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# High Desert Museum

STAKING A CLAIM OF WESTERN HISTORY IN CENTRAL OREGON.



**A** saloon girl, all rosy and bare, poses provocatively against a fountain. Relax—she's just on canvas. Even so, it's subject matter you wouldn't consider typical fare for Central Oregon's **High Desert Museum**, but in this case, it's perfect. Blazing a new trail, the museum just outside of Bend debuted the exhibition called *Sin in the Sagebrush* last February (it runs through September 26). Re-creating an authentic 19th-century high-desert saloon and the characters and artifacts that would have inhabited it—from bottles of laudanum and French contraceptives to games of chance and games of cheating—the interactive exhibition transports visitors to the seedier side of the Old West.

It's one of the most in-depth exhibitions to examine the lives of folks who went West seeking opportunity and fortune and found community and escape in saloons and bordellos. The job of bringing to life that Old West story in museum format fell to Bob Boyd, the museum's curator of Western history. Boyd is used to digging deep and wide in his research, having spent 30 years scouring the region, visiting pawn shops, antiques shows, attics, barns, and forgotten shelves and spending years getting to know the individuals who help him re-create the past. His obsession with all things Western and his deep respect for its people, land, and culture are a succinct metaphor for the museum he serves.

(continued on page 158)



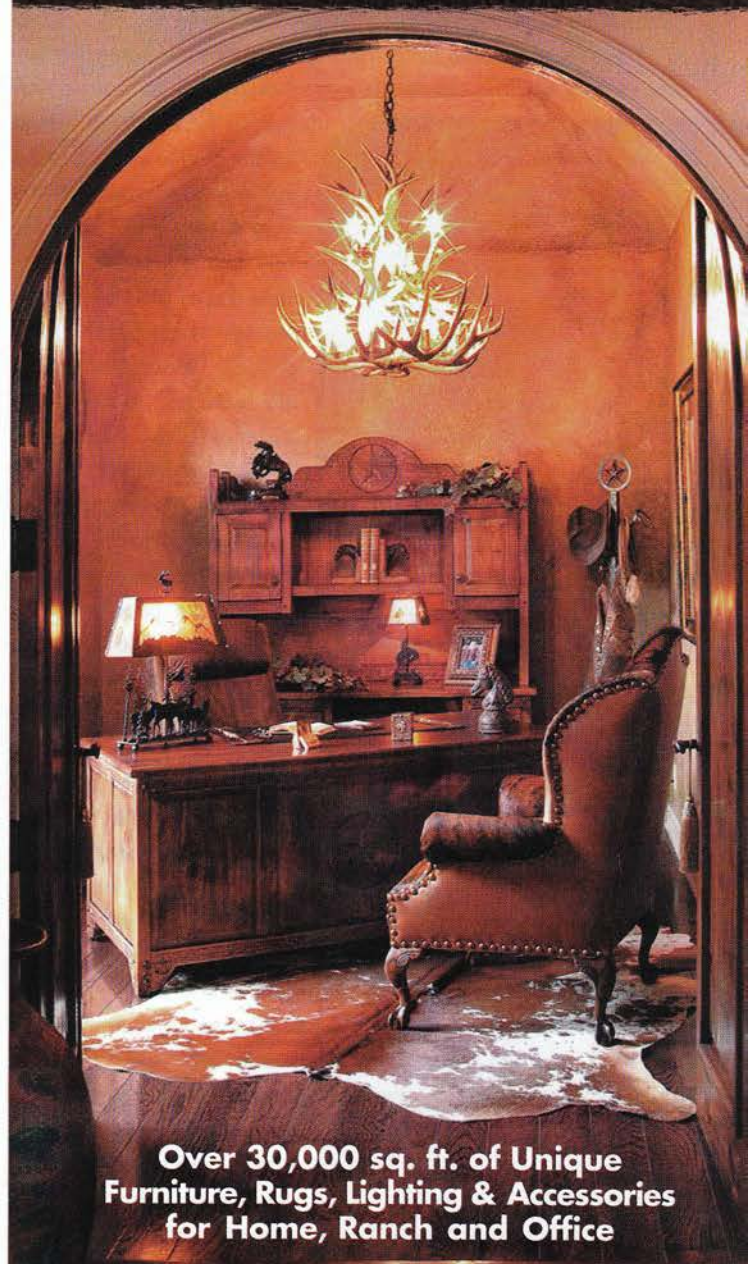




### *High Desert Museum*

**S**in in the Sagebrush runs through September 26; it will then tour museums throughout the West. For dates and locations, see [www.sininthesagebrush.com](http://www.sininthesagebrush.com). Upcoming exhibitions include Gum San: Land of the Gold Mountain, a look at Chinese life and labor in the mid-to-late 1800s in the West and these immigrants' contributions to modern America, and Volcano Country!, a hands-on exploration of the Earth's dynamism (it turns out that some of the world's most diverse and accessible volcanoes are in Central Oregon). The museum is open daily, year-round, with the exceptions of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day. Admission rates range from \$6 to \$15, depending on the season and the age of the guest; children 4 and under are free.

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Traveling shows like Sin in the Sagebrush are just some of many draws here, which is exactly the way visionary founder Donald Kerr

wanted it. His dream was to tell the stories of the people, cultures, and wildlife of the high desert, and though he was told it was an impossible dream, the High Desert Museum opened its doors in 1982. Today, the nationally acclaimed museum has expanded to encompass 135 forested acres with more than 100 live rescued animals in natural habitat exhibits and winding nature trails where people portray 1880s homesteaders, stagecoach drivers, frontier soldiers, and others from the high-desert past. "No one tells the story of a region as we do," says museum president Janeanne A. Upp. Or—with its changing exhibitions, wildlife, and live historical portrayals—as inventively.

