

There is a special art to being a community

Most Kansans know about S.P. Dinsmoor's world famous Garden of Eden built in Lucas, Kansas during the early 1900s. And, if anyone has been to Lucas they also know that Lucas is located a few miles north of Lake Wilson; both are gems in the Smoky Hills. The area is also on Kansas Highway 232, designated the Post Rock Scenic Byway. The stunning beauty of the unique Russell County farm country has continued to stimulate artistic endeavors in Lucas during a century since Dinsmoor's passing.

Art strengthens a future

This artistic heritage and hard work by Kansas and Lucas community artists helped earn Lucas the official State of Kansas designation, "Grassroots Art Capital

of Kansas." A creative spirit kindled long ago continues in Lucas today with art venues like the downtown Grassroots Art Center that houses sculpture and art collections of 17 Kansas artists and traveling exhibits. Other Kansas

artists like Eric Abraham and his *Flying Pig Gallery* and Erika Nelson and her *World's Largest Collection of World's Smallest Versions of World's Largest Things Traveling Roadside Attraction and Museum* have moved their talents to Lucas, opening studios, museums and retail outlets. The Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C., partnering with the Kansas Humanities Council, has shown two recent traveling exhibits in Lucas.



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A new art direction

The first steps in another cultural direction for Lucas, in the areas of theater and music arts, were taken in 1997 when local friends became motivated to save the old storefront Isis Theater. It had

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been closed for nearly 20 years and although the native limestone structure was sound, the roof was nearly gone and a sizeable pond existed at the foot of the theater's sloping floor. Most everything inside was unsalvageable.

The group of 11 formed the Lucas Area Community Theater, Inc., a not-for-profit corporation. They started fundraising for the first step of a theater renovation with the stated goal, "To provide a facility that could be used for live theatrical and

musical performances, as well as for cinema and to entice residents of all ages to stay in the community."

A tour through the process

Husband and wife members of the theater board and advisory



The Lucas Community Theater advertises the weekend movies from the marquee on the last weekend of 2006. The movie schedule has not been altered during the KAN STEP addition project.

group, Les and Lynn Schneider, possess the same qualities of community spirit, focus and love of the arts that the entire theater group and many of the group's relatives and friends (who became

\$90,000 total renovation budget. Each council since has had the same idea that small communities need a proactive city council to help keep the community together. Our councils have worked

planned for, including: a hi-tech digital "big city" sound system; brand new, wider, more comfortable seating; acoustic, sound enhancing wall covering; a modern, refurbished movie



Above: The Lucas Garden of Eden log cabin and Dinsmoor's lasting concrete artwork are seen decorated with holiday bows.



Right: Les and Lynn Schneider take time out from work on Lucas' theatre addition to pose for a picture on the front row of the theater. Les is President of Lucas Area Community Theater Inc. and Lynn serves on the advisory board. They are two volunteers who spend many hours volunteering at the community theater.

the core group of project volunteers) continue to bring much to the project. Les is the Community Theater Board President and is Plant Manager of the Lucas Great Plains Manufacturing facility. His wife Lynn is a Lucas artist and owns Lynn's Glass Works, a stained glass studio located next door to the theater.

"One of the first donations the group received was the title to the property, given by the theater's owners," Lynn Schneider said. "But the key to getting started was \$40,000 made available by the Lucas City Council."

Les explained further, "One thing about the original project stands out, that the Lucas city government allowed this to happen. They believed in us and contributed that \$40,000 in a

together and have been focused on what the community needs and have not been afraid to step up and help in those areas. Our proposal to the city in 1998 was for them to be the anchor and we would raise the rest. At that time there wasn't a KAN STEP or other way to get financial help. We checked everything. The council took the initiative. They allotted it – gave us the money as we went along. We were frugal, bought locally, and put money back into the community. The end result at worst was a win/win proposition for the city. They would at the very least, for \$40,000, get a stable structure put back on the main street of town. We spent our first volunteer time and donated money to get the building stabilized, cleaned out and a new roof put on."

