

# Argus Leader.

## Need a dash of Christmas spirit? Come to Nora Store

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**NORA** – Small stores once speckled country intersections, giving rural folks a chance to get needed supplies without going all the way into town.

Most of those stores are gone now. Those that still exist in tiny settlements like Norway Corner, Spink and Big Spring have been converted to other uses such as private homes, restaurants or church buildings.

Then there's the Nora Store.



Mike Pedersen unfurls the flag outside the old Nora Store Tuesday, Nov 25, 2014. Pederson invites the public to join him in singing Christmas carols over the next three weekends for the 25th annual Christmas Carol Celebration at the store.

Elisha Page - Argus Leader

Step inside, and you'll glimpse a little of what it was like a century ago when the store owner had only one pair of shoes to show you but would obligingly order your size.

*"This was Americana,"* says Mike Pedersen, and he's referring to much more than a country store. He's talking about a sense of community, one he fears is rapidly being lost in a whirl of technology that sometimes seems to separate people more than it brings them together.

That's why Pedersen, who came to Union County in 1972 for a weekend only to remain there for a lifetime, had dedicated his life to Nora, the store and its history. That's why for the next three weekends and more than a dozen weekdays he opens his store to strangers who want to sing Christmas carols to the accompaniment of a pipe organ, a player piano or a baby grand.

The Nora Store Christmas began 25 years ago, soon after Pedersen acquired the pipe organ. From the first year, it has attracted hundreds of people who come there for reasons of their own.



Mike Pedersen plays a Christmas carol on his pipe organ at the old Nora Store, Nov 25, 2014. Pederson invites the public to join him in singing carols over the next three weekends for the 25th annual Christmas Carol Celebration at the store.

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Pedersen has his own theory.

*"To me, Nora is a very spiritual place," he says. "Ever since I was a little kid I wanted to be a missionary. Little did I know that Nora was to be my mission field."*

Pedersen himself had never been to Nora, never knew it existed, until that long-ago summer in the early 1970s. He was born in Newell, Iowa, and from the age of 10 raised in California and Arizona. His mother's family came from Beresford, and the summer he was 21 Pedersen returned to the area for the Roseni Lutheran Church's centennial celebration.

*"I got to meet some relatives that I knew of but didn't really know," he says. "They invited me that summer to come and spend some time on the farm with them, and I really enjoyed it."*

As summer waned, though, it was time to depart back to a big city. But Pedersen's newfound friends didn't want him to leave. A friend suggested that Pedersen move into a small apartment on the friend's grandparents' place at Nora.

*"I had lived a few miles west of the store for the whole summer into the fall, and I'd never heard of Nora," Pedersen says. "We came down the hill to an intersection, turned south, and there was Nora."*

Nora already had shrunk in size from its peak. The Ronning store was closed, and in 1945 the creamery known as far away as Chicago for its Sunshine brand butter burned down, then relocated to Alcester.

Carl and Helma Oden operated the store from 1907 to 1947, then others took it over. Selmer and Lilly Sommervold lived on the property when their grandson brought Pedersen to their door.

They offered him the back of the store rent-free if he paid the electricity and natural gas bills. That gave Pedersen a ground-floor kitchen and living room with a large upstairs room. It had running water but an outdoor bathroom.

Pedersen accepted the offer.

*"I thought life was grand," he says, tears filling his eyes. "And I still do."*

In 1985, he purchased three of Nora's 10 acres, including the house, store, barn and shanty. Pedersen moved into the Sommervold house and began filling the buildings with the items he had accumulated. He calls himself a packrat, but a visitor's description several years ago still makes him laugh.

*"If you were in therapy," she told him, "they'd call you a hoarder."*

Among his collection: A pipe organ from George Kilgen & Son of St. Louis, Mo. Like the store, it dates back to 1907 and for years it served the congregation at Lake Preston Lutheran Church.



Mike Pedersen sits with his pipe organ at the old Nora Store, Nov 25, 2014. Pederson invites the public to join him in singing carols over the next three weekends for the 25th annual Christmas Carol Celebration at the store.

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When Pedersen acquired it, the organ had been completely disassembled. It was while he was reconstructing it with the help of two others that he decided to open the store for Christmas, then only about six weeks away.

But, acting on the faith that dominates his life, Pedersen put an ad in a newspaper inviting people to sing Christmas songs at the Nora Store. Thirty minutes before the appointed time, the first carload arrived, and the people kept coming.

In recent years, Pedersen has accepted freewill donations to be used to help preserve the 107-year-old building. A house painter by trade, he was unable to save his property's barn because of lack of cash. He doesn't want to see the store, which has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places, crumble in a similar fashion.

The first song he ever played on his pipe organ was the hymn "Jesus Loves Me," and Pedersen, essentially a self-taught musician, plays it often. It's a fitting theme song for a man who refers to his best friend Al and Jesus Christ in the same affectionate tone.

Need a dash of Christmas spirit? Come to Nora, Pedersen says.

*"Nobody who comes through the door doesn't hear what Christmas is really meant to be," he says. "I will play 'Jesus Loves Me,' and just about every time that gives me a tear. And 90 percent of the time the whole crowd will sing 'Jesus Loves Me,' and that's priceless."*

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### **If you go**

WHAT: Reason for the Season 2014, A Nora Store Merry Christmas

WHERE: Nora Store, 30707 475th Ave., Nora

WHEN: 6:30 to 9 p.m. Friday, Saturday, Dec. 5, 6, 12, 13; 1:30 to 4 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 7 and 14. Small groups during the week are welcomed by appointment. Call 670-1455.