



Prairie Plains Resource Institute's Charles L. Whitney Education Center: The Story So Far

(Supplement to *Prairie Plains Link*, April, 2013)



The story of the creation of an Education Center on the beautiful Platte River loess bluffs of Griffith Prairie is long and colorful. It involves many and various phases and characters, and is constantly evolving. It began with a dream in the minds of a handful of people over three decades ago, and is being transformed into reality by a growing number who share a passion for creating a positive future for the river corridor and the Plains. There follows a summary of the steps achieved to date.

April, 1980. Prairie Plains Resource Institute's Articles of Incorporation includes the following in the list of purposes of the organization: "To provide a center where persons of mutual interest in the natural history, horticulture, agriculture, human culture, sociology and a development and the welfare of the Plains may exchange ideas for the benefit and welfare of the members thereof and the state and the nation."

March, 1999. The Prairie Plains Board of Directors and Executive Director Bill Whitney established the Platte River Corridor Initiative, a long-term project aimed at promoting resource protection and planning along the river, as an organizational priority. Acquisition of a property on the Platte and the development of a resource center were included in the plan. The group envisioned the center "situated on a beautiful prairie and riverfront land, serving resource management, educational and human development needs . . . a meeting place and educational center for people interested in this region's future."

April, 2001. The Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET) granted Prairie Plains the funds to purchase land on the Platte River. The three-year funding timetable provided time to search for the best site.

May, 2001. Prairie Plains Board, staff, and several members (including Eugene "Mert" Griffith) met to discuss the type of land to acquire, to define the resource center concept, and to envision the building(s) necessary to perform multipurpose education and resource management functions that would meet the organization's needs. The planning group agreed on the basics for building design and programs, emphasizing that the building must fit into the environment, exhibit excellent design, functionality, and low-cost maintenance characteristics. One suggestion was to work from an agricultural motif, such as renovating an old barn.

June 9, 2001. Director Bill Whitney had begun the diligent search for a property on the Platte, when Mert Griffith stopped by the Prairie Plains office and offered his place. A better property could not have been imagined – located just four miles west of Marquette – with over .5 miles of riverfront, 250 acres of Platte loess bluffs prairie in excellent condition, quality irrigated farmland, plus a farmstead with a set of buildings that would house equipment and store seeds.

November, 2001. The purchase agreement for the Griffith land was completed and approved by NET.

January, 2002. Purchase of the Griffith Prairie and Farm was announced at the Prairie Plains annual meeting of members.

Spring, 2002. Mark Ratzlaff, UNL architecture graduate student, chose the Prairie Plains Education Center as the basis for his studio thesis project. Mark's project required that he select an appropriate building site and create a building design incorporating the organization's needs, complete with all the drawings and presentation materials.



Eugene "Mert" Griffith, right, had allowed access to his land for SOAR and other activities for several years before he sold the property to Prairie Plains, being aware of the mission and funding to acquire a quality prairie on the river. Mert is shown here receiving the 2005 Charles L. Whitney Outstanding Service to Prairie Plains Resource Institute Award - presented by Director Bill Whitney - for all of his many and various contributions. These include the land sale; equipment repair, invention, donation and loaning; assistance with prescribed burns and cedar tree removal; farmyard and building maintenance; grass seed harvesting and SOAR presenting. He has continued to be of service, assisting with the construction of the Education Center and greenhouse.

November, 2002. The Education Center committee pinpointed the site at the south edge of the prairie – still close to the farmstead – as a potential location for the Center.

December, 2002. *Prairie Plains Journal* No. 16 (2001-2002) included an article, “A New Project: The Griffith Land,” describing details of the new acquisition, along with plans for creating a Platte River Resource Center on the site. The Center was presented as “a home base for the SOAR program . . . a site for educator training, a meeting place for people working on natural resource and community development issues, a center for people to come learn about natural resources of Nebraska, and a place to explore ideas about long-term sustainability of both the human community and ecosystem along the Platte River. It will also serve small retreat groups, and a student intern program.” (All *Prairie Plains* publications cited in this document are available to view online at prairieplains.org.)

