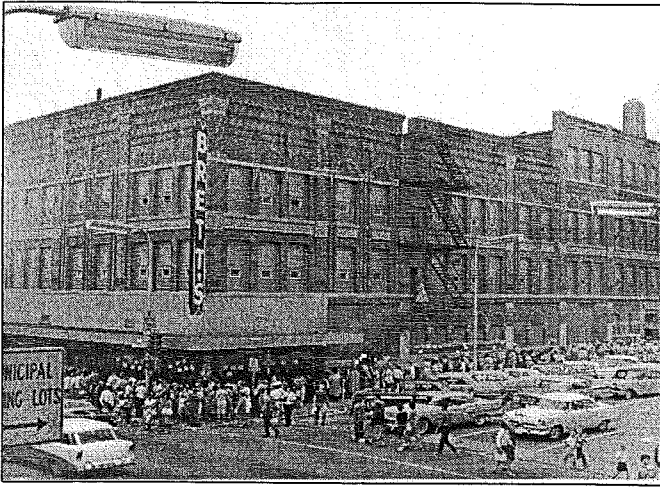


The Blue Earth County Historian

Blue Earth County Historical Society Spring 2001



Brett's store "Crazy Days" in 1962

Keeping Pace With Progress

By Rachel Kuehl

The Brett's building stands empty and is somewhat of a local controversy. Is the Brett's building worth preserving? What plans have been offered, and what ideas are there for its use? Most importantly, are we risking losing another historic building in a city that is so eager to erase Mankato's past?

George E. Brett was born in Strong, Maine in 1845. He came to Winona, Minnesota at the age of 17 and took a job as a clerk in a local dry goods store. He worked there until he was transferred to work as manager in a branch store in Faribault, where he stayed for another two years before fate brought him to Mankato.

The year was 1868. The village of Mankato had been in existence since 1852 and was on the verge of becoming incorporated as a city. According to the census for the year of 1865, there were approximately 1,973 people living in the city of Mankato. The next census, in 1870, shows the population at 3,482--nearly doubling in five years! In 1868, the town was mainly supplied by riverboats. The railroad had not yet reached Mankato, so George Brett had to travel from St. Paul to LeSueur by train and from LeSueur to Mankato by stagecoach.

George had borrowed \$3,000 from his father-in-law in St. Paul. With these funds, he purchased a 22'x22' building on Front Street between Jackson and Cherry Streets. He stocked the store with approximately \$3,600 worth of goods consisting of fabrics and other sewing notions, and the Empire Store was born. He would continue business at this location, eventually buying out his partners until he became sole proprietor in 1895. At that time, he formed the corporation known as Geo. E.

Brett, Inc. and changed the store name to George E. Brett Dry Goods. The store was also moved from its original location to the southeast corner of Front and Jackson Streets.

Fabrics remained the store's mainstay item, but it was the addition of such departments as shoes, handkerchiefs, millinery and specialty furs that kept Brett's fashionable and ahead of the competition. Indeed, it was said that the name of Brett's was well-known within a 100-mile radius of Mankato. In addition to the goods that Brett's offered were the innovative and special touches that led people to call Brett's "the bower of beauty and good taste"--touches such as the third floor lounge, which was developed with the traveler in mind. Customers often traveled into Mankato on the train, a long and sometimes arduous journey, so a third floor lounge was made available. Called the "Brett's Restroom", it featured couches and writing tables and was the location of the first public telephone in Mankato, and one of the first indoor toilets.

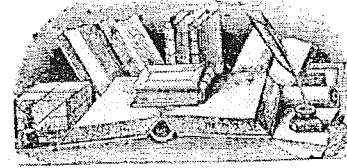
Another innovation introduced by George Brett was the first delivery truck in town--it was said that Brett's would deliver a spool of thread anywhere! Brett's also introduced a pneumatic tube to make change for the customer, and was the only store to date in Mankato with an escalator.

A charming paper entitled "Keeping Pace with Progress" is located in the archives of the Blue Earth County Historical Society. It details a young lady's memories of shopping at Brett's. It clearly shows her delight at having such a fine store in Mankato and her respect towards George Brett as a business person. It was written in 1922, and excerpts are as follows:

"Even in [the early days] Mr. Brett believed in advertising. The very first week he was open for business he carried an ad in the *Weekly Record* announcing his preparedness to serve the public. Many people now living throughout southern Minnesota can recall Mr. Brett in his early days and tell of his ability to make friends and his "hobby" for service. They knew that when they came into the store that he would be there, heart and soul, to personally administer that service.

