In a shadow of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, there lived something warm, soft and furry – the bunnies of the Umatilla Army Depot.

Brought to Umatilla when nerve gas shipments arrived in the early 1960s, the rabbits served as living chemical agent monitors.

Animals have served beside their human counterparts for centuries. Horses have carried soldiers into battle and dogs have saved an estimated 10,000 American lives during wartime. In World Wars I and II, homing pigeons carried messages strapped to their leg – one flew 52 missions before it was wounded.

Bill Brankowitz, in a history compiled for the Army in 1987, noted that detection of nerve agents was a matter of grave concern on discovery of Germany’s secret stocks in 1945.

“As all nerve agents are essentially odorless and deadly at low concentrations, a quick and accurate method was required. Rabbits, which were found to be very susceptible to the nerve agents, were placed in the vicinity of the weapons. Usually four rabbits in small cages would be placed in a railcar,” he wrote.

“This method continued in use during transportation until 1969, and at some storage installations into the early 1980s.”

Belgian hares were preferred because of their early and obvious response to exposure to very tiny amounts of nerve agent—their pupils began to constrict to pinpoints.

At Umatilla, the Army kept the rabbits in a building dedicated to them. An employee known as the Rabbit Man would feed the colony and issue rabbits out as needed.

An Army operating procedure from June 1970 says the rabbits would be placed at work sites with G agents 30 minutes prior to entry and would remain until work was completed. Operators would frequently check the rabbits’ eyes for pinpointing. Roving monitors would carry two rabbits with them in the vehicle at all times to act as detectors.

Eventually, technology took a vast leap. Mobile labs, working outside the storage igloos, would extract air to analyze with a gas chromatograph. They could detect chemical agents down to parts per trillion in about a half-hour.

Surprisingly, the rabbits survived their service to the nation. Very tiny exposures to nerve gas such as GB, which is
similar to farm pesticides, does not kill or leave lasting physical damage. But in the late 1960s, when it first became public knowledge that the U.S. stored nerve gas at Umatilla and other sites, the plight of the rabbits drew public concern.

The depot’s commander at the time, Col. Chuck Norris, told reporters that no rabbits had been lost since nerve agents first arrived in 1962. A longtime depot employee said he had never heard of or observed a rabbit that died during work operations at Umatilla. (The Army archives note that several rabbits died during a single cross-country nerve gas transport to Umatilla in the late 1960s.)

At Umatilla, the rabbits took it all in stride.

Said the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin in a 1969 article, “The rabbits on the inspection teams used to hunch quietly in the back of the respective cages when introduced to strangers. Now, after receiving a certain amount of publicity, they seem quite willing to pose and wiggle their noses for press photographers.”
Dick and Mo Nichols have practically been lifetime volunteers. “We enjoy trying to make things better,” Dick says. “My dad’s attitude got me going. You should leave life a little bit better than how you found it.”

Dick, 87, and Mo, 71, have been involved in numerous causes through the years. For Dick, who was a rancher during his working years, those causes included the beef industry, urban growth planning, parks, chamber of commerce, Jaycees, Lions, Music on the Half Shell and Riverbend Live!

Mo, who was a teacher, has been a volunteer for programs in education, health and wellness, the arts, theater, chamber of commerce, Music on the Half Shell and Riverbend Live.

“I like being involved,” Mo says. “I like positive changes. I feel like I’ve been successful in that thinking.”

The two have been recognized for their civic efforts on numerous occasions. In 2008, they were named Winston-Dillard Area Chamber of Commerce First Citizen. That same year, Dick was presented Douglas County Livestock Association’s Pioneer Award.

The Nichols Bandshell, an outside stage in Roseburg’s Stewart Park, was named after the couple.

“Dick and Mo have always had good community spirit,” says Clint Newell, a friend of the Nichols for the past 30 years. “Dick Nichols is a guy who has had a great vision for the community. Take Music on the Half Shell, for example. He stayed true to that vision and reached out to others to get that support, to get sponsors, to convince other people who didn’t completely understand his vision. It was his persistence in getting sponsors, getting helpers that got things off the ground. His persistence and tireless effort made the difference.”

Clint adds that Mo has worked hand in hand with Dick, shared the same vision and compassion, and put in an
equal effort and commitment.

