

Repurposing the Past to Reclaim the Future: How Boxholm is Finding a Key to Closed Doors

By Cheryl Tevis

Rural Iowans tend to downplay their milestones. Granted, these milestones may resemble miniature stepping stones to the rest of the world, but they deserve to be celebrated. A recent event in Boxholm showcased one of these moments that would have made the Seven Founding Fathers proud! You'll find their names engraved on the cornerstone of the 1916 Boxholm Consolidated School: Elmer Thorngren, Axel Westeen, Axel Henderson, Frank E. Carlson, Christian Peterson, Joseph E. Reutter, and Aiken Muench. If any of these names bring to mind ABBA, IKEA, and the newest member country of NATO, you're correct; the town, population 178, is the namesake of Boxholm, Sweden.

Two summers ago, the 1955 addition to this school, later reorganized as Grand Community, was saved from the wrecking ball at the 11th hour. The Grand Heritage Foundation was formed, setting in motion a tortuously-slow legal process of transferring the building from the school district to the Boxholm City Council, and finally to the possession of the Foundation on September 28, 2023.

Then the real work began on the vacant building, closed in 2014. But no one wanted to simply recreate a monument to the past: the board's vision was to create the Grand Community Center.

Off to a Good Start

The Foundation has been meeting to plan renovations, apply for grants, and tackle projects requiring an abundance of elbow grease. On Sunday, June 2, the public was invited to view the contents of the time capsule placed inside the 1916 cornerstone, and witness the progress on the building.

"We've raised \$400,000 so far," Mark Muench, president, Grand Heritage Foundation, and the great grandson of one of the seven founders said last Sunday. "It's given us a good start."

Here's a checklist to date:

- Conducting an Independent engineering inspection, including two accredited labs experienced in asbestos removal
- Replacing windows and door locks
- Power-washing interior walls and ceiling
- Roofing work
- Painting exterior trim
- Removing faulty piping and heating system, and completing plumbing inspection, cleaning and repairing drains and sewer

- Replacing basketball backboards, rims, and hoops
- Painting the kitchen and hallways

The next major investments will be installing an HVAC system, and renovating the bathrooms.

Dying ash trees were taken down. Sections of landscaping block were removed and new caps added. The Bluff Creek Wranglers 4-H club helped plant flowers. Last year, the club received a Pioneer Community Improvement Grant to purchase and plant an Eastern red bud tree.

In April, the gym doors opened wide to hold an Easter egg hunt, due to inclement weather, and in a few weeks, the Grand Community Center will serve ice cream cones at the town's 4th of July fireworks.

Time Capsule Reveal

The Foundation estimated about 40 people would attend the opening of the time capsule; 80 people showed up. Descendants of four of the Seven Founding Fathers: Carlson, Peterson, Reutter, and Muench, were introduced. Many still live nearby.

After a brief retrospective by Melinda Muench Anderlik, it was time to open the capsule. Drumroll, please! And, although the contents might have seemed underwhelming to some, I'd call them a treasure trove; Four independent newspapers covering Boone County, Iowa:

The Boxholm News, October 21, 1915 and January 27, 1916

Boone County Democrat, April 26, 1917

The Ogden Reporter, May 7, 1917

Boone News-Republican, May 11, 1917

Only two survive today: The Ogden Reporter, owned by Mid-America Publishing, one of a chain of about 25 Iowa newspapers, and the Boone News-Republican, one of a half-dozen in Iowa owned by Gannett. "The Boxholm newspapers in the time capsule had an article about the vote to consolidate, and another one, a year later when the school construction was completed," Muench said.

The inclusion of four newspapers demonstrated the value the Seven Founding Fathers placed on civics and journalism. The fragile newspapers will be turned over to another hidden treasure, the Boxholm Museum, housed in the old bank building (open by appointment-515/846-5413).

