

Hunsakers Recall Interpretive Center's Grand Opening

by Sherrie Kvamme
of the Hells Canyon Journal

In 1989, Dave Hunsaker, of the Bureau of Land Management, was hired as the project manager for construction of the 23,000-square-foot Oregon Trail Interpretive Center. He also served as the first director of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, a position that he held for nine years. Joyce Hunsaker was an integral part of the team from the community side during that entire time period, serving as executive director of the Oregon Trail Preservation Trust.

Both Dave and Joyce were involved in the multi-faceted work of planning, building and opening and continued to be players in the life of the center in the years that followed. They have graciously agreed to share insights from their involvement with the immense project. Dave and Joyce have made it clear that the incredible amount of work accomplished by many individuals, agencies and the community, laid the foundation for all that was achieved, and the end project would never have come to fruition without all of them.

Memorial Day weekend in 2022, will mark 30 years since the Grand Opening of the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center. Perched atop Flagstaff Hill, the center overlooks the location of the Oregon Trail – the Blue Mountains, the rich valleys, the expanse of land and the well-worn wagon tracks.

It's not yet known if there will be a 30th anniversary celebration in the spring as the center may be closed for renovations. There is also the matter of a lease agreement between the county and the BLM that has not been signed as yet. However, the parties are in negotiations and a joint press release is expected in the near future.

"In general, and from a private citizen's perspective, I think we can say the plan is to put new skin on the building, install new heating systems, air conditioning systems and insulation. The technology is old, and it needs to be brought up to date," commented Dave.

