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Wood icons dot prairie landscape

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Tom Ford

ANGUSVILLE -- One of the joys of visiting Europe is wandering around ancient, stone castles, houses, halls and churches and getting a sense of how people lived in the past.

Manitoba also has an interesting past, but much of it was built of wood. Over the years, some of our historic treasures rotted and slumped into the ground. But much has been saved.

The work of preserving our past has fallen mostly to hardy, small bands of volunteers who did not want to see the history of their rural communities disintegrate. Some of them have been helped by the province's Historic Resources Branch and the Prairie Churches Program, funded, in part, by the Thomas Sill Foundation and a U.S. grape juice company.

I was lucky enough to go along on a tour of some of Manitoba's icons in the prairie and parkland regions with Ed Ledohowski, heritage designations officer of the Historic Resources Branch, John Lehr, of the University of Winnipeg and some members of the Manitoba Historical Society.

A shining example of the kind of people who keep things going in rural communities hammered by declining populations and changing global economies is feisty Nydia Kostuik, whom we met at the Ukrainian People's Home of Ivan Franko in Angusville, near Russell.

Mrs. Kostuik, who, I am proud to say, is a fellow journalist writing for some community papers, and her friends put on a party for us -- 20-odd dishes of lip-smacking Ukrainian food and a dance featuring a local band, which performed lively tunes with all the seriousness of brain surgeons.

After the party, Mrs. Kostuik and her husband hurried back to their farm to harvest the crop in his and hers combines.

The hall we frolicked in was built in 1934 by the people of Angusville and the surrounding area. Ukrainian National Home societies were set up to maintain Ukrainian communities through theatrical groups, choirs, reading, political discussions and cultural and social activities. The one in Angusville, named after a famous poet, is unusual in that it has three domes, normally associated with churches.

Many Ukrainians settled in the Parklands, a region of hills, forests and small lakes started by the melting glaciers. The land was tough to clear, but it provided them, says Mr. Lehr, with wood, game and shelter from the cold.

They built churches, many of them in a distinctive cross shape with onion domes on top. Inside, many have sky blue walls and numerous paintings and religious objects, some made by the pioneers. One of the church builders had been billed as the world's strongest man in the Barnum and Bailey circus. He bent steel bars clenched in his teeth -- and all of his churches have a bow-shaped piece of wood over their front doors.

Life for the pioneers was difficult. Scarlet fever and measles broke out among one group camped at Patterson Lake, near Oakburn, killing 42 of the 45 children in the group. A farmer, who owned the land subsequently, couldn't stand the sight of all the small crosses and moved to Saskatchewan. Later, the site was lost. Now,

however, several substantial monuments mark the place of the disaster.

In the same general area, other newcomers built their own churches. (You can get their locations from the provincial Historic Resources Branch.) We saw the small St. Elijah Romanian Orthodox Church, near Lennard. Built in 1908, it is the oldest standing Romanian church in Manitoba. The oldest standing Icelandic Lutheran Church, built in 1889 by volunteers, is at Grund.

The Ste. Thérèse Roman Catholic Church at Cardinal has been saved by a few dedicated volunteers, and is said to be a fine example of Roman Catholic architectural traditions.

In Griswold, there's a pretty, small granite church, one of more than 200 Methodist and Presbyterian churches built in Manitoba between 1890 and 1910.

Not all the icons are religious. The people of Inglis, near Russell, are saving, with some government help, five old grain elevators, Canada's last row of standard-plan, wood elevators. In the 1940s the prairies had more than 5,500 standard elevators.

One of the problems facing the volunteers, who are safeguarding our icons, is that their numbers, never high, are dwindling. The question is whether younger generations will take as much interest in preserving history as they do.

It would be a great pity if Manitoba's icons began to fall apart. They don't rival Europe's massive castles, but they are ours and their histories are every bit as interesting.

Tom Ford is managing editor of The Issues Network.

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