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Wellcome to England

By Bob Fenske

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GARDEN CITY — Thirty-three years ago, Karen Lachmiller and Roxie Mell-Brandts were seniors at Wellcome Memorial High School and they had one whale of a Christmas break planned.



John Cross

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They were going to England. They had their shots. They had their passports. They had their airline tickets. They were set ... save for one little uncontrollable detail: an airline strike.

“And that was that. We didn’t go,” Lachmiller said. “I can’t tell you how disappointed I was.”

The disappointment is now wiped away. Lachmiller and Mell-Brandts flew to London Tuesday to help celebrate Sir Henry Wellcome’s 150th birthday. The two Garden City women will give a 20-minute presentation this weekend on the man who contributed so much to their hometown. And this time, the airlines cooperated.

“Roxie’s been there five or six times, but after that failed trip, I never made it,” Lachmiller said. “So I’m as

excited as a schoolgirl. To see England and to let people know what Sir Henry did for us ... wow.”

And Wellcome, make no mistake about it, did a lot for little Garden City.

He may have only lived in the town for nine years and he may have departed Garden City more than 130 years ago, but he never forgot it. **When he died in 1936, the pharmaceutical pioneer left the town \$400,000 — \$250,000 for public buildings and the rest for upkeep and maintenance.**

The result was the construction of a gym, community room and library attached to Wellcome Memorial High School in 1957. Fifteen years later, the district and the Wellcome Trust pooled resources to construct locker rooms, a choir room and a band room.

“He never forgot this little place, and I think that says a lot about Garden City,” Mell-Brandts said. “When you think that he left here when he was 18 and lived for so many more years after, it’s just amazing.”

Mell-Brandts is a member of the current Wellcome Trust board, which oversees the endowment. She also purchased the 1922 portion of what was once Wellcome Memorial High School and along with her partner, Dan Wingert, plans to turn the building into apartments.

She has kept in touch with folks from the other Wellcome Trust, the one Sir Henry left the bulk of his money to for continued research into improving human and animal health. This past spring, she e-mailed her friends in England and said she was thinking about making another trip to Europe. They suggested this upcoming weekend, dubbed “open house” weekend in London.

Every public building in the city is open for free tours. A few months later, they e-mailed again. How about speaking about Sir Henry at the Wellcome Trust open house? She immediately called Lachmiller with the news.

“And I think the first thing she said was, ‘Can I go? Please?’” Mell-Brandts said. “So we’ve been busy getting everything ready. It’s been fun and it does make you realize how much the Wellcome name means around here.”

The two have put together a Power Point presentation titled “Wellcome to Garden City.”

Lachmiller jokes that Mell-Brandts is the critical one to the operation and that “I’m just the pointer.”

“But I don’t care,” she added, “because I’m going.”