



High Desert Voices

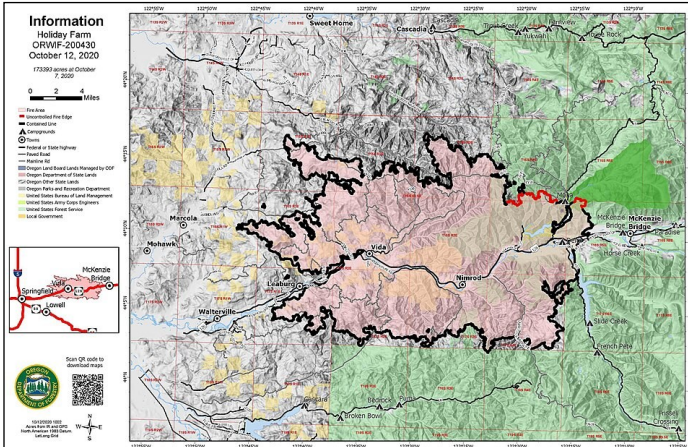
A newsletter published by and for volunteers

April 2026



January's Natural History Pub: *Following Fire*

By Tom McGibbon, Newsletter Writer



The High Desert Museum's acclaimed Natural History Pub series welcomed the new year in the Father Luke's Room of McMenamins Old St Francis School with an improbable scientist and artist duo. The scientist, Frederick J. Swanson, a disturbance ecologist and former U.S. Forest Service research geologist, and the artist, David Paul Bayles, an environmental photographer and former logger in the Sierra Nevada, were introduced by Museum Associate Curator of Visitor and Volunteer Engagement Jack Gaines. They discussed their brilliant collaborative project, *Following Fire: A Resilient Forest, An Uncertain Future*, a study of the McKenzie River forest following the notorious 2020 Holiday Farm wildfire.

During the 2020 Labor Day weekend, following

extended seasons of climate-driven drying, extremely high easterly winds funneled down the western Cascade's McKenzie River valley and its communities, toppling timber into power lines, and rapidly swelling small local fires into megafires. The largest of these was dubbed the Holiday Farm Fire, named for an RV park near the suspected man-made ignition source. It raged for nearly seven weeks before subsiding and leaving a vast, smoldering, colorless, skeletonized forest landscape of 173,000 acres (270 square miles). The fire destroyed the small communities of Blue River and Vida and caused extensive damage to neighboring Nimrod. The fire infamously ranks as one of the largest of all western Oregon Cascades' wildfires.

Two months after the fire cooled, Swanson and Bayles arrived on the scene. The scientist — data-driven, erudite, and precise—sees the world through a time prism spanning centuries to epochs, and the artist, who experiences the world through the aesthetic, emotive, and instantaneous click of a camera viewfinder. Their mission was to merge their differing but complementary perspectives into one of both facts and human values, recording both scientific data and photographic images of the post-disturbance forest. This creative synthesis has been primarily self-funded and performed under the auspices of the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest [Long Term Ecological Research Program](#) and the Spring Creek Program, which merge environmental sciences with arts and philosophy.



The McKenzie River Trust granted the duo unfettered access to two sites within the burn, Finn Rock Reach, a former logging encampment along the banks of the McKenzie River, and Blue River Easement on a ridge above its namesake community.

Their first decision was whether to focus on the wildfire's impact on humans or its impact on forests. Bayles commented that when he first walked through the sites, he experienced loss and grief, sorrow, and anguish. Swanson, extensively experienced with natural disasters, drew a laugh from the audience when he dryly joked, "Scientists don't have emotions." The duo decided to focus on the forest and its post-fire progression and have now documented this burned forest for over five years. They meticulously documented information and imaging from 41 GPS-fixed forest sites sequentially over 21 dates, creating a photographic *chronosequence*, visually tracking changes over time, and revealing the distinct annual changes that were occurring. An exhibit of 21 photos and a 16-frame montage, entitled *Hollow and Still: Photographs Following Fire* by David Paul Bayles, which was recently shown at the Museum, punctuated their presentation, highlighting visual



themes that were revealed during field observations. These starkly beautiful, non-traditional, large-format, colorless images by Bayles leave a haunting impression of the wildfire's aftermath in a once verdant Oregon forest.

The exhibit displayed three themes. The first, "Still Standing," shows solitary charred totems and slabs, deeply burn-textured, with naked, shining black remains of large individual trees. Next, "Still Moving" shows the river running through Finn Reach, with submerged burned timbers looming as dark shadows under the clear currents. Finally, "Still Reaching" features photographic fine art images, in which Bayles uses lighting, tone, form, and perspective to show monolithic trunks stretching into uncertain skies.