It was Mr. Brett's one great ambition and dream of life to give to southern Minnesota a store--no, more than a store--an institution that would stand out as an example of real service to the community. To this end, he worked untiringly...and we can be thankful that Mankato had a merchant of the caliber of Mr. Brett with foresight and consideration to see into the future.

Brett's continued on page 3



The Blue Earth County Historian *Spring 2001*

The Blue Earth County Historian is published quarterly for the members of BECHS. BECHS has the mission of collecting, preserving and publishing material relating to the history of Blue Earth County.

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Please consider joining BECHS. Members receive free admission to the Heritage Museum, free access to the research center, free admission to the R. D. Hubbard House non-event tours, reduced admission for special events, quarterly newsletter, discount on many items in the museum shop, and the ability to help preserve the heritage of Blue Earth County!

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Make checks payable to BECHS and return with this form to
415 East Cherry Street, Mankato MN 56001.

From the Executive Director

As winter takes its final bow and spring returns to Minnesota, we at BECHS look forward to new challenges and projects. Please take a look at our schedule of events to see what is happening next.

The Annual Meeting took place last month and the 2001-2002 Board of Trustees has been elected. Carol Jaenish, Tyler Crogg, Russ Garlic and Jeff Walker have reached the end of their service. I wish to thank them for their time and dedication to BECHS and good luck on their future endeavors.

The new Board Members are Mary Basset, Jack Madsen and Bernadette Wilson. Bernadette began serving as our interim treasurer a few months ago and the position was confirmed by the membership. Jack and Mary join us as at-large Board Members. The other major change on the Board is that Jo-an Lavitschke will turn over the duties of secretary after serving faithfully for four years. Jo-an will continue serving on the Board for the remainder of her second term.

There are extra copies of the written annual report given at the meeting. If anyone would like to have one please contact the office.

Committee assignments will be made in the near future, and as always members are encouraged to sit on committees to assist the society in planning and carrying out the preservation of BEC history.

There have also been some changes in the personnel at BECHS. Archives-Librarian Carol Oney resigned earlier this month. The Board of Trustees will be evaluating the Research Center over the next couple of months to determine which direction to take regarding staffing needs in this area.

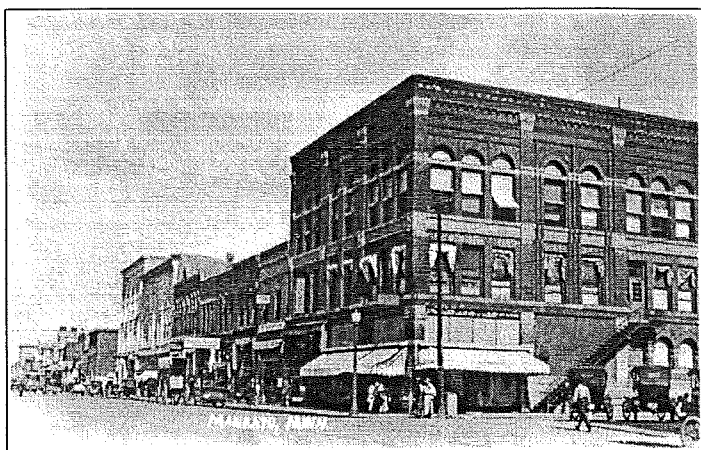
Last month BECHS staff and Board Members met with representatives from other area attractions and historical societies. This is the second annual meeting. We learned more about our neighbors and shared ideas and experiences. One of the results of this meeting will be the cross promotion of events. Look for the list of events sponsored by our neighbors. Partnerships like these will make it easier for all of us to meet our specific missions. We hope that our members will enjoy their events and our events will attract some new faces as well.

James C. Lundgren

Brett's article Continued from page 1

On approaching Brett's, one is struck with the impressiveness of the spacious arcade display windows, which are an innovation in Mankato, representing the newest idea in display window construction. The...windows were considered such an important factor that a large amount of valuable floor space...was sacrificed in order to install [the windows].

All of the fixtures on the main floor are of dark oak of the very latest design. Display places built into the upper parts of these cases are illuminated and attractively trimmed with merchandise, which is sold in the department. To truly appreciate what these up to date fixtures mean in service giving and what they mean to the sales people behind the counter, you must really shop in this great store.



