

# Birth of the Sedalia Museum



Excerpted from the Sedalia View articles by Carole Williams

The early days of the Sedalia Museum start with the enthusiasm of one resident—and not even one of the many descendants of Colorado pioneers still living here. Its growth formed collaborations with other organizations, bringing Sedalia a wealth of activities and opportunities seldom found in a small unincorporated village.

Long-time Sedalia resident Barbara Machann was concerned that her town's history was vanishing. Barbara's family, the Belfields, moved to Sedalia in 1950, buying Nels Anderson's ranch just west of the present elementary school. As office manager for the West Douglas County Fire Protection District (WDCFPD), Barbara met many of the town's residents, including descendants of original homesteaders. She was a firefighter for the district from 1980 to 1989, then became dispatcher.

In 1982, to celebrate the town's centennial, Barbara compiled a small booklet titled Sedalia 1882-1982. Known as the "Blue Book" it contained photos of early homes and businesses, and information about early days of the village.

Barbara continued to collect historical information, which grew to fill an entire carton—but there was no real place to house the material. A few other local women, including her sister, Pam Belfield, became interested in helping, but it wasn't until Feb. 7, 2000, when a group of history enthusiasts began meeting regularly at Fire Station #2. They set a goal "To Protect and Preserve the Local History of Our Area." Oral histories and photos the group gathered were copied and shared with the history research department of the Douglas County Library. The group successfully applied for status as a 501©3 nonprofit organization.

As with so many of Sedalia's organizations, the history group overlapped with other groups. The Robbins, Meyers, and Youngs all were active in the WDCFPD, setting the stage for a collaboration between the two groups. As an unincorporated area, Sedalia has no governing body, and no tax revenue for community projects. The only "governing" groups at that time were the school, the fire department, and the Sedalia Water Board.

Just about the time the history group formed, WDCFPD broke ground on a new, much larger building. The former firehouse, a brick building constructed in 1933, became the office for the office manager (Barbara) and the fire chief. The fire department used about 1/3 of the building, and Barbara talked the board into letting the museum share the space.

The museum had its first home. The museum board named it the Sedalia Historic Fire House Museum in honor of the landmarked little firehouse. Through donations, they furnished it with display cases, and the few artifacts they had collected. Most of the displays relied on items loaned by museum members.

The collaboration with the WDCFPD made the museum's growth possible. The fire department charged no rent and paid all utilities—perfect for an organization with few members and no income!

Completion of the firehouse brought another important collaboration. The new station was surrounded by bare land. One of the board members, Kelli Fallbach, a new Master Gardener and museum member, suggested approaching the Colorado State Extension Douglas County Master Gardeners program. The firehouse/museum gardens became one of the accepted Extension Office projects, which meant that Master Gardeners could work at the fire station for their required volunteer hours—an instant gardening staff! The fire department installed a lawn sprinkler system, and paid for maintenance of the lawn areas, while local gardening enthusiasts and master gardeners established garden areas to make the fire station's new building an attractive part of Sedalia and an educational tool to show local residents plants that flourish in the Sedalia intermountain area.

One day Barbara was pulling weeds in her pasture and noticed the small, dilapidated cottage behind Gary Sutton's home. An idea began to take root. She approached the Suttons, who offered to sell the house to the museum for one dollar—with the provision that it be moved. The project was first broached in the September 2005 Museum meeting. At that time the organization had fewer than 20 members, with about half of them active. Most were at or near retirement age.

There's a joke among Sedalia Museum's earliest members. "If someone offers to sell you a house for a dollar, run!"

The proposal to acquire a house ushered in a time of conflict, learning, and creativity for the fledgling historical group. Not everyone wanted to tackle the little house. (The author of this article was one of those most strongly opposed.) After years of being a rental, the house spent many years sitting vacant, victim to the weather and to local wildlife. Rodents lived in the walls. Windows were of varied sizes and materials. But it retained its Victorian fish-scale shingles, original to the house when it was built by ranchers Mary Ann and Willis Bryant. The building itself was 18 by 24 feet, with a six-foot semicircular bump-out.

The fire department offered to put the building on its Sedalia property. At first, the plan was to put the house to the west of the new fire station. Further investigation revealed many underground utilities, the hub of Sedalia's communication system.

Fortunately, at that time the state agreed that the fire department could fill in the deep and unsightly barrow pit (water run-off reservoir) to the east of the property, and museum members began to investigate that site. By this time, the museum had so many questions for the fire department that Fire Chief Terry Thompson began to refer to the museum board members as "the War Department."

All that remained was to get the correct documents from the county and raise the money—originally estimated at about \$36,000. At the time, the museum treasury had just under \$5,000.

The museum board was just about to get a lesson in local politics. Applications to the Douglas County planning department were prepared—and promptly rejected. Rules, they said, required two handicapped bathrooms—in an 18 by 24 foot building! Setback rules, zoning, materials—the list of things the museum couldn't do was endless.

