

New 'working' exhibit at Museum of Prairie du Chien features Cal Peters dioramas

By Melissa R. Collum

The Prairie du Chien Historical Society, which owns and operates the Museum of Prairie du Chien and the Fort Crawford Museum is excited to announce they are opening new exhibits for this tourist season.

One of the changes that visitors will see is the change entrance of the Museum of Prairie du Chien. The main entry now is host to the 2022 banners celebrating 150th Anniversary of City of Prairie du Chien. "We decided it was time for the museum exhibits to get a fresh look and to rotate in different historical artifacts. There are some new exhibits and more to come," states Chad Fradette, president of the Prairie du Chien Historical Society.

When entering in the museum proper, one will see the new fur trade exhibit. According to Brandon Brockway, Executive Director of the Prairie du Chien Historical Society, for some of the items in this exhibit it is the first time they have been viewed by the public. "In the early 2000's there was road construction down on the island and the Wisconsin Historical Society archeological findings were donated to the museum. One of the items is a metal fleur-de-lis," notes Brockway. "This is tangible proof that the French were here."

This exhibit does a wonderful job laying out how Prairie du Chien ties to the 350th anniversary of the expedition of the Marquette and Jolliet and the fur trade. "We did not have a good photo of the stature of Marquette so Tom Swenson used a drone and took the photo," states Brockway. Additionally, there is an Emma Big Bear basket on display and a map from 1775 that were recently donated to the collection.

By far the biggest thing visitors are going to notice are the displays of the "History in 3-D: Histori-



Five of Cal Peters dioramas will be part of a 'working' exhibit at the Museum of Prairie du Chien this season. The Prairie du Chien Historical Society is restoring and working to incorporate the dioramas into the museum's collection. (Melissa R. Collum/ Courier Press)

cal Dioramas of Prairie du Chien". There are five dioramas originally created by Cal Peters, that depict scenes and events of early Prairie du Chien. This is the first opportunity for the public to view these dioramas in many years.

When the dioramas were on display in the original museum of Prairie du Chien, the artifacts that pertained to the subject matter were storied in under the diorama. "But because flooding they were all taken out and stored. There was a great deal of damage and repair that has already been done to them, so we are trying to restore them," comments Brockway. Through comprehensive research, Brockway has been able to find original photos and drawings of the dioramas.

During the tourist season not only will the dioramas be on display but it will also be a working exhibit. "People will have a chance to see the dioramas in their raw form before they are revitalized, repaired, and get encapsulated in to the display walls," states Brockway. "When the first Museum of Prairie du Chein was closed, these were stored. There was no museum of PdC. There was no PdC Historical Society. These dioramas were stashed. Now we do have the Museum and the Historical

Society and the dioramas do belong here. It is a great opportunity to have these on displayed and preserved."

The dioramas were created by Cal Peters as part of a WPA project from 1938-48. There are paintings and murals by Peters displayed throughout Prairie du Chien, but no other dioramas. "These are dioramas that most of the people of Prairie du Chien have not seen since 1965," notes Brockway.

It is the hope of the Historical Society that the 'History in 3-D exhibit' will not only give people a chance to view Peters' work, but also help to educate people on the role and responsibility the Historical Society takes in the conservation of Prairie du Chien history. "We have photos of when the dioramas were being made and people painting them, which will be on display," comments

Brockway. "It is really neat because you can see the backs of the dioramas and the shell. It is a unique opportunity for people to see what went into them and how we are refurbishing them." Part of the plan for the dioramas is to place them within the

context of the museums' exhibits and work on the flow of the museum.

Another hidden gem that has been updated is the area that houses the Prairie du Chien family trees. Brockway enhanced the area by updating the display cases with artifact from the collection. "When I started going through the collection though the collection boxes in 2020. I found a box that was donated in 2017. It included artifacts from Captain Ira Bisbee, of the Diamond Joe Steamship," notes Brockway. "We have his pocket watch and key, and there is an inscription on the back from 1865." Also on display from the Bisbee Collection is a daguerreotype of his daughter, sewing samplers, a book, and more. "It is cool stuff and no one knew it existed!" exclaims Brockway.

The institution of a 'Prairie's Attic' exhibit is also set to enlighten visitors. "We, the Historical

Society, are the 'storage place' for Prairie du Chien history," muses Brockway. "I thought it would be fun, to display things that people never would have seen." This exhibit will be rotating and currently hosts a book from 1595, a gun that was made in Prairie du Chein, canes, and so much more.

Opening for the 2023 season was May 1, the hours for the museums of the Prairie du Chien Historical Society are Wednesday through Monday (Closed Tuesdays), 10:00 am - 4 pm. The last admission is sold at 3:15 pm each day.

If you have not been to the museums since your 4th grade field trip or it has just been awhile, it is well worth the adventure to see into Prairie du Chien's past and glimpse the future of the museums of the Prairie du Chien Historical Society.



A close-up of the Fur Trade diorama by Cal Peters. (Melissa R. Collum/Courier Press)

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