

Tending to Bickleton's Past

Ada Whitmore gives a whoop and holler for pioneer history

By Drew Myron

The past is personal for Ada Ruth Whitmore, a farm wife who has spent more than half her life working to save people and places from fading away.

For nearly 50 years, Ada and her husband, Lawrence, have welcomed thousands of visitors to their outpost of historical curiosity known as the Whoop-n-Holler Ranch -n-Museum.

In the remote, dry stretch between Bickleton and Roosevelt stands the Whitmore homestead, first home to Tom and Nellie Whitmore in 1902. Since 1967, it has been a private museum of memorabilia serving as tribute and guide to the eastern reaches of Klickitat County history.

"With five kids on a farm, there's a lot of whooping and hollering," says Ada, explaining the name.

From Car Barn to Schoolhouse

Troves of treasure are scattered throughout the rambling ranch. There are thousands of items dating back to the late 1800s.

The car barn, a 50-by-100-foot garage, is the most notable, filled door-to-door with 30 vehicles, including several Model T Fords, antique pickup trucks, horse-drawn wagons and even a



Ada Whitmore's appreciation for music is reflected in the museum's collection of seven pianos, four organs and numerous phonographs. Here, she shows the round tubes of music used in a cylinder phonograph.

vintage hearse with shovel drawer.

"I got started on cars, and one thing led to another," explains Lawrence, who was the first farmer in the area to buy a self-propelled combine.

Another showpiece is the one-room schoolhouse, an 1890 building relocated from the Fairfield School District, 7 miles away. Whitewashed

and tidy, it is lined with wooden desks, old books, lunchboxes and historic photographs.

Other buildings are packed with a jumbled mix of historic and quirky items, including a set of 100-year-old false teeth belonging to Grandma Huit, Lawrence's great-grandmother; Aunt Dessie's kitchen with woodstove, dishware and

the bib overalls she wore to milk the cows; 100-year-old gas pumps; the couple's first bathtub; and an old harmonica.

There is an early 1900s bell from the Methodist church in Mabton; numerous pianos, organs and phonographs; countless sewing machines; 130 Montgomery Wards catalogs; and jars and jars



Left, a one-room 1890 school is a pristine display of turn-of-the-century education, complete with wooden desks, preserved textbooks and vintage lunchboxes. Right, the car barn is filled with 30 vehicles, including Model T Fords, antique pickup trucks, horse-drawn wagons and a vintage hearse.

of sewing buttons, all from the Whitmore family.

A Spare Start

Lawrence grew up on the Whitmore ranch, and Ada in “downtown” Bickleton.

“Lawrence calls me a city girl,” Ada quips.

They married in 1947, when Ada was 17 and a junior in high school. She had a hope chest and he had a 1926 Studebaker, but the real accretion began when both sets of parents died.

“They were rockhounds and pack rats,” Ada says.

The duo inherited a ranch full of things.

Then more family died. And friends. And neighbors.

The collection expanded.

“I just can’t believe it all keeps coming,” Ada says. “What happened is, I made my circle too big.”

The couple had five children—enough hands to help tend the 7,000 acres of

wheat and barley.

“It was so much,” says Ada. “We always called it ‘to hell and gone.’”

Except for a stint at age 58, when Ada attended beauty school—a short-lived passion that served as an escape from driving tractor—Ada has had her eye on history and her feet in action.

At 87, Lawrence is in failing health, but Ada, 85, presses on.

Sharing the News

Ada is pepped up, zipping around the Whitmore acreage on a golf cart and tending to the area’s history with vigor and pride. For years, she has written a community news column for the Goldendale Sentinel.

“We had a reunion here at our place, and some of our museum tourists mixed right in,” she writes. “I had a cousin come from Alaska, and he played the tourist for two days

before some of us caught on to who he was. What fun that was.”

Ada’s more serious work is in her office, a narrow trailer lined in orderly notebooks filled with detailed local history that Ada has collected, culled and maintained.

Marking the Past

A one-woman historical society, Ada has spent decades identifying people buried in unmarked graves in the area’s seven pioneer cemeteries.

Starting in 1970, she wrote letters, gathered data, unearthed records and organized volumes of local history. To date, she has helped mark hundreds of graves.

“I lost track after 500 tombstones,” she says.

“For a long time, I was concerned with the many unmarked graves in the little cemeteries around here,”

Ada told the Grandview Herald in 1978. “Many of the people buried in them I had known or have known their descendants. Many I did not know, and their unmarked graves were being lost a little further into the past with each passing year. Each year, as more of the old timers died, a little more of the Bickleton history was lost forever.”

Today, explaining her lifelong passion, Ada says, “It’s important to let people know about history and this place.”

She points to her bright pink shirt announcing the Whoop-n-Holler Museum, and gives a bright smile.

“I’m gonna be buried in this shirt,” she says. “No, really, I am.” ■

The Whoop-n-Holler Ranch-n-Museum is at 1 Whitmore Road, Bickleton. The museum is open Friday through Sunday from May through September and by appointment. Admission is \$4. Call (509) 896-2344 for more details.