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E. J. Peterson Baskets Featured in CCMA Open House

Longtime residents of Columbia County may recognize the name E. J. Peterson, a Swedish emigrant who lived in St. Helens for many years before his death in 1981 at age 86.

A skilled craftsman, Peterson was well known for his baskets, works of art that were functional as well as beautiful. Oreognians have been collecting them for decades.

The public is invited to view a rare collection of Peterson's baskets, gathered from among many collections for display on the second floor of the historic Columbia County Courthouse. An open house is scheduled for Wed., Oct. 15, from noon to 7 p.m. in the courtroom adjacent to the Columbia County Museum.

In an event hosted by the Columbia County Museum Assoc., the open house also will feature guest speaker Cindy Ede at 6 p.m. Refreshments will be offered as well.

E. J. (Erik John) Peterson was trained in splint-style basketmaking in his home village in rural Sweden, where he first began learning from his father in 1908. Swedish basketmaking was a male endeavor, and in his village, he once estimated, there were about 123 basketmakers.

"If there were three sons in a family, that meant there were four basketmakers," he told a reporter in 1980.

In 1914, Peterson came to St. Helens to work as a logger, arriving with a friend from his home village. Coincidentally, that man shared his name, Erik Peterson. The "other" Erik was a cousin of Mrs. Heinie Heumann of St. Helens.

Missing Sweden, Peterson renewed his practice of basketmaking one day while whittling a stick at a logging camp on upper Sykes Road. The mindless whittling had turned into splints for a basket. When his boss and others showed interest, Peterson made some wastebaskets for the logging camp offices, then he began making baskets again in earnest, selling and trading his baskets for other necessities.

Peterson was well-known locally, and his baskets attracted regional attention for most of his life. And then in late 1980 and early 1981, not long before his death, a sampling of Peterson's baskets went on display at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., as part of a folk art exhibit of Oregon craftsmen.

"What a life," he said in an interview that year. "One day you're nothing, the next day, something. I feel very humble that my baskets are going to be shown in so many places."

Organizers of the Columbia County Museum Assoc. event are not sure how many more Peterson baskets will be part of their special open house. Display baskets are still coming in from local families, and the expert handiwork by their maker is evident in each article.

As part of the event, an E. J. Peterson "Pie Taker" basket, donated by Jean LeMont, will be raffled with tickets at \$1 each.

Tickets are available at the door or in advance of the event at the Columbia County Museum, located on the second floor of the historic courthouse. The museum is open every Wednesday from noon to 4 p.m. CCMA is a non-profit organization that welcomes new members, as well as donations of items, photos and stories that illuminate local history.

For more information, call CCMA President Joanne Pellham at (971) 225-3971, or visit www.colcomuseum.org.