

Traveling west in the 19th century required enormous measures of vision and hard work, spirited debate and coordinated teamwork—and so did the recent undertaking to tell the story of westward expansion at the new Western Historic Trails Center in Council Bluffs. What's the Trails Center all about? Steven Ohrn, sites coordinator for the State Historical Society of Iowa, gives us a guided tour below. In accompanying sidebars, six key planners of the Trails Center reflect on what inspired them and how their ideas and visions took shape in a variety of media. —The Editor

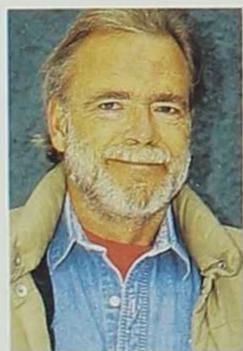
Exit 1 B

Touring the New Western Historic Trails Center

by Steven Ohrn

photos by Mike Whye

Once again, I am heading west on I-80, from Des Moines towards Council Bluffs. I traveled this way many times over the past eight years while working on the Western Historic Trails Center. I attended planning meetings with scores of individuals involved in the



Steven Ohrn
Sites Coordinator
State Historical
Society of Iowa

project. As the center took shape, I visited the building site and interviewed potential staff. And in early October 1997, I took part in celebrations and ribbon and rope cuttings when, with great fan-

fare, the Trails Center officially opened to the public.

The Western Historic Trails Center in Council Bluffs introduces the complex story of the largest voluntary migration of people in recorded history. In the history of westward expansion, Council Bluffs—like St. Joseph and Independence, Missouri—was the starting point for countless journeys west. The mission of the Western Historic Trails Center, as defined by Congress in 1989, is to recognize the national significance of these four historic trails, which passed through or near Council Bluffs. The Lewis and Clark Trail was the route taken in 1804–1806 by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark as they explored and mapped the new Louisiana Purchase. Beginning in 1843,



Visitors at the new Western Historic Trails Center connect with the past through interactive exhibits that bring drama, color, and voice to the story of westward expansion.

the Oregon Trail took thousands of overland emigrants to new homes in the Northwest. After 1846, the Mormon Pioneer Trail took members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to Utah and freedom from religious persecution. The later California Trail generally followed the Oregon and Mormon Trails before branching south to California for the Gold Rush. Designed by the National Park Service, and owned



“A compelling experience”

In the initial meetings for the Western Historic Trails Center, I challenged the planning group to create a unique and distinctive concept. We did not want the facility to appear as “just another trail center.” The group’s exceptional creativity, cooperative spirit, diverse talents, and unlimited energy accomplished that goal. From the entry experience to the final departure, the public will enjoy a unique interpretation that engages them with the wide diversity of people who were connected to the trails.

A talented group of historians ensured that the exhibits reflected current academic interpretations of the trails. The exceptional synergy between the center’s architect and exhibit designer produced a

unified experience of quality and creativity. The use of art and contemporary photography created a dramatic focus on individual experiences on past and present trails. The feature film enhances that approach without duplicating content.

Just as on the western trails, our group encountered obstacles along the way. Yet each time we returned to the center’s vision—to provide a compelling experience with the meaning of the trails.

Tom Richter
Interpretation Planner
National Park Service, Omaha, Nebraska



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and operated by the State Historical Society of Iowa, the Trails Center gives visitors a glimpse into what it was like to travel west, from the heartland to the Pacific Ocean.

Now I, too, am traveling west. But whereas the journey for thousands of emigrants began in Council Bluffs, mine ends in Council Bluffs. Leaving the interstate, I take Exit 1B, a mile east of the Missouri River. Driving through the handsome limestone entry gate into the 480-acre site of the Western Historic Trails Center, I adjust my speed to the single-lane, one-way road. The planners took great pains to ensure that travelers exiting the freeway to visit the site would experience a transition from the fast lane of today to a time when the world moved at a slower pace—consider, for example, that emigrant wagons on the western trails generally crept along at a mere 15 to 20 miles *a day*.