A quick look at the facility shows that the initial renovation project exceeded its goals by a country mile. The theater sports a host of features not originally

projection system; an enlarged, deeper, more live performance friendly stage; complete rewiring and re-plumbing; new concession and restrooms in the front lobby; and many other bells and whistles that only a modern movie or stage production crew could appreciate.

"As we went along, \$130,000 had been donated by the time renovation was completed. We were able to upgrade. Instead of putting used seats in we put in new seats. A donor gave \$20,000 to put in the new seats. We had many individual major donors that liked what they were seeing. They helped move the project on. The budget increased because we went with digital sound instead of analog. We didn't have all the money in the bank to start. The community wanted a better facility and they paid for it," Les explained.

On the subject of project fundraising, Lynn added, "Fundraising for the renovation was very successful at all levels. The donor board in the theater lobby is a testament to that. We

utilized a Web site (www.lucastheater.org), regular newsletter mailings to the area's 2,400 residents, as well as newspaper and radio promotions to publicize our fundraising efforts.



Lynn Schneider demonstrates how easy it is to splice a film break. Community volunteers take turns working at the theater, taking care of all the regular theater duties to show movies every Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

Planning, patience and hard work at fundraising are still a part of what we do. A group of about 250 Lucas alumni has been particularly generous in funding these hometown requests. The Alumni Hog Roast every Memorial Day is our big yearly fundraiser. We also receive several local family memorial contributions a year. Our current project is to raise money for a newer technology projection system.”

What happens at the theater?

The theater marked its grand opening with a December 16, 2000 concert and never looked back. Besides movies every Friday, Saturday and Sunday evening (the 50,000th movie customer, who happened to be from Ellsworth, was recognized in July 2006), annual and other special events as well as business meetings at the facility fill the bill. Youth concerts

happen on Halloween night. Both the Salina and Russell Community Theater performance groups have regular Lucas performances. A December Santa Claus day always includes a bicycle and movie pass giveaway. Area schools hold their own live theater (the auditorium can hold about three complete area schools-worth of students.) The Chamber of Commerce has an Annual Talent Contest. The Kansas Department of Commerce held a grant writing seminar. A Kansas Travel Industry Association wants to hold a meeting at the theater. Very important to the

Theater Board are the many free movie nights for the kids and community members at different times of the year. The facility, like many community resources, will get busier as area organizations find new and different ways to utilize it.

“We’ve taken donations to subsidize our facility. But we want to try to keep this at a minimum for the community. They’ve already donated money and labor so we want to try to keep it as affordable, as inexpensive, or many times ‘free’ in order to continually give back to our community,” Les stated. “A community of this size does not need a financial drain. It would be a burden. It’s nice to have money in the bank so we can pay a bill we need to pay. We’re blessed because we’ve never borrowed a dime and don’t plan on it. The way we’ve built the facility, including the KAN STEP addition, has been with an eye towards affordability, especially with the utilities. Our bills should be around \$200 per

month for electricity for summer cooling and about the same in the winter for gas heating, even with the completion of the addition.”

How the community fares

Another benefit of having the theater in town is that theater patrons stay in town to eat a meal, do some shopping or check out one of the art exhibits. “The town storefronts right now are full, we’d like to have another building to use for theater business but none look to be available in the near future,” Lynn noted. “We also take some of the theater’s profits and give to different places in the community, to community functions and other organizations. It gives back a little to the community that has helped put the theater on the map.”

“Personally, Lynn and I have a family and we have wanted to help develop something for kids to do here in Lucas – keep them here in town. If they want to see a movie they don’t have to drive all the way to Hays. You’ve got an option here. Maybe some [kids] from Sylvan Grove will come here for a movie and not have to drive so far. You may not get them all to stay here but you can provide an option, provide a little entertainment. We just don’t want to be a town that dries up and blows away,” Les said.

Volunteers make the day – everyday

A community theater project like this depends a great deal on volunteers. It needs volunteers initially with modern construction skills and many with strong backs. But for a community business that has movies and customers every Friday, Saturday and Sunday evening, as well as all the other area school and community functions, a serious group of volunteers must commit.

