

Historical society strikes 'Umatilla Gold' with grant

Exhibit will open in 2019, tell the history of wheat in Eastern Oregon

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
STAFF WRITER

Mineral mining was more prevalent elsewhere in the American West, but a Umatilla County Historical Society exhibit will make the case that the county is bountiful with a gold all its own.

The historical society has been working on "Umatilla Gold: The History of Wheat in Umatilla County" for years, but a recent large grant from a private foundation meant the nonprofit could finally publicize the project.

With the help of Formations Inc., the Portland consultant that constructed the SAGE Center's exhibits in Boardman, the historical society plans to give locals and visitors an interactive tour through the history of a crop that's nearly synonymous with Umatilla County.

The exhibit

While the majority of the exhibit deals with the past two centuries, it also covers millions of years of the region's history.

After an introduction, visitors will learn the geological history of Eastern Oregon, from the sediment that was deposited during and after the ice age to the volcanic effect that created the "bones of the region," according to a 2017 outline of the exhibit.

The museum will also include a section on the indigenous people of the Columbia Basin, including the tribes that would come to form the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

From there, the exhibit will skip ahead to 1862, a big year for Umatilla County's agriculture sector.

At the national level, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, which entitled men older than 21 to any unclaimed 160-acre parcel of land. Domestic migrants from the Oregon Trail and the Willamette Valley poured into Eastern Oregon, as did European immigrants from abroad. More locally, Umatilla County was



CONCEPTUAL ART CONTRIBUTED BY UMATILLA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The "Umatilla Gold: History of Wheat in Umatilla County" has received a \$121,780 grant and will open in 2019 at the Heritage Station Museum in Pendleton.

created just as a Baker County gold rush created demand for wheat.

While early settlers used wheat for subsistence farming, the grain industry started to flourish in the late 19th and early 20th century in places like Pendleton, Adams, Athena, Weston, Pilot Rock, Echo, Buttercreek and the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Those years saw farmers embrace mechanical reapers, tractors and vehicles while they grew and harvested the wheat before shipping it off on rail or boat to other markets. During the Great Depression, farmers formed the Pendleton Grain Growers co-op to help keep farms from closing.

The exhibit eventually transitions to modern wheat farming and its latest trends like no-till farming and auto-steering tractors that use GPS for more precise rows during plowing, seeding, fertilizing and harvesting.

Like the SAGE Center in Boardman, "Umatilla Gold" will have interactive elements to the exhibit.

Molding gold

While the Umatilla County Historical Society has featured many different exhibits at the Heritage Station Museum in Pendleton over the years, executive director Barbara Lund-Jones said they've never had an exhibit that focuses exclusively on wheat.

Board president Tom Winn, a retired wheat farmer, said modern changes in the industry means that it's time to pre-

serve history. Although agriculture is still an economic driver in the region, farm consolidation and the advent of new agricultural technology means fewer people are farming than they used to.

The historical society sketched out its first exhibit outline in 2015, but the nonprofit refrained from going public until recently. It had been steadily raising money from organizations like Umatilla County Economic Development, the Oregon Heritage Foundation and the Pacific Power Foundation when it got big news from the MJ Murdock Charitable Trust — the charity was granting the historical society \$121,780 toward fabricating and installing the exhibit.

"Umatilla Gold" has an estimated cost of \$354,873, and the historical society has already raised money needed for planning and programming, as well as the concept design. The nonprofit is continuing to raise money for the final design while the Murdock trust dollars will go toward the final construction phase, which has a total cost of \$287,113. When the exhibit opens in 2019, Lund-Jones said it will fit into Pendleton's growing tourism industry and downtown area.

"Umatilla Gold" is expected to be a steady feature of the Heritage Station for years to come. As one of the conditions of the Murdock grant, the exhibit will have to stay open for at least 10 years.

COLUMN

Livingston: BMCC agriculture connects locals to education

By **ANNE LIVINGSTON**
BLUE MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Agriculture is a big player in the Eastern Oregon economy. More than 37 percent of the workforce in Umatilla County is either directly or indirectly employed by the agriculture industry. And farm sales in Umatilla County exceed \$1 billion annually. As the industry continues to grow and become more technologically advanced, producers are finding that working together with a local community college is a wise investment in fortifying their employee teams. The Blue Mountain Community College agriculture department works closely with the eastern Oregon and southeastern Washington region's ag industry.

Training and education is built to suit the needs of agriculture. In the last year, crop producers, irrigation specialists, suppliers and others have worked with BMCC to provide a series of short workshops in specialty areas to advance the knowledge and skills of those already in the workforce. Eight workshops were developed on topics ranging from agricultural safety to soils, irrigation design to base stations and controls, moisture monitoring and remote sensing to managing crop production through proper use of irrigation technology. One workshop focused on welding. The workshops were scheduled through November and February on Fridays for four hours each.

The format of these workshops met the industry need both in length and the "offseason" time of year.

Each of the four workshops in February were delivered using Internet technology (Zoom) which allowed students to benefit from the classes without having to travel. Students ranged in age from 16-75 and participated from as far away as Parma, Idaho, and Othello, Wash. Most workshops averaged 18 participants.

BMCC has plans to continue these workshops. And with continued input from ag industry managers and their BMCC ag advisory board, plans to expand the curriculum to include more topics and students next winter.

In the meantime, BMCC's Precision Irrigated Agriculture Facility, located on the Oregon State University Hermiston Agricultural Research and Experiment Center, and the Facility for Agricultural Resource Management on the BMCC Pendleton campus has traditionally formatted courses that focus on a long list of agricultural topics. Traditional and nontraditional students know that BMCC is connected with industry employee managers, and BMCC is connecting these students with the education they need to keep up with an agriculture industry that is changing every day.

Anne Livingston is the director of Marketing for Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton.

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