

Historic Site Taking Shape

By Becky Qualls – Adams County Record, July 16, 2010 issue – permission to post granted

The Last Great Buffalo Hunt historic site, located on Highway 12 near Haynes, has taken another step towards being a tourist attraction with the addition of a full-sized teepee.

Tom "Tommy Dakota" Nelson from Custer, South Dakota and Hettinger resident Mark Baker met at the site on Wednesday, June 23 to erect the teepee made of Montana Lodgepole pines and canvas.

"Of course, we can't use real buffalo hide for the teepee," said Nelson. "The hides are valuable and may be stolen so we're using canvas for the structure."

The canvas was designed and made by John Flying Horse of Watauga, South Dakota.

The men started by unloading several poles from Nelson's truck and arranging them in a tripod shape on the ground.

"The three starting poles, or tripod poles, are pretty important," said Nelson. "They give the teepee strength and form. The other poles can be adjusted a bit but these poles need to be in the right places from the beginning."

Nelson tied a buffalo hide strap at the top of each of the three starting poles and one additional pole.

"They feel nice and they blow in the wind like a weathervane," he said. "They represent the four directions and the four seasons."

When the tripod poles were arranged to his satisfaction, Nelson used rope to tie them together at the top.

"It's important to weave the rope in and out of the poles then pull it tight," he said. "This is what gives it shape and holds it all together."

Baker used the end of the rope as a guide and pulled the poles into a standing position while Nelson lifted the poles from the other side and guided them into place. Nelson adjusted the poles to ensure stability.

Six more poles were added on the sides and three were added to the back of the teepee with the ends of the poles being tucked into the groove created by the tops of the three tripod poles. The rope was then wound through the poles four times. A stake was driven into the ground and the rope was tied to it for stability.

The canvas was pre-cut into the correct shape to be added to the poles. Nelson and Baker lifted the canvas and stretched it around the teepee, securing it tightly. A doorway was shaped and wooden dowels were used to pin the flaps down.

Two more poles were added in the back to hold the smoke flaps in place. The poles were shortened with a handsaw so the ends would be near the base of the teepee. Nelson went inside the structure to adjust the poles once again so the canvas would be tightly stretched and the teepee would be firmly anchored into place. The teepee had loops at intervals along the bottom. Lengths of rope were run through the loops then secured with wooden stakes. Baker then drilled holes at the bottom of the tripod poles and staked them down with steel pins.

"We won't be putting in an inner covering but the Native Americans had another layer on the inside to hold in the heat," explained Nelson. "It worked well to keep heat in, cold out, and people dry. The smoke flaps were adjusted and a small fire would heat the interior of the teepee very nicely."

In his "regular life", Nelson owns and operates Nelson's Piano Service.

"I started putting up teepees because it's easier than moving pianos," he laughed. "My dad, Dean, started the business in Spearfish in 1950. In fact, he opened the first Wurlitzer franchise there in 1950. I've worked in the family business for most of my life."

While working with his dad in the piano business, Nelson found the time to learn about teepees.

"Some Indian friends at school got me interested in teepees and I learned how to set them up," he explained. "I fell in love with them for their beauty. They are some of the most beautiful things I've ever seen."

Nelson set up his first teepee in 1980.

"I have 30 years of teepees and 50 years of pianos," he laughed. "I do the teepees mostly in the

spring and the piano business is busy in the fall. This was a good time to come to North Dakota. I like the wind blowing in my face. North Dakota has the purest wind I've ever breathed."

Nelson also provides poles for powwows and has set up teepees for Ruth Ziolkowski. Her husband, the late Korczak Ziolkowski, was the designer of the Crazy Horse Monument, which is still in progress in Crazy Horse, South Dakota.

"I met Ruth when I tuned her piano," said Nelson. "I consider her a good friend. I've set up teepees for her at her campground."

Nelson locates and cuts his own poles.

"I get most of the poles in Montana in early July," he said. "I can't get a permit to cut until July. I think it should be open range in the Forest Service so people can use it. Not abuse it but use it. I prefer Black Hills Ponderosa for the poles. I cut them then peel them with a drawknife. Poles are usually about 22 feet and they get tied at 14 feet when we're constructing a teepee."

Nelson supplied the poles for the movie "Dances With Wolves".

"I supplied 300 poles for the movie," he said. "I delivered them to a site near the river in Belle Fourche. After the movie, people bought the poles. I don't know why but they sold very quickly.

"I have five sets of poles going down to the Pine Ridge Reservation soon too. I'm not sure what they're planning to do with them."

Nelson has traveled extensively to put his skills to use.

"I do one or two dozen specialty teepees every year," he explained. "I've been all over the world doing this. I even sent a teepee to Saudi Arabia but I didn't go over there. I've done a few with hide but mostly I work with canvas."

Retirement is not in Nelson's plans.

"I'll keep doing this as long as I have the health and am able to get around," he said. "I love doing this and can't imagine stopping."

Hettinger native Francie Berg has worked on the historic site for 15 years and is pleased to see the area taking shape.

"The teepee is a project of the Dakota Buttes Visitor's Council," she said. "We've received two grants from the State Historical Society," said Berg. "I believe our first grant was in 2005 or 2006. We worked on the site even before getting the grants. We've been actively working on a fence, plantings, and signs for about 10 years now. We'll continue to add improvements and maintain the site."

Joe Wieland of JW Masonry in Hettinger was hired to pour a concrete slab near the two historical markers at the site. Concrete benches have been added as well.

"Duane Wamre deeded that piece of land to the Dakota Buttes Visitors Council," said Baker. "We plan to plant more native grasses at the site. We'd like to be able to hold events out there, maybe even have an annual powwow."

Earleen Friez, member of the Visitor's Council and secretary for the Hettinger Area Chamber of Commerce, is pleased with the authenticity of the teepee.

"The land that the teepee sits on is now owned by the Dakota Buttes Historical Society," she explained. We have no plans to dissolve the Visitor's Council but we know that the Historical Society will go on and on so it seemed appropriate for ownership to go to them.

"It's a neat thing to drive by and see the teepee. We need to acknowledge the wonderful influence of the Native Americans and to keep our project authentic. During the Clean-Up Day at the site, someone gave a \$100 donation. We do seem to have a lot of support from the community."

For more information on the Visitor's Council or to make a donation, contact Friez at 701-567-2531.