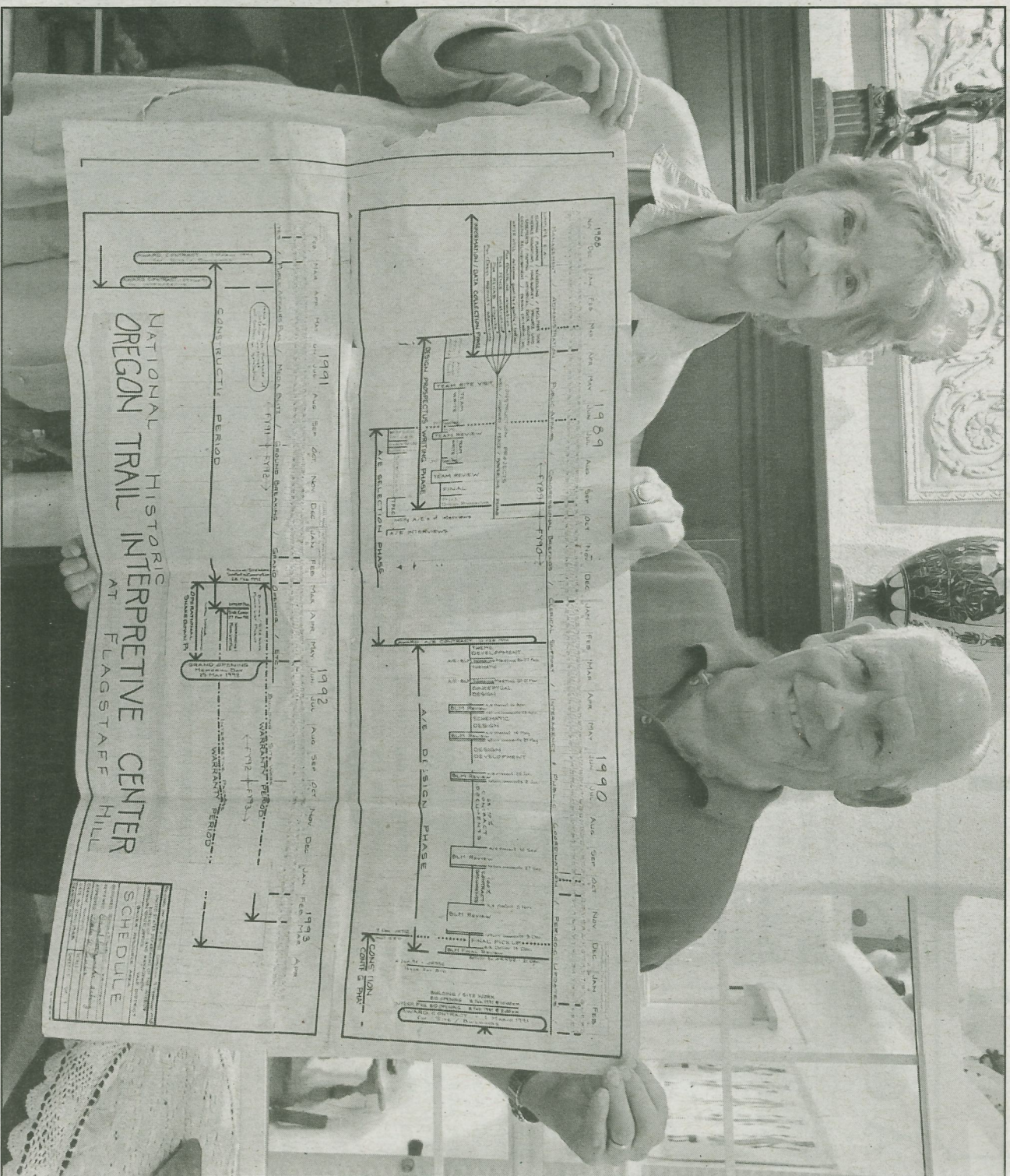


Photo by Sherrie Kvamme

JOYCE AND DAVE HUNSAKER display a timeline of events leading to the opening of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center.

High Winds on the Hill
"I don't know to what extent they will make changes to the exhibitry, if any. The last retrofit was in the winter of 2000-2001. We were closed for four or five months.

"We hadn't realized it initially, but the wind had started to move that building. The only wind information the design team had prior to the build, was from down at the airport and officially the highest winds were gauged at about 90 miles an hour. We had planned for 105 miles per hour, thinking that would be substantial. But when we put the fire-weather station up there with an anemometer we found out that we had experienced four, 120-mile-per-hour wind events in the first five or six years. The wind would get underneath that building and tended to twist it. There were some cracks on the inside of the building and potential damage on some of the supports."

Joyce noted, "The first hint that something was not right was when we were walking down the hall of the Great Gallery. David looked up and said, 'There is something wrong here.' There was a mirror that was tilted into the other one at the top corners. He said, 'That should not be. It's always been straight.'"

Dave continued, "That was in about 1998. We expect those 10-foot and 12-foot mirrors to be one-eighth to one-quarter of an inch separation from top to bottom. Well, those two were just touching at the top and there was an inch of separation at the bottom. Also, as you walk down the main gallery, on the right-hand side was the glulam beam for the roof and there was a long, crooked crack in that beam. It's about 100 feet long, and it is very thick, which was an attention-getter. A glulam beam is eight to 10 times stronger than a continuous wooden beam. They were able to fix that rather than replace it, but it was another indicator that something was wrong," he said.

Upon further investigation, it was discovered there were also four internal and external walls in different locations that would need to be stripped out, and to move ahead with the retrofit, exhibits had to be removed, an exterior wall had to be taken off and a significant steel I-beam had to be installed in the walls to stop any shifting.

"After they finish this next project, that building will be good for another 50 to 75 years of a natural life cycle. The agency is committed to having that building stay up there permanently," said Dave.

An Ambitious Timeline

Joyce smiled as Dave started to unfold a well-worn document.

"This," said Dave, "is the infamous document that we all had copies of. It was our day by day, month by month schedule and years of schedules and goals. It starts in October of 1988, and it goes by week all the way through when we opened, to the end of 1992 and then it continues into the first part of 1993. These

are the elements of what had to be done," he explained as he spread the paper on the table, summarizing the content.

"You start with the data collection," he explained. "In other words, here's an idea. We need to re-ignite our economy. That's a good idea and a goal. What should we do to make that happen? So, we collect ideas and suggestions. There were team site visits around the country. We wanted an interpretive center, a visitor's center and preservation of the trails outside. We pulled together a set of ideas that we could go to potential contractors with and tell them this is the baseline of what we want to accomplish and ask them for proposals on how to accomplish that."

