

History of CCHS
Heritage Notes
8-27-13

Greetings from the Austin-Whittemore house, home to the Clay County Historical Society! Our hope is that each week in this column you will find some interesting notes or stories about the history and heritage of the Clay County area in South Dakota. There is so much to tell and we as the CCHS assume the responsibility to learn, preserve and disburse this information for all to know, understand and enjoy. Please check out our web site shown above for a listing of current board members, or contact us with questions or to express interest in joining our efforts. All are welcome!

Our Victorian home was built in 1882 by Horace J. Austin, a surveyor for the opening of homestead land in Clay County, who arrived here in 1860. He spent much of his time out in the county working on surveys and often stayed with families in his work area. He tried to make it back to Vermillion each weekend to attend church services at First Baptist Church, where he noticed a lovely young lady named Rachel Ross, who later became his wife.

The great flood of 1881 wiped out the original Vermillion below the bluff and since Horace Austin had already acquired several parcels of land atop the bluff this became the location of their grand new home in 1882.

Mr. Austin was serving as a legislator from our area in Pierre in 1892 when he became ill and passed away during the legislative session. This left Rachel Austin as a rather well to do woman who decided to remodel the house. She relocated the stairway leading to the second floor as well as added a large dining room and another bedroom above it; also a greenhouse to the south.

Her daughter Pansy married Arthur Whittemore, a football coach at the University of South Dakota. They raised four daughters and a son in this family home, and after the children were grown and moved, Pansy continued to live in her childhood home. She passed away in 1968 and her son Arthur "Bucky" Whittemore inherited the home. He was an accomplished musician who lived in New York and did not wish to deal with the repairs needed to keep the house, so demolition was planned.

Connie Bowen, wife of former USD President Richard Bowen started a group to "save the house", which led to the formation of the Clay County Historical Society. When Bucky Whittemore came to Vermillion to perform a concert the group of concerned residents met with him back stage to try and convince him to save the house. After considerable future negotiations he agreed to give the house to CCHS in consideration of the tax benefits he received when the Historical Society also purchased the four adjoining lots.

After decades of hard work, today our home is completely outfitted with beautiful furniture and historical artifacts. Our files contain 4,500 obituaries, the cemetery records of all cemeteries in Clay County, and many family and oral histories on file. We also have the histories of many Clay County churches as well as many records pertaining to the City of Vermillion. Among our collections are Vermillion newspapers dating back to 1896.

We invite your participation and thank you for your support!