Their talk chronicled key forest changes in the half-decade following the fire. In the first year, a soft palette of colors was brushed onto the carbonized, gray-black burnscape. The forest floor became tinged with tans and browns from needle fall, while *pyrophytes*, plants that emerge following fires, appeared as golden fungi and green tufts of fire moss, splashing living color onto the burned forest canvas.

The second year burst forth like an awakening in Oz. Flowers and color were everywhere, characterized by density, diversity, and complexity. Fireweed, a fast-colonizing pioneer with its conical blooms of purple-pink flowers, reigned over the colorful community. Analyses of the flora showed a 3.5:1 ratio of non-native to native species, some spawned from ornamental gardens formerly tended by residents of nearby communities.

By year three, new cedar and fir seedlings were sprouting in addition to signs of small mammals' presence. Scats from foxes containing digested bones from moles were found. Trees were taking root and animals were returning.

A broad category of photographic images called *typologies* was mentioned. These are distinctive categories of repetitive objects that create a visual classification of a system of images. They are born of the intense heat of wildfire. Swanson labeled numerous categories. One category was called *Swoopies*, which are upward continuous curving tree branches, caused by the unequal heating, burning, and warping of *reaction woods* composed of cell-types that differ from the top to the bottom of individual branches. Another typology is *Hollows*, where the interior of a tree ignites and burns like an out-of-control chimney fire, leaving a hollowed-out tree-trunk shell. The *Hollow & Still* photographic exhibit included a montage documenting numerous branch holes perforating one such shell. During a wildfire, the thermal pressures from these 'chimney fires' can exude fiercely flailing arms of flame from these openings.



There were also *Stump Ghosts*, where the living tree trunk and large root system had penetrated deep below the forest floor. The fire and long-smoldering heat eventually turned these into ash, leaving pits and circuitous hollows where the roots once lived.

By year four, these pitfalls had become hidden by dense vegetation. Brushy thickets of non-native, invasive Scotch broom emerged, competing aggressively for nutrients, sunlight, and moisture. Native species struggled to reestablish and maintain a foothold in the forest's uncertain future.

This past year, the fifth of observations, saw the widespread secession of the old forest crown, as its canopy collapsed. Insects and fungi had weakened the old skeletal remains, subjecting them to gravity and the elements, dropping them to the forest floor. There, they further decomposed, releasing their last contribution of nutrients to the ascending flora below.

Just as ecological succession in the Willamette National Forest continues with the remains of the burned forest converging and melding into the upstart future, so too will this long-term project undertaken by Swanson and Bayles. The type of study they're performing can span several hundred years with succeeding generations of scientific and artistic observers.

Poet [Alison Hawthorne Deming](#), who often reflects on nature's resilience and regeneration, once observed a lesson as she walked through a disturbed forest that's a metaphor of the Following Fire project. She wrote, "Nothing of this ruin was mine, mine only the lesson that the forest has one rule: start over making use of what remains."

Prohibited!

A Fringe Affair pays homage to liberation through the lens of Prohibition

by Andrea Stuart, Newsletter Writer



The glint of sequins and the loose dance of tassels were juxtaposed by felt-covered hats and leather boots as couples tangoed, foxtrotted, and two-stepped through a crowd of knocky knees and Charleston aficionados. The mood was buoyed by upbeat tempos pouring from Michelle Van Handel and the Swingin' Doors at the Museum's 2026 *Prohibition Party: A Fringe Affair*.

February 20 resounded with the aural amalgamation of Western swing and vintage jazz as it echoed through Schnitzer Hall. Time seemed to loosen its grip as fringe hemlines brushed up against Carhartt cuffs, yet neither felt out of place. Laughter ricocheted, glasses clinked in a conspiratorial rhythm, and motion took the form of swirls, stomps, and spins.

The adjacent children's exploratorium, *Whose Home?*, was transformed into a creative common where hands traded cocktails for craft supplies, eagerly threading bolo ties, and super-gluing headbands. Around the corner, tucked into the shadows of the *Spirit of the West*, a hidden speakeasy buzzed. There, a bootlegger's favorite—the sidecar—was poured with a wink, its citrus edge cutting through low light and hushed conversations.

A lone banjo player anchored the room, his sound at once homey and mildly disobedient, as if Appalachia had wandered west and picked up a distortion pedal. He slipped between bluegrass standards, original medleys, and unlikely grunge covers, each note landing somewhere between nostalgia and mischief. “Wets” (guests who eagerly downed their “illegal libations”) gathered around picnic tables, their toes tapping and shoulders loosening.

Throughout the evening, guests posed for photographs, donning masks and cheeky signage, preserving their alter egos in playful snapshots. The night built to its crescendo: a costume contest. One by one, participants danced their way into an open circle, each step a small act of theater, each outfit a love letter to a bygone era.

