

Collaboration Key to Preserving Historic Idaho Gem

The historic Rock Creek Station and Stricker Ranch homesite have served as an oasis for visitors for more than 150 years. Dating as far back as 1811, this outpost just south of the Magic Valley city of Hansen provided explorers, trappers and mountain men a place to rest, refresh and restock water and supplies after long days traveling the network of trails first carved out by Native Americans.

Decades later in 1865, a small community started to develop around Rock Creek Station as Oregon Trail travelers stopped to camp overnight and replenish provisions for the next leg of their cross-country journey. Later, the store diversified to cater to a new breed of visitors, from Gold Rush miners camped in the nearby Snake River Canyon to stagecoach crews traveling along the 232-mile Kelton Freight Road to postal workers carrying mail across the region.

Today, thanks to the dedication of so many who have donated time, energy and financial resources, this iconic piece of history will continue welcoming visitors and build on its historic legacy in Idaho and beyond.

Last month, I had the honor of speaking at the ribbon cutting marking the reopening of Rock Creek Station and Stricker homesite. During the last two years, preservationists and volunteers collaborated to refurbish some of the most critical assets of the site.

The scope of the project included building a new outside interpretation exhibit for self-guided tours and a pavilion to accommodate educational tours for students and learners of all ages – elements designed to provide essential historical context and help visitors imagine and experience the heyday when wagons, oxen, horses dotted the site.

Additionally, the Idaho State Historical Society (ISHS) secured state funding via the Department of Public Works Permanent Building Fund Advisory Committee to stabilize and restore the site's wet and dry cellars, the old Rock Creek store and the Stricker family home.

This incredible preservation effort would not have been possible without the support and gumption of so many. The Friends of Stricker Board, formed in 1984, partnered with ISHS to care and maintain the site, logging hundreds of volunteer hours over the years.

Board members played an important role in securing the financial resources to help pay for the preservation work. On behalf of ISHS and its Board of Trustees, I want to thank the Janice Seagraves Family Foundation, the Maurice Bowers Charitable Trust, and the Grace Smith Keveren and Kenneth A. Keveren Foundation for their financial support.

In all, nearly \$500,000 in public funds and another \$100,000 in private donations helped protect and preserve this historic gem.

This project has been gratifying on many levels. Efforts to preserve the past are critical for future generations to better understand the lives of their ancestors, pioneers and residents who left their mark on this part of our state. On a broader scope, this project has undoubtedly made this location one of the most intact Oregon Trail sites in the nation.

I am proud of what's been accomplished, moved by the partnerships that turned preservation dreams into reality and emboldened by the community spirit driven to honor the future by protecting its past. Idaho families now have the opportunity to peek into the lives of their ancestors and the travelers that helped forge the identity of the Gem State.

Paul Smith is a member of the Idaho State Historical Society Board of Trustees, serving on behalf of District 5. He has had a working relationship with ISHS since 1991 and a life-long love of state and local history. A former chairman of the Twin Falls County Historic Preservation Commission, Mr. Smith also started Preservation Twin Falls, a nonprofit dedicated to buying historic properties in Twin Falls.