2003. While Mark Ratzlaff was working on his thesis project, Bill Whitney became aware of a unique barn about five miles from the Griffith land. He was extremely impressed with its geometry, proportions and height. Bill was also familiar with the resident farmer, Larry Sands; Larry’s mother, Mildred Sands was the owner of the barn. Permission was granted to take a closer look, and the interior proved to be even more impressive. Bill asked if it would be feasible to acquire the roof structure for the center. The whole Sands family discussed the idea and decided to donate the barn.

At that point, architect/builder Lee Schriever from Panama, Nebraska was brought into the process. It was hoped that Mark Ratzlaff could acquire some licensing hours with Lee in the creation of a building plan, since Lee had experience moving and restoring two other barns. They worked out the details; Lee and Mark measured the structure and elevations at the proposed building site, then drew up the plans. The final step was for Mark to construct a tabletop model, which ultimately helped the family to see the potential of converting the barn into the Education Center.

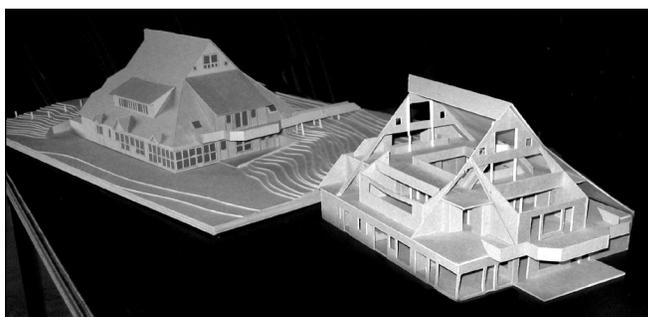
2006. With the stimulus of a significant anonymous gift, *Prairie Plains* began a fundraising campaign with the goal of putting the barn roof onto a new concrete foundation on the Griffith land. Committing to the move was a critical decision since the barn had to be moved on frozen ground over corn and soybean fields. Unable to risk any further delays, groundbreaking was set for late September.

August, 2006. The Hamilton Community Foundation awarded a grant of \$10,500 to *Prairie Plains* for moving the roof structure from the Sands Family Barn to Griffith Prairie. *Prairie Plains Link* announced that “The Center will usher in a new era for PPRI and its quest to create opportunities for education, research, recreation, restoration – and for celebrating the land and its people.”

Friday, September 29, 2006. The *Prairie Plains Education Center* Groundbreaking Ceremony took place, with 42 people present to celebrate. The memorable address to the group, presented by then board president Cliff Dill, was published in the October, 2006 *Prairie Plains Link*.



Above, original Sands Family barn. Below, architectural models of proposed Education Center created by Mark Ratzlaff.



September 29, 2006: Breaking ground are board members and other Prairie Plains leaders, from left - Steve Anderson, Dennis Ferguson, Cliff Dill, Lee Schriever (architect), David Meyer, Mitzi Fox, Curt Twedt, Colleen Babcock, Mert Griffith and Jan, Bill and Charles Whitney.

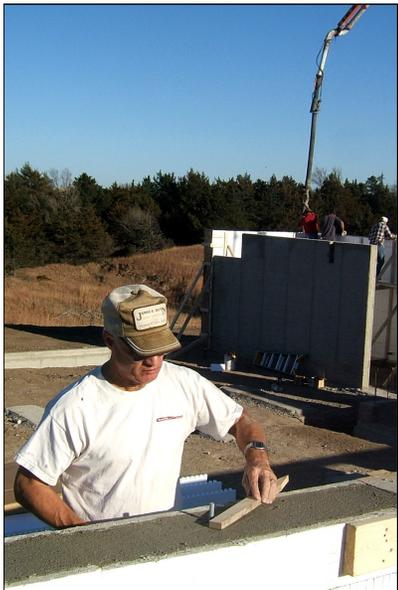
October 16, 2006. The real groundbreaking: Rob Roberts of Mid-Nebraska Land Developers donated excavation services, and the concrete contractor poured the foundation footings.

November 6-8, 2006. *Prairie Plains* staff, member volunteers and Aurora High School Trades & Industries students assisted M. C. van der Merwe contractors with assembling insulated concrete forms (ICF) and concrete pouring. Scott Jones, Trades & Industries instructor, commented, “This was a great example of hands-on learning. ICF is a relatively new process that isn’t covered in textbooks. Being at the site and having the chance to help build the walls provided the students with valuable real-life work experience.”