A Prohibition party might read, at first glance, as pure spectacle. Beneath the revelry is a reminder of a time when the American social fabric was tugged tight by legislation.

Prohibition in the United States officially began in 1920 with the ratification of the 18th Amendment to the United States Constitution, outlawing the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcohol. However, in Oregon, the dry spell had already taken hold. Years earlier, in 1916, voters passed a sweeping ban on intoxicating liquors ([Oregon Measure Nos. 316-317](#), Ban on Intoxicating Liquor Imports Initiative), effectively turning the state into a proving ground for what national Prohibition would become.

While the law was intended to quiet the flow of alcohol, it simply rerouted it into forests, canyons, and called on the ingenuity of those willing to skirt the rules. In Central and Eastern Oregon, where open land sat unobserved by most eyes, moonshine stills became part of the landscape as moonshiners [found liberation between the lines of legislative limitations](#). Springs provided water, local farms provided rye, and creativity provided the blueprint.



Barrels filled with grain and sugar turned to syrup before yeast was added to coax fermentation. The slow bubbling that followed signaled the transformation of raw ingredients into a living entity. What emerged days later was distilled into whiskey that traveled in fruit jars and unmarked containers.

For those on the Pacific Coast who sought refinement, shipments from Canada snuck in rum and Scotch. For many, the drink of choice was White Lightning, a bathtub beauty that was often as sharp as it was satisfying.

By the late 1920s, Central Oregon had become something of a quiet powerhouse in the illicit trade. Prineville historian David Braly famously described nights when the horizon boasted an aura as hundreds of stills fired at once. An economy born of constraint





had created an ironic twist where alcohol consumption had increased rather than decreased, as if the taboo amplified alcohol's appeal.

Then, in 1933, the 21st Amendment to the United States Constitution repealed Prohibition, collapsing the underground market overnight. What had been a lifeline for some became obsolete.

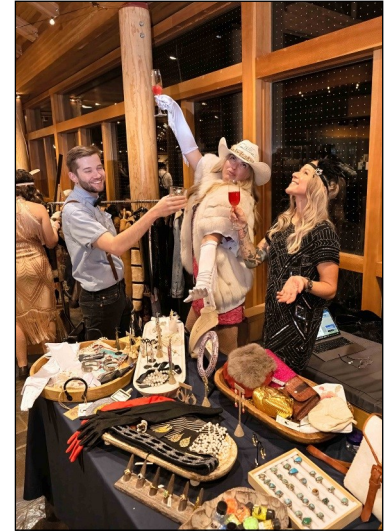
Yet the relationship between Oregon and alcohol did not simply revert to its former state. That same year, Oregon established the [Oregon Liquor and Cannabis Commission](#) (OLCC), maintaining a level of control that persists today.

In the decades since, the alcohol industry has done more than recover. It has flourished. What was once clandestine has become celebrated. Oregon now stands as a [global name in wine](#). Craft distillers have carved out their own niche, while breweries, especially in Central Oregon, have transformed the region into a destination.

In Bend and its surrounding areas, tap handles have become as common as trailheads. Cider houses press local fruit into crisp, bright bebies. Wine bars, once sparse, now punctuate the landscape as prolifically as Patagonia puffer vests and Hydro Flasks. What was once a place of necessity-driven production has become a place of potable experiments, where artistic chemistry is heralded rather than hidden.

Numbers tell one side of the story. By 2025, Oregonians spent [more than \\$3.6 billion on alcohol](#), supporting tens of thousands of jobs across production, distribution, and hospitality. However, celebratory remembrances like *A Fringe Affair* tell the other side. It's where history is reimagined.

In the end, a Prohibition party is less about looking back than it is about understanding the threads that connect the past and the present. The glass raised in celebration carries with it a century of tension, adaptation, and resilience. Somewhere between the swing of a tassel and the strum of a banjo, the past lingers as a quiet companion to the present.



Under Pressure

by Torree Abrams, Newsletter Writer



You had me at Hot Lava! As soon as you step into the Spirit of the West Gallery, you are presented with projected images of hot lava on the floor with “safe” rocks you can hop on. Who hasn’t played this game with couch cushions and chairs on a rainy day? The hot lava appears to emanate from a tall volcano with projected ash clouds. It is a visual and technological marvel. Once you finish hopping from rock to rock, be ready to spend a fair amount of time in the rest of the exhibition learning so much about our volcanic natural history. *Under Pressure: A Volcanic Exploration* is fun, imaginative, and informative whether you are four years old or 94 years old.