The landscaping will also reinforce a transition—from the more settled East to the untamed West. Next season, corn, bean, and hay

fields will symbolize the established farms many emigrants left behind. Prairie grasses and perennial wildflowers like purple coneflowers and black-eyed Susans will symbolize the undefined space the emigrants entered.

Ahead, a levee evenly breaks the horizon while keeping the Missouri River in check. The river, which borders the site, is a constant reminder that emigrants very early in their trek had to cross its muddy, roiling waters.

Against this levee is nestled the Lied Historical Building (*right*), the core of the Trails Center. Earth-sheltered on two sides and flat-roofed, the building has a low profile. Its design and construction are testaments to quality; the solid, hand-split limestone is striking and unusual. Limestone retaining walls abutting the building reinforce the sense that the walls and building are working together with the levee to keep the river under control. Large timber posts flank the entry portico. Above the posts, trellises shade the entry glass from summer heat while allowing

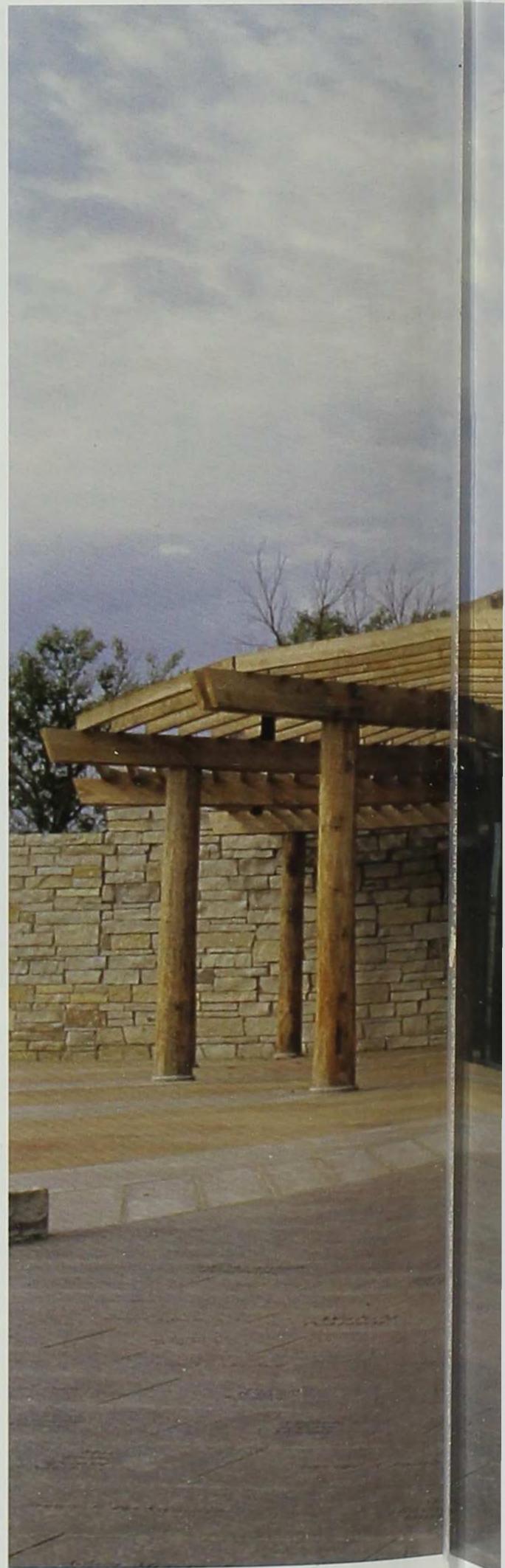
“A building of the land”

