

Merwin's Buffalo Dream Becomes Reality
By Becky Qualls – Adams County Record – July 9, 2010

Dan Merwin saw his dream come true when the Dakota Buttes Historical Society unveiled a full-sized buffalo mount at the Dakota Buttes Museum on Saturday, June 3.

A large crowd gathered behind the museum to enjoy a meal and entertainment by the Bessler sisters before the buffalo was displayed to the public for the first time.

"We had 20 or more people here at 7:30 this morning to help get things ready," said Bonnie Smith, member of the Buffalo Heritage Committee. "There were at least 20 people here last night too working on the food. Don Archibald provided the buffalo meat for the meal. I can't thank them enough for their help. We couldn't gather like this if we didn't live in a country where freedom is treasured so much."

Jim Strand set up a pen where visitors could pet his one-year-old buffalo calf named Lucky.

"Jim's partner, Donna Keller, told me that Lucky doesn't know he's a buffalo," Smith laughed. "He follows Jim around like a puppy."

Smith provided some background information on the buffalo project.

"I grew up on a farm west of town," she said. "This is my home. This prairie is my home. Dan Merwin must feel the same way because he has been the driving force behind the buffalo project. This has been his dream.

"This project was done through donations---small, large, and very large. No museum money was used for this. We held raffles and worked hard to raise the funds we needed. We raised \$10,000 in two months."

Along with Smith and Merwin, Randy Holler, Don Archibald, Jim Strand, Donna Keller, Howard Nelson, Francie Berg, Bob Pagel, Phyllis Enerson, Larry Jackson, Loren Luckow, and Betty Svihovec served on the Buffalo Heritage Committee.

"This committee was made up of community members who believed in this project," said Smith. "No one quit. Everyone who joined stayed with it. Their service and sacrifice is unequalled. The Committee had the approval of our Historical Society to pursue this project with the agreement that they would house and maintain the mount.

"Dan, we thank you for your vision. You thought of this for years and held it in your heart."

Merwin's daughter, Arlene Johnson Arujo, spoke briefly.

"I asked Dad what I should say today and he said to say thanks to all of you," she said, tearfully. "A lady at our church said if you have a project and want to get it done, get Dad to help. Dad feels the same way about you, Bonnie. The Merwins are having a reunion this weekend too. I haven't seen some of them for years."

Smith briefly mentioned the significance of the buffalo.

"We have such a rich history of buffalo in this area," she said. "We need to acknowledge and appreciate this magnificent beast. Imagine 60 million of these creatures roaming the prairie. It is said that there were so many, the plains looked black. Dan thought it would be a good idea to have a buffalo in our museum and gave a large donation to get us started."

Loren Luckow shared the story of the raffle that provided the buffalo bull that was used for the mount.

"We sold raffle tickets for a buffalo hunt," he said. "The drawing was held at the Country Club and Ralph Kieley was the winner. He has hunted here for 25-30 years. He hunts pheasants, deer, antelope, etc. He even put an addition on his house for the mounts. Ralph has hunted all over the world and even has an elephant and a giraffe. Unfortunately, he couldn't be here with us today. He has been diagnosed with cancer but is doing well."

Smith introduced Randy Holler, a national taxidermy champion. Holler prepared the buffalo mount for the museum.

"Randy is not just a national taxidermy champion," she said. "He's an artist. He becomes so involved with the animal and its scenery, its spirit comes through."

"About two-and-a-half years ago, Dan asked me if I'd be interested in doing a little taxidermy," said Holler. "He said he wanted a buffalo bull for the museum. We have such a rich history of the bison in this area. Our museum is full of area history."

"After dozens of meetings, hundreds of hours, and about 3,000 stitches, we have the buffalo. It was a lot of fun. I have to thank my wife and kids for being so supportive and putting up with me."

Smith presented a special jacket depicting a buffalo on the plains to Holler as a thank you.

The Committee sponsored a contest to find an appropriate name for the buffalo.

"We had 122 entries," said Smith. "The official name of the buffalo is now Prairie Thunder. There was a three-way tie for first place. Leonard Bjerklie, Jaylynn Huiner and another person entered that name. We couldn't read the name of the third person. The second place name was Dakota Thunder and was suggested by Howard Nelson's granddaughter Emily, Josh, Jesse, and Jackson Qualls, and Betty Jo Engraf. A lady from Reeder and one from Bismarck entered the name American Spirit and that was our third choice. All these folks won tickets to the Hettinger Theatre."

The buffalo mount was rolled out on a movable platform and received a standing ovation and much applause from the crowd.

"We are pleased to offer this gift to the Dakota Buttes Museum," said Smith.

Ceil Anne Clement, president of the Dakota Buttes Historical Society, accepted on behalf of the group.

"It is my pleasure to accept this gift," she said. "We hope it will serve as an inspiration and help to educate all the kids who see it."

Smith invited the guests to join her in singing "Home on the Range" to close the celebration.