

CountryPlace.

Here's One Heck of a Playground!

Practically everyone in the Colo, Iowa, section of the telephone book helped create this fantasy recreation area.



It's a typical main street in a typical rural town: a hardware store, a flower shop, and two beauty shops. A library, a co-op elevator, and a bank.

Typical, that is, until you spy the fortresslike edifice next to the Colo-Nesco Elementary School. It's a playground that features castle turrets, a

wooden car and boat, and an amphitheater.

"It was a total community effort," says Linda Peakin, describing what it took to build the facility.

Just how small is Colo? When asked her address, Peakin replies, "Colo, Iowa." Period.

"There's only one route in Colo," Peakin laughs. But almost all of the 800 caring residents helped build the playground.

Like folks in a lot of communities, those in Colo had lived for years with an out-of-date, unsafe playground. The slide was too tall, the merry-go-round was a menace, and several children had broken their arms falling from one particular tower structure, explains Claire Hall, general director for the project.

A committee of concerned residents looked into buying readymade equipment. Prices brought quite a "sticker shock," says Hall.

When the group visited an Ames, Iowa, playground designed by Rob-

ert S. Leathers and Associates of Ithaca, N.Y., they knew they had found what they wanted.

Playing It Safe Is Costly

Some residents were shocked when they heard the price for the playground the committee wanted—\$35,000.

"A senior citizen came up to me and said, 'I just can't believe you're going to build this thing for that amount of money,'" says Hall.

"At the end, he said, 'I still think \$35,000 is a lot of money, but I think this is really great.'"

Expertise in playground safety is one of the main features a community pays for when working with an experienced design firm.

"It used to be that a group of people got together and put some asphalt out and then put a slide on top of the asphalt," says John Dean.

Want To Build a Playground?

To plan a safe playground for your community, write to the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission, Washington, DC 20207. For a list of resources, including those of Claire Hall, Robert S. Leathers and Associates, safety consultants, and equipment manufacturers, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to Playgrounds, *Progressive Farmer*, Box 2581, Birmingham, AL 35202.

"Those days are over." Dean is the designer from Leathers and Associates who worked with the Colo community on the project.

"We're in compliance with Consumer Products Safety Commission guidelines down the line," he adds.

With the recent passing of the Americans With Disabilities Act, playgrounds soon will be required to be more accessible to children with special needs. Liability insurance always has to be a prime consideration.

What Is the First Step?

Dean came to Colo in the fall and mapped out the fundraising and planning strategy for the playground, which was to be built by community volunteers the following spring.

Involving the children is important, Dean emphasizes. "We ask the kids, 'Well, who's going to build this playground?'"

They look a bit confused at first, he explains, but then they volunteer their teachers and parents. When Dean responds enthusiastically, the kids feel free to describe the features they want in *their* playground.

"The little ones will ask for something like a rainbow," he chuckles. "The kids are the magic in one of these projects, and it takes magic."

Raising the Money, Planning the Construction

It also takes hard work and money. After Dean's visit in the fall, the Colo people began months of fundraising.

The kids held a design



The children of Colo worked hard at getting the playground: They suggested design features, helped raise money, and scrubbed tires and soaped screws during construction.

ing for depictions of what the playground would look like. The winning art was silk-screened onto T-shirts, which sold like hotcakes.

"Each of the kids in the school sent letters asking for donations for their playground," says Peakin. Out-of-town relatives and Colo school alumni were asked to contribute. The city council and the school board gave part of the needed funds.

Dean says, "A lot of people giving a little money equals volunteer turnout. If you don't cover that base, the wind is going to be blowing on your face that first day of construction and you're going to hear only one ham-

mer going bang, bang, bang . . .," his voice trails off.

Getting volunteers to do the construction also is crucial. A typical Leathers-designed playground put out for bids to be built by carpenters would probably cost \$150,000 to \$200,000, Dean says. Volunteer labor cuts the cost to one-third.

The Week of Playground Construction

Two Leathers engineers supervised the construction. Fathers and mothers gave up vacation time to come out and hammer. Grandparents brought food.

The children were disappointed because no one below the fifth grade was allowed on the site. But that didn't stop them from helping.

"Each class soaped screws, which makes the screws go in easier," Hall says. "They also cleaned tires."

When the playground was finished, Colo celebrated.

"We had ice cream for the whole community and brought in a hot air balloon that our mayor rode in," Hall recalls. "All the elementary children sang a song they had written."

More Than Just a Place To Play

"When people see the turrets from Highway 65 and U.S. 30, they say, 'Hey, what's that?' and stop," Hall says. She and others believe the "whoa-what-do-we-have-here" playground has helped persuade folks to move to their tiny community.

The playground boldly announces that Colo is a community that has no intention of fading away into small-town oblivion.

"I remember, just about halfway through [the planning stage], we were going, 'What did we get ourselves into?'" Linda Peakin recalls. "We're such a small town. How are we going to be able to get all of these people to come?"

"But I guess it's kind of like the movie *Field of Dreams*," Peakin concludes. "When we needed them, they were there."

By NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON with photos by JOE LINK