



Families and community members enjoy the Jerry Lynch Klickitat Community Center grand opening July 22. The center is home to historical displays, community events and the Ol' Mill Food Bank.

Yesterday's Mill is Today's New Hope

Klickitat pulls together to turn an empty mill office into a \$1.8 million community center

By Drew Myron

The man looked proudly, and a bit incredulous, at the building bearing his name: the Jerry Lynch Klickitat Community Center.

"This center provides a sense of optimism and is very symbolic of what can occur when a community comes together," Jerry said at the dedication of the community center named in his honor. "It provides a sense of hopefulness."

The recently retired school superintendent was instrumental in securing nearly \$2 million in grants and seeing the project to completion.

Built with tenacity and hope, the

community center was 15 years in the making and is steeped in the town's lumber mill history.

A town built on grit and determination, "rebuild" is the unofficial mantra. When fire sweeps in, dust up the ashes and rebuild. When businesses go bust, merge, sell or rebuild.

In this town snug against the Klickitat River, the lumber mill was always the primary employer. The first major business was formed in 1909 by Western Pine Lumber Co., which built a mill and logging railroad. Fire destroyed the mill in 1918. Rebuilding began immediately.

In 1922, the J. Neils Lumber Co. bought the mill, including the town and surrounding neighborhoods. Another



Left, the new community center is named in honor of retired school superintendent Jerry Lynch, who worked for 15 years to complete the center. Right, 12-year-old Conor Kessinger tries his hand at a typewriter in the center's heritage museum.

mill fire occurred in 1927. Again, the mill was rebuilt, including the administration office that was built in 1949. It now is the site of the Klickitat Community Center.

In 1957, St. Regis Paper Co. acquired mill operations and later merged with Champion International in 1984.

Sawmill operations ended in 1994 and the mill office closed in 1996.

After the mill closure, the school district bought the property with plans to increase classroom space and create a community center. Over time, however, enrollment declined and the school no longer needed additional space.

Still, plans for the community center continued.

Coming Together

Since 2001, dozens of organizations, volunteers, and federal, state and local government agencies have worked together to plan, fund and build the center.

A \$1 million Community Block Grant from the Washington State Department of Commerce and a \$500,000 grant from the Community Economic Revitalization Board served as the funding foundation. Other major contributors include the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development, Office of Public Instruction, Klickitat County Board of Directors and numerous private donations.

"In 2001, I was the individual that

presented the proposal to the county commissioners," said Kevin Davis, who has worked at Klickitat School for 33 years. "I never thought that 15 years later I would be standing here as the school superintendent officiating the grand opening of the newly renovated community center."

Owned and operated by the school district, the center is designed to serve as a gathering place for all. The 7-acre property features the community center with food bank, assembly hall, commercial kitchen, meeting rooms, a small museum, a picnic shelter and a playground.

"In a community this size, a facility of this size is unprecedented," Jerry says.

Hope for the Hungry

After years of moving from one temporary space to another, Jaci Fink and Allie Spino are thrilled to have a permanent and roomy location for the Old Mill Food Bank. As volunteer directors of the operation, they regularly provide boxes of food to 150 people. That is 4,500 pounds of fresh food and boxed staples every month.

Klickitat is a town of 420 people, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. Once a company town, a third of the population now lives below the poverty line. More than half of the children receive free or reduced-price meals at school.

"Having the food bank here is hope

for all families," says Jaci, who also is an EMT. "I've been on so many calls where having food would have made a difference. I've seen cupboards that were bare because there was no money for medicine and food. They had to choose."

A team of 12 volunteers runs the food bank. Food and funds to buy food come from a variety of sources, including the USDA, United Way, Northwest Harvest, Goldendale Gleaners and Canyon Market.

The food bank is open Wednesdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. All are welcome.

It's a huge effort involving many people, says Allie.

A History Worth Keeping

Down the hall, the center's heritage museum is a celebration of Klickitat's past. It is home to a child-size booth from Huntington's restaurant, posters for Canyon Days and a bottle from the Klickitat mineral springs.

Conor Kessinger, 12, plucks at the keys of a manual typewriter. He is not sure what to make of the awkward machine as he sits in what were once offices in the sawmill where his father, grandfather and great-grandfather worked.

Later, as he enjoys a free hot dog as part of the grand opening party, he will see a wall of wood paneling salvaged from the mill. ■