



THE JENNINGS CZECH MUSEUM (above) includes the addition of the Royal Neighbors of America building (left), which was given to Heritage Associates to house memorabilia. The museum itself, originally the Meth-

odist Episcopal Church in Jennings (below), was donated to the group after the United Methodist congregation moved into a new building.

— Dalene Gawith and Czech Museum photos

Czech Museum to show off improvements

By MARY LOU OLSON

During the annual Firemen's Fun Day in Jennings on Saturday, Aug. 25, the Jennings Czech Museum will have an open house from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. to show off all of the changes and improvements made in recent months.

Refreshments will be served from 1 to 5 p.m., with lots of other activities around the town all day.

With money from the sale of the Jennings School, an addition has been added, along with remodeling of the former Royal Neighbor Association building and a handicapped ramp, said Neoma Tacha, president of Heritage Associates, the nonprofit group which runs the museum.

She said the Jennings School Board gave the school building and contents to the museum and the City of Jennings after the school closed last year, with proceeds from the sale to be shared by the two. The school board gave school memorabilia to the museum, which put on a 28-by-48-foot addition to house it.

The building was sold to the firm which now operates as Bus and Coach International, or BCI, for \$150,000. The museum has spent part of its half, along with some donations, for various improvements on the grounds, Mrs. Tacha said.

City Clerk Sue Long said that among projects the city has done so far with its \$75,000 share included rewiring the city shop and community building, which houses the senior center, library and city offices and also serves as a community shelter; adding a side door and overhead doors at the shop; and drilling a backup water well.

Mrs. Tacha said the museum started in 1964 when a group of citizens wanted to do something to honor the early settlers of the Jennings area, many of whom were from Czechoslovakia. A meeting was held at the Jim Gaumer farm home with Jim and Garrah Gaumer, Doyle and Kay Brown, Josephine Kinser, Lillian Shimmick, Robert and Pat Robertson, Julius Tacha and Neoma Tacha present. The group decided to have a one-day celebration in July and call it the Kolache Festival after the well-known pastry made by the Czech women.

As the plans progressed, the Beseda Dancers, accordion players and singers were scheduled for the festival. The group decided to use several of the vacant buildings on

Main Street to display items that area people shared from family memorabilia. The response was surprising, Mrs. Tacha said, and after holding the festival for several years, many people wanted a place to leave their items, so Mrs. Kinser, Mrs. Gaumer, Miss Shimmick and Mrs. Tacha worked on a permanent museum to hold them.

In 1969, plans were being made for a new United Methodist Church, with the old building to be demolished. Then, the Hays District office offered to give the old structure to the newly formed nonprofit group, Heritage Associates of Jennings.

The church was moved by volunteer labor to the present location on Main Street and the first show cases were purchased from the W.P. Noone Hardware Store sale. Now, the many articles which had been stored in boxes from year to year would have a permanent home and be cataloged and organized and displayed for research so people could learn more about the history and lifestyle of the early Czech settlers.

After the discontinuation of the Jennings Royal Neighbors Lodge in 1970, this building was also given to the group and the Frank Shimmick heirs donated the Shimmick building at 103 N. Kansas Avenue to them for much needed space for displays and storage. Both buildings have added historic value to the museum, Mrs. Tacha said.

The Jennings Kolache Festival was held from 1965 to 1971, but eventually it outgrew the community and its volunteer work force. In its last year, organizers estimated that 5,000 people attended and 15,000 kolaches were baked by the local women.

In 2006, Mrs. Tacha said, a hall was built to connect the Royal Neighbors and church buildings, along with a handicapped access ramp.

This addition is used to display veterans' memorabilia, which includes World War I and World War II newspapers, uniforms, food stamps, a World War II Norden Bomb Sight donated by the late Col. Willis Kusy, a brother of Mrs. Tacha, along with photos, flags, maps, cemetery information and much more.

To make room to display the many articles from the school, she said, the group decided to build an addition on the east end of the

church, which also has a handicapped ramp.

The project was completed in May. Several trophy cases were built and some purchased. The new room houses all the school memorabilia. To make room for the school addition, the Sol Rees buildings and early 1900s farm machinery had to be relocated on the museum grounds, which was another big project for the group, Mrs. Tacha said.

A visit to the museum will give visitors an idea of the early history of the area. The Czech heritage has been a part of the Jennings area since several early settlers arrived in 1870, including the Cilek, Steffen, Rohan, Tacha, Munson, Harris, Rees, and Jennings families. Slab City, the first town, had a post office and trading post northeast of Jennings. The town was moved to the present location and renamed Jennings after William Jennings, who started the town of Slab City in 1873 with a two-story house, lumber yard, post office and trading post.

That history, along with quilts, post office boxes, Bibles, lodge materials, a display by a local wood carver, information in 13 cemetery books and much more can be found in the museum buildings.

"Up until 1999, the museum operated on donations..." said Mrs. Tacha. "In 2001, we received our first money from the county, which we very much appreciate."

"In 2006, the museum and city of Jennings shared equally in the sale of the school building and contents. With these funds, we are able to make the improvements and make a secure future for the Jennings Czech Museum. Our goal is not to take on more than we can support and maintain."

"We feel that we are very fortunate that BCI chose the Prairie Heights School building to locate their business here. We wish them success and welcome them to our community."

Other officers of Heritage Associates are Roger Shimek, vice president; Lila Jennings, secretary; and Dean Gawith, treasurer. Board members include Steve Hirsch, Lawrence Jennings, Jay Kump, Larry Mizer and Bob Tacha.

Everyone is invited to stop by during Firemen's Fun Day and check out the expanded museum, Mrs. Tacha said.



PRAIRIE HEIGHTS SCHOOL memorabilia (above) on display at the Jennings Czech Museum was donated after the school in Jennings closed in 2006. The museum, which also has displays of items from days gone by, will be open from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 25, during the Jennings Firemen's Fun Day.

— Dalene Gawith photos

