

Acknowledgements

There weren't all that many people--three or four dozen. Most, like me, were on the far side of fifty. But a pandemic is raging, and being out at all is something of a risk.

In 1870, Luxembourgers came to this corner of the state, the only region of Iowa not yet homesteaded. For the record, forty of them unloaded their wagons and cut through virgin prairie.

A month or so ago, Alton dedicated a big, colorful mural right across from the Veterans Memorial, a glorious flutter of butterflies across a darkened prairie landscape. A few ghostly four-leggeds haunt the mural, along with fizzy little yellow bubbles, the artist told us, are--I should have thought of it—fireflies.

Stop up and see it sometime. The state of Iowa is outlined between its two mighty rivers--the Mississippi and the Missouri; and there's a light jet trail across the state, from Dubuque (a village named St. Donatus actually) to Siouxland villages--Alton, Marcus, Remsen, Hospers, and LeMars, the trek those Luxembourgers took to claim some of Iowa's finest black soil.

The artist is Prof. Amber Hansen, who teaches art at USD. She was there for the dedication. She hails from Alton and stoutly claims her own Luxembourgian heritage, even says she visited "the old country" recently, she said, to see the land her ancestors left behind.

She called the mural "a community project," even pointed out the butterfly wings that have yet to be painted; but then, Alton, she claimed, has lots of good artists to finish the job.

The way she started the public dedication, downtown Alton, was stunning, not because of what she said, but because she said it at all. "I'd like to begin with a 'land acknowledgement,'" she told the crowd.

I had no idea what a "land acknowledgement" was. I'm quite sure most of that small crowd knew much either.

She took this "land acknowledgement," she said, from the U. S. Department of Arts and Culture.

Every community owes its existence and vitality to generations from around the world, who contributed their hopes, dreams, and energy to making the history that led to this moment. Some were brought here against their will, some were drawn in hopes of making a better life, and some have lived on this land for more generations than can be counted.

She was acknowledging that the land where her ancestors and mine settled and even occasionally mingled was not so much their own as it was a land with an already significant history, a legacy that needed to be acknowledged. Human beings lived here and loved here before any of my Dutch great-grandparents, or her Luxembourgiens, slaved away on their own homestead claims.

Truth and acknowledgement are critical to building respect and connection across all barriers of heritage and difference. Today we are standing on the ancestral lands of many indigenous tribes, but most recently of . . .
. . .and here she named two tribal peoples whose names few in the crowd, if any, had ever heard before, even though most of the crowd, I'm sure, live in the state, Iowa, named after indigenous people who've been gone for nearly 200 years.

We pay respect to their elders, past and present. Please take a moment to consider the many legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and

settlement that brings us together here today; and please join us in acknowledging these truths in any and all public events.

Big, colorful butterflies wing their way through the scene Professor Amber Hansen designed and painted on the wall, but behind them there are others, shadowy butterfly ghosts of the past, reminders that what's here is only what's here now, not what once was.

That Sunday morning, Prof. Amber Hansen gave Alton a wall full of beauty and a blessed lesson in humility.