

COUNTY NEWS

Construction starts on Wilson's Czech Cottages

BY ALAN RUSCH

ELLSWORTH COUNTY I-R

WILSON — After months of planning and preparation, developer David Criswell's Czech Cottages are beginning to take shape in downtown Wilson.

"It's going really well," Criswell said. "I couldn't be happier with how it's going. I think it's going to be everything I expected and more, really."

Hanzlicek Construction of Wilson is serving as the general contractor for the project. Mike's Plumbing and Heating of Wilson is responsible for installing the electrical, plumbing, heating and air conditioning fixtures for the project. Terry's Construction of Wilson is shingling the roof of the structure.

Part of what makes the Czech Cottages unique comes from the way they are constructed. For the project, Criswell is using

straw bale construction to build the exterior walls of the structure. As such, Dec. 18, workers began installing the square wheat straw bales into the exterior walls. Once stacked into position, bamboo posts are inserted in the center of the bales to stake them together, thus providing some horizontal strength to the walls.

"They are working out really good," Criswell said.

While Criswell has assisted with other straw bale construction projects in the past, this is his first project on his own.

"It's really pretty much what I thought," he said. "I'm sure glad that Todd (Hanzlicek) and Dale (Homeier) are helping me."

Criswell said that once all the bales are tightly in place, stucco netting will be installed on both the exterior and interior sides of the bales, which will help to provide an additional point of

adherence for the stucco wall finish. He added that before the stucco is applied to the exterior walls, wherever there is wood in the walls, such as the frame and studs, roofing felt and other materials impervious to water will be installed. The interior and exterior surfaces of the bale walls will be stucco, while all the other interior stud walls in the Czech Cottages will be sheet-rocked as in any normal building process.

"I want this to be a real quality project," Criswell said. "I want to do everything I can to make sure it's as good as it can be."

According to Criswell, the insulation provided by the straw bales exterior walls will be a value of R-50. That same value will be received from insulation placed in the roof of the structure.

"The uniform building code

only requires R-19," Criswell said. "So these units are going to be very energy efficient."

Given that Kansas is "the wheat state," Criswell said that he would like to see straw bale construction techniques become common place here in Kansas.

"I don't know if it will happen in my lifetime, but I'd sure like to see this type of construction popular enough to where wheat farmers could have another source of income from their wheat straw," Criswell said. "Of course, we all know that Kansas is known as 'the wheat state,' and wheat straw, for the most part, is a waste product of the harvest of wheat. Right now, the market value for that straw really isn't much at all, but if it is seen as a viable construction material, then I think it can have some market value and become another source of income

for farmers."

Even though he firmly believes using straw bales is a very viable form of construction, Criswell thinks it may be some time before this unique construction technique becomes commonplace.

"Once more people have a chance to live in structures like this, they will find out how comfortable it is and just how pleasant it is to live in a structure like this," Criswell said. "The word of mouth will spread and I think it will become more mainstream as time goes on."

Eventually, Czech Cottages will be comprised of three duplexes providing six living units. Each unit will be two-bedroom and have a living room, kitchen and an attached dining area. All appliances will be provided, including washers and dryers. A utility room will double as a "safe room," since

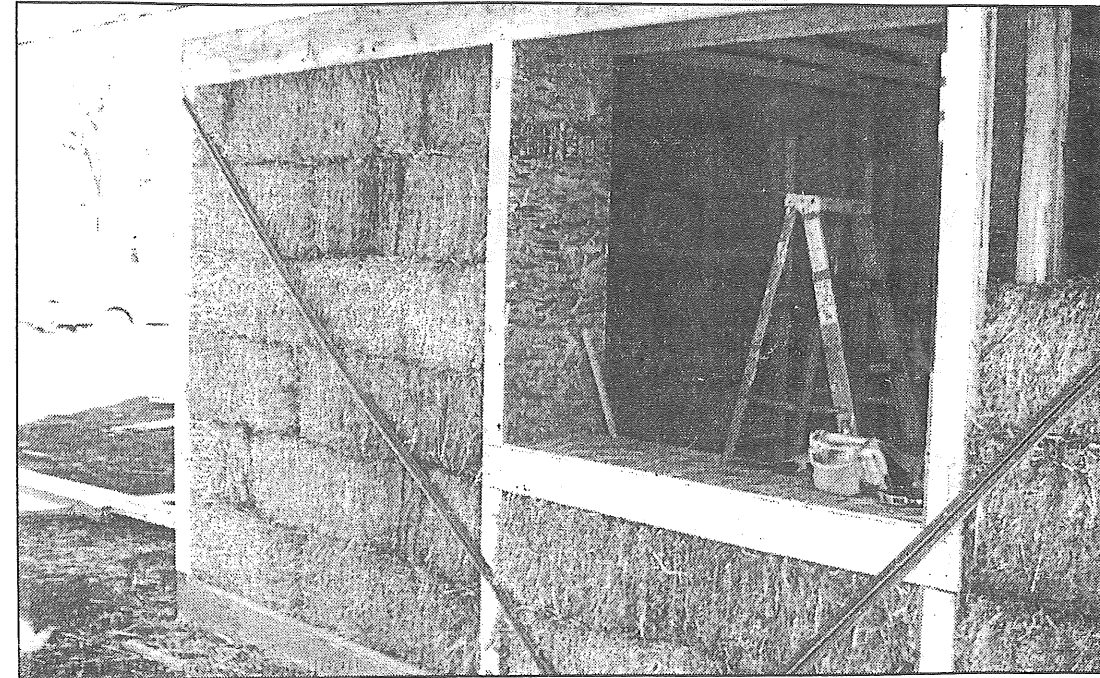
it will have walls constructed of concrete blocks and of Federal Emergency Management Agency design and specifications.

All of the units will be for senior citizens, 55 years of age and older, who are income-qualified.

While a lot depends upon Mother Nature, Criswell hopes to have this first duplex completed by late February or early March of 2003.

While he is still in the process of attracting investors in order to raise additional funds for construction of the second and third duplexes, Criswell remains highly confident that his efforts will succeed.

"We're well on our way toward the second duplex and we'll continue to push on until we can do all three. That's what we're going to do," Criswell said.



ALAN RUSCH/Ellsworth County I-R

At left, the first Czech Cottage duplex is starting to take shape. The other photo shows the wheat straw bales placed in an exterior wall as insulation.