In today's digital age of news curated by algorithms and blocked by paywalls, newspapers have survived the test of time. Five coins of varying denominations, including a mercury head silver dollar, also were inside the time capsule; they're dated from 1892 to 1904.

Bringing Country Schools to Town

Nine country schools were closed to form the Boxholm Consolidated School. A 1923 article in Collier's: The National Weekly, titled, "Giving Farm Children a Fair Start," underscores the challenges of this rural educational reform. Journalist Stanley Frost wrote, in amazement: "But of last year's class of 21, 15 entered college, and the year before sent 14 out of 18. I know of no other public school that does as well."

Frost marveled that "the farmers there, though hardheaded as most, pay school taxes from three to four times as big as those of their neighbors, and don't kick."

In the article, Axel Henderson, one of the Seven Founding Fathers, and board treasurer, responded to the question of the financial hurdles of building and maintaining a consolidated school. He declared: "We have found that it is not education, but ignorance that is really expensive."

Aren't his words profound? They deserve to reverberate throughout Iowa today. Viewed through the lens of history, public education is the foundation of American democracy, and a basic investment in critical thinking.

I came away last Sunday with an immense sense of gratitude – and relief. My husband and our children attended Grand Community, and in later years, the school opened its doors to children from a total of six other towns. I served on its school board for nine years. As a board, it was our goal to maintain the one story addition so well that when the older two-story school eventually was closed, the town of Boxholm and surrounding communities still would have a "grand" community center. After driving past this vacant school for a decade, I almost had given up hope.

Building a Future Based on Today's Needs

Substantial work and fundraising looms on the horizon for the Grand Community Center. The beautiful gym offers a 300-person capacity for alumni gatherings and family reunions, including kitchen space. Other space could meet the needs for:

- Child care center
- Youth recreation and leagues
- Wellness center and indoor walking for seniors
- Wedding and reception venue
- Live music, plays, and programs
- Meeting spaces

Many current Boxholm residents are unaware that the "Home of the Boxholm Swedes" sign at the south end of town refers to the town's fast-pitch men's softball team, the 1957 State Champion runner-up. Today, thanks to volunteers, the

City-owned diamond in front of the school where they played their games, is in immaculate shape, and a little league team from Southeast Valley School has been holding practices and games there.

The Grand Community playground equipment purchased by the Booster Club was hauled away after the school closed, leaving the town without a playground. This past year, the Boxholm City Council used a combination of grant and general funds to purchase new play equipment for the site of the former two-story school, now owned by the City. It was installed just in time for the time capsule opening. As Sunday's program ended, parents and grandparents reminisced with former classmates over lemonade and cookies, while the children played on the bright, shiny equipment.

A new bench, built, sanded, and painted by the Bluff Creek Wranglers 4-H club was placed next to the front door for the open house. The original bench and memorial for a wonderful teacher who died at age 47 in a car accident was dismantled after the school closed. The Bluff Creek Wranglers 4-H club added a memorial name plate inscription to the bench: "Char Challgren, 21 years of service: To teach is to touch a life forever."

"Eventually as we have the funds, we'd like to put some kind of memorial on the east side of the building, where it used to be when the school was open," Muench said.

"We still have kids in the town, although not as many on farms," Muench said. "We go in so many different directions—we don't have the same community interactions we used to have. But we're hearing interest in basketball leagues, child care, pickleball, and it's encouraging. It's nice to see signs of life and activity at the building, and it's fun getting to know people again. There are 25,000 people who live within a 15-mile radius from here. We're optimistic -- if we only reach 2%-3%, that's enough."

This spring the former one-story school addition opens a new chapter as Grand Community Center, a regional community hub. "In a sense, as we work on this, we're already achieving our goal of bringing the community together," Muench said.

And that certainly is a milestone to celebrate.

The Grand Community Center has launched a \$2.2 million Capital Campaign. To send contributions: www.grandheritage.org. Questions: grandcommunitycenter@gmail.com



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