“Running the Lucas Area Community Theater is a lot of work, it doesn’t come easy. People need to volunteer for the long

term. Once you build it, it's here and you need to find people who are interested in operating it. It's a very rewarding job as far as people who want to do something for their community – that kind of rewarding. It's neat! You can actually feel like you've done something that's made a difference. It's amazing to me how many people say, "You don't get paid for what you do?" They don't know what volunteering is. They just don't understand the concept," Les explained.

"I'd hate to count the hours our volunteers work each week. There are ads to be done, newsletters to be written, volunteer schedules to be made, accounting entries have to be made – just a lot of stuff behind the scene needs to be finished every week," Lynn added.

The Lucas Area Community Theater board met with the Department of Commerce KAN STEP directors on September 7, 2005 to finalize an application for a grant to build a dressing room/community room onto the back of the existing theater. That day seems long ago as final work continues and the facility progresses toward the June 1, 2007 finish date.

It is no surprise that the theater was able to take another step towards a community goal – one quite a bit loftier than, "Not drying up and blowing away."

I'd have to say, "Look out Sundance – a Lucas Film Festival is surely on the way!" Such a spirit in a community bodes for more good things to come. In providing the Lucas Area Community Theater with their KAN STEP project technical assistance and inspection services, KRWA is proud to be a part of the "Grassroots Art Capital of Kansas," even if we did come in through the back door of the theater.

She found cultural comfort in Lucas, Kansas

by Dan Knupp

Living in a town that holds its art heritage close, "I love doing art for my own amazement," Margaret Wade, exclaims. She is happy in retirement with a good measure of the infectious Lucas town spirit.

Margaret grew up in St. Joseph, Mo. and Omaha, Neb., studied music and art at the Kansas City Conservatory of Music and the Art Institute, has a daughter and a 12 year old grandson living close by in Lucas. Two other grandsons are at KU and an aunt, her mother's sister, also lives in town.



Above right: Margaret Wade at home in front of a good friend's painting that's ready to be hung on the wall. Work on the home's interior is nearing completion.

Above: As soon as it warms up, the plan is to tackle the refurbishing of the exterior of the 30s style, Art Deco building. The front portion of the old gas station's service bay holds a dining room, kitchen, upstairs office and sleeping loft. Behind the curved window facade at left is the living room, bath and storage.

Even with a music education, Margaret, with her knack and astuteness for the intricacies of computers, accounting and financial management, followed a career to Chicago, the City of Big Shoulders. There she managed the financials for *WFMT Fine Arts Radio* which at that time published *Chicago Magazine* and is owned by the Chicago public television station. She later moved on to the Big Apple, lived in Mid-Town Manhattan, and worked for theaters and other not-for-profits in New York City.

"In 1996 when I was visiting an aunt in Lucas, I didn't experience cultural shock. I had cultural shock when I first went to New York City! What I saw here was a great place to retire," Margaret said. "After moving here I worked as Lucas City Clerk for several years and then after that, I finally retired – now I'm busier than ever!"

Margaret assisted in setting up a custom accounting system for the Lucas Area Community Theater project. "In my experience with not-for-profits, they must have the best financials ever, complete, transparent and properly structured to qualify for grants and to correctly receive gifts from donors," Margaret said. "When I first worked as City Clerk, the Lucas medical clinic, along with multiple other

community improvements were built with a CDBG comprehensive grant that was just completing the paperwork. It seemed to be the catalyst for the town turning the corner to become a real vibrant community. I've never seen a volunteer oriented atmosphere like this – ever!"

"A kindness exists here for both the young and the old. They naturally watch out for the older driver and just look at the theater – what a joy it is for the kids. Lucas exhibits a lot of humanity – has a caring character. I just love it here."

Margaret also has a town art project of her own in progress. She has rescued a period 30s gas station with some great Art Deco architectural features. "This place is so cool! The windows, interior space and overall design are just perfect for my kind of home. My artwork collection will look great on these walls when it is finished." She said.

I couldn't agree more. Margaret also looks great in Lucas – where volunteerism, and family, and art, are top priorities for a very special spot in Kansas.