

THE ARTS

Visual arts, literature,
theater, music & more

BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

Ilwaco museum shines under director's artistic guidance

By LYNETTE RAE McADAMS

Not just anyone can look at a lacy antique wedding dress and a worn out pair of fisherman's waders and see the same beautiful story in both of them, but Betsy Millard can — as executive director of the small-but-spectacular Columbia Pacific Heritage Museum in Ilwaco, Washington, connecting objects to their shared story is one of her specialties.

"Sometimes it's the things you don't think of that really carry the story of a place," she says. "The day-to-day objects that moved with someone through the course of regular life—sometimes those can have the most power to draw us into history."

Now entering her ninth year at the museum's helm, Millard's current work rightly prides itself on being stuck in the past, but that hasn't always been the case.

Born in Kansas to a mother who was a painter and a father who worked as a potter, she followed the destiny written in her bloodlines, earning a Master of Art History from the University of Kansas, followed by a prestigious post-graduate internship at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

Doors in the art world continued to open, eventually leading her to settle in St. Louis, where she held several positions with the St. Louis Art Museum before accepting directorship of the Forum for Contemporary Art (now the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis). Enjoying an illustrious, decade-long tenure there, her successes included a \$12 million capital campaign, which created a new, architecturally designed building at the heart of the city, and helped secure the institution's spot as a leader in the cutting-edge world of contemporary art.

"That was a very intense time for me, professionally and personally," says Millard, who retired from the museum and, effectively, the high-level world of art, in 2002. "In the end, I was really ready to make a change."

But from a booming Midwestern metropolis to a tiny finger of land on the southwest coast of Washington state?

"My mother was a fifth-generation Orego-

COLUMBIA PACIFIC HERITAGE MUSEUM

115 SE Lake St., Ilwaco, Washington / 360-642-3446

Open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday

Closed Sunday and Monday

\$5 adults, \$4 seniors, \$2.50 youth, kids under 12 are free

Admission is free every Thursday, courtesy of the Port of Ilwaco

Annual memberships: \$25 individual, \$40 family

nian, whose family came by wagon and settled outside Oregon City. She spent her childhood summers here on the peninsula, and growing up, I did too," explains Millard. "I was born and raised in the Midwest, and I love it, but when I came to a point in my life where I really wanted to be rooted somewhere, it felt natural to choose this place to be rooted to."

Happy with her relocation, but ill-suited to permanent retirement, it wasn't long before Millard found herself answering a newspaper ad for a part-time director at the local heritage museum. "I'd discovered that it was the 'museum' part of museum work that I really loved," she says, smiling. "The concept that these are places that provide people with so much — be it knowledge, entertainment, respite, or simply a sense of community and place. That's the part I'm attracted to — bringing people together for that shared experience. I saw the ad and started thinking, 'You know, this just might work.'"

Bill Garvin, president of the museum's board of directors, laughs to recall Millard's interview: "It was such a pleasant and surprising experience — we were all just dazzled by her — still are, really. I don't think I can say enough good things about Betsy; she just brings a lot to the party. To find such professionalism and dedication — to the museum and the community — we couldn't be luckier."

"Her energy and enthusiasm are contagious," Garvin continues, "and she's a visionary when it comes to creating exhibits. She's always trying to make sure the viewer engages — always coming back to what they can take away, what they can digest. And once she lays the foundation, she's completely hands-on, mounting and displaying the objects just so, adding special captions — those are the things that are her forte."



PHOTO BY LYNETTE RAE McADAMS

Betsy Millard is the executive director at the Columbia Pacific Heritage Museum in Ilwaco, Washington. Here, she poses before one of the showcase pieces in the museum's current exhibit, "Memories of Megler," which runs through March 11.

With four permanent galleries and one changing exhibit space, there's plenty of opportunity to engage Millard's talents while also showing off the full measure of the museum's collection — all of which seeks to weave together the many layers of culture embedded on these shores.

"There's a lot that's special about us," Millard says, "but one thing that really stands out — aside from our collection — is our community. Museums all over the world ask themselves every day, 'How do we connect ourselves back to the community? How do we make ourselves relevant?' Here, more than anywhere I've ever been, there's already a passion for place — people already have that

desire to know what they're a part of. All we have to do is show them."

"If we're doing our job right," she adds, "and I hope we are, then people will feel like they have something to share back with us. That's my goal with every exhibit — that our objects and the stories we've coaxed from them will serve to spark another story, and then another. That when it's ended, you never feel like you've closed the book on something — but only like you've opened a different chapter."

To learn more about current and upcoming exhibits at the museum, visit columbapacificheritagemuseum.org.