

BHA launches new campaign to restore the Old City Jail in Bayfield

By Hope McLeod

BAYFIELD – On March 9, the Bayfield Heritage Association (BHA) officially launched a campaign to restore the Old City Jail on Washington Avenue – an important piece of Bayfield history.

Built in 1926, this iconic structure located in Bayfield’s National Historic District, needs a lot of TLC, and BHA is willing to provide it. Partnering with the City of Bayfield, owners of the property, BHA is going to oversee this ambitious project from start to finish – from moldy floorboard replacement to final paint job. The physical work begins in spring, but the ghost work (fundraising and story gathering) begins right now.

The estimated cost for the project is \$30,000, a modest amount considering what needs to be done: roof replacement; tuck-pointing of exterior stones; repairing/replacing interior woodwork; painting; creating educational and historical signage; and constructing a wheelchair-accessible pathway. Once completed, self-guided tours will be available to the public during museum hours. Also, at times BHA docents will be present to provide more details about this humble, (currently crumbling), temporary abode for wayward citizens of Bayfield between 1926-1959, when the jail closed.

The “work of scope” may appear overly ambitious, but not for BHA. Since the organization started 44 years ago, this non-profit has accomplished remarkable feats in a mission “to foster appreciation and understanding of Bayfield’s rich history.” Today BHA offers a free museum, an annual lecture series, research services, and preservation of historic sites around town, such as the Old Jail.

According to Bob Nelson, BHA board member, local historian, and author, this 25-square foot, four-celled jail was used to house “captured drunks, disorderly vagrants, assaulters, and whiskey runners.” Besides upgrading the building, BHA plans to capture some of these stories by sifting through the BHA archives. These include newspaper articles, photographs, and recorded DVD interviews of old timers, made by Bayfield resident and filmmaker, John Hanson in the 1980s. Add to this treasure trove, current interviews with living souls who remember when the jail was a jail, not a storage bin for the fire hall next door, or a mansion for mice.

Imagine, a cold winter's morning, waking up at the crack of dawn to shadow your dad, the sheriff, to the old jail, to light the stove.

“I was six years old when my dad, Herman Sense Sr., left the police department,” recalled Herman “Bumpy” Sense in a recent interview. “I went with him, over there, to clean the jail and start the fires, stuff like that. It was really cold.”

Now imagine having to sleep in one of those jail cells after the fire went out. Maybe that was part of the punishment.

Shirley Johnson, another sheriff's offspring, recalled, “My father, Sebastian Feldmeier, was a policeman in Bayfield at that time. Just between you and me, he used the jail to put the drunks in, until they sobered up in the morning.”

Barring no other complaints were filed against them, these scalawags were set free after breakfast, (leftovers provided by local restaurants).

Reading early accounts of this time period, you'd think Bayfield was the Wild West. Some criminals, according to Tom Polaski, owner of Andy's IGA, may even have gotten away with murder, thereby escaping the confines of these dank quarters.

Polaski recently shared a story about a ring of gangsters who used to hang out at Bayfield's Harbor Lodge in the 1940s.

“I think Kilgo was the bartender at the time. He shot one of the gangsters – that's what my older brother told us,” Polaski recalled. “He was of age and was drinking out at the lodge that night. I asked, ‘So what did they do with him?’ Well, he said, ‘They went across the street and just buried him.’” True or false, the fact remains Al Capone's younger brother ran a bar outside of Hurley in the '40s. Old timers from Bayfield claim these shady characters, smoked out of their holes, often retreated to the lodge. Either way, they were the ones who got away, just as interesting as those who didn't.

Story picking takes time before yarns can be declared truths – a job for BHA volunteers, who accomplished a similar task for the museum's award-

winning exhibit, “The Bayfield Flood of ’42”. Also, Museum Professional Services will participate.

“These consultants will help us design and create the signage,” reported Megan Boyle, BHA’s new executive director. “But BHA will gather the information, the stories, and designate a committee to develop the interior exhibit (guard desk, mattresses for the beds, etc.)”

Besides storyboards for an educational exhibit, BHA wants to set up an arrangement of artifacts demonstrating what it looked like inside the jail. When functional, it contained a desk, pot-bellied stove, coat rack, flushing privy, three grated windows on the north wall, and two on the south wall facing Washington Ave. Hoping to replicate this scenario, they realize they’ll need to watch out for mold, since there won’t be any sheriffs’ daughters or sons to light the stove in the morning.

Why the Old City Jail? For one thing, it’s on the National Register of Historic Places. Also, it’s darling, with Hansel-and-Gretel charm sporting thick un-coursed, (or quarried), exterior fieldstones that harken back to another time, and perhaps another historic place in town. According to Albin Larson, interviewed by May Pickney in an article discovered in the archives by BHA Vice President Marilyn Van Sant, these rocks were hauled in from the Old Military Road.

“Military Road,” Pickney wrote, “is said to be the Bayfield end of the St. Croix Trail, which started in St. Paul, Minnesota, built in the mid 1850s. The purpose was to facilitate the movement of troops in case of an Indian uprising.”

Old stones revived, creaky stories drug up from the BHA basement, whatever this team comes up with, it’s bound to be entertaining as well as educational – a capstone of this organization.

Dot Harris, who recently retired as BHA secretary of the board, used to lead student tours of the old jail as part of the Bayfield School 4th grade Wisconsin history curriculum. Marilyn Larsen, a BHA volunteer and board member, will continue these tours as part of BHA’s mission to provide unique educational opportunities in the community.

Prompted by Harris's successful tours, BHA decided to restore the Old Jail and open it to the public.

“With the cooperation of the City of Bayfield, in granting our organization a five-year lease, we find that the time has come to proceed,” Van Sant said. And proceed they have. Contractors have been selected. Funds, totaling \$12,000, have been secured through a collection of individuals, corporations, and foundations. Boyle has written one grant and is poised to write another. So what's left? Approximately \$18,000, to be raised through private contributions, which, by the way, are tax-deductible.

“The jail project is an opportunity to support the local community and invest in an historic structure,” Boyle reflected. “We're taking it on because we think it's important as a national historic landmark. But it also enhances the overall downtown historic appearance of Bayfield.”

Join BHA on this grand adventure to revive and preserve yet another fascinating piece of Bayfield history.

To learn more about the project contact Megan Boyle at 715-779-5958 or bayfieldheritageED@gmail.com. Also, visit the BHA website at: <http://www.bayfieldheritage.org/>.

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Photos & Cutlines:

OldJail_1.jpg The City of Bayfield and the Bayfield Heritage Association have partnered in a joint effort to restore the Old City Jail on Washington Avenue in Bayfield. Self-guided tours will be available in the not too distant future. (Photo by Hope McLeod)

OldJail_2.jpg Inside Bayfield's Old City Jail, a four-celled facility that was active between 1926-1959. (Submitted Photo)