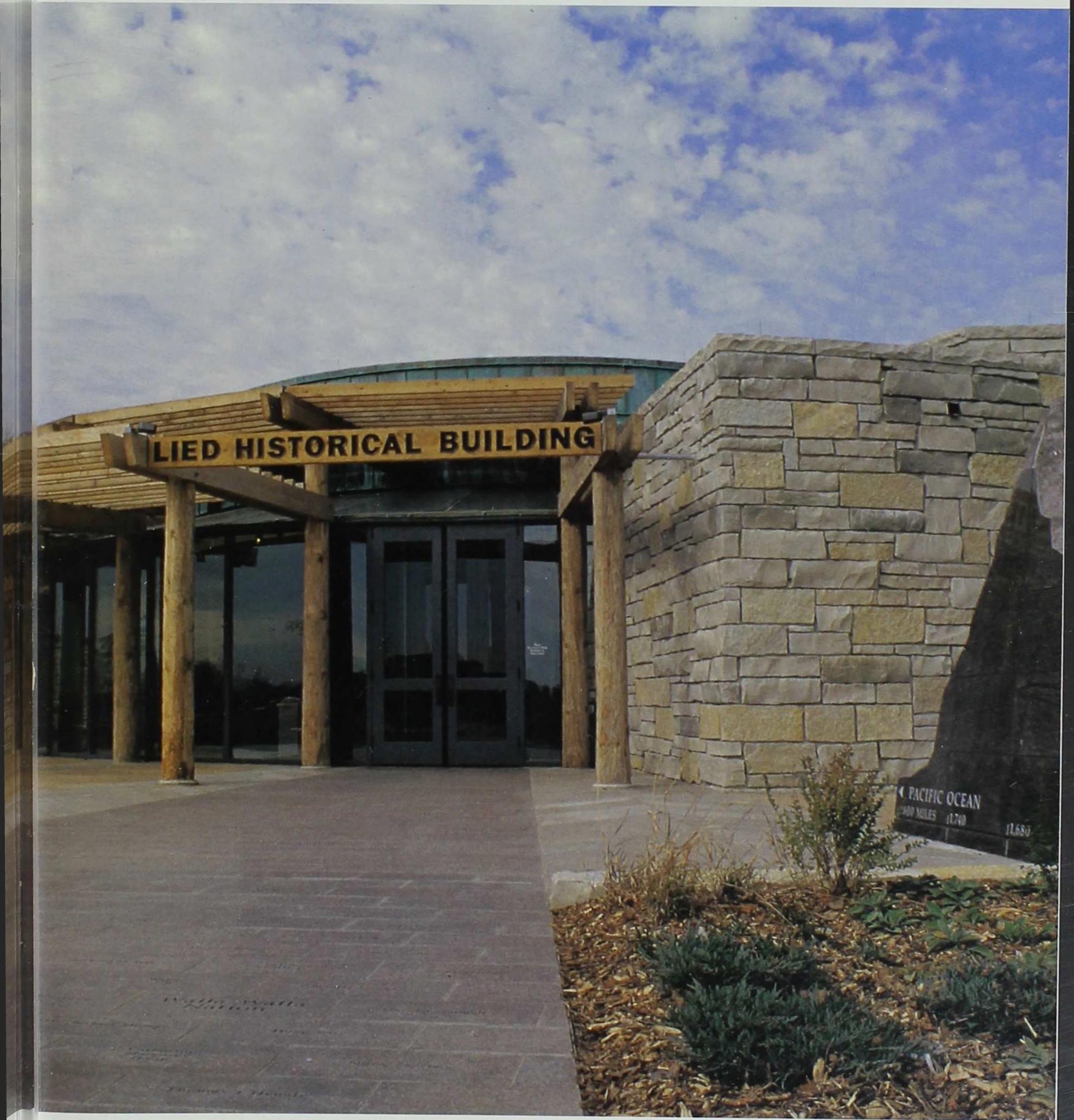
The Western Historic Trails Center acknowledges how the surrounding landscape may be used as a design resource. I am from the Midwest, and when traveling across Iowa and Nebraska, I am taken in by the landscape. For the Trails Center, the prairie served as my inspiration.