Undaunted, project manager Machann researched each “no” item and came up with a rebuttal. The Association of Northern Front Range Museums, a coalition of small museums, helped out. They pointed out that the venerable Molly Brown house does not have public restrooms—they are housed in a separate building. The Fire Department agreed that the fire station bathrooms could serve the museum as well. The list, with solutions, was returned to the Douglas County planning department.

Shortly, a second list arrived—along with a whole new set of reasons why moving the building would not work. That was the turning point for the museum board. They were so deeply offended by the obviously spurious regulations that they became even more determined—giving rise to the often-used expression, “Don't p--- off little old ladies in Sedalia.”

Kelli Fallbach, who was appointed to oversee the construction phase, took the fight directly to the county commissioners. Very shortly, the project was approved, and the Philip S. Miller Foundation gave the museum a \$10,000 grant, with an additional \$5,000 matching grant. They were the first of two such grants from the Foundation. Surprisingly, within several months the Douglas County Planning Department office was restructured, with several high-ranking officials dismissed. Now all that remained was to make decisions on the house restoration, and raise the necessary money, so the board learned a new trade—fund-raising.

Bake sales and garage sales just weren't going to do it. It was clear that the museum board needed to think in larger terms. The author of this article had a background in grant writing, so the group began to research possibilities. One major stumbling block was that the museum had no financial track record. It had no stable income, no paid staff, and no regular expenses. Foundations tend to take a dim view of making grants to a group with no proof that it can handle money.

While the fund-raisers put their heads together to present a good case for their cause, the rest of the museum members were hard at work with the details. Bit by bit, money became available to dig the foundation, move the building, and begin restoration.

So many changes had been made over the years that the museum group decided to restore it in the spirit of its 1890's look. The fish scale siding on the gables, one of the few remaining original features, was preserved. A new, larger porch accommodates a handicapped ramp, while an addition on the north side houses stairs to the basement.

The decorating committee, Barbara Robbins and Carole Williams, had a great time selecting colors for the Victorian cottage. Roofing chairman Deby Williams researched and selected shingles with an old-time look.

Construction supervisor Kelli Fallbach acquired the services of contractor Jack Hallett, whose family moved to Douglas County from Nantucket. His invaluable advice set the stage for everything from basic construction to authentic trim details.

Permission to use the fire department's restrooms saved the group from having to install plumbing and water tap fees. Further economy became possible by the donation of electric baseboard heaters from Elver and Barbara Robbins, so no gas line or tap fee was needed.

Contractors entered into the spirit of the remodel, offering discounts and helpful tips. Elver Robbins stripped untold layers of paint from the original oak fireplace mantel, and museum members painted interior trim. Local residents were generous in their gifts, “purchasing” windows, porch posts, and doors.

Equally successful, the fund-raisers secured grants from major foundations, including El Pomar, Philip S. Miller Foundation, Gates Foundation, Historic Douglas County, and Kowalski Family Foundation. Because the house no longer sat on its original site, it did not qualify for historic restoration funds. The little building was ready for occupying and had its Grand Opening on October 8, 2009. Moving into the little house brought regular expenses for the first time—electric bills, taxes, insurance.

During the house restoration project, the museum wasn't losing sight of its mission—historical information. Barbara Machann, Bev Larsen and Duggie Young gathered information for a series of books on Remarkable Ladies of Sedalia. Eventually, the series was extended to six volumes, then condensed into a hardback edition, followed by a companion volume, "Men of Sedalia". Barbara also compiled a color photo book, Historic Barns of Douglas County, documenting a number of the old barns in the area. Revenue from the books continues to bring income to the museum.

Award-winning songwriter Junie Fisher researched her family's history in Douglas County with Barbara Machann's help and issued a CD, "Gone for Colorado," featuring songs inspired by her findings. The museum hosted two fund-raising concerts featuring Fisher, and sells the CD in the museum.

Meanwhile, the gardens continued to grow, now wrapping around the fire station and museum building. The gardens have received two prestigious awards, the Plant Select Showcase Garden Award and the Audubon Rockies organization's Superior Habitat Hero Garden award.

Being one of the few official organizations in Sedalia gives the museum a unique position, offering the opportunity to help local residents in various ways. When the Old Town Sedalia Merchant's Association disbanded in about 2005, the Museum took over the Sedalia Merchant's Directory, a listing of local businesses—and coincidentally, another good fundraiser.

In 2011, museum members became frustrated by the lack of publicity from Denver and Castle Rock newspapers. Press releases were sent, but seldom published. The obvious solution? Start a newspaper. Many Sedalia residents are elderly and don't use computers, while the mountainous terrain makes internet reception difficult for others. At a time when many print newspapers were giving up the ghost, the Museum decided to launch a print publication, the Sedalia View. Through ad sales, today the publication is self-supporting.

As the museum's membership evolves, so do the projects it undertakes. Since 2013, a group of enthusiastic museum gardeners has raised heirloom tomatoes, and sponsored a sale raising about \$3,000 annually. Just for fun, there is a tomato tasting day in the late summer to evaluate the crop. The tomato project spawned a garden club, the Sedalia Growers.

When the final tally for restoring the museum was in, it totaled nearly \$150,000—and produced an entire cadre of Sedalia women who now believe that nothing is impossible.