The actual groundbreaking, October, 2006.

November, 2006



From top left, clockwise: Aurora High School Trade & Industry students were among the volunteers who assisted with assembling the insulated concrete forms (ICF) used to make the Center's new foundation; Delivering concrete into the ICF; Contractor M. C. van der Merwe directing the concrete mix into the forms; Member-volunteer Joe Ford smoothing the poured concrete.

December, 2006 – January, 2007. The radiant heat tubing layout and concrete floor were completed. Substantial progress was made on interior framing by architect-builder Lee Schriever together with staff and board member volunteers Cliff Dill and Wayne Mollhoff. Meanwhile, back at the Sands Barn, the interior teardown, salvage and cleanup was completed by another group of dedicated volunteers.

December, 2006



Laying down tubing for the radiant heating system.



The concrete pour - completed in two hours.



Interior framing progress with assistance from Wayne Mollhoff and Cliff Dill.



January 27, 2007: Sands Barn interior tear-down/salvage/cleanup day. From left, Mike Huebert and Mike Stewart at work; the barn interior; Cold and dusty workers, from left, Cameron, Scott and Cale Jones (Amy Jones also, taking photo); Bill Whitney, Mike Huebert, Larry Sands (in front), David Meyer, Bob Foulk, and Diane and Mike Stewart.

February 8, 2007. Perhaps the most memorable event in Education Center history – the barn roof structure was successfully moved to its new home at Griffith Prairie by Williams Midwest Movers of Hastings. The *Prairie Plains Link* joyfully announced, “WE DID IT!”



The future Education Center on wheels, over frozen fields, down the highway and on to Griffith Prairie. Extending to the south (below, right) is the foundation for the storm shelter/restroom section built in the fall of 2008.



May 25, 2007. The Center well was drilled.

Summer, 2007. Wednesday evenings were devoted to dismantling, cleaning and stacking the tiles from the original Sands Barn foundation, work being done by staff and volunteers.

August 29, 2007: Sands Barn foundation tile salvaging. From left, Bill Whitney and member/volunteers Dale Carlson, Jerry Jacobs and Joe Ford. The tiles will be incorporated into Center landscaping, e.g. as part of a retaining wall.



October, 2007. The Prairie Plains Board of Directors voted unanimously to name the Education Center in memory of the late Charles L. Whitney, who passed away in July. Charles practiced law in Aurora for 61 years, and incorporated Prairie Plains Resource Institute in 1980. He contributed his legal services to the organization for the rest of his life.

A \$50,000 challenge grant was awarded to Prairie Plains for the Education Center by the Peter Kiewit Foundation. The funds would be made available to the Institute when a minimum of \$64,000 match was raised by the end of 2008.

“Education in a Barn” by Bill Whitney was published in the October, 2007 issue of *Prairie Fire*. (Available online at prairiefirenewspaper.com).

November, 2007. Rough-in plumbing was installed in the kitchen, restroom and mechanical room areas, followed by a layer of foam board insulation and radiant floor heat tubing – all in final preparation for a concrete pour.

March, 2008. The Education Center Phase One fund-raising goal was achieved and surpassed, and work began on the Phase Two goal of another \$300,000.

August – November, 2008. Contractors Clint Petersen and Chad Garrett, assisted by staff and volunteers, installed columns & beams to support long joists that tie into the barn roof and foundation walls, bracing the entire building. The elevator shaft was blocked up, providing additional structural support for the south end of the building. The south (entrance) end of the building was enclosed, which included framing and sheathing the roof and walls, applying galvanized flashing on the overhang fascia, installing the south end doors and windows and the large double-hung windows on the lower level.

A 50"x 60" oil painting by Ernest Ochsner, entitled “Gjerloff Landing” - an image of Griffith Prairie and the Platte River from the north end of the Bush Island Bridge – was presented, to be exhibited just inside the main entrance of the Center. The painting was a gift from members Gerhard Assenmacher and Ochsner. (See *Prairie Plains Link*, October, 2008.)

In addition, a beautiful cedar bench and end tables were presented to the Center by the Gjerloff Family (see *Prairie Plains Link*, November, 2008). A memorial plaque will be displayed with the bench. (Read more about the Gjerloffs, who lived on the farm from 1913 to 1971, at prairieplains.org, under publications, then Gjerloff Supplement, June/July 2008 and Gjerloff Supplement insert).