This inspiration manifests itself in two ways. First, the building respects the horizontal line of the prairie. The structure is low and long, and it blends with the landscape into which it is built. Second, the building reflects nature and native materials. Limestone and wood are the main building materials. The Trails Center is truly a building “of the land.”

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Architect, Bahr Vermeer & Haecker Architects
Omaha, Nebraska





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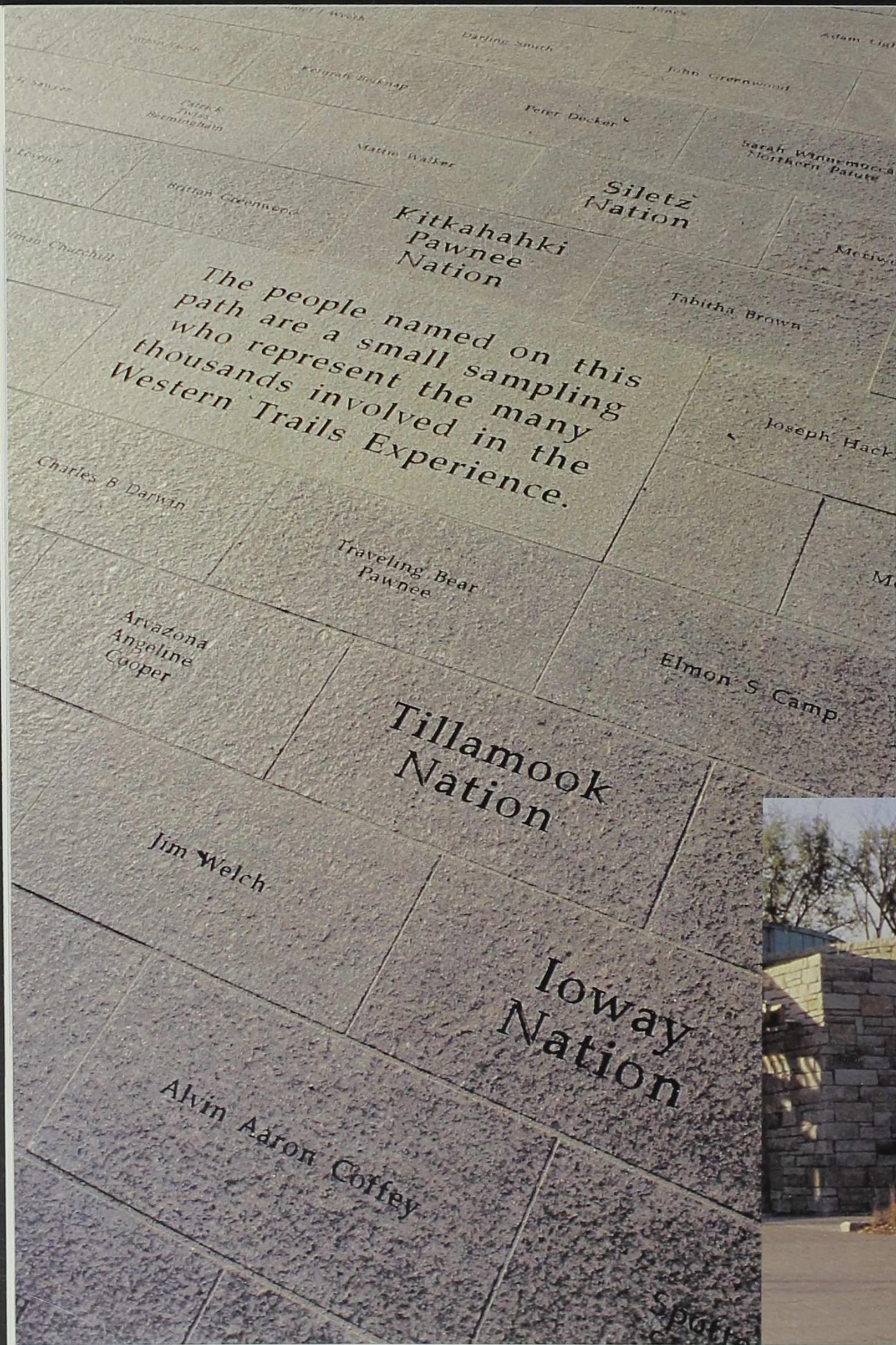
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John Simovic
Architect, Bahr Vermeer & Hoecker Architects
Omaha, Nebraska





