

A new mission for museum

By Barbara Curtin

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The Mission Mill Museum, one of Salem's best-known attractions, has stayed much the same from one year to the next. That's about to change.

The Willamette Heritage Center, created Jan. 1 from the merger of the museum and the adjacent Marion County Historical Society, has a new mission and a new strategic plan to guide the next three years. It's now in the hands of the nonprofit organization's board, which is expected to accept it on Wednesday.

The intervening months of institutional soul-searching have been supported by a \$26,000 planning grant from the Oregon Community Foundation. The money underwrote polls, forums, interviews and planning from The Canoe Group of Portland.

The draft plan shared with the paper last week outlined sweeping changes, from the organization's mission to the plants in its herb garden.

"We are moving out of being just Marion County, just the museums and the Thomas Kay Woolen Mill, to look at other aspects of the community and tell stories that have gone untold," said Peter Booth, the center's executive director.

Reaching out

Until now, the organization has existed to tell the stories of its four pioneer-era buildings and the mill that was a major Salem employer from 1889 to 1962.

The center did that well, Booth said, especially with its award-winning show "Facing Statehood," timed to coincide with Oregon's sesquicentennial.

However, the future mission will be far broader: to preserve and explain the heritage of the Willamette Valley, including Marion County and greater Salem.

"There isn't a significant regional museum south of Portland, north of



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The Methodist Parsonage is one of four pioneer-era buildings whose exhibits would change under a draft strategic plan for the Willamette Heritage Center. At present, signs for the 1841 structure explain its relationship to the development of education in Oregon. The plan calls for hands-on exhibitions to appeal to all ages, with a focus on children and family life in the 1800s versus today. Other displays would tell the story of Salem's history, discuss the Kalapuya people and address historic preservation.

At a glance

What: Willamette Heritage Center, 1313 Mill St. SE, formerly the Mission Mill Museum and Marion County Historical Society

Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays

Admission: \$6, \$5 ages 55 and older, \$4 students (with ID), \$3 for ages 6-17, free for children younger than 6; see website for \$1 off coupon

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

Eugene, that tells the story of our valley," explained Booth.

The heritage center will reach out to such partners as the Oregon Northwest Black Pioneers and the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. It will connect their stories with those of the heritage center site and the wider Willamette Valley.

One example of that approach was being hung in the center's gallery last week: highlights from Oregon State University's Art About Agriculture collection. It featured artists from Marion, Polk and Yamhill counties.

Another example will take its place in January, when 14 or more local historical organizations share their "Hidden Gems." The participants are as varied as the Aurora Colony Historical Society, Monmouth's Jensen Arctic Museum and Antique Powerland Museums in Brooks.

Then, come spring, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde will mount "Grand Ronde Canoe Journey." The exhibit will explain the significance of canoes to the tribes, past and present. Week by week, carvers will transform a red cedar log into a canoe as visitors watch.

This is a far cry from the Mission Mill Museum of the past, where exhibits stayed much the same from one year to the next.

As the draft vision statement says, the center wants to "become the place local residents want to bring their guests — first."

Telling a story

Temporary exhibits aren't the only things that will change. Gradually, as funding and research allow, the four mission-era buildings and the mill will get new signs and revamped displays.

Instead of simply explaining each house and its furniture, displays will create themes that interconnect. Visitors will learn stories about the people who used these buildings; the families, both white and native, that lived in this area; and communities of people from the Kalapuya Indians to mill workers to wine-growers.

These and other aspects of the plan will require more money. The draft vision statement calls for doubling the funds raised annually by 2013.

The grants that have flowed to the merged organizations — \$111,000 so far this year — suggest a vote of confidence in the new direction, according to Booth.

"Right now we're batting a thousand," he said. "We've done well at receiving grants from everyone we have gone to. ... It's very affirming. It's very humbling. It shows a lot of these granting institutions recognize we have a lot of potential."

Efforts praised

Several potential partners applauded the center's plan to take a broader view.

Al Hall, a board member for the Antique Powerland Museums in Brooks, said his organization was pleased to be invited to contribute three items to the "Hidden Gems" show in January. The challenge, he said, will be finding artifacts from a steam-power museum that will fit through the

Volunteers needed

The Willamette Heritage Center is looking for people interested in volunteering as museum docents. Docents lead tours and interpretive activities for visitors.

The center is offering a four-session class this fall to train museum docents. The free class gives an in-depth look into the history the museum interprets and trains participants to give an interesting and educational tour.

WHEN: Four-session class — 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Sept. 28, Oct. 12, Oct. 26 and Nov. 2

WHERE: Willamette Heritage Center, 1313 Mill St. SE

COST: Free

To register: Contact Kylie Pine at (503) 585-7012, or email kyliep@missionmill.org

Draft 2010-2013 Strategic Plan, Willamette Heritage Center

Willamette Heritage Center's door.

"Antique Powerland by itself has a lot to offer the community," he said. "People come out and they're amazed at what we have. How this will benefit us, it will help us make more people aware of Antique Powerland Museums.

David Lewis, manager of the Cultural Resources Department of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, said the tribes have welcomed opportunities to collaborate with Mission Mill in the past.

"We've been going 100 years or so, and most of our story has been told by non-Indians," he said. "People didn't ask what our story was."

If the spring exhibit on Grand Ronde canoes goes well, the tribes and Willamette Heritage Center may agree for the tribes to curate at least one show a year. Not only would that help educate the wider community, he said, but it would give tribal members valuable experience for their future museum.

"I think Mission Mill and Willamette Heritage Center are really good folks to work with," Lewis said. "They seem to be appreciative of our point of view. I don't feel we are junior partners, I feel we are equals. That is a good relationship."

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