

The AUSTIN WHITTEMORE HOUSE  
Home of the Clay County Historical Society, Inc.

The house was built in 1882 by Mr. Horace J. Austin. Mr. Austin came to Dakota Territory in 1860 to be the surveyor for the opening of the homesteads in Clay County. He was a very lonely man as all of his family lived on the East Coast. He made his headquarters in Vermillion but worked outside the Vermillion area while surveying the land the people wanted for their homesteads. While out of the village, he stayed many nights with the families for whom he was doing the survey. In his diary, which we have copies of, he tells of some interesting homes he stayed in and the beautiful young ladies who lived with parents in those homes.

As time went on, he would try to come back to Vermillion each weekend and attend church services at the First Baptist Church. After a few times of going to church, he noticed a lovely young lady, Miss Rachel Ross, and finally had nerve enough to ask her to go for a walk with him. She seemed to be willing to meet this young man and so the romance began. They were later married. By that time he had acquired two small homes near the crest of the bluff, just south of this house. In 1881, the flood came and the village of Vermillion being below the bluff, near the river, was washed away. However, Mr. & Mrs. Austin's houses were saved.

By this time he had acquired several parcels of land and the land this house stands on was a parcel that he owned. He decided the year after the flood to build this grand home for his wife.

Mr. & Mrs. Austin did not have children, but they soon became parents to Helen, whom they adopted when she was very young. They thought she had such a pretty little face that she became known as Pansy, a name she went by the rest of her life. The Austin's also gave a home to two or three other children, but we do not have many details on them.

About 10 years after the home was built while Mr. Austin was in Pierre, as a Legislator from this area, he became ill and died while the Legislature was meeting.

After his death, Mrs. Austin was a rather well to do woman so she decided to remodel the house. The stairway stood in the southeast corner of the music room. She had it moved to the foyer where it is today and she had the large dining room and the large room above it built on to the house. She also had a green house attached to the south side of the dining room where she grew her own garden year around. Mrs. Austin was known as a very good cook and many very important people sat at her table. The first meeting of the WCTU was held in this house. Little Pansy also had a pet rabbit that lived in the green house.

Pansy married Mr. Arthur Whittemore who was a football coach at the University of South Dakota. They raised 4 girls and 1 boy in this home. After the children all left and moved away from Vermillion, Pansy continued to live in her childhood home. She had an apartment built upstairs and she rented out rooms for extra income.

When she died in 1968, her son Arthur "Bucky" Whittemore inherited the home. He was a very well known musician and lived in New York. The house was beginning to need lots of repair and he did not want to deal with it. He decided to sell the lots with the house to the grocery store that was across the street at the time. The house would be torn down and a parking lot would be made on the land.

The President of our University, Dr. Richard Bowen, his wife Connie and their children lived in the red house directly south of this home and his wife heard that there was to be an auction of the household goods. She called several of us together and said we need to save the house. That is all it took and the Clay County Historical Society was formed. The young Mr. Whittemore came to Vermillion to give a piano concert at USD and a group of us went back stage after the concert and told him we wanted to save the house as it was such a part of the history of this community. He laughed us right out of the room. He did have the auction and the contents were scattered to the winds. The old white cupboard in the kitchen is the only piece of furniture that was in the house that was given back to us. We didn't give up on saving the house as we wrote letters, we made telephone calls, and tried very hard to convince him to save the house.

We offered to buy the 4 lots that are on this piece of property if he would give the Historical Society the house but it finally took a final letter asking if he had thought of the tax he would save if he gave us the house and we bought the lots. He went along with that and today we have the house, the lots are paid for and we are here to preserve the history of Vermillion and Clay County for future generations in Vermillion and Clay County. Every three years the Whittemore families gather here for a family reunion.

We have many families call upon us when they are writing their family genealogy. We have many family history files, we have over 2500 obituaries on file, along with city and county history, church history and the history of many organizations in this area. Organizations meet here for their monthly meetings. In June we have an ice cream social on the south lawn as one of our fund raisers to help with expenses of the house and on the first weekend in December we sponsor a Tour of Homes for the community with many beautiful Vermillion homes on the tour. This house is decorated in a different theme each Christmas and refreshments are served here for those attending the Tour of Homes.

We have no paid staff, all are volunteers and we are fortunate to have these people that are willing to give of their time to keep the house open for guests.

Please come and visit this beautiful home. We do not charge admission, but if you wish to leave a donation we thank you. You may call us at (605) 624-8266 **for more information.**