



DAWSON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM

BANNER

Vol.39 No.6

A Fresh Look at Our History

December 2017

Merry Christmas!



Lexington, looking north on Washington at about 4th Street

Dawson County Museum is excited to host an exhibition of 26 paintings from Todd A. Williams' project. This show will be in our Art Gallery through January 6, 2018. You can meet Todd here on Saturday, December 9, 2017.

The Legacy of Nebraska is a monumental collection heralding the nostalgia and history of Nebraska with 123 paintings, at least one for each of the state's 93 counties.

Todd Williams' mission for the past 5 years has been to depict significant historic, geographic, and figurative elements from founding-era Nebraska. He has worked with historians, sponsors, and leaders in each county to help him determine significant subjects.

The Legacy of
NEBRASKA

We get to show the Dawson County painting and those from many surrounding counties. Farming scenes, rural skylines, notable architecture, and celebrated faces create a warm impression of Nebraska life with rich historical, geographical and cultural context.

Come meet Todd A. Williams and watch him paint.

Artist's Reception & Live Demonstration
1:00-4:00pm
Saturday, December 9th



Demonstration is courtesy of NE150 Foundation and Lexington Community Foundation.

LEXINGTON
community foundation

Dollars and Cents

by Don Batie, DCHS Treasurer

I asked for this space to update you on the financial condition of your Dawson County Historical Society (DCHS).

To begin I would like to thank the Dawson County Commissioners for their increasing support for Dawson County museums. This year they included \$80,000 in their budget for the museums. Most of the money is used at the Dawson County Museum, however about 3.2% goes to the Robert Henri museum in Cozad and 3.8% to the Gothenburg Historical Society.

The last few years the staff and board of DCHS have worked to reduce operating expenses. Unfortunately expenses continue to exceed income. Payroll for one full-time and two part-time employees, utilities and insurance consume our portion of the County tax support. We still have expenses for maintenance, repairs, supplies and program expenses to have a working museum.

As a result we have to dip into our savings to make ends meet, which cannot continue much longer. If conditions don't change the DCHS board may have to make some difficult decisions next year. Options being considered include closing the museum for a portion of the year, laying off staff and starting regular admissions.

What can you do to help? First we need more members of the DCHS. Every year several of our older members pass away and we get very few new members. Please encourage your friends and neighbors to join DCHS.

Second, current members could consider paying at a higher membership rate. We have created gold, silver and bronze membership classes now.

Third, please consider a yearly donation to the DCHS. Many of us became lifetime members several years ago, but that doesn't help today. A yearly donation would greatly help. Charitable donations may be given through the Lexington Community Foundation.

Finally, we could always use more volunteers. We have some excellent volunteers now, but there are always tasks that volunteers could do that would free up paid staff for other duties.



Looking Past Skin & Ask the Doctor

Our main gallery now houses an exhibit from the Minorities Health Disparities Initiative Team from UNL. *Looking Past Skin* is an evidence based art exhibition stemming from a year-long research project here in Dawson County. There were many hours of time and energy put into interviews with/by Dawson County residents of many ethnic backgrounds.

Ask the Doctor, the second element of the exhibit, is an interactive experience simulating perception and language difficulties in health care.

This exhibit was designed and installed by Kim Matthews and Jason Young. It will be in this gallery only one more week. After December 12th, it will be disassembled and rebuilt at the Nebraska State Historical Museum for display through May.

WHY A BAR AND BILLIARD ROOM?

-- Crystal Werger

Many of you who have already seen the paintings in the Dawson County Historical Museum art gallery might be wondering why *The Legacy of Nebraska* painting that represents Dawson County is of the bar and billiards room in the old Cornland Hotel in Lexington. When the artist, Todd A. Williams, came to the museum three years ago seeking a subject for his Dawson County painting I brought out several classic photos from the archives I thought he might like, and then I showed him the pictures that I liked. He chose to paint one of my favorites.



One of my first days working at the museum I came across a picture of a majestic old building in 1890. My jaw hung open as I studied the picture trying to figure out where it was located. I've always been drawn to architecture of old buildings and was in awe of the regal and ornamental look this one had. I instantly wanted to know more about it and if it was still standing. To my excitement and dismay, I found out it sat on the northwest corner of Washington and 6th Streets and was called the Cornland Hotel. But it had been demolished over 40 years ago. My heart still aches when I think about that beautiful old building being torn down, but

then again, I'm a historic romantic and rarely think about the practicalities of tearing down and building new. To me, each old building has a soul. They have memories, and if you listen close enough you can hear them.