"With the basic understanding of what we had pulled together, we contacted at least and probably over a dozen, very professional companies from all over the West, one from back in New York and another in St. Louis, and they each pulled together a preliminary package of competing proposals."

"When we had worked through and decided on the top three proposals, we went back to those three companies and asked them to give us some very good building, exhibits and thematic designs and we wanted fully developed proposals," said Dave. "We went to them with an RFP [request for proposals] which is different than an RFQ [request for a quote]. The RFQ meant we would have held them to that. The RFP gives both sides more opportunity for conversation

and adjustments.

"We then zeroed in on a design team, and things went from there all the way through specific blueprints for construction for every detail, all of the stairs and the elements of the interpretations all of the paintings and the murals and the physical stuff and the big exhibits and the little things and the verbiage and the signage and the messaging and the research. It took years, and an incredible number of dedicated team meetings. It was 1991 before we started construction."

Pointing to the top left corner of the document, Dave continued, "We had to complete an environmental assessment which included invaluable input from the community, what the overall BLM plan that existed at the time was and all of the countless elements that go into the environmental assessment because it was on federal property. Once that decision was made, we got the green light to go towards the design and construction. The EA included many components, such as geology, archaeology, cultural studies, the physical and environmental impacts and alternatives. The first alternative was to do nothing. The second alternative was to create a project that had things like a petting zoo and a water slide. Alternative number three was, let's not build something, but let's enhance the interpretation of the existing landscape, and alternative four was, let's build a big center up there."

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Recalling the Interpretive Center's Grand Opening

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Dave emphasized that each of the very reasonable alternatives needed to be studied fairly, thoroughly and then make a decision.

"The decision was ultimately alternative number four. It had to be submitted to different offices for approval and the result was this document. We had our timeline," smiled Dave. "That process went through the first of April of 1989."

The next step was to address the fact that there was no water or sewage.

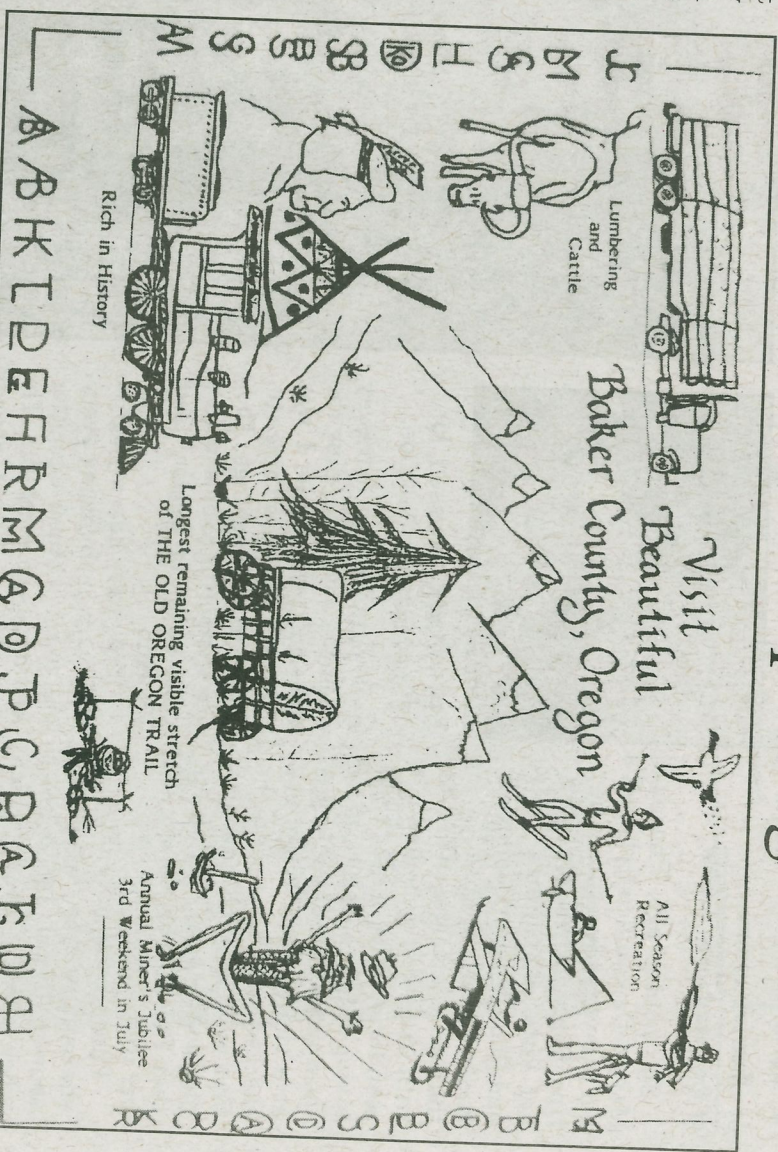
"We didn't have electricity, and we did not have sewage disposal. Our expectation was to have between 50,000 to 100,000 people a year visiting the center. So we had to build a complete sewage treatment facility. It was cost-prohibitive to drill a well near the center, so we had to drill a well across the highway and pump water up to the center. It went down 407 feet."