Bretts store circa 1900

By the time we have completed our tour of the main floor, we welcome a few minutes on the Mezzanine overlooking the store where we may enjoy easy chairs, indulge in a late magazine, or write a letter to Aunt Mary. Stepping off the elevator at the second floor, we find...corset and under muslin sections...drapery sections...and the general offices and "Elinor Gray" Personal Shopper Headquarters. "Elinor Gray" who is in charge of this personal shopping service is accepted by many of the store's out-of-town customers as an absolute authority on anything they wish to know concerning the store. The best part of this service is that it is absolutely free. "Elinor Gray" knows every inch of the Brett's store from one end to the other and whether it is a spool of thread or the most expensive suit in the entire store, she selects it with equal care.

Journey now to the third floor and in very spacious well lighted and airy quarters we discover the women's ready-to-wear section where Mankato's well dressed women congregate daily to see the latest fashions...the reputation of this section to show the latest fashions of each season in advance of their proper time has brought

to the store a following that would be envied by stores of many times its size.

The newly added "Baby Shop" nestles in a secluded corner at the right as we leave the elevators, giving it a scene of privacy where the mother may select unnoticed by the other sections all the dainty little clothes for the infant. A popular and unusual addition to the new "Baby Shop" is the Reference Library for mothers where books may be taken out for a specified period.

The "Downstairs Store" is really a store in itself. Reaching it from the elevators or by a stairway in the center of the main floor, we are greeted by table after table filled with piles and piles of new cotton goods, bedding, sheeting, domestic goods, house dresses and aprons. [The Downstairs Store] is noted far and wide as the most economical place for thrifty housewives to shop. On a hot summer day when everyone else is sweltering under a sun that says 98 degrees, the "Downstairs Store" is always as cool and comfortable as a lake breeze.

Summing up everything in this store and taking inventory of its many advantages--the Rest Room, Reading Room, free phone service, free parcel checking service, electric elevators, drinking fountain, automatic sprinkler system for fire protection, and the pneumatic tube system which carries all cash and charge sales slips from the various departments to the main office with lightning rapidity [one is reminded of] the great task of "keeping pace with progress".

George Brett was also an active member of Mankato society outside of the business world. He was renowned for his fine tenor voice and participated in the church choir at the Presbyterian Church. He was a stockholder, served on the board of directors at First National Bank, was one of the primary organizers of the Mankato Savings Bank, and was active in various clubs and associations in Mankato. Newspaper clippings circa 1905-1915 called the Brett family "one of Mankato's patrician families...who [are] social and political leaders" and added that Mr. Brett "has aided in the upbuilding of every material interest of [Mankato]".

After George Brett's sudden death in 1915, his son, James Edwin Brett took over management of the store and stayed at the helm until 1958. At that time, his nephew Brett Taylor (son of Mary Maxfield Brett and Wilbur Taylor) took over until 1971. Management subsequently passed through the Taylor family until the store closed in the early 1990s.

Now the building stands empty--and its fate is undecided. In the fall of 1993 and winter of 1994, the Brett's buildings were deeded and/or donated to the city, a move that was necessary due to the amount of taxes and ground rent owed to the city. Subsequently, six

buildings that were connected to the current building were demolished in 1994 (three buildings inside the Mankato Mall and three buildings annexed to the current building). The remaining existing building stood without too much controversy until 1999, when it was considered as a home for Mankato's new technology center.

An editorial in the *Free Press* dated 6/21/99 entitled "Old Brett's Building Is Worth Preserving" supported saving the Brett's building and using it as the technology center or at least preserving it for future use. The author states in favor of preservation: "No one claims the Brett's building is an architectural gem. But neither is it an unimportant or bad-looking building. With most of Mankato's old downtown destroyed over the past decades, it's worth saving what was home of one of the most significant businesses through much of Mankato's history..."

At that time, the estimate to raze the Brett's building and build a new technology center would have been 3.9 million, while the renovation of the existing building to accommodate the technology center would have cost around \$800,000 more. This plan fell through when the city decided to place the technology center in a different location.

In March of 2000, Gordon Awsumb of Awsumb & Associates approached the city council with a plan for redevelopment of the building. Mr. Awsumb also represents Minnesota Office Investments, the company that manages the Mankato Mall building. So far, Gordon Awsumb is the only party who has submitted a plan to the city. In his proposal to the city, he states that his goal is to "transform this historic structure into the most fashionable residential address in Mankato" and that this goal can be achieved either as developing the building into market-rate apartments or luxury condominiums. He likens this redevelopment of the Brett's building with the successful urban revitalization of inner city areas in St. Paul, and states that some of the thousands of condominium units that were developed in this area are among some of the highest priced properties in St. Paul and that all of the units were pre-sold.