“When you get Dick, you get Mo,” Clint says. “They are a team. They work as a team.”

Dick is a Roseburg native who graduated from Roseburg High School in 1947 and then from Oregon State University in Corvallis in 1951 with a degree in business and agriculture. He returned home that same year and became part owner/manager of Nichols Bros. Inc., working with his father, James “Harold” Nichols.

During the 1950s, the two gradually transitioned the ranch from 2,000 ewe sheep to 600 mother cows. The ranch west of Winston earned Century status in the late 1960s.

Despite long days on the ranch, Dick managed to attend early morning and night meetings of different clubs, committees and boards. His father was willing to tend to the cattle while his son got involved in advocating for and promoting the beef industry.

Dick eventually became president of the Douglas County Livestock Association, state president of the Western Oregon Livestock Association, vice president of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, chairman of the Oregon Beef Council and a member of the National Cattlemen’s Association Private Lands and Environmental Management Committee.

In 1974, while on the Oregon Beef Council, Dick met with U.S. President Gerald Ford in Portland to discuss beef exports to Japan. Dick says Ford helped open up that export market a year later.

While Dick was ranching and promoting, Mo, who had grown up on a grain farm in Minnesota before migrating west, was a grade school teacher in Roseburg. She helped on the ranch in her spare time and during the summer.

After retiring from the classroom in 1992, Mo became a full-time ranch employee and owner.

In addition to ranch and beef industry work, Dick found time to volunteer in local government and with civic organizations. He spent 30 years on the Roseburg Parks Commission. Early in that time, he began to bring his vision of music in the park to reality.

The fact $190,000 had been left for riverside park development enhanced his interest and vision. It was just a matter of convincing others to have the same vision.

Dick was persistent and others gradually, if not grudgingly, gave their support to the project. In the early 1990s, the area along the shoreline of the South Umpqua River that is now the stage for the Music on the Half Shell was briars. Jerry Hassler, Roseburg’s parks director, was all in on Dick’s vision, and the area was cleared and grass planted.

Sponsorships and donations for that first concert series in 1992 were secured by Dick. With a budget of about $6,000, Clint, a musician himself, secured seven acts for that first year. Jim Mackey provided technical support on the sound system.

“Dick had the idea for a long time, long before anybody else had it,” Clint says. “Give Dick credit for that. There was some reluctance within the parks commission about whether this would be successful, largely because nobody understood how it could be done.

“His business experience, my business experience, we collectively put together an organization that was solvent.”

There was discussion about whether to charge admission to the concerts, but Dick saw something at the first one that convinced him the events needed to be free.

“A little girl was dancing and I knew if there had been a charge, she wouldn’t have been there,” he says.

Dick has been on the Music on the Half Shell board since its first year in 1992. He was president of the board for four years. Mo was the board’s secretary for five years.

With their experience getting Music on the Half Shell established, the Nichols were the lead organizers in starting the Riverbend Live! concert series in Winston. The first was in 1997.

Music in the Park just completed its 25th summer season and Riverbend Live! its 20th season.

With age catching up to them, Dick and Mo are gradually pulling back from civic activities. They are still on the Music on the Half Shell board, but have chosen to move to the background. Mo is president of the Riverbend Live! board, but has been mentoring others to take over.

“They’ve been pretty awesome,” Mo says of the two concert series. “They’re in great hands. We’re going to kick back some. Age is saying you have to slow down.”


“My dad’s attitude got me going. You should leave life a little bit better than how you found it.”

—Dick Nichols
By Pam Spettel

The bold dashes of color that greet visitors to Barker Gallery provide a lavish first impression of the treat they are about to have. Billows of cheerful pink and fuchsia flowers and green vegetable beds speckled with red, yellow and orange line the drive leading visitors to a hand-painted script sign.

Out from the door pop Dave and Glenna Barker—equally colorful themselves—to offer an outgoing personal welcome.

It does not take long to learn the Barkers are not the idle sort. They work together with joy, purpose and dashes of lighthearted good humor to create a little bit of paradise.

Glenna, a former school bus driver, retired in 1994 to develop her interest in oil painting. Barker Gallery contains her work and that of local artists Jane Scotti and Rhonda Farfan. Intricate beadwork, fused glass art pieces, wind chimes of all sizes, framed paintings so realistic they look like photos and plenty of whimsy fill the gallery.

