Beer exhibit taps into history

Who knew that learning history could be as entertaining as a pub crawl?

That appears to be the case with the new show at Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill: “History on Tap: Farms, Fermentation and the Free Lunch.” It opened Friday and continues through Aug. 18.

The exhibit knits together such topics as frontier life (breweries were among Oregon’s first businesses), agriculture (hop harvest brought trainloads of pickers to the Mid-Valley), social history (the temperance movement kick-started the women’s suffrage movement) and politics (then-President Jimmy Carter played a key role in the microbrew revolution).

“If I did an exhibit on any of these, no one would come,” said Peter Booth, the museum’s executive director. “However, I think a beer exhibit will attract a lot more people.”

Along with photographs and explanations, the show includes dozens of intriguing artifacts from local collections. There are neon signs with slogans such as “Salem on Ice.” There’s a beer pail like those given by bars to workers who ordered lunch (it’s a 2-pound lard container, not the kind of pail you’d use to mop the floor, but still).

And there are many beer cans and bottles — some from trendy microbrews, some with names that only old-timers would recall.

“My husband and I drank a lot of beer,” said curator Keni Sturgeon. “I thought about putting them out full, but that would tempt people to break them, and it seemed a waste to pour it down the drain.”

Besides the show on the second floor of the mill building, there will be special talks, events and trips that include beer tasting. One is today: Gilgamesh Brewery’s “The Mid-Valley Pairing: Beer and Food at the Mill.”

A Portland pub and brewery crawl will take place all day Aug. 17. Weekly “History Pub” presentations will cover the Grand Ronde tribes and prohibition, the temperance movement and other subjects.

“You can buy a beer and hear some fun, lighthearted history topics,” Booth said. “Be careful; you might learn something.”

bcurtin@StatesmanJournal.com, (503) 399-6699 or twitter.com/BarbaraCurtin

‘History on Tap: Farms, Fermentation and the Free Lunch’ is the next show at the Willamette Heritage Center. / KOBBI R. BLAIR / Statesman Journ/KOBBI R. BLAIR /