The elevations and floor plans in Mr. Awsumb's proposal show new window openings being cut in to create light and original window openings to remain. The brickwork will be tuckpointed and treated. The ground level will have new entrances and will contain four new access points for future retail businesses. A reflecting pool and fountain is incorporated into the design, which will compliment the park and walkways already in place at the Intergovernmental Center. Underground parking will be available for tenants of the building, and the current historic lighting and fencing style will be carried through to the exterior of the building. Mr. Awsumb compliments the structure's exterior masonry and states that it reflects "the highest craftsmanship of the time" and intends to

use the current design in the new exterior facades by use of cast replicas or re-location of some of the existing carved stone that has been hidden behind service corridors in the Mankato Place space.

Whether the Brett's building stands or falls comes down to one thing: the price of demolition versus the price of redevelopment. Mr. Awsumb's proposal details the cost of total renovation of the building and the income that it will bring to the city as rental/retail units or condominium/retail units as well as how much the present cost of not redeveloping the Brett's building and/or demolishing it. For reasons of confidentiality, we cannot reveal these numbers until they are made public knowledge.

Certainly, the idea of bringing more quality living space to the area is a concrete idea--the city knows that we have a housing shortage in Mankato. Other ideas for reuse have been suggested--perhaps renovating it as a hotel, which would provide more rooms for people traveling into town, perhaps to attend events at the Midwest Wireless Center. With more available hotel rooms near the civic center, events and conferences of longer duration could be booked, thus reducing the deficit there and bringing more business into downtown Mankato.

Rachel Kuehl is one of the spring interns working at BECHS. She has written this article on the history of the Brett's building for The Historian. It was written using the resources available in the BECHS Research Center. Please visit the Research Center for information on many topics of Blue Earth County interest -editor

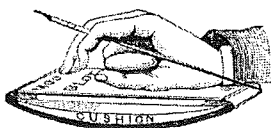
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Bartsch, Glenn
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F. B. Clements Foundation
Fischer, George
Hagen, Tom
Mankato Area Convention and
Visitor's Bureau
Minnesota Historical Society

Richard Marlow DMD PA
Medo Township
Schlichting, Don
Schultz, Jo
Tarjeson, Jane
Theissen Family
Walker, Jeff

Memorial for Lois Madsen
From Jane Tarjeson

Thank You All Very Much!



From the Collections Manager

History Day, a concept begun in 1974 by a university professor as a way to re-invigorate the teaching of history in America's schools, came to Mankato for another very successful event on Thursday, April 5. Several hundred schoolchildren from the nine county area of southern Minnesota gathered at Minnesota State University, Mankato to engage in this lively competition. BECHS was there as well. Kevin Lynch, a BECHS intern, joined me to judge student work.

Similar to a science fair, History Day allows children in grades six through twelve to display history projects and compete for the chance to move on to the state finals. Students, individually or in groups, may choose any topic that interests them, provided they approach it using the annual theme. This year's theme was "Frontiers in History." Students may display exhibits, create and show multimedia presentations, or give live performances to demonstrate their historical research. Topics ranged from the Beatles to Doctor Elizabeth Blackwell to the Scout Bomber Douglas and its role in the Pacific during World War II, and that was just the sixth graders! Presentations at all levels were very impressive, as was the level of student knowledge and enthusiasm for their topics.

The benefits to children involved are easy to see - just visit the event! Children learn not only sound research skills but also thorough investigative skills, proper writing, good presentation skills, and proper communication skills via acting, filming, recording, or interviewing individuals. One student even went so far as to contact NASA for his project on Apollo 11! Most importantly, students get a chance to interact with their peers from other schools in an atmosphere where no one is ridiculing learning and to meet their graduation standards through work of their own choosing in a learning environment outside the classroom. Grading is not a factor in these presentations since all entries by definition must represent sound historical research, though children are given ratings of "good", "excellent", and "superior". Judging sheets are constructed to provide maximum positive feedback for students, who actually get to take home the judges suggestions for future presentations and further research.

Unfortunately, only twelve schools in the nine county area sent participants and only three were from Blue Earth County. Participation simply depends on whether teachers and schools wish to invest the time and effort into promoting history as an important, vibrant subject

both in and out of the classroom. Some schools like Franklin Elementary School in Mankato sponsor a school-wide History Day before even arriving at the regional event. As parents, friends, and citizens we should promote the efforts of everyone involved in History Day - an event we can all learn from.

