

Priest Lake Museum opens door to history

By DAVID GUNTER Feature correspondent | Posted: Sunday, September 16, 2012 10:00 am

(Editor's note: This is the first installment in a series of Sunday feature articles on the museums of Bonner and Boundary counties.)

PRIEST LAKE — The view from Luby Bay is an absolute stunner, blessed with a panorama of Priest Lake that rolls like an unfurled tapestry from north to south and back again. That could explain why the Civilian Conservation Corps chose this very spot to construct a U.S. Forest Service guardhouse in the mid-1930s.

Whatever the reason behind it, this CCC cabin remains a stalwart sentinel, these days standing guard over the rich history of this pristine corner of Bonner County.

Since 1991, the sturdy log cabin has been home to the Priest Lake Museum, operated under a partnership between the Forest Service and the museum association. Though not the largest storehouse of photos and artifacts in the region, the building can lay claim to the one of the best scenic locations around.

“We're kind of bursting at the seams, but to be right on the water and to be in a historical building like this is great,” said Tom Weitz, museum president.

To his point, every available inch of space in what formerly was a cozy dwelling for Forest Service employees has been pressed into service as a showcase for Priest Lake's multifaceted history. The exhibits are arranged in a rough chronology of chapters in the human habitation of the area, starting with a display on Native American residents and followed by installations that cover trappers, homesteaders, loggers and the CCC camp workers who once swarmed the region as part of FDR's Depression-era jobs program.

Farther along this stroll through Priest Lake history, exhibits on one-room schools and the advent of a recreation economy help fill in the blanks.

“There were some very early fishing resorts up here,” Weitz said, calling attention to the hotel the Great Northern Railroad built in what is now Coolin back in 1890. “By 1900, this place was already renowned for its fishing.”

Priest Lake still rings with the names of characters who once populated its shores — mountain man Billy Houston, who took a tip from the Indians and located the tip of an ore vein that became the Continental Mine; Uncle Pete, whose famous bootleg liquor was a favorite spirit at Spokane's Davenport Hotel during Prohibition; Nell Shipman, who ran her own silent film studio and animal menagerie as she produced, directed and starred in movies filmed at Priest Lake in the 1920s.

From her rustic studio called Lionhead Lodge, Shipman & Co. would travel the 20-mile length of the lake south to Coolin whenever mail or supplies had to be picked up.

“During the winter, if the lake was frozen, they'd go by dogsled,” Weitz said. “If it wasn't, they'd hike the shoreline.”

The exhibit celebrating Shipman's brief but momentous stay on the lake typifies another chapter in local history, that of the pioneer women who called this area home.

There was Belle Angstadt, who left a career as a vaudeville entertainer and moved to the Priest Lake area, where she later was accused and acquitted of murdering a lumberjack who was boarding at her home; Ida Handy, who at one time owned both the Idaho Inn and the Northern Inn, giving her something of a lodging monopoly; and Rose Hurst, who came to Priest Lake as a widow, salvaged timbers and old boards from the Nickelplate Mine to build a home and proceeded to clear her land of stumps so that she could run 160 head of cattle - between trapping beaver and catching whitefish on the side.

“The hardiness of those women was just amazing to me - they were really something,” Weitz said, adding that families, too, had to be made of sterner stuff in the early days.

“Look at this group,” the museum president said, pointing out a pioneer family portrait where rifles, pistols and shotguns are as prevalent as the people. “Everyone in this photo has a gun.”

The Priest Lake Museum has kept the cabin's kitchen much as it would have been when it was used by the Forest Service starting more than 75 years ago. Because the rest of the building already is packed with the 3,000 photos and 750 historical objects in the museum collection, the living room was commandeered three years ago to act as the staging area for larger exhibits.

The first one, displayed in 2010, focused on early Priest Lake schools. In 2011, after Sandpoint residents Jim and Ruth Brown donated a Bosworth fire finder to the collection, the museum board worked with Ray Kresek, owner of Spokane's Fire Lookout Museum and author of the book “Fire Lookouts of the Northwest,” to round out the exhibit. The display - designed to look like the actual interior of a working lookout — was so popular with visitors that it was held over for the 2012 season.

Next year's living room exhibit could be based on a taste of Priest Lake history that was concealed, for good reason, in the hills surrounding the lake.

“We hope to have an exhibit on moonshining during the Prohibition era,” Weitz said.

“That's a part of our history that a lot of people aren't aware of,” added Eileen Kain, executive director for the Priest Lake Chamber of Commerce and a volunteer host at the museum.

Those who trek into the mountains here still discover long-abandoned trapper's cabins or remnants of moonshiner's camps, sometimes with the makings for a still set up nearby. The museum currently has two such contraptions in its collection, both bearing U.S. Department of Revenue stamps stating that the owners must register their liquid goods with the government - a directive that likely went ignored.

The museum grounds, gardens and lakeside walking paths already are sprinkled with donated pieces of equipment from the region's logging, mining and agricultural past. Future plans call for an outdoor

exhibit that will recreate an adit from the Woodrat Mine, complete with a cart loaded with ore from the original mine site and incorporating the same kind of boiler that was used to pump water from the claim.

“The Woodrat Mine was over 200 feet deep and went 400 feet out under the lake as it followed the vein,” Weitz said.

Such exhibits have brought in an average of about 3,500 annual visitors to the museum.

“It stays pretty steady and we're always trying to get the word out that we're here,” said Kain. “We have people who come every year and those who just stumble upon us and stay for three hours because they're so fascinated.

“It opens people's eyes to the fact that there's more than just resorts up here,” she added. “There's a lot of history from all the different industries that were in place.”

It would be fair to call the museum's compilation of photos, artifacts and recorded oral histories a “working collection,” since the organization maintains a welcoming, open door policy for researchers, authors and the simply curious alike. That policy has resulted in both heightened income and awareness, partly through publications such as “Pioneer Voices of Priest Lake” — a book based on oral histories from the museum archives that was edited by Lindenwood University associate history professor Kris Runberg Smith.

Over the next year, the Priest Lake Museum is readying its second book for publication. Fundraising for the project - budgeted at approximately \$35,000-\$40,000 — is fast approaching the halfway mark, Weitz said. According to Kain, the Priest Lake community invariably steps up to support the museum, as do the vacation season residents who have spent summers here for the past 20 years and more.

Those same supporters might not be aware that the museum has digitized its entire photo collection or transferred hand-written records into specialized museum software, but they have embraced the donation-based, come on in and make yourself at home approach that continues to win new fans every year.

“We have all of this history stored here,” Kain said. “But it doesn't do any good if people don't get to see it.”

For Weitz, who hikes and skis the trails around the lake year-round, history is something that lives and breathes around Priest Lake.

“There are still a lot of old cabins up in these hills and things like wood-structured dams that were used with the log flumes,” he said. “But every time I walk into this museum, I learn something new — I always find something in here to discover.

“Keith Petersen, the Idaho State Historian, has called us the best volunteer museum in Idaho,” Weitz continued. “We're very proud of that.”

“You could say that we're a hidden treasure,” Kain offered.

“In Idaho's crown jewel,” said Weitz.

The Priest Lake Museum will be open on weekends through the end of September, at which time it is open for group visits by appointment only through fall. Hours for the rest of the year are weekends from Memorial Day through mid-June and Tuesday-Sunday from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. during the summer months.

For information, call (406) 431-1219 or visit: www.plmuseum.org