

Young couples see vision for Thomas County



MARCIA HORA - THOMAS COUNTY HERALD

Bridget Licking stands inside the building she is renovating and will be home to her With Love Co. Photography studio. The building has had a “little bit of everything” inside its walls during the course of the buildings history, including a bank, newspaper office, grocery store, and bar and cafe, before being purchased by the Lickings.

Marcia Hora

Thomas County was the only county in the western half of the state to see an increase in population as it gained 22 people over the past decade. Thedford was also among incorporated villages seeing its numbers grow. There are now 208 people residing in the village compared to 188 in the 2010 Census.

McPherson County became the state’s least populated county with 399 residents after losing 140 people over the decade. Previously, the smallest county had been neighboring Arthur County that has a new official population of 434.

Custer County saw a decrease in population and Logan and Hooker also posted losses.

So what’s the secret? With all of the counties surrounding Thomas declining, why did this small county in the Sandhills grow?

Thomas County Clerk Lorissa Hartman said there’s been a lot of good things happening in the county and improvements being made.

If you ask Alicia Clark, who moved here 10 years ago with her husband,

Adam, to work for Brush Creek Ranch, there has been a resurgence in young couples moving back to their hometown. There’s also others who just want to experience small town life and raise their families in a good environment.

“It used to be people didn’t want to move back home. Now we have so many young couples who have a desire to live here. They want to clean up and fix up their homes and businesses and they care about the community,” Clark said. “If I had to say what the number one obstacle is to seeing even more moving here it is housing.”

Clark is one of the younger residents who have dove in to improve Thomas County. She has wanted to start a coffee shop for quite some time. That dream is coming to fruition with the purchase of the former Arrow Cafe, located on Highway 2, east of Thedford.

Clark is excited to show you around the completely gutted building and point out where everything is going to be.

“Over there will be the coffee bar. Here is where there’ll be storage space and an office. Over there will be a room that can accommodate people for book club, small bridal showers, and serve as a meeting room. Don’t you just love this area and how the light comes in from all sides? We’re going to put in a charging station for devices and of course we’ll have Wi Fi. Where we are right here will be a retail area and over there we’ll have tables so you can look outside. Here we’ll have a sofa, side chairs and a fire place.”

It doesn’t take much imagination to see how this ‘diamond in the rough’ will be transformed into a place where people can congregate and enjoy a slower pace of life.

The original part of the building was once attached to the Arrow Motel and moved to its present location and added on to. The years have taken a toll on the building and it was in need of major restoration work.

Clark said it has been a labor of love and credits her husband, kids, and friends, who have pitched in to make the coffee shop a reality.

“I’m very excited and at times it’s overwhelming, but the community needs

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Below, the former Arrow Cafe has been purchased by Alicia and Adam Clark of Thedford. The building is being renovated and transformed into a coffee bar, retail area, and small meeting room and will be renamed, “Anthem Coffee.”



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Why They Stayed: Homesteader reality tells us something about Nebraska



HISTORY NEBRASKA PHOTO

The Hilton family poses outside their Custer County house in 1887. The family requested that Butcher not photograph their soddie, as they didn’t want their East Coast friends to see how they lived. “But the young lady and mother wanted to prove they owned an organ,” Butcher wrote.

By Matthew Hansen
Flatwater Free Press
Second In A Two Part Series

Forgive George Barnes if he looks a little grim.

No one cheered for the camera in the 19th century.

But Barnes’ jaw is clenched and he’s frowning slightly beneath his horseshoe mustache. He stared hard at the camera in 1887, the day pioneer photographer Solomon Butcher showed up to take his family’s photo. Ol’ George had ample reason to mean-mug Butcher and homesteader life in general, you will learn if you glance at the sod house standing - barely standing - behind him.

The night before the family photo, it had rained. Hard. That would be fine if the Barnes family had lived, as most of us now, in a home of wood or brick. But they lived in a soddie, same as hundreds of thousands who wandered into the wilderness of this new state called Nebraska hoping to earn free land and free themselves. From East Coast poverty or European famine, the horrors of American slavery or something intangible they couldn’t describe.

The rain had soaked the sod roof, weighing it down. The decaying pole meant to hold the roof had snapped. The whole thing had come down on itself, like a bad metaphor, covering every item the family owned in mud.

“All escaped injury, but the disaster left them homeless,” wrote famed Nebraska historian John Carter in his book on Butcher’s photography.

The year before, George Barnes’ wife had died of an unknown illness. Barnes was raising three children by himself, while he tried to make crops grow without water or a tractor.

Then his house caved in. It’s a good reason to grimace.

The experience of George Barnes is much more real than the fictions we have come to believe about the Homestead Act that “settled” much of Nebraska - and also understand how that experience is still embedded on Nebraskans’ DNA.

The homesteaders of Nebraska had it rough.

Your soddie might collapse. Your spouse or children might die. Your land may refuse to produce wheat, maybe because

you have no idea how to farm, and you may grow gaunt and intensely homesick for Cincinnati or Copenhagen or whatever map dot from which you arrived.

And we haven’t yet considered the blizzards. Or the locusts.

All these things might and did happen, Nebraska historians say, and they lead us to one question George Barnes must have asked himself a thousand times.

What in God’s name am I doing here?

More than a century after George Barnes’ house caved in, a woman named Rhonda Seacrest stood in a central Nebraska country cemetery and asked herself the same question.

Seacrest, whose husband Jim Seacrest was then president of a group of western Nebraska family newspapers, had agreed to take her mother and friends to a funeral.

The burial took place in a cemetery near the village of Merna, just north of Broken Bow.

It was February. Gray. Twenty degrees. The cemetery sat on a little

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HISTORY NEBRASKA PHOTO

The Swan family cuts and eats watermelon in front of their Custer County house in 1886. Tabitha Swan, the teenage girl in the photo, lived until 1962, demonstrating that our homesteader history isn’t that far past.