

Fruita Museum building embedded in with fossils



The “Rock-A-Day” Museum, now the Fruita Chamber of Commerce, was built in 1938 as a Works Projects Administration project. Fruita Chamber of Commerce photo

By Kathy Jordan

“Rock A Day” sounds like a song about working on a chain gang which moved a rock a day.

Instead, it was the nickname given to the Fruita Museum when it was being constructed in the 1930s.

The Fruita Museum Society was formed in 1937 to build a museum. The first board members, C.S. Kirkendall, president; Philip Griebel, vice-president; Mary B. Roberts, secretary-treasurer; and the rest of the board, Ellen Kilby, Mabel Kiefer, and Lee Warner, were successful with the help of the Works Projects Administration (WPA)

The WPA was created by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration and employed millions of unskilled workers to carry out public works projects during the depression of the late 1920s and 1930s.

According to an interview done by the Lower Valley Heritage Chapter with Paul Peacock, who worked on the building of the museum, construction was started in the spring of 1938.

Peacock said he was one of six men who worked fulltime on the building. Mr. Boyd was the contractor, and additional workers were Max Otero, Elmer Fell, Jessie Nave, a man with the last name of Stone and himself.

The stone used inside and out of the old museum building at 432 East Aspen is a wonderful collection of rocks with all manner of fossils embedded in them.

Peacock said the stones came from all over, from south of the Colorado River and the Eastern Utah desert. The varicolored rock came from Stove Canyon, and lava rock came from Kannah Creek. Several people contributed rocks they had gathered on trips, some of which were to Hawaii and Mexico.

Construction was slow, hard work. Some days the builders did nothing but hunt and haul rock, some weighing up to 200 pounds apiece.

The building was nicknamed "Rock-A-Day" because workmen had to hold the larger rocks in place until the cement started to hold. Also, none of the rocks were cut to size, and that slowed them.

Peacock recalled that 12 men went up Salt Wash to cut logs for the roof. The trees were cut in various sizes, and a rope was tied around them. Six men would then drag the logs down to where they were loaded on trucks.

When the open house was held on July 7, 1939, several geologists were on hand to explain to visitors some of the fossils in the collection as well as Indian artifacts and bones from several dinosaurs.

The geologists were also kept busy educating visitors about all the amazing examples of fossils and dinosaur footprints in the rocks that covered the walls and fireplace.

In 1940 the museum was incorporated under the name "The Fruita Museum of Natural History."

By 1945 the museum was no longer in operation. Speculation was there wasn't enough money to keep it operating.

From 1945 to 1948 the building was occupied by the Fruita Times.

In 1948 the Fruita Rotarians converted the building into a library, and it was used for that purpose until March 1996 when the library was moved to the Fruita Civic Center.

When the library moved, the City of Fruita wanted to sell the building, citing the cost of repairs and upkeep. Referred Measure B for the proposed sale of the old museum went on the April 2, 1996, ballot and was defeated by Fruita residents.

In May 1996, Yvonne Peterson spearheaded a restoration project for the museum. Together the Lower Valley Heritage Chapter and the Fruita Lions Club furnished the material for a new roof through donations of money and material. Boy Scout Michael LeBaron and his father replaced the roof. Work on the foundation and basement work was done.

In November 1996 the old museum was given the honor of being listed on the National Register of Historic Place.

After the building was closed as a library, Joanie Haralson opened an antique and gift shop.

It has been the home of the Fruita Chamber of Commerce since 2003.

At the completion of the museum in 1939 a bronze plaque inscribed with the words "Erected through the cooperation of Federal, State and Federal governments by Works Progress Administration (WPA). Dedicated to the achievement of human lives a record of permanent achievement" was placed on the building.

Somewhere along the way the plaque went missing.

It remained missing until 1996 when Nancy Evans of Las Vegas, Nev., read about it in the Fruita Times.

Nancy and her husband, Jerry, had discovered the plaque when digging the foundation for their home on Roberson Drive years before, and they had kept it during several moves through the years.

On their next trip to Fruita from Las Vegas, the Evanses went to the home of Yvonne Peterson, who had led the 1996 restoration project, and gave her the plaque. It is now back where it belongs on the old museum.