

COMMUNITIES ENCOURAGED TO PRESERVE HISTORY, GET INVOLVED

PUTNAM COUNTY — Relics line the walls and fill the rooms of the old Buffalo Valley schoolhouse tucked away in the western end of Putnam County. Built in 1929 and known as the Buffalo Valley Community Center for the last 50 years, the preserved structure echoes of times past.

Like most of the 16 community centers dotting Putnam County's landscape, Buffalo



Valley was a school that was later converted into a public gathering space. After classroom doors shut for good in the late 1960s, the structure's purpose went from that of educating children to holding special events, as well as hosting reunions, birthday parties, dances and even weddings.

(Pictured: Carolyn Huddleston reads a book in the community library located inside the Buffalo Valley Community Center. Ty Kernea/Herald-Citizen).

Locals had taken care to preserve the building's history — it was added to the National Register of Historic Places about a decade ago — while also transforming it into a vital lifeline for social happenings. A library was eventually established inside one of the former classrooms. It was, and still is, a place where community members can go to make fond memories.

But some fear this center and others like it in the county are fading into the background of the past with each new generation. There seems to be a lack of interest or even awareness now in the centers — the majority of which are old schoolhouses — that still exist in these small communities.

John Ross Albertson, the new county parks and recreation director, is working to shake up that indifference and to breathe life back into the centers. His department manages all of the buildings. Having only taken his new position since March, Albertson has a few plans unfolding to get people in the communities involved with their local centers.

“These community centers were once the meeting places of each of these individual communities...” said Albertson, who said he is passionate about preserving the history and purpose of the buildings. “Unfortunately, I believe that a lot of the younger

generations aren't aware of what these community centers are or have been in their days and what these centers can offer people.”

He has already rounded up the leaders of each center's board of directors in a new initiative to discover ways to promote and get even more use out of the buildings. The director wants the public to know just how much history is behind the old schoolhouses — for example, the Buffalo Valley schoolhouse we see today took the place of another two-story school that had been constructed in the 1890s. He also wants others to know they, too, can get involved.

“Some of the community centers are actually open every day,” he said. “They have libraries — this (Buffalo Valley) is one of them and the other is Bangham. They open daily and you can check out a book.”

Albertson also hopes to feature the centers on the county's new website when it launches by the end of the year. And ideas are being stirred up with plans in their early stages to promote the centers, bring in new community activities and to get more — and new — people involved. The director feels it's his duty to help ignite public interest.

“I feel it's my responsibility to get the word out about these community centers. As a whole our department has to engage the community anyway, so these centers are an ideal way to engage with them. We can start working with the community boards and promote events and get it out there. ... But a lot of our community centers are losing our boards because they're getting older and they're not able to take care of the centers, and there's not as much activity anymore.”

That means trying to gain the interest and recruit younger members that want to be involved in their communities. Albertson said, “I feel like that's part of my mission, to go out and try to get younger generations to come out and pick up where they've left off in order to build these back up.”

One of the vital people who helped get the Buffalo Valley Community Center up and going was Carolyn Huddleston. She and her husband, Ted, along with many others, worked to preserve the history of the building and mold it into a community center. Original auditorium seats were preserved and hallways are lined with photographs of historical figures and events, including war veterans, buildings and class pictures.

“Ted and I got interested because I remember what my father said — and he has was an old timer born in the 1890s — the more you work in your community making improvements, the more valuable your property becomes. And I remember thinking that's true, because no one wants to move into a community where all the buildings are falling,” she said.

Carolyn didn't attend Buffalo Valley School and went to a one-room schoolhouse nearby. But the Buffalo Valley School was the happening place to be when she was growing up, and it became the happening social gathering place later on too.

She recalled traveling to the building to see the Grand Ole Opry performance. “It took a lot of doing getting here. We lived two miles away. My daddy had this 1935 Chevrolet he had bought but not many people had cars. You had to come in a buggy or on horseback or in your wagon.”

As for those who may be interested in getting involved with their local center, Albertson encourages calling his office at 931-526-8015. He hopes future generations will be able to use and cherish the buildings like those in the past, he said.

“We would be more than happy to help people get involved in their local community centers, because these are a big part of the community’s history.”

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