

Captivating Creativity of Classmates Takes Shape as Gallery Curators

By Mary Zeman
Photography by Kay Stewart

Packing our bags in Portland and Princeton, in Philadelphia, Connecticut, Minneapolis, Omaha and Lincoln, seven childhood friends travelled to Bassett this spring. After annual reunions elsewhere, it was time to return to Nebraska, to the earth and culture that held and raised us.

We met at the Corral Bar & Grille in town, toasted decades of friendship and devoured savory plates of burgers and fries. Just before dark, we drove to the Hutton Guesthouse. The sky was wide, the prairie grass was a symphony of light that time of day, and we knew we were onto something good.

Through the years, time is never enough for these reunions; we always wish for more. There are grandchildren, children and life issues to discuss. We take walks, we languish in the kitchen over good and satisfying meals, we swap our tales, we stay up late.

But this year, there would be one dimension more. We were meeting in Nebraska, inspired by the work and mission of the Audubon Society, and wanted to give something of ourselves. Ahead of time, we asked if there were any projects that needed extra hands. Little did we know what awaited us.

Attached to the guesthouse (two thumbs up for accommodations there) was an expansive room with a closet-like side room. Both were filled with a wealth of undocumented and unorganized artifacts and memorabilia that once belonged to Harold and Lucille Hutton. We were told it was a dream of Audubon of Kansas leaders (several of whom have deep Nebraska roots) to honor Harold and Lucille by turning this space into a small museum. The envisioned space would highlight their lives and acknowledge the extraordinary gift they gave by contributing their 5,000-acre ranch with the request that

it be preserved as a wildlife sanctuary. We rolled up our sleeves and got to work. With delight and amazement, we sorted through containers and boxes and selected a great number of Lucille's paintings and exquisite hand made dresses. We found Harold's stately top hat and a Stetson, his eyeglasses, an old silver flask, a collection of hunting memorabilia and some of his books.

Together, we pounded holes in the walls, hung paintings, and made decisions about how best to tell the story of Harold and Lucille. Over two days' time, we swept the floors, arranged furniture and other treasures, and adjusted the track lighting to honor each piece. When we finished, we realized we had not only given something back to Nebraska, we had re-affirmed the life long gift of prairie culture and the heartland within us.

Did we get more than we were coming for? Indeed.

Our time together was not compromised, but elevated by this

"You can go through life and make new friends every year...but there was never any substitute for those friendships of childhood that survive into adult years. Those are the ones in which we are bound to one another with hoops of steel"

Alexander McCall Smith. The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency

project. We worked together with grit, nuance and opinion (traits common to us all). We laughed a lot. Meanwhile, there was still time for communion and adventure together. We embraced the sublime vistas, the prairie winds and the drama of sounds at night. Over breakfast, someone said, "I think I heard wolves last night". Chuckle, chuckle, "This is Nebraska. That had to be coyotes!" We walked along the river, binoculars in hand. The world felt fresh and new, we were amazed by all the birds we

saw, then found ourselves whispering in hopes of seeing more. Toward evening, we beheld the closing of the day as if it were something unique and new. The sky gradually darkened, the wide canopy of stars appeared, we stood together, dazzled.

One afternoon, we found our way to the Hutton homestead, Harold's childhood home, and the secluded frame house where Harold and Lucille lived for a time during part of their marriage. Having poured through so many of their possessions, we could easily imagine them living there. The house was rough and empty, except for remnants of old necessities and left over bits of curtains on broken windows.



It's there we discovered the missing treasure, an essential piece for the new "Hutton Museum" we were creating. Lying in a dingy corner was Lucille's handmade, paper dress form, the necessary tool for any serious seamstress. We carried it back to the Hutton House, knocked off the grimy cobwebs and left it in the sunshine for an hour or two. When we brought it inside, we slipped one of Lucille's hand stitched, jewel-collared masterpieces over the top and were not surprised. It was a perfect fit.

Perfect, just as these days were for each of us.

With deep gratitude,

Seven Nebraska girls, your ad hoc **Hutton Visitor Center/Gallery Curators**



Kathy Day Elliott (Lake Oswego, OR), Nancy Crosby Kelly (Omaha), Mary Eno (Philadelphia), Kay Calkins Stewart (Minneapolis), Mary Tidball Zeman (Rowayton, Conn.), Elizabeth Walters (Princeton, NJ), Judy Brauch Greenwald (Lincoln).