Along with paintings and sculptures in the cowboy and Native American genre, the Rash collection includes a variety of Native American artifacts like Navajo rugs and sand paintings, along with Plains Indians works. L&T photos/Rachel Coleman

Baker Arts offers Liberal a look at the Don Rash collection

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Walk through the doors of Baker Arts Center, 624 N. Pershing, and a visitor may well feel she's stepped back in time. A Navajo rug bears witness to the value of corn crops, hand-beaded moccasins reflect the painstaking craftsmanship achieved by Plains Indians, and paintings depict an era that has vanished.

The show, courtesy of the Rash family, also offers a look into the past and the future for Liberal residents. Going back, the collection speaks of one family's desire to give to the community.

Looking forward, the collection might one day be accessible to future Liberal residents, through the construction of a “Heritage Center” at another local attraction, the Seward County Historical Society’s Coronado Museum.

“My wife, Priscilla, and I decided we would start buying one piece of art a year, to give back to the community,” said local oil company owner Don Rash. “After I lost her 18 years ago, I began to buy more. Now, I’ve got a collection of Native American art.”

For the Baker Arts exhibit, Rash chose a variety of pieces to display: an elk-tooth ceremonial robe, a war club, a Peace Medal crafted in 1793 and offered to Native Americans as proof that President George Washington hoped to be their Great Father. On the walls of the art center, paintings show a spectrum of western experiences, with the Native Americans at the center of interest.

“I started collecting the art first, and then I got into the artifacts,” Rash said. “They go together so nicely. You can put an artifact next to a nice piece of art, and they blend together.” Though his wife loved basket work, Rash obtained only a few such pieces.

“I don’t know as much about baskets,” he said. “The Navajo weavings, the sand paintings, the ceremonial items, I’ve learned more about. You have to understand what you’re looking for, maybe have an eye that’s a little different than some other person. Cowboy art is something special, too, but Native American has always been my very favorite subject.”

For now, the walls of every upstairs gallery at the Baker display gems from Rash's collection. The show, mounted Aug. 17, will open officially with a reception from 2 to 5 p.m. Saturday, and remain through Oct. 5.

In some ways, the exhibit offers a sneak peek of what could be on permanent display as plans for a Heritage Center on the Coronado Museum grounds coalesce. A long-time member of the Seward County Historical Society, and its current vice-president, Rash hopes to leave a legacy for all county residents to enjoy.

"My problem now is there's no place to leave the collection in Liberal that has the facilities," he said, noting that the show at the Baker offers a taste of what could be a permanent addition to Liberal's tourism offerings.

Although he is most often associated with the Coronado Museum, Rash is enthusiastic about all Liberal's attractions. He helped support and promote a Mid America Air Museum dinosaur show that drew school children from a 100-mile radius last spring. He has assisted the Coronado Museum in acquiring Indian artifacts for its permanent display. The Baker show serves as the first exhibit of his own collection he has opened for public viewing.

All his efforts go toward the goal of honoring the past and building the future in the community he calls home. Rash believes tourism is a key part of success for Liberal.

With several well-established attractions already in place, Rash said, the community should be learning that tourism is a "the cleanest source of economic development you can hope for. People who live here don't think tourists will come to see something we have every day. It's the hardest thing in the world to sell to your own people."

Yet from his office at Rash Oil, right next door to Dorothy's House and the Coronado Museum, Rash sees the reality many Liberal residents miss.

"I go outdoors every day and walk through the parking area to see where people have come from," he said. "It's amazing. There are license tags from all over. They stop in the evenings,

they stop on the weekends. And with the Heritage Building, they would come to see that, too, because we are right in the center of Indian Country, right here, where we are today.”

As fundraising continues for the Heritage Building, Rash continues to build his personal collection, one piece at a time.

“I can’t get it out of my blood now,” he said. “I’d rather go to see an art sale or auction than have breakfast in the morning. It’s great.”

And, he added, he hopes it is something the community will enjoy, as well.

You are cordially invited to …

The Baker Arts Center is inviting the public to come in to view the Rash Family Collection Exhibit. This exhibit showcases the private collection of Native American artwork and artifacts of the Don Rash family.

The artifacts include rugs, baskets, cradle boards, moccasins, dresses, war shirt, head dress, jewelry, Kachinas, photographs, a buffalo hide and many other items.

There will be an opening reception from 2 to 5 p.m. Saturday at the center located at 624 N. Pershing in Liberal. The exhibit will be on display through Oct. 5..

The lower level gallery will feature select Native American art and artifact items from the

center’s permanent collection to complement the current exhibit in the main galleries.

The hours of operation during this exhibit will be from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and from 2 to 5 p.m. Saturday. The center is closed on Sunday and Monday.

As always, there is no admission fee for viewing exhibits at the center.