

Tools of survival

By Barbara Curtin and photos by Kobbi R. Blair

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For much of Oregon's history, owning a good weapon was key to survival. Long before European settlers arrived, native tribes used an atlatl or spear-thrower to increase their chances of killing game. The latest weapons technology helped Lewis and Clark proceed up the Missouri River. Pistols raised havoc in the wild West or helped tame it, depending on who held the gun.

"If there is any item that is constant throughout human history, it is weapons," said Peter Booth, executive director of Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill.

The museum is showing about 100 knives, bows, guns and related artifacts through Aug. 20 in "Tools of Survival: Oregon's Past as Told by the Weapons That Witnessed Its History."

These items no longer are necessities for most families' protection and food-gathering. Instead, they have become cherished heirlooms, passed down through generations.

The show has been in the works for about a year. To prepare it, Booth and Michael Carrick, a local weapons collector and Willamette Heritage Center board member, identified the key points of history they wanted to cover, then y found weapons to portray each era and documented the story behind each piece.

Carrick loaned 44 of the 77 guns on display, plus artifacts such as the various sizes of shot used by Lewis and Clark. Carrick is especially passionate about that era of American history. He doesn't have the discoverers' own weapons, but in many cases he has collected the exact model.

One of his favorites is a repeating air rifle like the one that traveled with the Corps of Discovery. Every time the party met a new Indian tribe, Meriwether Lewis would bring out the gun and fire six or eight shots in succession. It was a stunning demonstration in an age when it normally took a half-minute to reload.

"Lewis wrote that it astonished the Indians," said Carrick, who has studied the expedition. "It would astonish anyone in 1803-05."

Booth's favorite pieces include a World War I-era rifle that was pressed into service



Kobbi R. Blair / Statesman Journal
A Kentucky Rifle, as carried by William Clark, and a sword which was probably like those carried by Lewis and Clark.

At a glance

What:
Tools of Survival: Oregon's Past as Told by the Weapons That Witnessed Its History

Where: The Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill, 1313 Mill Street SE

When:
Through Aug. 20

Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily except Sundays and

at Camp Adair, the World War II training facility near Monmouth. Apparently a soldier rested the rifle in the fork of a tree during war games, then forgot where he had put it.

Bugs devoured the gunstock for decades until the early 1980s, when a museum archivist happened upon the remains — still propped up against the tree.

The exhibit is another step in the Willamette Heritage Center's mission: to tell the history of the Mid-Valley, not just the pioneer buildings and woolen mill on the Mill Street SE site.

The opening reception last month was one of the best-attended ever, said Booth, with about 125 people instead of the usual 40.

Weapons have an enduring fascination, but the underlying story of the exhibit is what matters, Booth said: "If someone is not careful, they will go through this exhibit and learn a lot about Oregon history."

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some holidays

Cost: \$6; \$5 for ages 55 and older; \$4 for students; \$3 for ages 6 to 17; free for ages younger than 6 and for everyone on Tuesdays; free for active-duty military and their families through Labor Day

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