After that I decided to find out as much information as I could about the old hotel. Thankfully, I work in an archives with some really thick files. The one on The Cornland has kept me reading late into the evening on many occasions. At first, all I could see were the changes made to the building over the years. It began with ornamental bricks being removed from the top of the building and ornamental structures detached from the outside. Then it was small windows being removed, then larger ones, and ultimately, in 1961, the Washington Street exterior was covered in an ugly green porcelain metal from the ground up to the second floor. This completely hid the original beautiful masonry work on the first floor of the building. I also noticed that the grand corner doorway that once opened into the bank building was gone and had been replaced by a big display window. The nerve! Who were these people making these decisions to take out intricately carved doorways and carefully laid masonry blocks framing half-round stained-glass windows??? And why are they ruining **MY magnificent** Cornland Hotel!?! It didn't make sense!

After taking some (obviously) much needed time away from my research, I was able to come back to it later and learn more about its history...which, after all, is what I really wanted to know in the first place. Lots of interesting stories unfolded, and I couldn't help getting sucked in again. Did you know that William Jennings Bryan and his valet once stayed at The Cornland during his Chautauqua days? And Mari Sandoz, famous Nebraska author? She was also a guest. The hotel even accommodated Siamese twins, Daisy and Violet Hilton. I read an article about a man who shot himself in one of the rooms. Sad story but important, nonetheless. These people came and stayed because it was a grand hotel, the grandest between Omaha and Denver. Lexington was an up and coming western town striving to upgrade its reputation. The rowdy town of Plum Creek had changed its name to the respectable Lexington just shortly before the hotel was built in 1890. It needed a big fancy hotel to house visitors and hopefully, new respectable residents!

Construction of the hotel began in March of 1890 and was completed in October. The hotel featured 50 rooms with a large spindled staircase that led up to the third floor where a large skylight filled the halls with sunlight during the day. Besides the Lexington State Bank, the hotel also housed a barber shop and a bar & billiards room. On April 17, 1891 the Lexington Gazette reported "E.M. Gamble with Jay Hill as bartender will conduct the bar room and billiard hall. This is one of the handsomest appointed saloons in this section of the country (we get no drinks for this). The bar fixtures are from the Brunswick-Balke Collender Co., and there is but one other like it (the Midway at Kearney) in the state. The hall supports a billiard and pool table. All the latest appliances and conveniences in the matter of hot and cold water, gas, etc., etc., are at hand, and it is in a word, a "gin palace" of great attractions." The Dawson County Pioneer of April 18, 1891 followed up with, "The Cornland Saloon opened Monday last. It is one of the neatest rooms in the city." One hundred twenty-three years later when Todd A. Williams looked at the photograph of the Cornland Hotel's bar and billiard room, it was still a room with character. Stories seemed to shout from the photo. Is it any wonder he chose this to paint?



As I look at the old pictures of the grand hotel after it opened I can't help but be awed and excited. My reactions aren't much different than the reactions the hotel received shortly after being built! I honestly don't have enough words to describe its beauty. But it wasn't just beautiful, it was functional! In third floor rooms there were hooks on the wall for ropes (which were found in the dresser drawer) to be attached to in case of a fire. There were buttons in each room that when pushed alerted the employees downstairs that assistance was needed. The first and second floors had indoor restrooms which was quite a feat considering Lexington, at that time, had no sewer system. The hotel had gas lighting and steam heating. There was a ladies' parlor that hosted extravagant parties. The hotel hair salon was a once-a-year indulgence to some ladies—they sat at the window sun-drying their hair and catching up on the news. Men did the same in the barber shop. The Cornland had a private gambling room, whose stories stayed in that room. Traveling salesmen could display their wares in a "sample room". The hotel provided a restaurant. The chef received \$15 a week. Other employees received room and board in addition to their weekly wage--\$3.00.

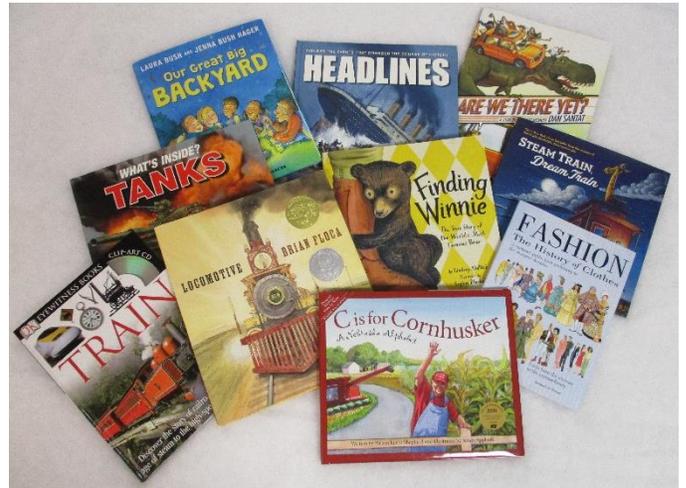
But for all its greatness The Cornland would see its demise in March of 1967 to make room for a new "Centennial Building" that would house J.M. McDonald's department store. But the memory of the Cornland Hotel and the days of cowboy towns and 30 cent meals will always live on through The Dawson County *Legacy of Nebraska* painting by Todd A. Williams. The Cornland Hotel may be gone from the streets of Lexington, but it is not forgotten. Many artifacts from the old hotel made their way to the Dawson County Museum and I am always happy to show them to anyone who has a love of old things. And the museum's archives are always open to the historian who wants go back and spend some time reliving the glory days of the Cornland Hotel.