The gallery’s studio space is where Glenna works, mostly in the winter. In the summer, she is too busy tending the flower gardens, putting up food and hosting gallery visitors to do much painting.

Dave retired from Lane County in 2003, where he started in the road department. He served from 1972 to 1978 as Triangle Lake’s resident deputy sheriff, then completed his career back with the road department. About 10 years before retirement, he and a builder friend built their home.

The vegetable gardener of the two, Dave grows all of his vegetables from seed and generously shares plant starts and his bounty with their neighbors.

“We like to help people,” says Dave. “We do successive plantings. We already have our cauliflower, cabbage, Brussels sprouts and broccoli in for the winter. We plant so that we get our first bunch of tomatoes in late May, and usually eat our last tomato of the season in February.”

Glenna belongs to an informal group of local women called the Rowdies, which stands for Rural Women of Diverse Endeavors. Every November she and Dave assemble a huge basket of fresh garden produce, home-canned tuna, pickles and other home-canned items that they donate to a Rowdies charity auction to benefit Junction City Local Aid.
“The Rowdies is a quilting bee without the quilts,” says Glenna. “Fifty or so women from the Junction City area participate. There are no dues, no president and no one in charge. It’s great.”

In 2013, Glenna was awarded the Gale F. Fletchall Award for a lifetime of service to Junction City’s Scandinavian Festival. She served as the festival’s art director for 17 years, overseeing the art show.

“That was the best job,” says Glenna. “It was so fun and so rewarding.”

She also coordinated the art show at the Long Tom Grange Annual Daffodil Festival for three or four years, she says.

The Barkers’ garage is filled with three freezers, their contents neatly organized and cataloged on lists affixed to each one. They turn their abundant crops into meals the two of them eat all year.

Dave’s bumper sticker collection adorns the freezers. From the funny, “Somebody has to do something, and it’s incredibly pathetic that it has to be us,” to the thought-provoking, “Peace begins when the hungry are fed,” the freezers offer lessons and laughs.

One thing Dave does not enjoy is the heat. Working in the hot summer sun takes its toll, so the Barkers decided to install a new heat pump in the summer of 2015.

“I had to get the heat pump,” says Dave. “We were going out to eat a lot during the summer growing season just to have a place to cool down after working outdoors all day. We already had ducting from our old forced-air furnace, so a heat pump was the best option.

“We went down to our local contractor, who was so helpful. They did all of the paperwork for the Blachly-Lane rebate and state and federal tax credit forms. I signed the papers, and they had the unit in in a day. We were going to have the heat pump installed anyway, but the $1,400 rebate incentive made it extra appealing.”

Dave says he was expecting to pay a lot for the cooling.

“But our average kilowatt use hasn’t jumped up,” he says. “And we get to be comfortable. Our winter heating bills are lower, too, and we aren’t using the propane heat at all.”

The Barkers have a long family history in the Junction City area. Dave’s great-grandfather came to Oregon in 1913 and owned the first service station in Junction City.

Glenna is painting a rendition of a historic photo of the family service station. Family photos of those days gone by fill a wall of their home.

Dave’s great-uncles were school classmates with Virgil Parker, one of Blachly-Lane Electric Co-op’s founding directors.

Gratitude colors the Barkers’ positive outlook for their community and each other.

“We make a good team,” Dave says.
From the oldest to the newest, Cory Misley has experienced both when it comes to Oregon's cities.

Cory was raised in Oregon City, the state's oldest city. He graduated from Oregon City High School in 2007. Now at age 27, he is the city manager of La Pine—Oregon's newest city.

The central Oregon community with a population of about 1,700 was incorporated in 2006. Cory became its manager July 1, 2016.

A hub for about 20,000 people, the community incorporated to better provide basic essential services such as water and sewer to its citizens and businesses.

“I’m excited about it,” Cory says of his new job. “I wanted the job because I felt it was an incredible opportunity to be part of the youngest city in Oregon. La Pine has a bright future. It is a community that wants to improve, to be the best it can be. It is a no-brainer to be a part of that.”

Cory succeeds Rick Allen, who was interim city manager for the past year. During that time, Cory was assistant manager, learning and preparing to take over the position.

Rick will continue mentoring and consulting with Cory, and helping on special projects.