Congratulations to all students who participated and best of luck to those going on to the state finals! The state History Day will be held on May 5, 2001 at the University of Minnesota and the national History Day in June 2001 at the University of Maryland in College Park, Maryland. BECHS plans to display several projects created by students from Blue Earth County following these events. History Day 2002 is right around the corner! The theme is "Revolution, Reaction, and Reform in History." Regional finals will again be held at Minnesota State University, Mankato in April 2002. Consider supporting this terrific cause and enjoyable event by volunteering to be a judge or just visiting. There is no admission and all judges receive a complimentary lunch and commemorative History Day shirt. Call BECHS for more information.

John K. Hedstrom



Historic Homes Series

Cards and prints from Marian Anderson's Historic Homes series are available at the Museum Store. Part of the proceeds from the Schmidt and Cray House prints goes to the benefit of the YWCA and BECHS. Please think of our Museum Store when looking for unique gift items. Marian is working on the third print in the series, The R. D. Hubbard House. We look forward to seeing another wonderful print from the Marian Anderson Gallery.

Thank you, Marian, for your efforts to help us preserve and share the history of Blue Earth County!

ARCHIVES AND ARTIFACT DONATIONS

January - March 2001

- Rebecca Ball:** "The Association Hymnal" (YWCA)
- Glenn Bartsch:** 35 postcards
- Ken Berg:** Free Press Printing Company mirror
- Blue Earth County Library:** U of MN 1945 yearbook
- Dave Boyce:** Guide to the Sioux Uprising
- Inella Burns:** Patent office report 1849-1850
- Center for Rural & Regional Studies at Southwest State University:** "The Genesis & Construction of the Winona & St. Peter Railroads"
- Newell Chester:** "The Story of a Regiment" video and book
- Betty Cords:** 2 photos of Haynes Apperson in 1972 (pre-restoration); history of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, 1992; Photo Green Gables after 1948 tornado
- Kathy Durenberger:** World War II US Helmet; engraved ammunition canisters; entrenching tool; painted helmet; VFW Cap; VFW Armband; U.S. Army, canteen, WW I; boots, U.S. Army Issue, WW I.
- Rosella Fogal:** "Aphorisms of the 3 Threes"
- Wood R. Foster, Jr.:** "For the Record"
- Mike Frederick:** yardstick; Farmfest commemorative can; commemorative can, Mankato Lancers.
- Donald Glamm:** South Central MN Holstein scrapbook
- Harley Goff:** cast iron "Monarch" wood stove
- Win Grundmeier:** bone handled knife sharpener; cracker, 3 metal picks; jar opener.
- John Hedstrom:** 4 postcards from Mankato
- Vi Holbrook:** "The Evolution of Dodd"; "Only a Year and What It Brought"
- Mary Humphrey:** 2 Free Press 50th Anniversary papers
- Helen Kenward:** 4 Mankato Dept. Store boxes.
- Donna Kock:** 11 books on patterns, 1960s-1990s
- Joe Kubicek:** "Child's History of Waseca County"
- Carol Marston:** photograph
- Mary McGrew:** Milk bottle; 7 postcards
- Julie Miller:** Mankato High School class of 1922 50th & 60th reunion photos & letters
- Rhonda Murray:** Newspaper clippings; 2, photos; baseball ticket stub; railroad timetable; 2 wedding invitations
- Mr. & Mrs. John Norman:** Accordion; 3 music books
- Gary Oney:** Issue of Connect magazine
- Renville County Historical Society:** Mankato Commercial College pennant
- John Rezmerski:** 2 books "Evans & Sontag" "A Pardoned Life"
- Marcia Richards:** Civil War letters, Reese Family
- Margaret Ritt:** Assorted negatives, Blue Earth County scenes
- Robert Sanden:** 2 compact disks with 650 digitized postcards and photos of Blue Earth County.
- Georgia Schultz:** Blue Earth County commemorative afghan; Jell-O box, in English and Arabic; Dairy Queen token; Clement's Auto token; 1930s crocheted afghan.
- Julie Strobel:** book, "Champions of the City"
- Jane Tarjeson:** Hubbard Milling news releases
- Phillip Teigen:** photos 1940's/50s college graduations
- United Methodist Church of Minneapolis:** 5 photos of the 1965 flood in Mankato
- Scott Valentyn:** Blue Earth County Map circa 1900
- David & Mary Jane Wiecking:** toy sawbuck
- Winnebago Museum:** 14 postcards scenes of Blue Earth Co.
- Lorraine Wright:** 2 embroidered pillow shams
- Thanks to all our donors for your help in preserving the history of Blue Earth County!**
- Door Prize winners from the Annual Meeting**

Mary McComb – BEC Photo Book
Doc Sheppard – BECHS Cookbook
Helen Griffith – BECHS Cookbook
Congratulations!

