

Where the Past is Present

History gets personal at the Gorge Heritage Museum in Bingen

By Drew Myron

Etta Hepner has a dilemma—a basement packed with pieces of the past and no where to put them.

“We’re out of room, and we think it’s an injustice to the public to not be able to see more of the collection,” says Etta, one of nine members of the volunteer board running the Gorge Heritage Museum in Bingen. “The museum has room for just 10 percent of the collection.”

The large collection of historical items is a big problem for the small museum.

Operated by the Western Klickitat County Historical Society, the Gorge Heritage Museum was established in 1984 to share the legacy of native people and immigrants who settled and traded along the Columbia River. The museum is in the former home of Bingen Congregational Church, a 104-year-old structure tucked one block off Bingen’s main street—Highway 14.

A Growing Collection

A committed group of museum volunteers eagerly walk visitors past key items and share stories of people, places and things.

It is a dizzying array of local history. Every inch of every wall is filled with artifacts from the lives of local explorers, trappers, pioneer



Volunteers keep the Gorge Heritage Museum in Bingen staffed and up to date.

settlers, fruit growers, ranchers, miners, loggers and Native Americans.

“So many museums are so sterile, but this place is like a treasure hunt,” says board member Gail Logan, a 53-year resident of White Salmon. “Every time you look, there’s something different.”

“Wow, look at the detail on this,” says Etta, carefully handling a pair of deerhide gloves with intricate beadwork crafted by a local Native

American. “And look at this. We just got this in,” she says, uncovering a jumbled box of donations.

Much of the museum’s collection is comprised of everyday items such as dishes, clothing, magazines, maps, medical equipment, logging and farming tools, and photos, all made valuable because they reveal what life was like in western Klickitat and East Skamania counties.

“Look at this flag,” Etta says. “It has 45 stars, and

was given to us by Myrtle Overbaugh. People might say, ‘What’s the big deal, it’s a 45-star flag.’ But this is our flag. It flew over White Salmon from 1896 to 1907.”

Fascinated with the past, Etta admits that as a youngster she detested history.

“It didn’t mean anything to me—all those dates and places,” she says. “But then I got older and I’d drive by streets and the names started clicking, the names and streets and people.”

Now she is the museum’s champion, volunteering thousands of hours during the past 10 years.

For display, each item is meticulously labeled to provide family history and community context. Behind the scenes, every item is painstakingly catalogued and cross-referenced to hone in on exact date, place and family lineage.

This attention to detail has made the museum a treasure to both visitors and those who donate.

“The people who donate their things, they understand somebody does care about them,” says volunteer Henry Balsiger, a photo historian who has contributed more than 250,000 photos to the museum.

Henry was born and raised in the Gorge and is retired from Bingen Plywood. He has gathered and digitally scanned old family photos



Above, this 104-year-old building is home to the Gorge Heritage Museum.



Etta Hepner sorts through donated items to be put on display at the museum. Left, the museum receives a variety of items, including older toys such as this train, now part of the lumber exhibit.

for the past decade.

“My job is to harvest the history,” Henry says.

“He’s worn out four scanners!” adds Etta.

Fundraisers and the Museum’s Future

The Gorge Heritage Museum keeps history real, present and relevant to our lives, says Jesse Burkhardt, a local published photojournalist who is donating a portion of his book sales to the museum. He also believes the museum and history of the Gorge are important because of how much times have changed.

But the museum is in danger of losing its ability to engage and maintain an audience.

“This museum is chock full,” says Etta. “We have it just stuffed.”

Board members acknowledge action is needed. Their lease with the City of Bingen expires soon, their historic home is not wheelchair accessible and the collection



continues to grow.

They are exploring a variety of options, from buying land and building a new museum, to buying an existing structure and undertaking a major renovation project.

Any move, says Board President Anita Gahimer Crow, will take a great deal of money.

“We’re very small and we don’t have a huge base of members to draw from,” she says.

While considering options, the group continues to host fundraisers, recruit

volunteers and accept pieces from the past.

“This place is so diverse in local history and it’s because people care enough to save,” says Etta. “You need to share history.” ■

The Gorge Heritage Museum is at 202 E. Humboldt Street in Bingen. The museum is open May through September, Friday through Sunday, from noon to 5 p.m. Special tours or projects/research can be scheduled by appointment.

Admission is \$5 for 16 years and older, and free for 15 and younger when accompanied by an adult. For more information or to volunteer, call (509) 493-3228, email ghm@gorge.net or visit www.gorgeheritage.org.