“He’s smart,” Rick says of Cory. “He’s got the personality that I think can be successful as a city manager. He interacts well with people of all ages. He can articulate his position well. He has a personality that people just like. That’s half the battle. If people like you, it makes it easier to do your job. If they don’t like you, it makes the job much more difficult.”

Ken Mulenex, La Pine's mayor, also is impressed with the city's young manager.

“Cory is extremely sharp,” Ken says. “He’s quick to understand simple to complex situations, to ask the right questions, and has that energy and drive to learn everything he can before making decisions, which sets him apart from others. I’m convinced that La Pine is heading into an excellent period of leadership and progress.”

Ken and Rick say they believe Cory is the youngest city manager in the state. That fact doesn’t seem to bother Cory.

“I’m fortunate to have this opportunity and to be learning and growing with this community,” says Cory, who has a staff of five: Ashley Williams, billings specialist; Patti Morgan, administrative assistant; Jake Obrist, public works manager; and Mike Ward and Johnny Bales, public works employees.

While La Pine wants to maintain its small-town feel, Cory says it is going through some growth. More planning applications were submitted to the city in the first five months of 2016 than in all of 2015, he notes.

The Dollar Store and Grocery Outlet stores will soon open in La Pine. St. Charles Medical Center of Bend is building a clinic and lab in town. A multi-housing project is also being developed.

The La Pine City Council sets policy. It is Cory's job to carry that out. He also researches proposed projects and makes recommendations to the council.

And he finds time to look toward La Pine's future.

“I’m also trying to look at some long-range planning,” Cory says. “Where is the city heading five years from now, 10 years from now? We have to be thoughtful about the things we can do, the things we can’t do, as we look to the future.”

He says the city's budget is “relatively small,” so the focus must be on essential services, especially water and sewer. But revitalization of the Huntington downtown core is a goal of the city manager and the city council.

“It’ll take years to revitalize that part of town, but it is in the plans,” Cory says.
Following completion of his graduate studies, Cory Misley spent a year shadowing Interim City Manager Rick Allen. He took the reins in July.

Rick says the La Pine community wants to maintain its rural nature, but at the same time enjoy some prosperity and growth.

He says Cory will be challenged to deal with land-use applications, building projects and services because people have different causes and interests—and each believes theirs is more important than others.

But Rick believes Cory has enough experience to deal with whatever issues he might face.

Cory has a degree in political science from Portland State University and a master's in public policy and management from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

While a student at PSU, Cory did an internship for the city of La Pine. That was his first experience with local government and city management.

He was no stranger to La Pine, having visited and vacationed in the area on numerous occasions, including visits to his sister, Amanda DuVall, who lives in the Bend area.

During his internship, Cory visited more than 100 businesses in the La Pine area, checking to see if businesses were conforming to the city’s business license program. He says about one-third did not understand or know about the program and needed an explanation, and another one-third knew of the program. The final third probably had voted against it and becoming a city back in 2006, he says, noting they needed a complete education and convincing of the importance of the program.

During his two-year program at Carnegie Mellon, Cory spent his first summer in La Pine as an AmeriCorps member. His second year as a Carnegie Mellon student, he worked 30 hours a week for the International City/County Management Association in Washington, D.C., working on local government issues.

Rick contacted Cory after he finished his schooling and asked him if he would be interested in an assistant city manager job, with the opportunity to become city manager a year later. Cory accepted.

“The community has been very welcoming,” Cory says. “It’s an opportunity to be part of a new city and help it develop going into the future. La Pine has a bright future.”
By Dianna Troyer

From his home in Moore, Mike Betts chats with ham radio operators from around the world.

“English is still the universal language for radio,” says Mike, who is licensed as a general radio operator. “I’ll have the radio on, and if I hear someone who sounds interesting, I’ll make contact. I’ve talked to people in China, Japan, Europe, Russia, North Africa, India and even Antarctica.”

Mike, 65, says radio operators generally fall into three social categories.

“There are those who want to do contests and contact as many people as possible in a day,” he says. “They just confirm your call letters and are on to the next person. That’s not for me.

“Then there are those who are interested in emergency preparedness. “Finally, the people like me are called ‘rag chewers’ because we just like to visit about what we’re doing. I’ve met some of the people I’ve talked to when I travel for work, and others I’ve never met.”

