

# The **BLESSING** Story

## BOUND FOR THE STAGE IN DRAYTON IN JULY

By Noelle Buss

Looking for a new, heartfelt Americana play? The vibrant and well-worn stages of progressive

arts towns like Chicago, New York, or even Houston and Saint Paul probably come to mind as *the* place to find it.

But how about Drayton, North Dakota, population 798 people? Not exactly the next Broadway, Drayton's Fifth Street is home to the public high school and its own well-worn stage. But that's where Drayton's Ox Cart Trails Historical Society will present *Bound for Blessing*, July 16, 17 and 19.

Adapted from the first three titles in bestselling novelist Lauraine Snelling's *Red River of the North* series, the play follows the struggles of Norwegian immigrants to tame the North Dakota frontier. Society president Marlys Boll says the story is an important one for anybody to encounter, as at some point in time "everyone's family came over and went through the same blizzards, desert storms and fire."

It is also a story that makes sense for Drayton, which in April 2006 declared itself the real life setting of Snelling's fictional town of Blessing. (Snelling originally set Blessing about five miles south of Drayton). Though the city was proud to do it, it also made things a little simpler – they now had an answer for the number of Snelling fans that kept asking where Blessing was and for the few go-getting tourists who off-

roaded through private fields trying to find it.

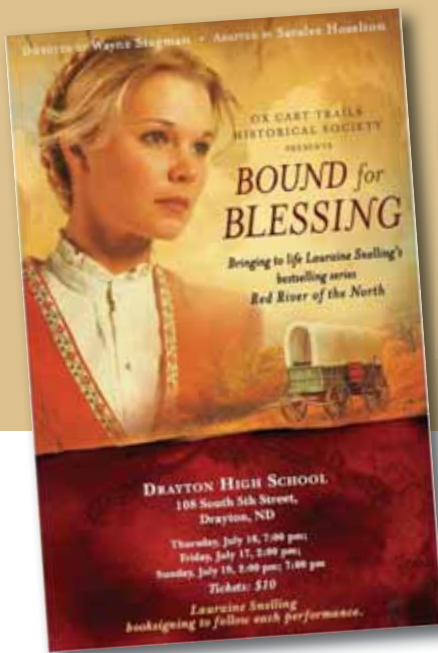
Playwright Saralee Hoselton agreed that it was a worthwhile story to tell. For her, adapting the novels was a chance to go to a different place and way of life. Something that not only fulfilled her dramatic sensibilities, honed over the course of 50-plus years in theater, but also offered an occasional escape from the realities of her husband's ailing health. Yet, that certainly didn't mean the creative process was easy for her.

Hoselton, who has written and directed two previous works on the history of Drayton, began mapping out the play in the fall of 2007, some time after the idea came out of a brainstorming session. According to Snelling, "Hoselton said she'd never write a play again. However, a few months later she came back with some great ideas and it grew from there." Hoselton says she instinctively knew the story should end at the naming of the town of Blessing, but everything before that, "was like solving a puzzle – figuring out what to put in and what to leave out."

She carefully paged through the books highlighting scenes she knew would be good fodder for dramatization. It's a process Snelling admits she never could have done herself; she was too attached to each scene and character to let any of them go. Over the course of roughly a year, Hoselton painstakingly by hand composed her notes and wrote the whole play out before transferring it to a computer. In the end, she relied on much of Snelling's original dialogue and settings, while linking them together with original narration and a few original scenes.

But the work was hardly over; she and director Wayne Stegman had to manage the casting of 30 actors for the production, staying true to characters that had long lived only in the minds of Snelling's readers. Beyond that they had to invent and carefully record stage directions, create sets and acquire props and costumes. Among other things, this meant scrounging up an authentic wagon and transporting a portable stage from 75 miles away. Yet, Boll said the task was occasionally made easier because of the setting. "It wasn't too hard to put historically accurate shoes on the kids – they didn't wear any."

As rehearsals and construction continue, Boll is also able to fall back on the people of Drayton for added help, with nearly



Set construction for the show has been a community project for several months.



Many Drayton-area young people, shown here in rehearsals, are participating in the play.

10 percent of the population somehow involved in the production. Yet the citizens of Drayton aren't the only ones who are gearing up for these performances. Author Lauraine Snelling will also be present, conducting a writing seminar and signing books. She approved the original script from her home in southern California, but the distance and a busy speaking schedule kept her participation at a minimum. Snelling says she is "thrilled to see the people who have lived in my imagination all this time moving around in real life. I can't wait to watch the audience's reaction to my characters and stories coming alive."

With a few weeks to go, many of the tickets have already been sold or reserved by diverse groups such as Bismarck's Satrom Travel and Tour, Harvey's First National Bank, Forbes' Happy Trails Tours, the Red Hats from East Grand Forks and others. *Bound for Blessings'* four performances also coincide with the annual Drayton Riverfest and Drayton High School's All-Class Reunion, which occurs every nine years.

In all, Boll says they are expecting more than 1,500 people that week, pulling from all over the country. Though creating *Bound For Blessing* is more work than she ever thought, for Boll being able to share a touching bit of history with all these people is a great bit of fun. And it allows the people of Drayton to really be able to say that Blessing can indeed be found right there.

## ***BOUND FOR BLESSING AND BEYOND***

The *Bound For Blessing* performance times are 7 p.m. July 16 and 17, and 2 p.m. July 19 at the Drayton High School gym, 108 S. 5th St.

At 5 p.m. on Saturday, July 18, the Ox Cart Trails Historical Society members dressed in costume will serve a Supper at the Soddy. This sodbuster home-style meal will be at the museum grounds, and there will be a free will offering to cover the cost. After the dinner, guests will be able to tour Blessing Square, the museum grounds, which include a sod house built

by community members, and a log house from the late 1800s. Blessing Square is located at 201 Almeron Avenue.

Lauraine Snelling's writing seminar is also on July 16, at the H. G. Johnson Memorial Hall, 105 Almeron Avenue. The 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. seminar is open to everyone from age 12 and up, with registration due by July 12. The cost is \$35. After each play performance, Snelling will sign books, including



This is the Ox Cart Trails Historical Society's soddy, the site of the July 18 supper.

any personal books of hers people may want to bring.

Reservations for the Supper at the Soddy and the writing seminar should be made through Treasurer, P.O. Box 213, Drayton, ND 58225. Direct all questions to Marlys Boll, president of Ox Cart Trails Historical Society, 701-454-6103, [president@oxcarttrails.net](mailto:president@oxcarttrails.net). When sending payment for the play tickets, indicate which performance attending, and the tickets will be available at the door. They are \$10 each. Wheelchair accommodations are available upon request.

These events coincide with Drayton's annual Riverfest celebration, and an all-class reunion. All activities are supported in part by a grant from the North Dakota Council on the Arts, which receives funding from the state legislature and the National Endowment for the Arts.