

Bits of heritage

By Barbara Curtin

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From Grand Ronde to Silverton, from Newberg to Salem, many Mid-Valley residents are passionate about preserving a slice of local heritage. For the first time, 18 museums and other organizations are sharing some of their treasures in a show called "Hidden Gems: A Mid-Valley Heritage Invitational Extravaganza!"

Keni Sturgeon, curator for the Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill, asked her counterparts to share a few unique, interesting and/or important standouts from their collections. Each institution gets a nook or wall to display the items and to share something about its mission.

"This is our effort to help these institutions gain attention so they can gain support so we can build a stronger heritage community," explained Peter Booth, executive director of the heritage center, as the final pieces of the show went up last week.

The outreach is part of the heritage center's new mission: to interpret the wider history of the Mid-Valley, not just the Thomas Kay Woolen Mill and pioneer-era buildings on its site.

The first surprise of the show is that there are at least 18 institutions, above and beyond the heritage center, committed to preserving and explaining local history.

Salem visitors will recognize the Bush House Museum and the Historic Deepwood Estate, no doubt. But how many people know about the St. Paul Mission Historical Society?

It has a photo collection of more than 6,000 images available online (www.spmhs.com). The "Hidden Gems" display includes shots of young people harvesting hops (and in some cases, it seems, showing off their buff physiques).

"Our mission statement is to make artifacts and the history and knowledge of the pioneers available to people in the future," said Butteville resident Don Koch, a board member for the St. Paul Mission Historical Society.



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This Silverton Red Sox uniform can be seen at the Hidden Gems exhibit at the Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill.

At a glance

What: "Hidden Gems: A Mid-Valley Heritage Invitational Extravaganza!" featuring treasures from 18 Mid-Valley heritage museums and organizations

Where: Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill, 1313 Mill St. SE

When: Through March 12. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays.

Admission: \$6, \$5 ages 55 and older, \$4 for students, \$3 for ages 6 to 17 and free for ages younger than 6 and members of the participating institutions, including Willamette University students and Grand Ronde tribal members.

Participants: Antique Powerland Museum

"Hopefully this participation will get the word out."

Three of the displays are by organizations whose museums still are in planning stages: the Oregon State Hospital Museum, the Oregon Northwest Black Pioneers and the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.

David Lewis, manager of the cultural resource department for the Tribes, said it was an honor to be invited to join the show.

"We're practicing the skills we will need when the (Grand Ronde) museum is built," he said. "The exhibits we are creating will be a part of the museum at some point. I think the staffers love being able to show our history in a positive fashion, from our perspective."

At least one museum in the show is in danger of disappearing from the area: the Jensen Arctic Museum. Western Oregon University will end its support in June, and the museum must move from Monmouth or raise enough money to survive on its own.

Jensen curator Roben Jack Larrison said "Hidden Gems" may raise awareness of the arctic museum's plight. "We're out in Salem, we're at a great event, so more people have the opportunity to hear about us and our situation," she said. "Hopefully they will be compelled to donate time or money."

Unfortunately, Booth said, financial troubles are dogging small museums across the country.

Association, Aurora Colony Historical Society, Bush House Museum, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, Forest History Center, Frank Lloyd Wright Gordon House, Historic Deepwood Estate, Hoover-Minthorn House, Jensen Arctic Museum, Keizer Heritage Museum, Linfield Anthropology Museum, Oregon Northwest Black Pioneers, Oregon State Hospital Museum, Settlemier House, Silverton Country Historical Museum, St. Paul Mission Historical Society, Willamette University Archives and Yamhill County Historical Society.

Information:
www.missionmill.org or (503) 585-7012

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"Nearly every one of these is volunteer-run or run by a small staff of one or two people," he said. "These heritage gems, which are the backbone of heritage and cultural tourism, are being held in trust by economically strapped nonprofits. For the community to have these treasures saved, they have to support them."

That's one of the goals of "Hidden Gems." People who see the fine-stitched Perkins quilt carried over the Oregon Trail may decide to see what else the Yamhill County Historical Society offers. A set of charming fruit illustrations may draw visitors to Woodburn's Settlemier House, built by nurseryman and pioneer Jesse H. Settlemier a century before the town's famous outlet mall.

Booth plans to make the group show an annual event. Next year's theme is already chosen: the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage in Oregon.

Booth also hopes to cooperate with other Mid-Valley heritage institutions on marketing and professional education.

"Only as a group are we going to achieve goals we hold mutually, such as promoting our area's heritage," he said.

bcurtin@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6699

Online documents

What's with "Willamette Heritage Center at the Mill"? Didn't the Mission Mill Museum and the Marion County Historical Society just change their names to Willamette Heritage Center when they merged on Jan. 1, 2010?

It's about branding, said executive director Peter Booth. "At the Mill" began tagging on to the heritage center's name last fall when it became clear that in many locals' minds, "the mill" was indelibly linked to the renamed site at 1313 Mill St. SE.

Discussions of branding, goals and transformation plans are covered in a heritage center document, "Forging the Future: 2010-2013 Strategic Plan." To read it, see this story at StatesmanJournal.com.

Peter Booth's picks

Willamette Heritage Center executive director Peter Booth chose his personal five favorites in the "Hidden Gems" show at the Statesman Journal's request. (He wanted to include many more). In the order they appear in the show, they are:

1 "Picture Hair," Minnie B. Byers, 1878-98, Hoover-Minthorn House: At first glance, this appears to be a floral arrangement made from brown pipe cleaners; it's actually a memorial woven from the hair of departed loved ones (and "an old pet horse.") "It's one of the most unusual Victorian traditions; for our palate today, it would be macabre," Booth said.

2 Basket by Eliza Young ("Aunt Lize"), woven around 1922, when she was 100, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde: "It was reported that when she made the purse, she had gone blind. It's a sweet little artifact we have up with a story about an interesting thing."

3 Original color sketch by Frank Lloyd Wright, Frank Lloyd Wright Gordon House: Booth likes the story of how the 1964 house was narrowly saved from demolition and moved from the Portland area to Silverton in 2002. "It's a very unique piece, an original Frank Lloyd Wright

sketch."

4 Jail bars from Yamhill County Courthouse, pre-1857, Yamhill County Historical Society: The bars are bent and, in one place, cut. "Obviously there was an effort to escape," Booth said.

5 Child's sled made from whale baleen, Jensen Arctic Museum: "The uniqueness of this is what we intended for the exhibit," Booth said. "We wanted these treasures to be brought forward that people didn't know about."

More online

For a video tour of the exhibit with Peter Booth and a photo gallery, see this story at StatesmanJournal.com.

Willamette Heritage Center Strategic Plan