Technically, radio operators are categorized according to three licenses. The licenses allow access to certain radio frequencies.

Operators must pass progressively complex tests administered through the American Radio Relay League. License designations are technician, general and amateur extra, which is the highest level.

While Mike set up his radio system at home mainly to socialize, he also knows the value of a radio for emergencies. When he travels for work as a self-employed computer technician installing
small networks, he carries a radio in case an emergency occurs out of cellphone range. 

“I’ve never had to use it, but it’s reassuring to know it’s there,” Mike says.

After moving to the valley about three years ago, Mike joined the Lost Rivers Amateur Radio Club, which has 25 to 30 members in the Lost River Valley and the Little Lost River Valley. Many of the club’s operators have small 5-watt radios.

Club President Steve Streeper started the organization in 2014 because many local residents were interested in emergency preparedness.

“People wanted to be able to help in case of a disaster,” says Steve, 73, who has an amateur extra license. “There are about seven of us in the valley with that designation.”

A licensed radio operator since 1985, Steve says a friend who was involved in search and rescue and was a ham operator encouraged him to earn a license.

Steve has talked to people as far away as Japan.

“We could hear each other plain as day,” he says. “Other times, the sound fades in and out, depending on several atmospheric factors.”

Every Sunday night, club members do a role call to report in and make sure the system works.

If cellphones or landlines fail, radio operators could communicate, says Mike’s neighbor, Merlin Waddoups, who is also a ham radio operator.

“Most cellphone towers have generators, but they only last so long,” says Merlin. “When the Teton Dam failed years ago, the ham operators were available for emergency communication.”

Merlin is a member of the Lost River Electric Board of Trustees. He says the co-op’s linemen rely on commercial radios because there are places in the valley where cellphone service is unavailable.

To get better coverage in the valley, the club is working to have a repeater installed on Windy Devil near Mackay, where cellphone towers have been built.

Merlin, 80, says his interest in radio began just a few years ago because he wanted to be part of the local emergency preparedness system.

Mike, on the other hand, has been fascinated with amateur radio since junior high.

“I’ve always loved radios and electronic projects,” he says. “The final test in my high school electronics class was the general radio exam.”

Mike says it is fascinating how solar activity—such as sunspots and flares that occur in 11-year cycles—affects radio wave transmission. He adds that the sun is entering a two- to three-year period where there should be less solar activity, referred to as a solar minimum.

Mike would like to see more young people become radio operators.

“Most of us are between ages 50 and 80,” says Mike.

To encourage more people to become operators, the ARRL dropped the requirement to know Morse Code in 2007.

“It was a real stumbling block for some people,” Mike says.

Becoming a licensed technician is relatively easy and affordable. The test costs $15. Practice tests are available on the internet. Equipment is inexpensive, too.

A small radio costs $25 to $50.

“As for antennas, we build our own inexpensively by using aluminum rods with fittings and a mounting bracket,” Merlin says.

Mike has helped others set up their radio system and given advice.

“It’s a great educational and social hobby,” he says.■

**Why are They Hams?**

A ham was considered a critical term meaning “a poor operator” or “a plug,” according to the manual “The Telegraph Instructor.”

In the early 1900s, the first amateur radio operators competed for time with receivers, sometimes unknowingly jamming other operations in an area, according to the American Amateur Relay League.

Frustrated commercial operators sometimes criticized the amateurs, calling them “hams.”■

For more information about becoming an amateur radio operator, go to www.arrl.org.
Two items on Barbara Brown’s lifetime bucket list are on their way to completion.

Barbara’s springer spaniel and Australian shepherd mix dog, Buster, age 5, has fulfilled the first goal: to train a dog to compete in a canine sporting event. Buster is a Champion X level rat hunter—one of only 22 mixed breed dogs in the United States to hold the title.

Buying and training her second dog, a 1-year-old purebred Australian shepherd female named Bella, means breeding a litter of puppies from the pair is on the horizon. Raising a litter of puppies is Barbara’s second bucket list item.

But Barbara is putting that goal on hold while Bella is also competing in ratting contests, known as barn hunts.

Bella is just a few successful hunts away from achieving her title in the Master division and should achieve it soon, says Barbara.

“Once they hit Master, they have that title for life,” she says.