Left: Representing only a sample of the diverse peoples involved in the trails experience, nearly a thousand names are engraved on the stones leading to the Trails Center—mute testimony to the trails' impact on individual lives and on entire Indian nations.

Below, the jagged profile of a polished granite wall matches the elevation from the Mississippi to the Pacific—heights that railroad builders would face in the 1870s.



ample sunlight during winter months.

Approaching the center, I admire a polished granite sculpture stretching 75 feet on my right. Eight feet high at its peak, the sculpture was modeled after an 1851 section drawing showing the challenging elevations railroads would have to traverse between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean. Aptly, the Trails Center uses the jagged profile of the wall as its logo.

On the granite path leading to the building, I step past nearly a thousand names engraved on polished stone slabs. They represent a small sampling of actual persons known to have been involved in the western trails experience. Names of individual travelers are interspersed with the names of Indian nations affected by the influx of thousands of emigrants. More

“Dramatic yet human and personal stories”

My key goals in designing the exhibits were to give visitors clear, complete information about the location of the trails and major destinations, and to tell the trails story in an informative and engaging manner using a variety of media. I also wanted the visitors' experience in the space to reflect the dramatic yet human and personal stories of our nation's westward development.

The variety of media I used ranged from interactive maps to sculptural vignettes, from text, photos, audio, and video to a granite silhouette showing elevations along the trails. This variety allows people with different ways of absorbing information to learn what they want.

I planned the exhibits so that visitors with varying amounts of time can access the information they desire—from a description of points of interest, to the details of people's experiences. I translated a range of historical perspectives so that visitors understand the effect of the trails on the lives of emigrants and American Indian nations, as well as the roles of leaders and the economic story.

Visitors will leave the exhibits with an understanding of the impact of the trails experience on ourselves as a nation.



*Vincent Ciulla
Designer, Vincent Ciulla Design
Brooklyn, New York*





information on the names is available inside the Trails Center at the information counter.

As I enter the building's rotunda, an inlaid granite compass rose on the floor catches my attention. It reminds me of the extreme importance for all travelers, past and present, to stay on course.

At the information counter, I inquire about a few names I remembered from the path outside. I find out that Spotted Horse was a Skidi Pawnee chief. I look up another name, Arvazona Angeline Cooper. She traveled on the

Left: An inlaid compass rose in the rotunda reminds visitors that all travelers, past and present, need to stay on course. Throughout the Trails Center and on the surrounding grounds, design elements of architecture, art, and landscaping act as subtle messages and evocative symbols of the trails story.

Oregon Trail in 1863, and was a farmer, wife, and mother. I learn that Traveling Bear, a member of the Pawnee nation, acted as a defender and provider for his people, and that Zenas Leonard was a trapper and trader. Alvin Aaron Coffey traveled on the California Trail in 1849; he was an African-American slave owned by a man named Dr. Barrett.

Kathy White, site manager for the Trails Center, sees the engraved stones in the granite path outside the building as "an artform that reminds visitors of the thousands of emigrants who carved their own names or initials on Register Cliff, Chimney Rock, Scotts Bluff, and other landmarks as they traveled west."

In the center's theater, I watch a 14-minute film titled "... and there we wandered, sometimes West..." The National Park Service commissioned it from Maryland film maker John Allen (recognized for his film *Daniel's Story* in the

Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.).

