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The Volland Renaissance Story

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Volland Store
Lily Brooks

THE VOLLAND RENAISSANCE STORY

The original version of the story on the previous page, which appeared in the 2011 Field Journal, set in motion a chain of events that resulted in the renaissance of the Volland Store and the resurgence of a lost community.

Although Otto Kratzer's descendants attempted to maintain the store building after his death, they eventually moved away.

Maintaining the building was difficult to do from a distance. Years passed. A persistent leak caused the roof to cave in, collapsing the second and first floors into the basement.

Thirty years of rain, sleet, snow, hail and wind ensued, but the brick walls never wavered. They stood strong, and the empty building continued to remind neighbors and relatives of the good times they experienced there.

At the turn of the present century, a new family came to Wabaunsee County and heard stories of the building that stood vacant but begged to come alive. Patty and Jerry Reece of Mission Hills, Kansas, had bought and restored old buildings before, and this one caught their eye. It was too good to let melt away. More than that, it held an important place in the heart of the community. That was clear from the way eyes lit up when old stories were told.

In 2011, Symphony in the Flint Hills held its Signature Event on the hills across from Volland. Greg Hoots' article about Volland in that year's Field Journal told of the huge treasure trove of Otto Kratzer's photos that could be seen at the Wabaunsee County Historical Museum in Alma. Patty Reece, who is a photographer, saw an early version of the Hoots article. She and her husband visited the museum and asked to see Kratzer's photos. She was immediately struck with the storytelling quality, humor and

affection evident in the photos. With the museum's blessing, she curated an exhibit of Kratzer's photography for the weekend of the Signature Event. Hoots invited Otto Kratzer's granddaughter, who still owned the Volland Store, to come for the weekend, and he made sure that Karen Kratzer Durso met Patty Reece.

The following spring, Durso contacted Hoots and asked him to find someone who would buy the store and restore it. She had been approached with an offer to buy the bricks, but she couldn't bear to see the building disappear. Hoots contacted Patty Reece, and, with the promise that the building wouldn't be torn down, the Reeces became the new owners.

A first look inside revealed a mountain of debris reaching from the basement floor to the first floor. There was only one way in and out, down broken steps through a door (that miraculously still opened) into the basement. A couple of strong guys with five-gallon buckets soon began clearing the rubble until there was enough room to bring in heavy equipment to finish the job.

As word spread about the work on the building, a combination of curiosity and disbelief fueled interest and, eventually, strong support for the undertaking.

An engineer, an architect, a designer and a builder, along with their teams, dedicated their considerable talents and energy over a couple of years to give the Volland Store a chance at a second century. It was more

than a building project for all involved; it was a journey to return the building to its rightful place in the community.

The Volland Store reopened in June 2015, repurposed as an art gallery and community gathering place. It is once again a comfortable place to greet old friends and make new ones. Just as Otto Kratzer brought the newest and best of everything to Volland (the first electricity, telephones, photography, a tennis court), the Volland Store has brought in new art experiences, music, theatre, vintage motorcycle shows, poetry readings, book signings, talks by scientists and authors, and even a vaquero equestrian show, contributing to a lively and entertaining scene in the little town of Volland.

In 2021, the Reeces donated the Volland Store to the Volland Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. The foundation also owns and operates the award-winning Little House at Volland and the Loft on the second floor of the Volland Store. Both are used as lodging for artists-in-residence and visiting artists and, when available, for self-directed artist residencies and the general public. Another small house in town will be renovated into an art studio.

In addition, the Ruin — the rock foundation of Otto Kratzer's house that burned down in 1929 — has been transformed into an outdoor performance venue for music and theatre. The History, Nature and Sculpture Trail is open every



Volland Store Interior

Mike Sinclair

day from dawn to dusk. A horse arena stands ready for events and neighborhood children and their horses.

The Volland Foundation hosts a residency program that provides time and space for artists, writers, poets, musicians, designers, scientists and historians to

experience the tallgrass prairie and engage in the culture of the rural community.

The creative energy of the artists and, indeed, all the people who come to this place is enlivening this once-sleepy community. The Volland Store remains at the heart of it all.

Patty Reece is a former board chair of Symphony in the Flint Hills. Reece is devoted to the preservation of the tallgrass prairie in the Flint Hills and the sustainability and enrichment of its culture, as currently manifested by her engagement as trustee of the Kansas chapter of The Nature Conservancy, a public board member of Landscape Architecture Accreditation Board, and founder and president of the Volland Foundation. Editor's Note: More information may be found at thevollandstore.com.