New and Renewed Members

Barrett, Mary	Ohlenkamp, Ora
Bartsch, Glenn	Peterson, Jill
Bassett, William	Preis, Judith
Boroske, Betty	Prudential Action Realty
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Dore', Rich	Salsbery, Tom
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Hill, Evelyn	Stoeckli, Ina
Hinrichs, William	Tarjeson, Jane
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Loughborough, Ivy	Wingen, Carol
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Mathiason, Renee	Zimmer, Beth & Jim
Mitchell, Sandra	Zimprich, Shirley
Mosenden, Lori	Zumwalt, Patricia

BECHS Volunteers since the last issue

Anderson, Elaine	Kubicek, Joe
Apitz, Darrel	Kuehl, Rachael
Baer, Marcia	Lavitschke, Jo-an
Baird, Jane	Lundblad, Larry
Ballestraze, Thad	Lynch, Kevin
Bartholdi, Roberta	McComb, Mary
Bartsch, Glenn	McGuire, Darrell
Bolstar, Stacy	McLaughlin, Theresa
Boyce, Dave	Mellon, Paul
Burns, Inella	Mielke, Jessica
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Hopman, Edith	Wright, Lorraine
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Jones, Jack	Zimmer, Beth

BECHS Wish List

These items are currently needed at the BECHS Heritage Center. Please let us know if you can provide any help.

- Blank 3X5 index cards for the Research Center
- Used books for sale in the museum store
- Cotton sheets for use in Collections Department
- Volunteers for BECHS Committees
- Donation to aid Twilight Garden Club's purchase of plants for the Hubbard House Gardens.
- Weekend guides for the R. D. Hubbard House. Training will be provided.
- Heavy duty extension cords.
- Wet-dry shop vacuum

Interns, Interns and More Interns!

This spring BECHS has many students assisting with various projects. We would like to thank Minnesota State University, Mankato and Bethany Lutheran College for working with us to meet many needs. Thad Ballestraze, Stacey Bolstar, Matt Coulsey, Nicole Guggisberg, Mandie Henningson, Racheal Kuehl, Kevin Lynch, Darrell McGuire, Paul Mellon, Jessica Mielke, Nathan Schmidtke, Andrea Stoll and Paul Wichmann are joining BECHS for a few months. We hope you enjoy your time at BECHS.

We will be continuing to develop stronger ties with area schools to provide educational opportunities for students while getting needed projects finished for the Society

Upcoming BECHS events!
Mark your calendar and join us.

Volunteer Appreciation Event	April 23, 7:00 PM
Archaeology in Blue Earth Co.	April 25, 7:00 PM
Travel Like Bert - Nebraska	April 28 - May 5
<i>Hubbard House open weekends</i>	<i>May 5 & 6, 1 - 4 PM</i>
Young Historians May: Tour of "Old Mankato"	May 19
<i>Young Historians July: Antique Toys</i>	<i>July 21</i>
Blue Earth County Fair	August
<i>Young Historians: September</i>	<i>TBA</i>
Travel Like Bert , Northern MN	
Logging, Mining, Furs	September 22-25
<i>Ghosts from the Past</i>	<i>TBA</i>
History Fest	October 5 - 7
<i>Young Historians November:</i>	
<i>Ornament making</i>	<i>TBA</i>
Christmas at Hubbard House	December

**Events at Other
Area Historical Societies**

Brown County HS

"Works of Photojournalist Flip Schulke" Opens April 28

Cox House

30th Anniversary Open House June 24

Farm America

Open weekly during summer starting in 2001

Spring Farm Festival June 9 & 10

Harkin Store

Bob Bovee & Gail Heil, Bluegrass music May 27, 2:00 PM

Nicollet County HS

Talk on the "Traverse des Sioux Rock" May 6, 2:00 PM

150th Anniversary of 1851 Treaty July 22

For questions please contact the specific site listed

Blue Earth County Historical Society
415 East Cherry Street
Mankato MN 56001

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Preserving and sharing Blue Earth County's history for 100 years, 1901-2001