

New book explores history of Wallowa Lake

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Rita Ehrler and Ellen Morris Bishop recently published "Stories of Wallowa Lake: A History of the Lake and Its Communities" to offer new glimpses at Wallowa County's history.

According to a press release, the book details the competition between an electric railroad and the more traditional steam line to serve Wallowa County, the attempt to establish a national park in the Wallowa Mountains, and the intriguing stories of Edelweiss Inn, Wallowa Lake dam, sockeye, elk, geology, the Wallowa Lake monster and much more.

"I started collecting information for this book more than 40 years ago," Ehrler said. "At that time, I thought I'd write a book just about time that Joe and I ran our business, The Matterhorn Swiss Village at Wallowa Lake. But as I talked with our neighbors, other people began coming to me with great

stories. And they were saying 'Look what I have! I have these pictures, and this happened, and so forth.' "

In 1965, Rita Ehrler and her husband Josef came to Wallowa County. Both were ski instructors, and the Wallows reminded them of Joe's native Switzerland. They opened the Matterhorn Swiss Village, became leaders in the Wallowa Lake business community, and fast friends with many other business owners.

Ehrler was enthralled by stories her friends told of the hardships they endured when starting their businesses, and their persistence until they succeeded. When she attended the first Fishtrap at the Wallowa Lake United Methodist Camp, she was inspired to write a book about her friends' travails and triumphs.

She recorded interviews with every business owner at the Lake, past and present.



Contributed Photo

Rita Ehrler, right, and Ellen Morris Bishop recently published "Stories of Wallowa Lake: A History of the Lake and Its Communities."

She researched courthouse records, dug through the Wallowa County Museum's files, and read and scoured the Chieftain and Observer archives to gather information. Importantly, she also asked for photographs that showed the lives and businesses at Wallowa Lake.

"They were wonderful stories, and very special pictures that could be found nowhere else," Ehrler said. "And so I thought I should add extra to include more important and very interesting information about people and businesses at the Lake over

many, many years."

Ehrler invited local writer Ellen Morris Bishop to contribute to the book's chapters on Wallowa Lake geology, as well as the stories of the extinction of sockeye salmon, the reintroduction of elk, the proposed Wallowa National Park and others.

Together, they tracked down the stories of the Nez Perce and the early settlers, Old Chief Joseph and his reburial in 1926, the stagecoaches that brought visitors to the lake in the late 1800s, the Wallowa Lake Monster and more.

"There was a lot of history, like the national park attempt, the reintroduction of elk and how the sockeye went extinct that I'd heard about, but never knew the details," Bishop said. "And it was astonishing to learn that in 1905, Frank McCully and others made a very serious attempt to build an electric railway from Joseph to Walla Walla. The many historic photos we found add authenticity and a real view back in time."

The book, published by Eagle Cap Press in Halfway, is available in Wallowa County at The Bookloft, Copper Creek, Heidi's Town Shoppe in Joseph, Heidi's Gift Shoppe at the Lake and other stores, including Betty's Books in Baker City and through the Eagle Cap Press website: www.eaglecappress.com.



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