

ARTS & CULTURE



Photos courtesy of Kandiyohi County Historical Society

In its storied history, the Willmar Fest Kaffe coffee pot has lived many lives, from parade icon to playhouse to chicken coop. Now, thanks to a band of volunteers, the 10-foot piece of kitchenware is finding a permanent home at the county historical society, having been refurbished to its former glory. Above: Weathered from years of exposure to the elements, the pot was discovered at a farm near Grove City. Below left: Wrapped in plastic for now, the fixed-up pot will be placed on a concrete slab outside the historical society on Tuesday. Below right: A chicken stubbornly refused to leave its longtime coop as the pot was being loaded onto a trailer and transported from the farm.

Rescued from the roost, iconic “Kaffe Fest” pot finds home at KCHS

By Brett Blocker
Editor

From parade icon to lowly chicken coop, and now restored to its former glory in the historical society’s permanent collection, if ever there was a Greek Tragedy in ceramic form, the Willmar Kaffe Fest coffee pot is it.

Driving down Highway 71, it’s impossible to miss the towering vessel, parked on its temporary stand near the Sperry House. For longtime residents of the Willmar area, the sight of the massive mug brings back waves of nostalgia; to the uninitiated, confusion. But whatever the reaction, the pot is here to stay thanks to a band of local volunteers.

Recently, historical society staff and volunteers, through Facebook, tracked the pot down to a rural farmstead in Grove City, effectively ending a decades-long mystery as to its whereabouts. Although in clear disrepair, and not at all how volunteer Cal Miner remembered it, the item was clearly, unmistakably, a large coffee pot. *The large coffee pot.*

Before there was Willmar Fests, there was Kaffe Fest.

A celebration of all things coffee – for which Willmar, home to an unusually high number of coffee shops and brew-loving Scandinavians was synonymous – the three-day summer festival was unrecognizable to the parades of today.

Sure, the event featured a crowning of royalty and promoted many a business, but the main attraction was the refreshments – namely coffee and donuts.

In the years leading up to, and into, the festival’s 42-year-run (1946-88), consumption was at an all-time high. Advertisements from as early as 1930 boast about the literal tons of grounds passing through the community each year. As reported in a newspaper advertisement from that year:

“Daily Tribune Survey shows that 8,250,000 cups of coffee were consumed in Willmar during 1930... 165,000 pounds of coffee are sold annually. This tremendous volume gives Willmar a right to lay claim to being the ‘Coffee Capital.’”

But of course, the community needed a way to back this claim. And so, it was in this

way that Kaffe Fest was born.

Each year, for three days in July, the festival attracted thousands to the city. Archived news clippings from the era the paint a near incomprehensible picture of the volumes swallowed.

“An astounding total of 31,000 cups of coffee was consumed in Willmar during the first day of the Kaffe Fest, an amount of coffee which proves the truth of the Willmar’s Chamber of Commerce boast – the coffee drinkingest town in the United States,” reads an excerpt from the July 14, 1948 edition of the Daily Tribune detailing the first day of that year’s festivities.

The busiest place in town for the 18,000 attendees: the “great four-sided coffee bar” near the courthouse lawn, where “many enjoyed 20 and 30 cups of the rich, full-bodied beverage during the day.”

Consumption continued to swell in years to follow – up to 55,000 donuts and 63,000 cups of coffee in 1949. To meet demand, steaming water was brought over from the local power plant.

And with more demand came more activities.

Steel-gutted locals tested their gullets in coffee-drinking contests. (Marvin Finstrom, a

Talent shows were held; queens were crowned; bands played; and at least one “fire-dance baton twirling spectacle” was performed.

But always, one tradition remained: the Kaffe Fest coffee pot, which stood as the centerpiece on a 250-foot coffee bar and ambled down the parade route on its own float.

Now 67, lifelong Willmar resident Cal Miner still recalls being awestruck by the sight.

“I was in awe of the thing. It looked magical. I just remember watching it come down the road, and I can’t remember if it was lighting up or steaming, but as it was coming toward me I just kept wondering ‘how did they make this thing?’”

Standing 10 feet tall, the pot featured a new coffee brand advertisement each year, atop decal lettering with the summer’s Kaffe Fest dates. Coffee was even served straight from a bar attached to the float.

However, after roughly 13 years of use, age began to take its toll. By 1958, the float’s undercarriage deteriorated, and the pot was discarded for a year for repairs. Once fixed, the Chamber of Commerce decided it would be safer to pull the pot from the parade, instead placing it by crane atop the chamber office.



From the late 1940s to the late 1950s, the Kaffe Fest pot served not only as an icon for the annual parade, but also cups of coffee from its float. The word “Kaffe” is derived from the Swedish word for coffee.

had more to offer than its coffee. By the mid-60s, the city decided to retire the pot completely.

“It was getting pretty crusty-looking, so someone was told to take it to the dump,” said Bob Larson, historical society deputy director. “But instead of doing that, he must’ve figured ‘we could probably use that out on the farm.’”

That “someone” was Stan Liedman, who took it to his parents’ farm near Grove City. Rather than waste the piece, a door was cut into the pot for kids to use as a playhouse. Years later, it was used as a chicken coop.

“That’s how it was when we found it,” Larson said.

“When we drove out there to the farm, it was in pretty bad shape,” said Miner. “The wooden door to the playhouse had rotted off, and they have free range chickens, so as we were jacking it up, they kept walking in and out. It was their home, and I’m not sure if they understood it was leaving.”

The historical society discovered the pot’s location af-

ter posting a Facebook photo during the 2017 Willmar Fests asking if anyone knew what became of the item.

Liedman’s sister, Sonia, responded “it is in my farm grove.”

The family donated the pot to the historical society two years ago, where, until its arrival last week, it went through a series of repairs.

The pot spent a year in Miner’s backyard as repairs were arranged. Ultimately, Chappel Central, a heating contractor in Willmar, took the job. The result:

“They did a phenomenal

job,” Miner said. “When you see some icon of the town, kind of like the Antique Car Run in New London... it’s just one of those things that should be preserved.”

With a slab now laid outside the historical society, the pot is scheduled to be placed Tuesday morning at 10 a.m., Miner said.

In the future, Larson said, “It’s going to be decalated and will say ‘Welcome to Willmar, home of the Kaffe Fest.’ We’ll have benches and people can up and take their picture with it.”



28-year-old Swedish farmer from Kerkhoven, set a record in 1952, downing 36 cups in 10 minutes, beating out runner-up Willis Wieberdink by a one-cup margin.)

But as the city grew in size and more businesses sought representation in the festival, Kaffe Fest began its transition to Willmar Fests. Times were changing, and Willmar simply

