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Article Summary: Gunnerson actively collected and displayed historic pieces. He believed that his Hamilton County Museum “contained a sample of everything in common use in a pioneer home.”

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Joe Gunnerson — Museum Builder

Dolores Gunnerson

Another of Nebraska's museum founders has become a part of the past which he cherished. As long as there is an interest in history, however, he will be remembered in his community.

Joe E. Gunnerson was born in 1884 on a farm in Hamilton County, Nebraska. As a young man he worked in the farm implement business, both wholesale and retail. Later he purchased an implement business at Aurora, Nebraska, and in 1916 was married to Mabel Murl Brickner. He served as Hamilton County treasurer from 1926 to 1930, and was a member of the State Legislature in 1933 and 1934. During his long residence in Aurora he was active in civic affairs.

Mr. Gunnerson was deeply attached to his native countryside. He liked the farmers. He liked the small towns with their friendly people. The land itself, the fertile acres between the Platte and the Blue, was a source of pleasure to him. Through his business he came to know every farm and family in Hamilton County. But while he functioned in the community's current life his thoughts were very often with its past.

As a boy he had hunted arrowheads in his father's fields, and his imagination, fed by these mute relics, had not only re-peopled the prairie with shadowy red men, but had inspired him to study Indian life. He was always ready to defend the Indians against popular misconceptions of their nature.

The old settlers and their stories of early days in the county aroused in him much interest and respect—so much that he wished to share it with others. He desired that everyone should understand the achievements of the pioneers. He saw farm and town life gradually become mechan-

ized and the realization came to him that the old way of life was not only gone forever, but that most of its relics were being carried to the refuse heaps. The Hamilton County Museum is the result of his determined efforts to preserve the past for the benefit of the future.

It might be said that the museum started with Mr. Gunnerson's collection of Indian relics. He had continued to acquire new material through the years, and had augmented his knowledge of Nebraska Indians, in particular, through reading and association with other collectors. He displayed his collection at his place of business, where it attracted so much attention that he was requested to exhibit it at the county fair. Many people who saw it there brought him articles of historical interest which they were no longer willing to bother with. This confirmed Mr. Gunnerson's belief that material was available and in danger of destruction.

For a long time he had wanted a museum in Hamilton County, and he now realized that action must be taken soon. Prospects were discouraging, for the depression was at its lowest ebb and funds for non-essential activities did not exist. Mr. Gunnerson accepted material, however, until the drawers and closets in his home were filled. He was frequently called upon to lecture on Nebraska Indians before local organizations, and he began to urge these groups to work for a museum. He suggested the formation of a Historical society and became its secretary-treasurer. Finally so much enthusiasm was aroused that the County Commissioners were prevailed upon to allow two rooms in the court house for a museum. Their resolution took effect on September 1, 1945.

Mr. Gunnerson moved the material he had stored at his home. He bought articles from old homes at public sales. He drove about the county to gather up material promised to him, and persuaded more reluctant persons to loan family heirlooms. A great many articles were purchased with his own funds. In a few months the little museum was full, and items too large to display, such as old farm machinery and a cutter, were stored on the top

floor of the court house. Again the Gunnerson home began to fill with the surplus.

Mr. Gunnerson was grateful for the museum, which was attracting many visitors, but he was not satisfied. Some day, he insisted, the museum should have a separate building. Meanwhile, never ceasing to emphasize the need for a larger place, he continued to acquire all the pieces he could possibly store, and planned for the educational displays he would have when there was more room.

There were no dull moments in his life. Scarcely a day passed that he did not receive a phone call from someone who had found a strange bird, snake, or insect, or perhaps an Indian relic. Twice he relayed news of fossil discoveries in the county to Morrill Hall, and assisted the field parties in their excavations. He mapped the Pawnee camp sites in Hamilton County and located the sites of early postoffices, cemeteries, trading posts, and other spots of historical interest. His mapping of the Nebraska City-Fort Kearney cut-off of the Oregon trail through Hamilton County was accepted by the State Historical Society.

Mr. Gunnerson took advantage of N.Y.A. funds and compiled a History of Hamilton County. He interviewed old people still living in the vicinity and wrote to those who had moved away requesting accounts of pioneer days. He based other articles on excerpts from old newspapers, county records, and other documents. When Mr. Gunnerson had collected these manuscripts they were typed by N.Y.A. stenographers, and the resulting volume, though unpublished, remains an interesting and often amusing record of the past.

In 1943 Mr. Gunnerson's hopes for a museum building were realized. A two-story brick home, in excellent condition, was purchased by the county at tax sale. The city of Aurora and the county divided the cost of converting the building into a museum and each now contribute a sum toward its maintenance.

Mr. Gunnerson supervised the moving of the material and arranged the displays as they are today. Among

the numerous special exhibits are those showing the evolution of matches, timepieces, and lighting devices. There are cases of old grocery and drug store material. A large case devoted to dishes contains forty covered mustard dishes which were the special collection of Mrs. Gunnerson, who passed away in 1942. There is a room set aside for natural history displays, and a room furnished as an old bedchamber.

Besides the Indian material the items in Mr. Gunnerson's collection which he valued most were a high-wheeled bicycle, an elaborately decorated blunderbuss, a little pair of copper toed boots and some copper plate money from Sweden.

The eight-room museum is outstanding as an example of the preservation of a county's history. Ninety percent of its contents came from Hamilton county. Mr. Gunnerson believed that the museum contained a sample of everything in common use in a pioneer home.

Once again the museum is full and many fine historical articles must be stored for lack of display room. At the time of his death on June 21, 1947, Mr. Gunnerson was working for an addition to the building. He might well be proud, however, of his achievement as it stands now, one of the foremost museums in the state.