The next phase was the tremendous process of the design and writing phase of the prospectus and starting the architectural and engineering selection. The design contract was awarded on February 12, 1990 to Ewing Construction in Boise, Idaho. Dave Shelton was the lead architect. With meetings held multiple times a week and some back-to-back on the same day, the construction contract was awarded in December of 1990 and building could begin.

Groundbreaking to Grand Opening

"In May of 1991, they turned dirt," smiled Dave. "Memorial Day weekend, of 1992, we opened the doors. I tell you we were painting inside at 4:30 that morning! We said we were going to open then and we did!"

The memory of painting in the early morning hours of the Grand Opening of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center brought laughter and



FUNDRAISING POSTCARD created by the fourth grade class at Brooklyn Elementary in the 1987-88 school year. Sold for 10 cents each, sale of the unique postcards netted \$1,800 towards the Interpretive Center's creation.

needed to be done."

Former Oregon Governor Barbara Roberts was at the opening, as well as the center's 10th and the 25th anniversaries. She was one of the speakers and her comments affirmed what the Hunsakers consistently emphasize, "This is a recognition of how history, economic development and courage come together in teamwork to create something as wonderful as this Interpretive Center."

Fourth Grade Postcard Raises \$1,800 for Center

In 1987 and 1988, Dorothy Woofen, who was a fourth-grade teacher at Brooklyn Elementary School in Baker City, helped her students create a fundraising and marketing project. Dorothy had her class make oversized Oregon Trail postcards. The border is made up of brands of the student's initials and they all helped design both sides of the postcard. They mailed them to senators and representatives and everyone

they could think of.

"We absolutely loved that project. They were in color, and they were on cardstock with scenes of what was pertinent in the county. Every one of us enjoyed that effort so much. I think they sold for 10 cents each, and they raised over \$1,800," smiled Dave. "It was great!"

A special profound memory for both Joyce and Dave recalls third morning of the Grand Opening. People had come from all over including out-of-state, to be part of the wagon train. They all camped by White Swan mine at the far end of Virtue Flat. That morning, the people in the wagon train were up early, they had breakfast and then they packed up their wagons and got in line. There were over 200 head of livestock and over 100 people, riders and wagon teams of four and six.

"They were all headed towards the Interpretive Center, and you could see them coming off in the distance. The dust started to rise and billow," said

Dave. "You could see the line of wagons coming, and it was a sight like you can't believe. Pretty soon though, instead of a line, you could see them one at a time, moving out just like they did on the Oregon Trail so instead of driving into the dust of each other's wagon, the line was across the horizon. It was awesome. It brings tears to your eyes to see something like that," said Dave.

Joyce continued, "It was like you had been transported and been allowed to see a little peek into the past when you watched it all happen. It was an honor to be there and be able to experience that. Visitors had lined up along the walkways to watch. It is a memory that those who were there will never forget. It marks you," said Joyce.

That night by the well across the highway, the wagons circled and there was a huge cookout with a feast. An interpretation called "Fanny" was performed by the campfire. Joyce was Fanny.

To be continued...