To achieve a specific title, the dog must successfully complete a certain number of hunts.

While the sport is only three years old, barn hunts have become popular in the Northwest, says Barbara. Their appeal is because any dog—either purebred or a mixed breed, registered or not—can be trained to compete. The dogs learn to hunt for and locate live rats concealed in canisters hidden in straw bale mazes.

Hunts are held at various locations, typically hosted by an official Barn Hunt Club member. Three clubs exist in Oregon. Each holds clinics and trials.

It is common to find dogs and owners from across the Pacific Northwest and Canada at the competitions, Barbara says.
The hunting course consists of variable components and is a timed event. As the dogs get better at finding their quarry, the amount of time given to them to complete the course dwindles.

At the Master level, Buster and Bella each have 4.5 minutes to find eight hidden canisters. Some tubes have live rats inside; others have only the scent of rat. The dog has to be able to determine if the tube is a blank, or if it contains a live specimen. They also are required to travel through dark tunnels and climb the straw bale maze to find hidden canisters.

Adding to the difficulty is that sometimes only one of eight canisters contains a live rat. Each race is complex, says Barbara. This adds to the element of fun, too.

The component she finds most enjoyable is the relationship between dog and handler.

“You have to know your dog’s signs,” she says.

The rats used in the courses are not hurt, she says, noting there are professional rat handlers at the hunts and “there are strict guidelines and safety procedures to be followed.”

The competition rats, “have breaks and lunch,” Barbara says. “They are not to be harmed during these events. They are domesticated and we do not use wild ones.”

At home, while training the dogs, Barbara uses her pet rat, Herman, for the job.

“Herman is very tame,” she says. “He loves to get scratched behind the ears. He earns his keep here.”

Barbara, who owns Monkey Business Nursery off Highway 101 near Pacific City, says she never dreamed that adopting Buster would lead her down the path of competitive barn hunting.

“It was only a freak accident I got into this,” she says.

Barbara returned from picking up plants in the Willamette Valley and stopped in Grande Ronde, where she read an article in The Statesman Journal about a new sport, barn hunting, that was coming to the state fairgrounds.

Barbara’s interest was piqued so she, reviewed videos, read instructions and showed up with the dog.

“I had no experience, nothing,” she says.

While at the competition, Buster “watched, listened and um, he identified a rat! He was excited and happy, so I kept going!”

Aside from growing closer to her dogs through the training process, Barbara says having canines that are skilled rat hunters has been a benefit to her personally and professionally. Barbara’s nursery is on a hillside in the woods. Buster and Bella have found rats in her woodpile, near her nursery and even in a customer’s car engine. She even takes her dogs to local businesses to help them find rat problems in barns or warehouses.

“Some dogs will sniff out a rat, but if you train and get them familiar with the idea they are more keen on that scent and will hit on it faster and quicker,” she says.

Having dogs that can find and kill rats means she does not have to use poisonous bait, which is something she says she avoids because it can accidentally poison other animals, too.

In the coming year, Barbara says she is looking forward to watching both her dogs progress. In the past year, she says she has grown as a handler, too.

“My fellow barn hunters even now are coming up to me and saying, ‘You have improved dramatically. You’re good!’ I’m getting a lot of compliments on my handling skills,” she says.

Barbara is interested in helping dog owners who want to begin training their dogs to barn hunt.

“If people want to give me a call to set up a time in the evening, we can find out if their dog is interested in the sport,” she says. “Some dogs don’t like it no matter what you do. Some are lackadaisical, so that’s best to know before you get serious.”

Barbara can be reached at Monkey Business Nursery, 38005 Hwy 101 S. in Cloverdale, or (503) 392-4021. For more information about barn hunting, visit www.barnhuntassociation.com.
By Kris Capps

It is an exciting day at the Historic Alaska Railroad Depot. Not only is a freight train blasting its horn in the distance, but it looks like the train will stop at the depot. Visitors with cameras are giddy with excitement. Inside the depot, they were immersed in the history of the area and the railroad tracks. Seeing a working train so close is a bonus.

Proprietor Lamont Hawkins Jr. operates the museum, gift shop and, since last year, historic hotel. He leases the building, registered nationally as a historic site, from the city of Nenana. Lamont’s mother, JoAnne, formerly leased the historic railroad depot, and turned it into a gift shop, museum and room rental. She was an early proponent of tourism in Nenana and is well known for her personalized tours of the area.

