

Museum looks to digitize Spruce Goose archives

By KEVIN HARDEN
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If you think Howard Hughes' plane the Spruce Goose is big, then try this on for size: more than 1 million pieces of paper — documents, blueprints, original drawings and thousands of photographs.

That's what the Evergreen Aviation and Space Museum in Yamhill County holds in a stack of shelves, file cabinets and cardboard tubes related to construction of the giant flying boat.

The museum hopes to get a state grant to move the entire collection into a new research facility, where it would be stored in more archive-friendly shelves, photo boxes and files. It also hopes to digitize most of the collection so researchers and the public can access it online.

"We don't really have a proper archive," said Michelle Kaufman, communications director for the Stoller Wine Group in Dayton, which owns the nonprofit museum's property along state Highway 18 about 45 minutes south of Portland. "We want a place where we can really showcase it. Where people can come and dig through the records to do their research."

No matter how you measure it, Hughes' H-4 Hercules is an engineering marvel. It's one of the largest airplanes ever built. It's bigger than a Boeing 747.

The Spruce Goose is 218 feet long, has a 320-foot wingspan and is about 80 feet tall. It weighed about 400,000 pounds and was powered by eight Pratt and Whitney Wasp Major 28-cylinder engines. It was built to fly about 3,000 miles at nearly 20,000 feet, cruising at 250 miles per hour.

Nearly 700 banker boxes full of papers and photos related to the plane's construction arrived at the McMinnville museum in February 1993 with the Spruce Goose after a 1,055-mile journey from Long Beach to Yamhill County. Since then, museum volunteers have worked to put the documents in searchable order that could be useful to researchers and hobbyists interested in the plane and its history.

"Before they came to Oregon, the files and boxes were in warehouses that were repositories for everything," said Lydia Heins, the museum's curator and collections manager. "All of that paperwork was just sent to warehouses as a historical asset."

Creating digital versions of the documents and photos is a big deal. According to Nicole Davis, supervisory archivist for Seattle's Museum of Flight, putting the files and photos online turns the collection into a global gem.

"While physical preservation and cataloging of materials is a necessary first step for



accessibility, requiring researchers to come onsite to your research center places a big burden on researchers," Davis said. "It limits accessibility to those who can afford to travel to the museum. Digitization opens up accessibility to people around the world, and not just academic or professional researchers, but anyone who might be interested."

"Having materials available online also increase awareness of the materials — now the materials are findable with a Google search, whereas materials that haven't been digitized are much more hidden."

Davis said about 500 people visit the Seattle museum's research center each year to search documents and photos. The museum's digital collection gets about 80,000 hits each year, she said.

Grants for several projects

In late April, Heins applied for \$7,500 in state funds through the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department's historic museum grant program. The museum plans to match that with about \$6,200 to fund the nearly \$14,000 archive project. If approved, work would begin in mid-July and probably be finished by late April 2022.

Heins said it was the first time the museum asked for grant money to work on the Hughes

archives.

Thirty-one large and small museums across the state applied for grants. The Oregon Museum Grant committee met Thursday to review and rank the proposals. Oregon's Heritage Commission will meet June 7 to approve funding for the top proposals.

Among the requests:

- Portland's Architectural Heritage Center/Bosco-Milligan Foundation sought \$8,830 for a project to properly store architectural artifacts.
- The Oregon Historical Society asked for \$8,000 to hire a cataloger who would work in its Gresham facility to prepare the museum's Native American artifacts and database for future tribal visits.
- Portland's Oregon Heritage Rail Center requested \$7,500 to repaint the exterior of the historic passenger rail car 105.
- Newberg's Hoover-Minthorn House Museum sought \$800 to pay for an interpretive center display system.
- Yamhill County Heritage Museum asked for \$9,200 to develop a virtual curriculum highlighting the region's pioneer history.
- Molalla's Dribble and VonderAhe houses sought \$4,967 to repair and replace damaged windows.
- The Five Oaks Museum in Hillsboro

asked for \$7,080 to redesign an interpretive pavilion at the site near the small Washington County town of Helvetia.

Vision for the future

Hughes' gigantic H-4 Hercules (he did not like the "Spruce Goose" nickname) flew only once, on Nov. 2, 1947, for about a mile, 70 feet above Southern California's Long Beach harbor. It cost more than \$23 million to build in the 1940s (probably around \$200 million today) and spent most of its life in storage at a Long Beach pier.

Hughes designed and built the plane as a wartime transport to carry troops and material across the ocean without fear of enemy submarines. He began building it in 1942, using wood laminate instead of aluminum, which was in short supply.

The 1947 flight was a demonstration that the massive aircraft could actually become airborne. As World War II ended, Hughes ran into trouble with a U.S. Senate oversight committee digging into wartime contracts. The committee was concerned about how the more than \$22 million the federal government put into construction of the massive plane was spent and wanted Hughes held accountable.

By 1947, the Hercules was no longer needed for military transport. Hughes had spent millions of his own money (along with federal funds) building the plane. Hughes told the Senate committee that if the plane couldn't fly, he would leave the country.

The large aircraft's construction and modifications generated thousands of files, blueprints, change orders, drawings and photographs. Since they arrived at the McMinnville museum 28 years ago, more than a dozen volunteers have dedicated their time to preserving and protecting the documents.

The Hughes archives have been housed in the museum's theater building. The museum plans to construct a new research facility in its mezzanine, where it can house not only the Hughes documents, but also some of the nearly 40,000 artifacts — flight suits, models, military medals and documents — it holds related to the 150 aircraft and spacecraft in the collection.

Work on the Hughes archives is being done at the same time that the museum presses ahead with plans for expanded educational programs, more exhibits and partnerships, like the one with the nonprofit Carlton Observatory to build a state-of-the-art facility on the Evergreen campus.

"We're hopeful that we can fund this," Kaufman said. "It's the first piece of a much bigger vision for the museum and its future."

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Astoria



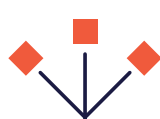
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