

Keeping our history alive

By Julianne Endres

Watertown Area Community Foundation

If you have ever been a student in History 101, you probably loved it or hated it. If you were the latter, hopefully you have at least learned to appreciate history as it relates to your family and community.

Thankfully, many of the Watertown Area Community Foundation donors have had a passion for history – preserving and remembering our community's heritage. There have even been Field of Interest Funds established with that focus in mind – among them the Vera Way Marghab Fund in 1996 and the Ervin H. and Sybil Schafer Fund in 2017.

Likewise, in 2014, Gaylord Hoftiezer left a bequest to the Castlewood Historical Society which allowed the organization to establish a fund both at the SD Community Foundation and at the Watertown Area Community Foundation to support the society's mission and community. Locally, both the Codington County Historical Society and the Mellette Memorial Association have endowment funds at WACE.



The Codington County Heritage Museum hosts hundreds of youngsters every year.

Throughout the Foundation's 40 years, it has awarded roughly \$350,000 in grants to support our community's history in all its forms, shapes and sizes. Many of the grants have helped with physical structures including building maintenance/preservation at both the Codington County Heritage Museum and the Mellette House.

In fact, both have projects ongoing currently funded by the Foundation. Work is in progress in the museum's basement for tuck-pointing and painting as well as shelving. The end result will be a sizeable room for organized storage of objects needed for exhibits. Christy Lickei, museum director, is excited

about what that means for the overall basement's function. Much of the remaining area in the basement will be used for classrooms which allow for more and enhanced programming at the museum for all ages.

Other grants at the museum have included support for cameras and scanning equipment, books – even acid-free boxes for their archives.

“As a nonprofit in Watertown, we are super lucky to have the Community Foundation,” Lickei said, adding that the museum has been able to rely on the Foundation for many projects over the years.

Prudy Calvin of the Mellette Memorial Association couldn’t agree more.

“Throughout the years, the WACF has always been supportive of preserving our 1885 Mellette House,” Calvin said. “Because of this support, thousands of guests have been able to enjoy this historically significant house.”

The Mellette House should see a new roof yet this year thanks to a Foundation grant. Other grants at the Mellette House have included support for landscaping, wallpaper, electrical work and the re-printing of “The Civil War Diary of Arthur Calvin Mellette.”

Still other Foundation grants with



Christy Lickei of the Codington County Heritage Museum, left, and Jan DeBerg, executive director of the Watertown Area Community Foundation, take a look at the new storage area in the basement of the museum. A grant helped fund tuck-pointing, painting and shelving for the space which will house objects needed for exhibits.

our culture and history in mind have supported the Living History Fair, South Dakota’s 125th birthday celebration at Joy Ranch, a program sponsored by the Sons of Norway and traditional Pow-Wows held in Watertown.

The Foundation also continues to work with the Historical Society in creating an archive of Oral History Interviews with long-time area

residents. These interviews on DVD can be loaned to interested residents, teachers and students.

A bit of a history lesson that we all can appreciate, Calvin continued, “Remember, the Mellette House was condemned and scheduled to be torn down in 1943. The Mellette Memorial Association was formed by Watertown citizens to save the house and for 40 years the WACF has been a friend of the Mellette House helping with many projects to keep this beautiful home open for the public to enjoy.”

“In 2018, the Foundation appreciated the opportunity to support saving another historic gem in downtown Watertown when it awarded a \$150,000 grant to the Friends of the Goss Opera House Foundation” said Jan DeBerg, executive director. “Work is being done to repair the building while preserving its historic integrity as the Goss is brought back to life.” It is hoped by all who support the cause that the Goss will be a destination for visitors and residents to enjoy for generations to come...whether you like “history” or not.