This is just one of the “Shoppes” that will be available to those attending Baker Arts Center’s French Market this weekend. Shoppes include: Bake Shoppe, Candy Shoppe, Gently Used Shoppe, Christmas, Fall, Cowboy, Jewelry, Home & Kitchen, as well as a Silent Auction area. L&T photos/Rachel Coleman

Baker Arts set to ‘Celebrate’ 25 years of French Market

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

When it began, French Market was meant to raise money to transform the Irene Dillon Baker home into an art center for the community.

Twenty-five years later, it’s clear the original vision has been realized. The pre-holiday market and luncheon is still going strong, and it’s still the foundational fundraiser for the non-profit Baker Arts Center. “Celebration,” this year’s silver-anniversary theme for the popular

marketplace and luncheon, runs from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and continues from noon to 4 p.m. Sunday.

Director Denae Weber said she's excited both by the newness of the event — it's her first year as director of BAC — and by its durability.

"I'm just 25 years old, same age as the French Market, and I think it's such a special event," she said. "It's rare for a fundraiser like this to last so long, and to grow."

The French Market has expanded from its original Wednesday-afternoon roots, said former director Mary Lambert of Liberal. It began as the idea of Doris Engel, longtime community booster, and many of her friends. The group of women, in fact, dubbed itself "Friends of Baker Arts," predating the center's establishment.

"They did it all back then," said Lambert. "They got the idea, they put in the work, they cooked the luncheon of crepes, and they made Mrs. Baker's dream a reality."

Irene Dillon Baker, local artist and eccentric, had built her family home specifically for the purpose of later transforming it into an art center. She purchased nearby lots and residential properties until she owned most of the block where Baker Arts now sits at 624 N. Pershing Ave.

In 1988, however, the Baker house was still only that: a house with an unfinished basement and countless art pieces crammed into closets, corners and the attic. A community art center seemed like wishful thinking, but Engel's idea came at the ideal moment, Lambert recalled.

"That was the year the Kansas Arts Commission — which doesn't even exist anymore — announced it would award brick-and-mortar grants to arts agencies," she said. "The timing was perfect." In two months' time, the Friends put together the first-ever French Market, and with matching funds from KAC, "we were able to do a lot of the renovation and put in the parking lot," said Lambert.

Baker Arts Center was on its way. The French Market came along as well.

"Every year, we expanded it a little," said Lambert. The Friends of Baker Arts added a second sit-down luncheon, serving quiche. They added to the market offerings, with homemade candy and baked goods, original artwork, and handcrafted holiday decor, a rarity in pre-Amazon.com, pre-Hobby Lobby days. In time, the French Market came to serve as the community's official holiday kick-off. Each year's theme explored another facet of Christmas: the Nutcracker Ballet, the 12 Days of Christmas, Winter Wonderland, gingerbread houses, candy canes, snowflakes and more.

"It was so much fun," said Lambert. "These women had been involved in starting things for the community before, and they never ran out of ideas."

One year, they hit upon the concept of offering an elaborately decorated Christmas tree to guests who purchased tickets for a drawing. The venture was so popular, it eventually grew into the Festival of Trees, a gala event where formally-dressed guests snacked on hors d'oeuvres and cocktails before bidding on an array of whimsical theme trees and high-dollar art. That in turn grew into "Night of Lights," which survived, thrived, and will take place later in November.

Weber, who holds a degree in liberal arts and sciences with an emphasis on marketing, is putting her college education to work during the French Market. Along with artful silent auction exhibits and appealing shop fronts, she's set up "teaser" displays throughout the French Market to give people a glimpse of what lies ahead during this year's "Night of Lights," set for 5:30 p.m. Nov. 23 at the Seward County Event Center.

The French Market, however, is the main event this week. With two days to go, amid galleries sparkling with lights, glitter and greenery, Weber and BAC Art Director Diane Marsh continued to set up displays. Weber loaded cakes onto bookshelves donated by Southern Office Supply and arranged bags of toffee and peanut brittle. A refrigerator contributed by Circle D Appliance stood in the coat closet, ready to hold perishable items.

Businesses and groups in the community have exceeded BAC's expectations, said Weber, in offering a helping hand.

"We've got some amazing items upstairs for our silent auction," she said. "Sometimes I hate to keep asking people to give, but we're a nonprofit, so that's what we rely upon. Everyone here appreciates the help so much."

In the lower-level galleries, Marsh priced items destined for the shoppes. With categories such as "gently used," cowboy/western, children's items, kitchen, bath, and fall decor, the tables and wall displays offered something for everyone.

"I've seen people get bored or burned out with other fundraisers in other places," Weber said. "That just doesn't seem to happen here."

Students from Liberal High School volunteered to help set up French Market, adding a youthful burst of energy to the longstanding Friends of Baker Arts and Baker Babes volunteer groups. As Thursday and Friday wore on, friends and supporters from the community stopped by Baker Arts to drop off donations — large tubs of snack mix, dozens of cookies, fragile tea sets and hand-sewn kitchen linens — as opening day drew nearer.

On the main floor, silver and white arrangements sparkled on the table tops, silverware neatly arranged for Saturday and Sunday luncheons. Instead of artwork, Marsh had filled the gallery walls with a life-sized scrapbook of photographs, memorabilia and reminiscences from Lambert, Friends and Babes.

“It’s really something,” Lambert said. “So many of these ladies are gone now.”

If they could see the center they built, the extravagant trees, tables loaded with tempting items and the vaulted ceilings of the south gallery itself, they’d likely agree with the motto emblazoned on the glittery sleigh parked in one corner: “It’s the most wonderful time of the year.”

FRENCH MARKET details

Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Sunday, 12 to 4 p.m. Free admittance to browse, shop and bid. Shoppes include: Bake Shoppe, Candy Shoppe, Gently Used Shoppe, Christmas, Fall, Cowboy, Jewelry, Home & Kitchen. Silent Auction area will be open from Saturday morning until 3 p.m. Sunday afternoon. Luncheon served at 11 a.m., 12:10 and 1:20 p.m. Saturday, with paid reservations required, $15 per person; Sunday luncheon does not require reservations, and is priced at $8 per person. Saturday menu: Crème poulet (chicken), mélange squash, rice pilaf, cerise geleé salade (cherry), pudding au pain (bread pudding), dinner roll. Sunday menu: Fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, rolls and dessert.

For information, call Baker Arts at 624-2810, or stop by the center at 624 N. Pershing Ave.