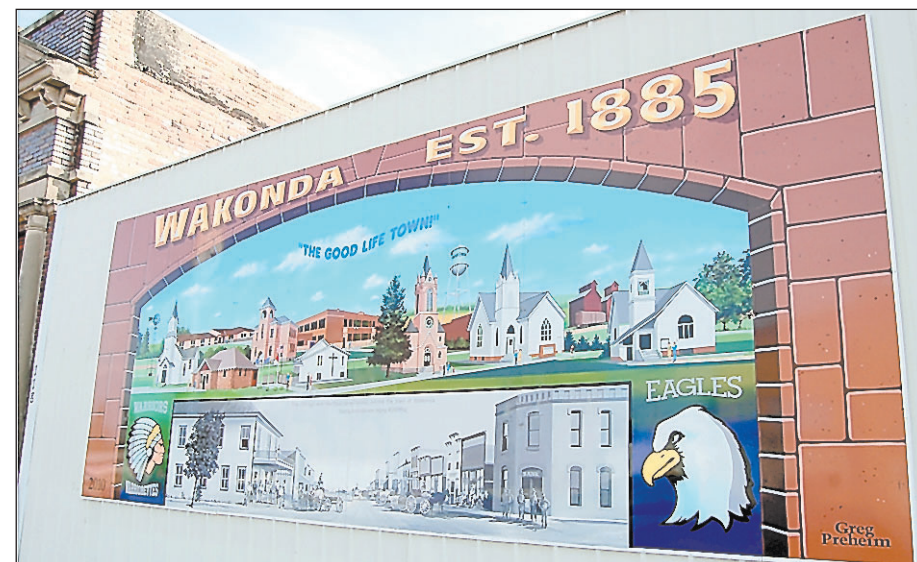
While the railroad spawned the start of Wakonda, the region also benefited from good farm land, she said.

Wakonda started with a strong Irish community, Sharples said. St. Patrick's Catholic Church was originally located four miles outside of town, and parishioners relocated the church into Wakonda.

Other early churches included a German Methodist congregation built in 1885, Sharples said. The Methodist church closed in 1900 and was taken over by an English church from Lodi. Today, Wakonda has five churches: St. Patrick's, Bethel Baptist, United Church of Christ (Congregational), United Methodist and First Lutheran (ELCA).

Wakonda's history has been captured not only in the book but also the pageant entitled "Prairie Hearts." The production, which covers 1885 to modern day, will be presented at 7 p.m. July 1-2 in the school gymnasium.

Ruth Williams and Barbara Knutson co-authored the original pageant, written for the town's centennial in 1985. Williams is directing this year's pageant



ABOVE: After more than three years of planning, Wakonda will celebrate its 125th anniversary July 1-4. The committee includes (from left) Riva Sharples, Pam Ganschow and Kayla Nielsen. The Clay County community, which started as a railroad town and rich farming area, today is home to about 400 residents. LEFT: If one picture is worth 1,000 words, Irene artist Greg Preheim's mural depicts 125 years of Wakonda life. Preheim was commissioned to create the Main Street mural, which includes various facets of Wakonda's history. (Randy Dockendorf/P&D)

and has added the history of the past 25 years.

"The pageant is historically accurate. It takes us through five generations of a Wakonda family," Williams said. "We start with the homesteaders and the early Irish ancestry. We look at how they build the community and kept going."

Williams admits it was difficult to condense 125 years of history into a two-hour pageant. She removed some of the early history from the original pageant to accommodate additions from the last quarter-century.

"The older history was much easier to write. The last 25 years was actually the hardest part," she said. "It's hard to see history as it is happening. We're living it and don't always realize what will become important. I guess we're just too close to it."

The pageant includes many aspects of the community, including the school district that has seen changes.

"The school has progressed during its recent history," she said. "It had a cooperative with Gayville-Volin for sports, and now we have the consolidation with Irene."

Patrons in both of the old Irene and Wakonda districts approved the merger, and the new Irene-Wakonda school district came into existence July 1, 2007. The district maintains a K-6 elementary school in Wakonda and grades 7-12 in Irene. The athletic teams, formerly known as the Wakonda Warriors and Irene Cardinals, are now known as the Eagles.

Wakonda has sported a number of outstanding athletic teams over the years, with school or co-op

teams winning state championships, Williams said. The Wakonda girls basketball team won 101 consecutive games in the early 1990s, which remains the longest Class B girls basketball winning streak in South Dakota.

The pageant will also feature stories about both famous and infamous residents, Williams said.

"We had colorful characters of the community," she said. "I didn't write the scene, but there are stories about them that are interesting and funny."

In recent years, Wakonda residents have worked together to promote the community. The Legion Hall was rebuilt after an October 2006 fire, and the community re-opened the local cafe. The park has seen improvements, and the Cornstock festival has

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