The Trails Center film is a fast-paced distillation of many westward journeys. It blends historic photographs and quotations with contemporary sights and sounds. For instance, portions of a 1996 trip videotaped by a family traveling from the East Coast to the Pacific help today's travelers connect with those of the 19th century. The film recently received the Silver Award at the Charleston Film Festival.

The purpose of the Trails Center is to give a broad overview of the western trails experience and to encourage visits to the nation's many historic sites, museums, archives, and libraries for a more complete story of this American saga. The exhibits are designed for visitors with varying amounts of time and levels of interest. For example, in the

"Giving form to memories and hope"

Myths are real. Don't let them tell you otherwise. Myths infuse our present with echoes of the past and with visions of the future. The American myth of the West and the westward journey is no different. Its promises, its hopes, and its realities changed lives, and continue to do so. There's nothing more real than that.

Because of this kind of reality—this mingling of past, present, and future—film is particularly well suited to capture the spirit of the myth. As much as any artistic medium, film combines movement, sights, and sounds, key pieces of our daily experience. But film can also give form to memories and hopes and their movement across time. These are the parts of our experience that link us with the myths and make them real.

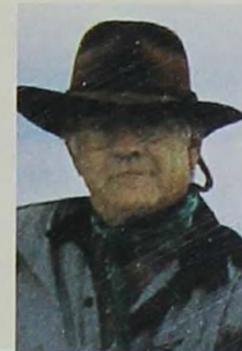
We set out to capture that reality on film as we began making "... and there we wandered, sometimes West..." for the Trails Center. We wanted to combine

the hopes, memories, and encounters of the last century with those of today. Because early emigrants' experiences are a part of today's myth of the West, the film juxtaposes the past and the present. We enter the roar of cars down a freeway and then sense the buffalo stampede that once infused these plains. We shift gears on a mountainside and hear the straining of ox yokes and leather.

These are not tricks of the memory and the imagination. This is the stuff of myths, finding their own reality in human lives. Certainly yesterday's myths still mingle with today's. Showing this was the goal of our film.

John Allen
Film maker

Signature Communications
Dunkirk, Maryland





Interactive exhibits, videos, and sculptures, shown on both pages, give form to the perspectives and stories of those involved in the westward migration. Above: Trails Center guide Debra Weilage watches a young visitor light up trail routes.

entrance of the large exhibit hall, an enormous map titled "Trails Today" lies before me. With a push of various buttons I watch the routes and major stop-overs of the four trails light up. The interactive map gives a quick, vivid understanding of the location of the historic trails for visitors with only a few minutes to spare.

Fortunately I have plenty of time today. Beyond the "Trails Today" exhibit, sculptures, historic photographs, text, videos, and more maps draw me into intriguing presentations of geography and history, land and people. For instance, the "Time Sweep" exhibit shows how the borders of the United States have changed as territories were added and Indian nations lost control of their lands.

Behind these sweeping changes, of course, are the stories of countless individuals. The "People and their Experiences" exhibit depicts some of these stories. New York City

sculptor Timothy Woodman was commissioned to create ten sculptural scenes for the exhibit. Woodman's three-dimensional scenes highlight situations, drawn from

historical records, that brought diverse people together because of westward expansion. Intrigued, I wander among scenes of fur trappers trading with Indians, of overlanders buying goods from outfitters, of missionaries camping with gold-seekers.

Made from heavy-gauge aluminum, Woodman's arresting sculptures are painted with muted colors. Below them, historic photographs and text enrich the scenes, and excerpts from letters and diaries individualize the experience. I pick up the earphone under one sculpture and hear an early account by Alfred Jacob Miller, who recalls an 1837 rendezvous of trappers and traders. Through an earphone beneath another scene, I hear a more recent western experience: Margaret Gehrke's journal recounts her family's automobile trip through Wyoming in the 1920s.

At the back of the exhibit hall,





“To imagine what the people might have been thinking and doing”

My first challenge was accepting the size of the sculpture project for the Western Historic Trails Center. It meant setting aside my own work as an artist for over

two years. But the possibilities intrigued me—particularly the challenge of creating sculptures that would depict stories and would also physi-

cally fit into the predetermined display spaces.

