

PRESS RELEASE FOR *PRAIRIE EARTH, PRAIRIE HOMES: A FIELD SCHOOL*

The Department of History, North Dakota State University, is collaborating again this year, as in 2009, with Preservation North Dakota, the statewide association for historic preservation, to deliver a rare opportunity in a summer course. “Prairie Earth, Prairie Homes: A Field School,” to be offered 11-20 July 2010, is nationally advertised as “experiential learning in an unforgettable landscape.” The course promises tours of little-known earth building sites on the prairies of western North Dakota and hands-on restoration activities at the historic Hutmacher farmstead. Options are available for graduate credit, undergraduate credit, teacher professional development, and non-credit learning vacation.

“Prairie Earth, Prairie Homes” is a field school that celebrates, investigates, and encourages the preservation of buildings built of earth on the northern plains. Instructor for the field school is Tom Isern, Professor of History and University Distinguished Professor, North Dakota State University. “We’ll cook dinner in an Hidatsa earthlodge, rediscover forgotten sod houses, explore Ukrainian and German-Russian earth building sites, and get really dirty putting a clay roof on the historic Hutmacher farmhouse,” says Isern.

Concurrently, History PhD candidate Suzanne Kelley will offer a professional development option for in-service teachers. As President of Preservation North Dakota, she also welcomes inquiries about learning vacations associated with the field school.

“You can’t get an experience like this anywhere else,” Isern declares. “We have the resources in the field, and we are doing both study and restoration work that is unparalleled. It’s serious learning, and it’s great fun.

“Western North Dakota has a long history and terrific variety of historic earth buildings,” says Isern. “One reason for this is the prairie environment, which means earth construction makes sense simply for the sake of human comfort. The old cut-sod house of prairie pioneers could be more comfortable than a house built of milled lumber.

“In addition, we have several distinct ethnic groups with earth building traditions of their own. Germans from Russia knew how to build using homemade clay bricks or hand-formed walls of puddled earth. Ukrainians built houses of rammed earth, clay compressed between posts and lath. And of course, the Mandan and Hidatsa, with their earth lodges, knew the benefits of this sort of construction long before white settlers arrived.”

Website for the course – historyrfd.net/isern/earth

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