Born in Fairbanks, Lamont grew up in the family tourism business. He spent many years working in tourism around the state. Now, settled back in
his hometown, he is revitalizing the depot, gift shop, hotel rooms and museum.

Lamont and a handful of volunteers refurbished the hotel rooms and the museum. Although the bulk of work was done last year, it is an ongoing project.

“It’s a labor of love, for sure,” Lamont says. “I don’t think it would have come together any other way. We have great ideas from one room to the next.”

The museum portion of the building is on the main floor and is filled with memorabilia. One area features old editions of the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner newspaper touting news of the Alaska Railroad.

In another area is a sign Lamont recently posted with a tribute to his mother, renowned for guiding visitors to the railroad museum, in her own comically informative and musical way. The sign reads:

“The depot became an intricate part of this routine, as Joanne would lead patrons into the museum and surprise them by using one of two antique concertinas on display to squeeze out a tune.

“With her reputation ultimately gained as ‘the accordion lady,’ JoAnne’s unique impact upon visitors was such that it continues to inspire returns from worldwide.”


Lamont says it is not unusual for returning visitors to recall stories of visits with his mother from years ago.

When he took over last year, Lamont decided to renovate the hotel rooms on the second floor. They had not been rented in quite a while.

There is the Harding Suite, named for President Warren Harding, who on July 15, 1923, drove a spike to officially complete construction of the Alaska Railroad.

There also are the Conductor, Engineer and Brakeman’s suites. Each has its own historic personality.

The furniture and decor is from an earlier era. For example, the Harding Suite includes a writing table, complete with parchment paper, quill pen and bottle of ink. There are even candlestick telephones that work.

The four suites share a common bathroom.

Each room includes a complimentary copy of The Depot Gazette, a six-page collector’s newsletter, filled with information about Nenana’s railroad history, local service, ads from the old days and classic comics.

Guests can sleep in a room from another era, then head downstairs and learn more about local history. The museum is free and has much to see.

The museum chronicles the railroad as it progresses through time. Its story is told through artifacts, historical photographs and a little storytelling from Lamont, who brings the history to life.

Alaska organizations with a special interest in history regularly stop at the depot, including the Vernon Nash Antique Car Club from Fairbanks and the Historic Railroad Society.

Small tour groups often spend up to an hour looking around the museum and grounds.

Lamont says the independent travelers seem to be the most interested guests and the most eager to pepper him with questions.

“Those people tend to find us and enjoy what we offer,” he says.

“You may be lucky and see a freight train come through,” he tells them. “This is the perfect place.”

While they wait, he chats with them about the town, the history, and his own experiences growing up in Nenana.

Sometimes visitors turn the tables and captivate him.

In early September, he reported on his Facebook page that one of his visitors was Charles Bettisworth, whose grandfather, a jeweler and watchmaker named Boyd Hering, attended President Warren G. Harding’s ceremonial driving of the golden spike in North Nenana on July 15, 1923.

“Many thanks for stopping by to share your personal and much appreciated history,” wrote Lamont on the page.

The museum is closed in the winter, but it is never too soon to start making plans for next year. For more information, call 832-5500 between 9:30 a.m. and 5 p.m., or go to the Historic Alaska Railroad Depot Facebook page.
Credit Union Makes Big Changes

Wauna Credit Union members will notice more than just an office remodel

By Scott Laird

Wauna Credit Union has made some big changes in Clatskanie, both in the physical appearance of its office and in the way it does business with its members.

“Along with our building remodel, we’ve remodeled the way we help our members because we really want it to be more personal,” says Gina Dines, financial center manager at the Clatskanie Wauna office.

As many Wauna members who regularly visit the Clatskanie branch are aware, the office has undergone a facelift. The total remodel of the office is complete with a new and bright layout.

Gina’s team that runs daily operations are called member consultants, as opposed to tellers or loan officers.

“This is a new concept for Wauna,” Gina explains. “A financial center is a group of people that are able to do everything from A to Z and provides one-stop shopping. We want our members to have their experience with us with just one individual.”

As an example, Gina says that any member consultant can help a member with a deposit, open an account, draw up loan paperwork, provide notary services or help with any other financial assistance a member might need.