I was given a rough script that specified the individuals and general situations for each of the ten displays. I found help and support from everyone involved in the project. The exhibit designer and other project members provided extensive research. Gail Holmes, a historian of Council Bluffs, supplied many important historical details and suggestions. Through this research I tried to get a feel for the individuals

in the scenes and to imagine what the people might have been thinking and doing.

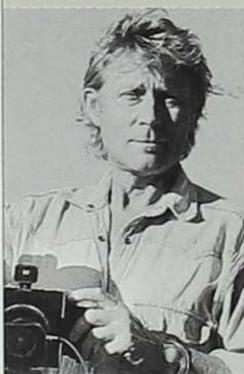
Then I sketched out a design for each scene and made scale models. The final sculptures, about a third life size and made of heavy gauge aluminum, were worked up from the models, allowing for slight changes because of the difference in scale.

*Timothy Woodman
Sculptor
New York City, New York*



“The scars of the western trails”

For well over a decade I have been traveling and photographing in the Great Basin area, that thousand-mile stretch of land that lies between the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevadas in California.



While driving between distant destinations, I often wondered where the highway I was traveling would finally penetrate the mountain range far ahead. I became curious about the

individuals who discovered the first passageways into the Far West. How did they ever find even a remotely efficient route across a continent where the mountain ranges are always perpendicular to the direction of travel?

This simple question eventually led me into a project—now in its tenth year—in which I would follow and photograph the California, Oregon, Mormon, and Lewis and Clark Trails. Many of these photographs are now on display at the Western Historic Trails Center.

The romantic interpretation of landscape, often found in both paintings and photographs, has

never interested me, and I do not photograph it so. For centuries, the land in the West was used to scratch out a living on a large or small scale and by whatever scheme people could invent. In such arid climates the evidence of these efforts is slow to heal, and it soon became obvious to me that the scars of the western trails, as well as the overlay of what has replaced them, would be a more potent record and perhaps a truer statement of the meaning and current condition of the trails.

Greg MacGregor
Professor of Photography
California State University, Hayward

rows of colorful postcards beckon me to the “Trips Across” exhibit. The postcards depict historic tourist views along the trails. Stunning black-and-white photographs by Greg MacGregor reveal dramatic vestiges of the trails; for more than a decade MacGregor has traveled the historic routes and photographed the trail landscapes as they appear today (many appeared in the Summer 1997 *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*). A United States map sliced into eight segments from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean is augmented with video monitors and photographs that offer comparisons of then and now for travelers headed out on the trail.

Of course, there’s always more to discover about the western trails experience, and a trip to the Trails Center isn’t complete without browsing the museum store for trails-related books, videos, and souvenirs. In the spirit of emigrants buying supplies in Council Bluffs, I consider a few purchases of my own.

As I exit the rotunda, a see-through display of new postcards prompts a new thought: 19th-century travelers who left home were also urged to write home. To continue this tradition, the staff of the Trails Center encourages visitors to send new picture postcards of their own journeys. The rotunda display will be updated as new cards arrive.

Again outside, I follow the walk up to the top of

the levee. Once a Council Bluffs city park, the area between the levee and the Missouri River is being returned to a more natural landscape of trees, prairie grasses, and flowers. I stroll west on the new walking trail towards a wayside by the river. Signs point the way, reminding me that in 1804 the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery passed by this point and camped in the vicinity, and that in 1846 Mormons established temporary settlements on both sides of the river (their “Winter Quarters” was just north of present-day Omaha).

I reach the wayside and see before me the Missouri. Banked by chunks of stone and concrete and bridged by iron and steel, the current is fast but confined. A century and a half ago, the river intimidated drivers of emigrant wagons ferrying across. Today’s drivers zip effortlessly over the bridge from Council Bluffs to Omaha and into the American West.

