



Photos by SCOTT MUSSELL / Courier Staff Photographer

Ruth Rasmussen of Traer amassed an impressive collection of salt and pepper shakers. The Traer City Council recently agreed to spend \$12,500 to help purchase the entire set, and the Traer-Community Betterment organization plans to turn the collection into a tourist attraction.

Shaking things up

NE Iowa towns turn to unconventional attractions to lure visitors

By JOSH NELSON

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TRAER—No mountains, lakes or caves grace the landscape of northern Tama County, just rolling hills and grain bins. It is a good place for harvesting crops, not necessarily for harvesting tourist dollars.

Instead of giving up hope on tapping into a \$5.4 billion industry in Iowa, members of Traer Community Betterment got creative.

"We don't have any natural attributes that are going to draw people, so then the next stage is to look around and see what do we have that people might come and see," said Ellen Young, director of the nonprofit organization.



Explore odd tourist attractions in Iowa with an interactive map. Learn more about how Traer's plan for a museum at wctcourier.com.

Members of the City Council approved \$12,500 in local option sales tax money to buy a collection. What they will get is more than 14,400 pairs of salt and pepper shakers assembled by Ruth Rasmussen of Traer.

The money will pay half of the cost. Matching funds will come from donations or grants. The collection will likely be on display next year.

Facing a similar challenge, other towns around Northeast Iowa have also turned to unconventional attractions. They run the gamut — from Iowa's largest frying pan to the world's smallest church — and appear to be effective tools to get people into towns they would otherwise never visit.

Room for two

Traer already has a unique feature, a winding iron staircase leading to the former headquarters of the Traer Star-Clipper newspaper. The stairs were



One pair of more than 14,400 shakers in Ruth Rasmussen's collection.

built in 1894 to access the newspaper's second-floor entrance.

The attraction is as ingrained in the character of the city as the Golden Gate Bridge is for San Francisco. The spiral steps show up in both Traer's slogan — "Wind Up in Traer" — and its annual celebration — the Winding Stairs Festival.

Some felt the town could use another draw. Young said the idea to start a shaker museum came during a conference about tourism years ago. She thought about the collection on and off over the years, but Rasmussen, 84, only recently agreed to sell.

See **ATTRACTIONS**, page A6