“Forty-four percent of our members will use our online or our mobile banking services, which is one of the reasons we are moving to this financial center concept,” Gina explains. “Our younger members, the millennials, like to do things on the go. We’re trying to be sure we stay current, but also not offend our older membership, because they like things the traditional way. We’re trying to find that nice balance.”

The stations where member consultants do most of their work are designed so a member can stand beside the consultant to look at the computer screen and review their accounts or information. At their stations, member consultants have laptop computers they can take with them to a separate office if a member needs additional personal assistance.

The laptops allow member consultants to work at granite counter tops in the lobby, and greet and assist members as soon as they enter the office. Those counters, outfitted with stools, serve as a place for consultants to work with members in a casual environment.

The separate offices are designed to provide privacy for personal business, but are set up so members and consultants sit side-by-side while conducting business.

“We want it to be more like a conversation,” Gina says. “We’re trying to make it easier and more personable.”

The offices are named “Tigers” and “Eagles”—a reference to the local high school and middle school mascots. The eagle also features prominently in the Wauna logo.

“We wanted to incorporate the spirit of the community here in our office,” Gina says.

As an added security feature, all money handled by member consultants comes and goes directly through cash recycling machines at their stations.
Instead of a cash drawer, the money is secured in a mini vault at all times.

To complete the branch renovation, a new digital message board will be installed on the side of the building. The digital clock and temperature sign that sits in front of the office on Highway 30 was refurbished and reinstalled.

Wauna Credit Union has a total of seven branches in Clatskanie, Scappoose, St. Helens, Vernonia, Astoria and Warrenton. The Clatskanie office serves as a trial for this new concept in financial services.

“Change can be hard for everybody,” Gina says. “And it can be especially hard for our older members, who are used to doing things a certain way. But they are starting to come around, and I feel like we are starting to be what the credit union envisions. In the future, all of our branches will operate this way.”

The Wauna Clatskanie branch has 3,510 members. The number has increased by 43 percent in the past five years. Forty-two percent have been members for 20 years or longer.

Total loans to members at the Clatskanie branch is $23.8 million, and total deposits are $39.9 million.

The branch also handles 157 business accounts, with $3.1 million in business loans.

Twenty-seven employees work at the Clatskanie location, which also is home to the administrative offices and corporate headquarters for the entire Wauna credit union operation.

Gina is proud of Wauna’s involvement in not just the Clatskanie community, but all the communities Wauna serves.

“We are very service focused and community oriented,” says Gina. “We just want to be out there helping.”

Since 2014, Wauna employees have engaged in fundraisers each quarter. Employees nominate charities they think are worthy, then vote on the charity that will receive the donation.

Funds are collected through candy sales at the all branch offices, through payroll deductions and through a “pay-to-play” system where employees who choose to wear jeans to work on Fridays pay $5 a week into the fund.

Past recipients of collected funds include Vernonia schools, Columbia and Clatsop humane societies and Columbia Pacific Food Bank. Overall, Wauna employees have raised and donated more than $50,000 to local causes.

“We try spread it around to all the different communities,” Gina says.

Wauna employees recently raised funds for the Clatskanie Baptist Church backpack program, which puts together a backpack of food for children on weekends. The packs include a breakfast, lunch and two snacks for two days, to ensure children get meals when they are not in school.

Wauna employees recently presented a $6,800 check to volunteers at the church to help expand the program to include middle school students. Elementary students are already served.

In addition to its employee fundraising, the Wauna Clatskanie branch hosts a Tree of Giving for needy children each Christmas season, and participates in the Stuff the Bus program to gather school supplies for local students. They also have gathered food for a local food bank.

“We’re trying to make sure we’re helping within our footprint,” Gina says. Gina’s support for the community doesn’t stop when she leaves the office. She is a past president of the Clatskanie School Board and currently serves as president of the Chamber of Commerce, which organizes the Heritage Days celebration each Fourth of July. She is a recent graduate of The Ford Family Foundation Leadership Training.

With all the changes happening at the Clatskanie Wauna branch, one thing has not changed.

“Wauna Credit Union is my second family,” Gina says. “It’s a great feeling to be able to say I work at a place that I adore. To be a part of something that is so giving, to their employees and to their community, it’s really an honor to be a part of it.”