I follow the trail around the shore of a large pond. Hiking past a few anglers, I head back to my car. Winding slowly down the road again, I exit the Western Historic Trails Center and rejoin the traffic on the interstate—the latest western trail. ❖

The Western Historic Trails Center is open daily, except on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Day, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Free admission. In Council Bluffs, take exit 1B off Interstate 80 and south onto 24th Street. For more information, call 712-366-4900.



Postcards bearing messages from today's travelers begin to fill the display case in the Trails Center rotunda. Visitors are encouraged to send their own postcards to the center—in the spirit and tradition of travelers describing their journeys.

TO FIND OUT MORE

You'll find many fine books written about westward expansion, and many are stocked in the Trails Center museum store. If you'd like to read more, here are some suggestions:

Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

Susan Easton Black and William G. Hartley, eds., *The Iowa Mormon Trail: Legacy of Faith and Courage* (Orem, Utah: Helix Publishing, 1997).

John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited* (Tucson: Patrice Press, 1997).

Greg MacGregor, *Overland: The California Emigrant Trail of 1841-1870* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).

William W. Slaughter and Michael Landon, *Trail of Hope: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1997), companion to PBS documentary.

Geoffrey C. Ward, *The West: An Illustrated History* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996).

TRAIL PARTNERS

The Western Historic Trails Center began as a local idea. Taking their idea to their congressional delegation, local leaders, primarily the Council Bluffs Area Chamber of Commerce, succeeded in getting legislation passed in 1989 that defined the center's mission as recognizing the national significance of four national historic trails. The center was funded by a partnership including federal, state, and local governments and private donors. The federal share was approximately \$8.4 million, which was matched with \$4.2 million.

The major donors included: The Iowa West Foundation, The Lied Foundation Trust, Harvey's Casino and Hotel, State of Iowa, Acceptance Insurance Corporation, People's Natural Gas Company, Ameristar Casino and Hotel, Union Pacific Foundation, ConAgra, Inc., Firststar Bank of Council Bluffs, *Omaha World-Herald* Foundation, Jennie Edmundson Foundation, Peter Kiewit and Sons, Inc., Alegent Health Systems, Allied Communications, Commercial Federal Bank, First National Bank of Omaha, Firstier Bank, Hitchcock Foundation, MidAmerican Energy Company, and Pottawattamie County.

After looking at a number of potential owner-operators, the National Park Service (NPS) selected the State Historical Society of Iowa, which became involved throughout the process of site selection, building and exhibit design, interpretation, and construction. The effort involved a large team of talented, dedicated professionals. The building was designed by a team of NPS planners (led by Amy

Schneckenburger and Shelly Wells), architects (primarily George Haecker and John Sinovic of Bahr Vermeer & Haecker of Omaha), landscape architects (Don Carter and Margaret Tighe of Nishita & Carter of San Francisco), and exhibit designers (primarily Vincent Ciulla of Brooklyn, New York). Barry Vance and Michael Paskowsky (NPS, Harpers Ferry Center) guided exhibit and audiovisual planning, construction, and production.

Consulting historians included: Gary Moulton (University of Nebraska at Lincoln); James Riding In (Arizona State University); Glenda Riley (Ball State University); Jan Shipps (Indiana University-Purdue University); Michael Tate (University of Nebraska at Omaha); and Gail Holmes (Omaha, Nebraska).

The State Historical Society owns and manages the center. Just as the center was funded and built by a partnership, the Society will operate the center with several partners, including the City of Council Bluffs and the Council Bluffs Area Chamber of Commerce. The center will also be an official Iowa Welcome Center, operated with the Iowa Tourism Division of the Department of Economic Development. Early estimates suggest that it will attract over 100,000 visitors each year. The museum store will be operated on contract with the Jefferson National Expansion Historical Association, which also operates the museum store at the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis.

Steven Ohrn, Sites Coordinator, State Historical Society of Iowa