June-December, 2011. Following a long dry spell on construction progress, the next building phase commenced, made possible by a bequest from Prairie Plains founder and longtime board member, Curt Twedt. Major headway was made on roofing, dormers, interior framing and windows.



Charles Whitney (1918-2007) with Mitzi Fox and Jeanne Dill at Center Groundbreaking in September, 2006.



November, 2008: The Center taking shape, showing progress on (top) the south entrance and east sides. The building was enclosed by the end of the year.



September, 2011: The roof was opened up on three sides and dormers were constructed.



November, 2011: A big leap forward! Significant progress was accomplished on the roof, and all windows and doors. The top view is of the north and west sides; the next photo shows the west and south (main entrance) sides.



November, 2012: South side (main entrance), with recycled siding from Kansas Barnwood.



November, 2012: The concrete pour for the patio on the east and north sides was completed by Willis General Contracting. The concrete has a stamped stone-like surface, resembling sediment deposition one might find on the Platte's sandbars.



December, 2012: East side of Center showing completion of northeast corner (porch). The storm windows allow for great winter scenery viewing from a sheltered location; in summer, screens will keep the mosquitoes out as visitors enjoy the breeze and summer night sounds of the prairie.

June-December, 2012. The septic system was installed. Staff and volunteers Bill and Shirley Snyder completed siding the exterior using recycled barn siding acquired from Marty Hesting, owner-operator of Kansas Barnwood in Beloit, Kansas. Willis General Contracting completed the concrete pour for the patio on the north and east sides of the building; doors and windows were installed in the northeast corner, effectively enclosing what will be the screened-in porch.

<p>Charles L. Whitney Education Center <u>Contributions to date, with goal of \$1,000,000+</u> Mildred Sands Family Barn donation: \$12,600 Prairie Plains Members: \$336,500 Heuermann Foundation: \$30,000 Hamilton Community Foundation: Barn Move: \$10,500 Windows: \$15,000 Proctor & Gamble: \$5,000 Peter Kiewit Foundation Challenge: \$50,000 Anonymous Foundation: \$5,000 Farr Foundation: \$25,000 Mather Foundation: \$10,000 In-kind donations: \$14,700 Total raised: \$514,300</p>

2013, Moving Forward

The moment the Sands Barn roof was lowered onto its new foundation in February, 2007, the Education Center became a tangible reality, and a major Prairie Plains focus. It represents a serious commitment to the future - offering opportunities in recreation, education, research and regional community development in the context of the land and resources of the Plains. It is especially important as a tool to facilitate the organization's educational programs and events in the beautiful Lone Tree Corridor of the Platte River, including the Sherman Ranch, Griffith Prairie, Bader Park and Tooley Park.

The Center has steadily progressed on a pay-as-you-go basis, just like Nebraska's State Capitol during the Great Depression. We appreciate the good work of our contractors and architects Lee Schriever and Mark Ratzlaff. There has also been significant sweat equity contributed by volunteers and staff in its construction. The dream of the Center and our faith in its role in our mission is alive and well, even though the project has taken a few years to complete. It is a one-of-a-kind structure, a piece of agrarian sculpture on a beautiful prairie landscape.

We owe so much to the contributions made by Charles L. Whitney in building the foundation of Prairie Plains, without which this project could not have been. We also are indebted to the late Curt Twedt, founder, board member and friend, for his never-ending faith in our work, in addition to his significant financial support. The Mildred Sands Family has our deepest gratitude for contributing their amazing historic barn. Finally, the funds contributed by foundations and by members and friends - many of whom have also given time and muscle - is fully acknowledged and greatly appreciated.

The next tasks are the most expensive ones: electrical, plumbing, insulation, drywall, fire alarm and protection, elevator installation, kitchen, woodwork and painting - along with exterior concrete and deck work. The price tag is approximately \$500,000.

The sooner we can program activity at the Center, the better, so we are in the process of launching a new capital campaign. Our goal this calendar year is to have at least the electrical and plumbing systems installed, estimated at \$120,000.

Please consider a generous contribution today for this next step forward in our journey toward a sustainable future for the Platte River Corridor, and the Prairie Plains vision of Education in a Barn.