

Celebration dinner marks 140 years of Kam Wah Chung

Guest speakers include former first lady Mary Oberst

By Angel Carpenter
Blue Mountain Eagle

Friends of Kam Wah Chung — 130 of them — gathered Saturday evening at the John Day Senior Center for a special presentation to celebrate the 140th year of the opening of Kam Wah Chung & Co., which became a National Historic Landmark in 2005.

The meeting was highlighted by honorary speaker former Oregon first lady Mary Oberst, news of the Discovery Channel visiting John Day this summer and a special performance by Chinese lion dancers.

Oberst said she and her husband, former Gov. Ted Kulongoski, first visited Kam Wah Chung over 20 years ago.

After her husband became the governor in 2003, Oberst's interest in the museum continued, and she expressed to him her interest in doing more. She said he told her she would have to speak with then-state Sen. Ted Ferrioli — "That's his sandbox."

She and Barbara Sidway spearheaded fundraising for the interpretive center, along with Sharon Leighty, who was then head of the Oregon State Parks Foundation.

Sidway also coordinated with the National Trust for Historic Preservation to shepherd the museum through the National Parks Service designation as a National Historic Landmark.

Many others joined in the cause, and \$1.5 million was raised to restore the museum and to renovate a building for an interpretive center, and, Oberst added, the funds were raised ahead of schedule.

She said it was Sidway's expertise that led to Kam Wah Chung becoming a National Historic Landmark.

Oberst said the experience was "a spotlight during my time as first lady of Oregon."

Adele Cerny, president of the Friends of Kam Wah Chung nonprofit organization, encouraged everyone in attendance to spread the word about the landmark and invite friends who visit to tour the site.

Christy Sweet, the curator from 2005-2016 who is now the Oregon State Parks historian preservation specialist in Salem, said her favorite memory as curator was seeing the reactions of visitors.

"It's very unassuming



Christy Sweet holds a cabbage out to the Chinese lions during their dance at the Kam Wah Chung & Co. celebration dinner.

Eagle photos/Angel Carpenter



Adele Cerny, left, and Mary Oberst clap after the Chinese lion dance at the Kam Wah Chung & Co. anniversary dinner.



Saturday's Kam Wah Chung anniversary celebration was a sellout with 130 guests at the John Day Senior Center.



A dinner guest captures video of the Chinese lion dance performance during Saturday's dinner.

from the outside," she said. "To see their eyes light up" as they entered and experienced history was the most interesting part.

One favorite story came from two Grant County men, whom she said would remain unnamed, who told her about how they broke into the museum in the '70s, as 13- and 14-year-olds.

Looking for "booze and cigarettes" inside, the pair broke through the upper-level floor to the main level, and explored the area with a flash-

light, she said.

Upon seeing a bear claw in Doc Hay's apothecary, they thought they heard a noise behind them — possibly the spirit of a bear coming after them, she said. The boys fled the scene empty-handed, leaving their flashlight behind, and avoided the area in the future.

Sweet also recalled stories of how Doc Hay would play hide and seek with some of the children, and Lung On taught them to gamble, the kids leaving with plenty of candy.

Eric Brand, a researcher who led a group of professors and their spouses to Kam Wah Chung in 2017, was unable to attend Saturday's event; however, he sent a video announcing he has been in contact with Professor Zhou Zhongzhen who is serving as an adviser to the Discovery Channel on a

series they're producing about early Chinese herbal medicine trade.

The series is timed to celebrate the 500th anniversary of a famous Chinese medical scholar.

"We hope to come to John Day this summer to begin doing some filming," Brand said, adding that Zhou would like to put the Kam Wah Chung collection, which is the only large, intact collection in North America, at the same level as two other nationally recognized collections "to draw attention to its tremendous value for scientific research as well as for its intangible cultural heritage."

Kam Wah Chung curator

Don Merritt said the Discovery Channel series is "the tip of the iceberg." He said there are research projects in the works, including genealogy projects, and a Chinese sister city forming.

There were 9,000 visitors to the museum last year, and he expects an additional 1,000 this year. He added, more volunteers and donations are needed.

"I'm not short of ideas," he said.

Other speakers for the evening included former Friends of Kam Wah Chung president Jeanne Day; interpretive store manager Chris Labhart; and Park Manager for the Clyde Holliday Unit Dennis Bradley, who recognized all the volunteers, including Bruce Carey for 1,000 hours of service to the museum.

Kathleen Cathey, from Sen. Ron Wyden's office, presented a flag that had flown over the Capitol to Friends of Kam Wah Chung for their support of the museum.

The evening began with a Chinese dinner catered by Snaffle Bit Dinner House and ended with a finale, a performance by Lee's Association Dragon & Lion Dance Team of Portland with two lively "lions" that danced on stage and down the aisles, up close with the audience.

Lion dances, which are presented during the Chinese New Year and other celebrations, are "performed to ward off evil and bring good fortune," said coach Terry Lee.

For more information, visit friendsofkamwahchung.com.

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FRI-THURS (4:00) 7:00 9:40
TAG (R)
A small group of former classmates organize an elaborate, annual game of tag that requires some to travel all over the country.
FRI-THURS (4:20) 7:20 9:50
OCEANS 8 (PG-13)
Debbie Ocean gathers an all-female crew to attempt an impossible heist at New York City's Met Gala.
FRI-THURS (4:10) 7:10 9:45
\$9 Adult, \$7 Senior (60+), Youth

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