

LONG BEACH GRANGE

A restored building, energetic leaders and DIY resurgence makes for a strong, community-minded institution

The National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry, known colloquially as the Grange (the word means granary or farm, from the Latin for grain), was established in 1867. A fraternal organization and advocacy group for American farmers, the Grange grew rapidly. Grange halls throughout the country served as centers of rural community life — until people began leaving farms for the cities. Now many Grange halls have been abandoned or turned to other uses.

No so on the Long Beach Peninsula, where a small group of concerned, energetic and well-organized people have revitalized their Grange hall.

By the 1990s the Long Beach Grange had become little more than a bingo parlor, and even that came to an end with the recession of 2008. That made it possible, Grange member Rick Haug explains, to revive the organization “as a traditional community-based Grange.”

But the building was outdated, expensive to run, and showed the effects of years of deferred maintenance. “It’s a large hall,” says Haug, “and it takes money to heat and maintain the building.”

The group began raising money through donations, events, grants and support from local businesses. Building chairperson Gwen Wagner oversaw the installation of new windows. John Larson had an energy audit done, and the entire building was converted to LED lighting. The front entryway was made handicapped accessible; the roof was repaired.

The old hall was restored, but that wouldn’t mean much if people didn’t use the building, so they set about making the Grange once again a center of community life.

The primary purpose of the Grange is to build better community through teaching, sharing and serving, so the new leaders of the Long Beach Grange set about increasing membership and providing programs for locals. They also began renting the hall for functions, organizations, classes and fundraisers.

“We are providing a service and a place — a warm, dry place — for the community,” says Gale Ahrens, and signs in front of the Long Beach Grange Hall make that clear.

The indoor market, held the first and third Friday and Saturday of every month, is a fundraiser for the Grange as well as for local vendors, who sell a variety of items reflecting the rural values espoused by the organization. You’ll find goat cheese, lavender soaps and scrubs, cran-

berry vine baskets, home-grown vegetables, eggs, honey, and a lot more. A Christmas bazaar and consignment auctions serve much the same purposes.

“Of all our events, the auction is my favorite,” says John Larson. “It’s a kick in the pants.”

John Dawson, another Grange leader, agrees. “We get some great stuff,” he says. “It’s a treasure hunter’s delight.”

Items that don’t sell go into the “rummage room,” the proceeds of which go to support the Junior Grange Camp in Ocean Park, Washington, and to provide scholarships for



Members of the Long Beach Grange are, from left, William Mundy, Gwen Wagner, Rick Haug, Patty Bagley-Wills, John Dawson, Gale Ahrens and John Larson.



Thanks to the work of dedicated members, the Long Beach Grange hall has been restored with new windows, LED lighting, a new roof and a handicapped-accessible front entrance. Now, the sturdy building serves as a thriving community meeting place.



Gale Ahrens arranges a display of awards won by Grange members in various competitions.

‘Of all our events, the auction is my favorite. It’s a kick in the pants.’

kids who couldn’t otherwise go to camp

The events don’t stop with fundraisers. There’s the edible garden tour that raises cash and canned food for three food banks, the mushroom gathering class taught by local forager and Shelburne Inn owner David Campiche (who discusses how to do it without saying where). There are “family living” classes where you can learn arts, crafts, gardening, and home skills like baking, candy making, food preservation, needlework, quilting and sewing.

Do you have a talent? There’s a talent club and contests in vocal, instrumental, and body movement disciplines, as well as

photography, creative writing, painting and drawing, and crafts that involve wood, paper and recycling. There’s a stamp club and activities for pre-schoolers. Seniors can play cards, dance or do tai chi.

Groups renting the hall include line dancers, bridge players, religious groups, and “Kitchen Music” on the first and third Sundays, from 1 to 5 p.m., where you can play, listen and sing along.

Why has the Grange become so popular? Rick Haug believes that it’s because, “There’s a resurgence of doing things for ourselves instead of living out of Wal-Mart.”

Or maybe, as Patty Bagley-Wills says, it’s simply because the Long Beach Grange is, “a fun place to go in a small community.”

Coastal Life

Story and photos by DWIGHT CASWELL