

Hillsboro Cabin

Won't Log Any More Floods

In the late 1870s, Norwegian immigrant Hans Halvorson built himself a little log cabin in Minnesota on the banks of the Red River of the North.

To Halvorson, a lifelong bachelor, the simple, 16-by-18 one-room structure was home. It stood the test of time — weathering the floods and winter storms that are common in the upper Plains states.

In 1931, the cabin was moved to a city park in Hillsboro, North Dakota, to mark the 60th anniversary of early European settlements along the Goose River. There, too, it weathered more floods and winter storms.



*Halvorson's cabin arrives in Hillsboro in 1931.
Photo courtesy Traill County Historical Society.*

But as the years went by, repetitive flooding took its toll on the symbolic cabin — believed to be one of the oldest in the state. The Goose River, a tributary of the much larger Red River, which forms the North Dakota-Minnesota border, often overflows its banks and floods the park where the cabin sat nestled in a grassy area near a playground and the municipal swimming pool.

More often than not, the cabin flooded too. Parts of it began to rot. When the area was hit with record flooding and a late blizzard in the spring of 1997, the damage caused by both water and ice was even worse.

And that was a big concern for city officials and for county historical society members who had long considered moving the cabin but never had the money to pay for it.

The city's park district owned the structure and used it to store park equipment. Although the city had "mucked out" the structure many times before, the '97 flood had caused some serious structural damage. Historic preservationists wanted to move the cabin to protect an important piece of the area's history.

It was, for all practical purposes, the moment of truth. To save the log house, it had to be moved away from the river where it had lived for more than 65 years. And the move had to be done soon or future floods could easily destroy it for good.

So the city opted to take the \$5,100 in state and federal disaster money it was given to repair or replace the public structure, and use the funds to help relocate the cabin out of harm's way — creating a permanent solution that would stop repetitive flood damage and repair costs.

"The flooding was destroying it," said Mark Forseth, city auditor. "Our choice was to burn it down and build something new or give it to someone. There was never an option to build it up or floodproof it because of where it was located. It was so low, it would have had to be moved regardless. We thought maybe this is the time we could move it out of there."

The relocation brought its own set of challenges. A suitable site had to be found and an extensive historical and environmental review would be required to ensure that moving the log house wouldn't have a negative impact on the park, the new site or the cabin itself.

Furthermore, the structure—which flooded twice more after the '97 event—was so damaged that it couldn't be moved intact. Instead, it would need to be dismantled, moved and then reconstructed.

Fortunately, Hillsboro resident Duane Nysveen loves that kind of a challenge. A contractor by trade, Nysveen, 69, had helped restore other historical properties in town because of his wife Shirley's involvement in the historical society. Duane liked the cabin and wanted to save it.

So in June 1998, he and five other townspeople took the log house apart the same way it had been built—piece by piece—carefully numbering each of the 61 logs so that it could be correctly reconstructed.

The logs, some bigger than a foot in diameter, then were loaded onto a trailer and hauled about a mile away to the cabin's new home in "Heritage Park," a three-acre tract of land where the historical society has a museum and other significant buildings. The park is well beyond both the 100- and 500-year floodplains.

"First we built up the site so there wouldn't be any water problems and then we built a concrete base," Duane said. "We wanted to get the cabin up enough so we were sure it would stay dry."

But before the cabin itself could be reconstructed, disaster struck again.

"We had stapled tag board with a number on it to the end of each log," Duane said. "Somebody had the great fun of having a beer party and taking all the numbers."

Down but not out, Duane and his daughter Julie began the tedious process of reconstructing the cabin using old-fashioned trial and error.

"We would try a log and it wouldn't fit," Duane recalled. "Each log was notched so they would fit on top of one another. It took us about a month, working every day, to put the whole thing back together. Losing those numbers really slowed us down."



Duane Nysveen (left) gets help taking apart the cabin log by log. Photo courtesy Shirley Nysveen.



After the '97 flood, the cabin had deteriorated even further. FEMA file photo.

To replace the flood-damaged logs—about 20 percent of the whole structure—Nysveen went to rural electric cooperatives and got old, weathered high-voltage power line poles that looked strikingly like the original timbers. Mortar, rather than the original dirt-and-cow-manure paste, was used to fill the spaces between the logs. A new roof was added, the lone window was rebuilt and a new front door was put on.

Today, Hans Halvorson's cabin again stands as a symbol of pioneer perseverance. Trees have been planted around the house to re-create its original wooded setting. Inside, the floor is dirt. And period furnishings, including a rope bed and an old cookstove, have been added to show visitors what life on the prairie once was like.

“It’s a tremendous teaching tool to show the younger generation how their ancestors lived,” said Shirley Nysveen. “It’s made quite an addition to our museum.”

“I’m glad that we were able to acquire it and get the money so we could move it,” Duane added. “Now it’s where people can enjoy it again.”

Forseth agrees, adding that it would take a flood of “biblical proportions” to affect the cabin now.

“I think it’s just worked out great,” he said. “Where it’s at now, it’s appreciated. People can see it. It’s well taken care of. And it’s not going to be a problem ever again. We know now, as we are finding out about a lot of things in North Dakota, that putting something close to the river, while very scenic, is not very practical anymore.”



Newly reconstructed outside the floodplain, the cabin now has a chance to live high and dry. Photo courtesy Shirley Nysveen.
