

# FARMLIVING

## CARNDUFF RESTAURANT FINDS SWEET NICHE

The Olive Branch Bistro opened in 2000 and has been steadily expanding in size, customer base and tasty dessert offerings. | **Page 25**



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ENTREPRENEURS | INNOVATION

## Fresh start for old building

**Revitalizing a community** | An old school turns into a thriving hub for business, arts and education

BY ROBERT ARNASON

BRANDON BUREAU

CYPRESS RIVER, Man. — For two years, Linda Truelove dreaded walking past the elementary school in her community.

For 50 years, from 1959 to 2009, the clamour of kids playing and shouting on the school grounds was a familiar sound in Cypress River in south-central Manitoba. After the school closed in 2009, it bothered Truelove to wander past the school and hear nothing but the breeze.

"When you walked by, you would listen for the kids," said Truelove, whose children attended the school, who attended as a child and who worked there as an educational assistant.

"It was very sad to (walk) past here for two years."

Life returned to the school last fall when a community group purchased the building and grounds from the local school division.

Truelove and the directors with the Cypress River Resource Centre bought the 7,000-sq. foot school and surrounding eight acres of land for \$100.

Skeptics in town scoffed at the idea, with some residents wondering why anyone would want an old school.

"Something new usually creates a lot of conversation at the coffee shop," said Georgette Hutlet, a director.

In the first year of operation, the centre has proved the cynics wrong.

The directors opened a second-hand store in the school, hosted a music festival and held a Saturday morning farmers' market.

In addition, Assiniboine Community College of Brandon will use the school to train 25 licensed practical nurses starting in January. The course will last 22 months and the arrival of 25 new people will have an impact on a town of 165.

Nursing students are already renting rooms or homes in the commu-

nity, which should stimulate social and economic activity in the small town.

ACC is training nurses in communities outside of its Brandon campus because the college hopes students will take a job in a rural community after graduation, Hutlet said.

"(They) bring the course to an area where there is a need for nurses."

Landing the LPN training course was a coup but Hutlet is also proud of the inaugural Prairie Wind Music Festival that drew 200 people and is held on the school grounds in June.

The directors borrowed the concept from Clearwater, Man., which has hosted the Harvest Moon Festival for 11 years.

Jolene Gardiner, who farms near Clearwater, said this year's event attracted more than 1,200 people to a community of 64.

Community leaders in Clearwater purchased the vacant school in the town, named it the Harvest Moon Learning Centre and developed educational programming.

The Harvest Moon Society, which runs the centre and the festival, offers workshops on subjects ranging from forest gardening to root cellar construction to rainwater catchment systems. It also partners with others to offer farmer training courses and University of Manitoba credit courses.

The society also wants to revitalize skills from earlier times on the Prairies such as canning, milling grain, making jam and gardening.

"Things that our parents knew and our grandparents did all the time,"



Gardiner said. When the nurse's training program ends, the Cypress directors are considering offering bread-making classes, a master spinners course and other rural arts.

The Cypress society also owns eight acres of land behind the school, which could be used for agricultural test plots.

"I think the land is going to be a huge opportunity for us," Hutlet said, noting any enterprise chosen must be financially sustainable.

### THE CLEARWATER EXAMPLE

Many rural Manitobans consider Clearwater, Man., a role model when it comes to reviving a small community. Since forming the Harvest Moon Society more than a decade ago, leaders in Clearwater have launched a number of unique initiatives:

» The society has helped develop a University of Manitoba accredited course, called Living Rural Communities and Environments. Students take the course at the Harvest Learning Centre in Clearwater and visit farms in the area to gain a better understanding of agriculture and rural life.

» The society has teamed up with Manitoba Farm Mentorship to offer the Exploring Your Small Farm Dream course, where aspiring farmers can learn about the challenges and opportunities of running a farm. The course is offered in Clearwater.

» As well, the society will soon take over the farm mentorship program, where interns live on farms that practise organic or sustainable agriculture.

» Ten farm families around Clearwater have created the Harvest Moon Local Food Initiative. It's a buying club, where consumers can order products like pork, vegetables and eggs directly from farmers in the group.



Linda Truelove, right, and Georgette Hutlet are part of a group that purchased the former elementary school in Cypress River, Man., in 2011. Within 12 months, the directors of the Cypress River Resource Centre opened a secondhand store in the school and hosted a music festival. In January, the Assiniboine Community College of Brandon will train nurses in the building. | ROBERT ARNASON PHOTO

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