

'Tis the season for sharing

Written by Deb Egenberger
Wednesday, 09 December 2009 22:17 -



Christmas food basket program began with a bag of potatoes.

Bill Buss was a small-town farmer with a big heart.

In the late 1940s on a farm between Gothenburg and Cozad, Buss gathered sacks of potatoes and hauled them to town every December.

Gothenburg businessman Blaine Peterson says he's pretty sure Buss grew the potatoes himself, although it's possible they came from somewhere else.

It doesn't really matter anymore where the potatoes came from. What matters is where they ended up.

Blaine said every year around Christmas, Buss delivered the sacks of potatoes to people in town who he believed could use the extra food.

That was the meager beginning of the community's Christmas food basket program more than 60 years ago.

Blaine said he's not certain how long Buss delivered the potatoes before he approached the grocer about adding more food to the deliveries.

Blaine said dented canned goods were included at little cost as well as turkeys with minor

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defects.

“We could get a turkey with a missing wing or something like that for close to nothing,” Blaine said.

In later years, bigger turkeys were cut in half to share with more families.

Shares fund tops \$1,500

Gothenburg Shares received a substantial boost this week with nearly \$1,000 added to the fund. Donors gave \$669 to bring the total thus far to \$1,514. The goal of the campaign is \$4,000. Money raised will be used to provide food baskets to 75-90 families in need just prior to Christmas. It's a continuation of a program that is over 35 years old. The Gothenburg Rotary Club, with the help of community volunteers, now operate the program. In addition to anonymous donors, those contributing to the fund this week include: Gothenburg Senior Center Card Room, Elsie Gierlich, Barbara Kamph, Margaret Rubenstahr, Dale and Mary Lou Block, Von and Sherida Cook and TCF. Send donations to: Gothenburg Shares, P.O. Box 385, Gothenburg, NE 68138, or drop them off at the Gothenburg Times. Please note on the donation if you would like your name published as a donor.

Somehow, Buss always found enough community donations to cover the cost.

“Bill Buss was solely responsible for (the food basket program),” Blaine said. “He just drew other people into it to help.”

Blaine's son Steve remembers when he first got involved in the mid-1970s.

“Bill would come in the grocery store and we'd talk about how much food we needed,” Steve said. “Then he'd disappear and come back with money.”

It was somewhat magical, Steve said, sort of like Santa.

When the Gothenburg Rotary Club was chartered in 1980, Steve said he pitched the Christmas food baskets as a service project idea and the organization got involved.

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"This is definitely not my program," Steve said. "It's a community project."

This year between 70 and 80 families will receive food baskets.

Steve explained that three entities make the project work.

Rotary oversees the organization of the program and recruits help for packing and delivering the boxes of food.

The Gothenburg Shares fund, collected for 25 years at The Times, brings in donations from people and service groups in the community to cover the cost of the food. This year's goal is \$4,000.

And finally a selection committee works to gather names and addresses of the families that will receive the food baskets.

Steve said there are a variety of circumstances that may put a family's name on the list.

"Financial struggles happen for all kinds of reasons," he said. "Maybe a family had something unfortunate happen in the past year that leaves them short on money. There are a lot of folks who have lost jobs in this economy and have suffered a really bad year."

Regardless, those who receive food baskets change from one year to the next as do the people on the selection committee.

On the Saturday before Christmas, volunteers will gather to fill the boxes. Steve said it usually takes much of the morning to distribute three or four pallets of food between boxes designed for small, medium and large families.

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Then other volunteers spend a day or two delivering the goods which include canned vegetables, fresh fruit, bread, jelly, marshmallows, ham and, of course, a bag of potatoes.

“At one time we talked about not doing the potatoes because they’re heavy and they’re kind of a pain to deliver,” Steve said. “We knew we couldn’t do that, though. That’s how this whole thing got started.”