**Remember COFFEE with CAROL is the 1st Wednesday of every month.
see you December 6th at 10:00!**

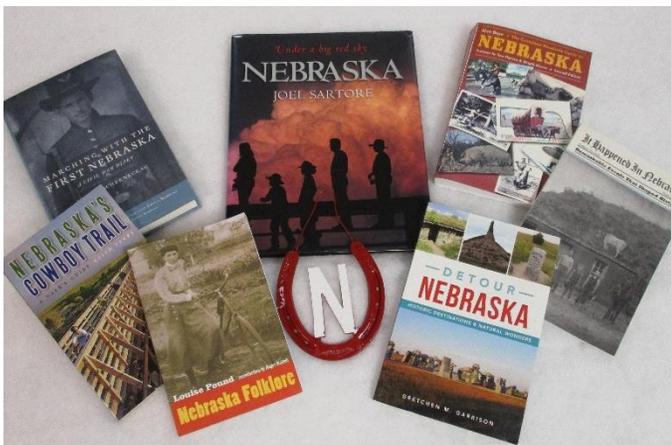
This Christmas Shop our Gift Shop!



Family History Helps



Children's Books



Nebraska Books including the new *Detour Nebraska*



Framed Prints of DCHS Photos



Lexington Landmark Ornaments



Patriotic Books & Gifts

This Christmas Shop our Gift Shop!



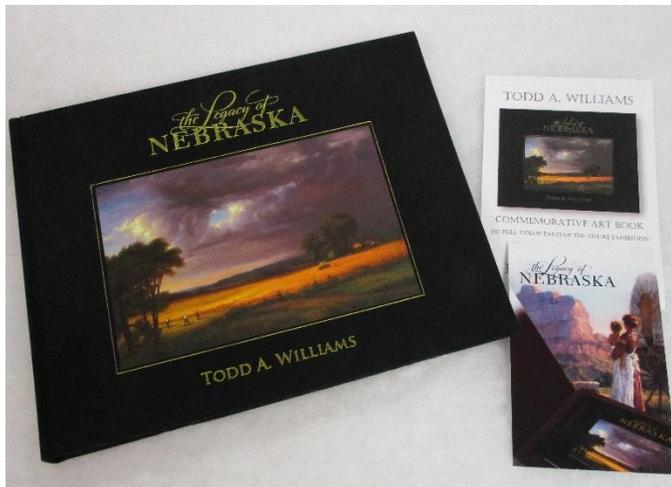
Local Publications

Including the new edition of
Plum Creek: The Rest of the Story

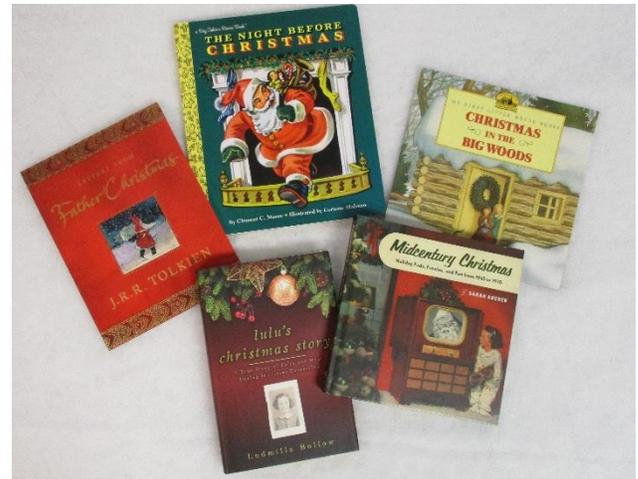
If you've read our *Captive of the Cheyenne*, you'll want to know what happened to some of the other characters from the Plum Creek Massacre story!

Shelley China
from a personal collection

Vintage Aprons
Authentic & Reproductions



The Legacy of Nebraska
Commemorative Art Book



Christmas Favorites

Give someone a membership to Dawson County Historical Society!

