

2-1-98

Mac helps bring back flavor of old downtown

By Erin Andersen
Journal Staff Writer

When he couldn't support his family teaching history, Steve McCarthy decided to preserve history.

And it's because of dedication like McCarthy's that life and history have been restored in Rapid City's downtown.

"Rapid City's downtown is undergoing a renaissance," says Paul Swedlund, chairman of the Rapid City Historical Preservation Commission.

"Steve is a real pioneer in historic preservation, both from the point of view of doing restoration on his own projects and being a contractor willing to undertake a restoration project," Swedlund says.

McCarthy and his Mac Construction Co. have completed numerous restoration projects in the Black Hills. Among them: the once condemned Lawrence County Courthouse, the Firehouse Restaurant, the Elks building, the second floor of the Buell building, Prairie Edge, the Sixth Street Deli, Arrow Pawn, the old Sears building, the former Woolworth's building (Republican Block) and now the old JCPenney building.

Contractors frequently shy away from historical restoration projects because of the time, restrictions and unknowns hidden behind facades, sheet rock and brick.

"It's the thing I like doing," McCarthy says. "There's a certain character to the buildings that I don't find in new buildings. I like brick and wood over aluminum and steel."

The son of Irish immigrants, McCarthy was born and raised near Manhattan, N.Y. His father taught all of his children how to work with their hands — although, "He tried to get us to college so we didn't have to do it."

McCarthy became a history teacher. And in 1967, he boarded a South Dakota-bound bus in Manhattan for a one-year stint teaching at Red Cloud Indian School.

"I never went back," he says of New York. "I met my wife and fell in love with western South Dakota."

He taught four years in Wanblee before moving to Rapid City shortly after the 1972 flood.

"They didn't pay me to teach school, so I figured I could make money in construction," McCarthy says.

Mac Construction started in 1974.

Today, he has about 50 employees — including his daughter and son-in-law, Maria and Peter Anderson.

"I don't have interest in being the biggest, just the best," he says with an affable smile.

It's not just a business philosophy, it's a way of life. "Steve really has been involved in all the major quality restoration work that has been done," Swedlund says.

Two decades ago, Rapid City's Main Street was in the midst of decline with the loss of Sears and JCPenney department stores to the Rushmore Mall. Rapid City's business hub soon turned into "a bunch of burned out and abandoned buildings," McCarthy recalls.

McCarthy was among a group of businessmen who vowed to turn it around.

In 1977, retired Rapid City doctor David Sabow hired McCarthy to restore the old Firehouse. Four years later, McCarthy was hired to restore the second floor of the Buell building.

The work prompted more restoration projects by a variety of contractors. McCarthy and former partner Jim Scull bought the Elks building and restored it.

Other projects followed for McCarthy, including Prairie Edge and the once burned-out Price House. The former is McCarthy's favorite project and has been called "a jewel" by historic preservationists and contractors alike.

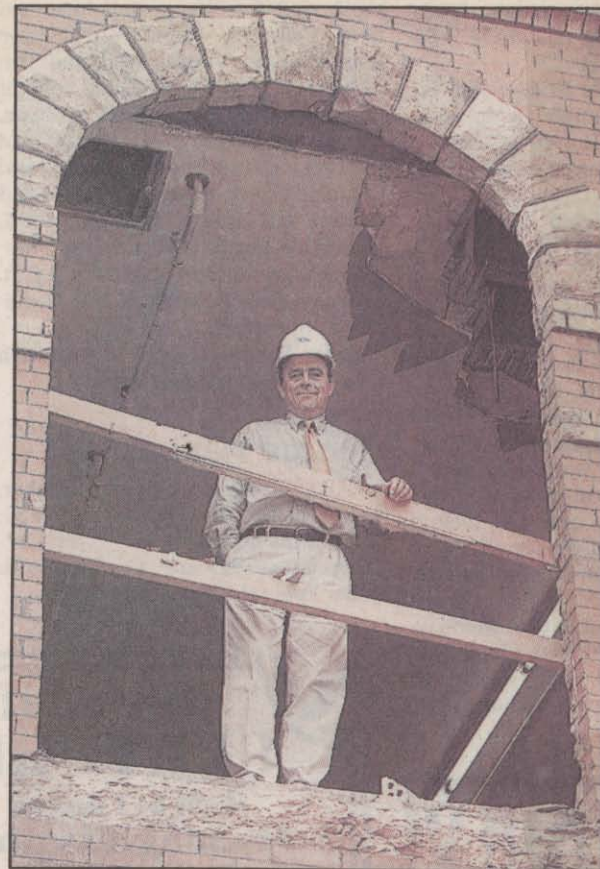
The latter project was the subject of much criticism because of an addition McCarthy built. Swedlund defends McCarthy. "Steve was the owner and contractor willing to step up and save that house," Swedlund says. "That house looks better than it did before the fire."

McCarthy also purchased the old Baers (former Sears) building when the furniture store went bankrupt, and he restored it to its original 1940s-era architecture.

The restoration has done more than fill empty store fronts. Businesses now occupy the second and third floors of buildings — space that for years stood vacant or was used for storage.

Adding to that vitality is the quality of restoration. Swedlund says McCarthy's work surpasses the minimum federal standards for historic preservation projects.

"When you look at Prairie Edge or the north end of the



Journal file photo

Steve McCarthy, owner of MAC Construction, stands in one of the second-floor windows of the old JCPenney store, which his company restored.

Elks or at the Penneys building, you are seeing really meticulous restoration. It costs more to do that," Swedlund says. "That shows that this is not some sort of fly-by-night or short-term commitment to these buildings. This is a long-term commitment. ... People see that and say 'therefore, the downtown is a safe place to make an investment,'" Swedlund says.

McCarthy is much more low key about his role in the downtown renewal. "It's nice to feel you're a small part of making that happen," McCarthy says.