Or as enjoyably. One place on the museum grounds where everyone is always smiling is the otter exhibit, which includes outdoor and indoor viewing areas and also the chance to watch Thomas, the northern river otter, rollick and play underwater. With his happy

antics, this carefree creature absolutely entrances children and engages even the stodgiest of grown-ups.

The museum is also home to two wildcats: a bobcat named Ochoco, who was born in captivity in 1991 and came to the museum in 2005, and Snowshoe, a lynx who was found starving by a hiker in Northern California. Snowshoe's canine teeth had been removed, he had been declawed, and he is presumed to have been turned loose to fend for himself in the wild by a disillusioned "pet" owner. Both precocious wildcats now live a life of luxury and adoration, but, more important, a life safe from circumstances they couldn't survive.



### Hot Chicks, Cool Museum

Through the passion and dedication of its staff, the High Desert Museum is helping ensure the survival of certain threatened species. Consider Polka and Dot, the only Northern spotted owls to have successfully bred in captivity in the United States: Living at the High Desert Museum, they became the proud parents of two owl chicks. Their owlets went to the Mountain View Conservation and Breeding Centre in British Columbia, where they are being paired with other owls and their chicks released into the wild.

At the Donald M. Kerr Birds of Prey Center, visitors get a rare opportunity to get up close and personal with owls, hawks, and eagles—some of nature's fiercest predators. The Desertarium hosts reptilian wildlife, including collared lizards, a rubber boa snake, scorpions, the endangered desert tortoise, and venomous Gila monsters.

Human history is equally on live display. Characters in authentically replicated period clothing roam the museum, talking with guests and telling their stories. Meet the stagecoach driver who tells the proud tale of carrying Mark Twain and Horace Greeley in the stagecoach sitting before you. Pioneer wives describe their trials on the open frontier and

#### HIGH DESERT MUSEUM

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[www.highdesertmuseum.org](http://www.highdesertmuseum.org)





will get your help tending to the homestead garden and chickens, in view of an authentic willow corral where mustangs roam.

Two permanent exhibitions delve further into the frontier. In Spirit of the West, the museum re-creates the lives of pioneers who explored and settled the high desert, from a mining camp to an 1885 settlement town. The exhibition By Hand Through Memory recounts the transition of Native American peoples from their traditional heritage to the "white" world, after Andrew Jackson and his conquering Army relocated them to reservations.

It's an amazing and enjoyable expedition into learning—one you don't have to go alone. Volunteer interpreters are there to answer questions and enrich the museum-going experience. "I don't think there is any place I've ever been that has such strong support from volunteers as the High Desert

Museum," says Upp, who has presided over museums from Chicago to Tacoma, Washington. "This goes back to Don's vision. It's easy for people to be captivated by it." U

—Kyla Merwin Cheney

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