You can step into a volcanologist’s protective gear to get into the mindset of the challenges of studying the fascinating and dangerous world of volcanoes. They need specialized protective gear that does not melt easily, filters out noxious gases, and protects them from falling rocks and cinders.

Moving through the informational panels that resemble graphic novels and MTV, you can find out all about the ages of the Three Sisters volcanic mountains we see almost every day. They are not triplets but have their own ages and geologic compositions. Of course, Mount Mazama and its eruption that resulted in Crater Lake is a focal topic. You can learn more about the Medicine Lake volcano and its lava tubes and their

role in history. The Cascade Range was formed by subduction (think putting your feet under a couch cushion and pushing). You realize that volcanic activity has so much to do with our geological and cultural history.

Using technology is not just for playing Hot Lava. At the back of the exhibit is a full wall screen, showing different scenes of lava oozing, exploding, and destroying everything in its path. While I was investigating the exhibit, two four-year-old boys each found what fascinated them. One boy kept watching the big screen, focusing on the volcanologist scooping red lava from an active flow into a bucket, wearing protective gear. He and I couldn’t figure out how the scoop and bucket didn’t melt. His friend was captivated by a computer screen where visitors could change the level of gas and silica to create bubbling lava, oozing lava, or an explosion from a volcano. He preferred explosions, of course.

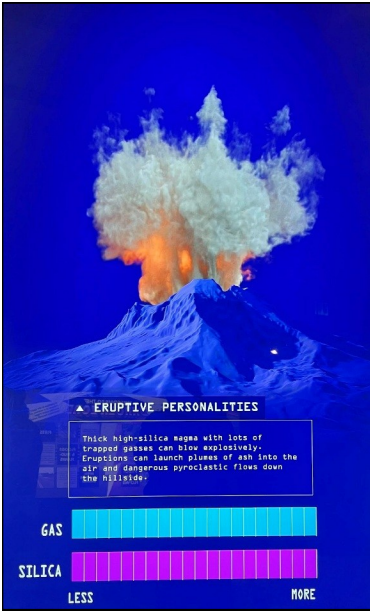
Volcanology is a science of history and current research. Is Oregon’s and Washington’s volcanic activity, past and present, part of the Yellowstone hotspot? Come find out.



For those of us who grew up on kiosk-style video games like *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders*, you will find the displays about volcanic rocks irresistible. Touch and examine examples of every kind of volcanic rock. *Aa*, not only works well as a Scrabble word, but visitors learn it’s that jagged rock that hurts if you fall on it.

The exhibit highlights the significance of volcanoes in the history of the Indigenous Plateau and their place within Indigenous sacred culture. How it affects all humans living in Central Oregon now is an important focus. If you appreciate the clean, natural taste of our water, thank a volcano.

Under Pressure is a brilliant collaboration between the Museum’s in-house exhibit curators with support from Kyrie Kellett of Mason Bee Interpretive Planning. They worked closely with six advisors—three volcanologists and three Indigenous cultural advisors. It ensured the scientific and cultural accuracy of the exhibit. The exhibit acknowledged these advisors, and I bowed in honor of their significant contributions.



Under Pressure is accessible to the smallest child, who may only interact with the Hot Lava game or mixing silica and gases to create an eruption, to the scientifically inclined adult who wants the details of historical and current volcanic evolution in the region. Bring your visiting family members and friends. They will be delighted. It may take multiple visits to absorb all that *Under Pressure* offers. We can be thankful that it will be available through January 3, 2027.



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Editors: Siobhan Sullivan & Ralph Berry
Team Leader: Siobhan Sullivan
Contributing Writers: Torree Abrams, Tom McGibbon, & Andrea Stuart
Copy Editing: Lisa Johnson
Proofreading/Editing: Phil Meurer
Computer: Ralph Berry & Siobhan Sullivan
Photographs: Torree Abrams, Bill Jorgens, Julia Sparks, Terry Stanley & Siobhan Sullivan

Photos by Torree Abrams

2026



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	April 2026
8	Museum Event: Indigenous Speaker Series: A Recipe for Resilience. 6:00–8:00 pm. Presentation begins at 6:30 pm. Reception with no-host bar, light appetizers at 6:00–6:30 pm. \$12. Members 20% off. Free for tribal members. RSVP here .
11	Exhibition opening: Miguel Almeida: Las Manos que dan de Comer.
13	Natural History Pub: Central Oregon Volcanoes. 7:00–8:00 pm. Doors open at 5:30 pm. Free. McMenamans Old St Francis School, 700 NW Bond St., Bend. SOLD OUT.
15	Museum Event: 250 in the West: Public Lands. Doors open at 6:00 pm. Presentation begins at 6:30 pm. \$8. Members 20% off. RSVP here .
21	Volunteer Event: VAC meeting. 1:00 pm. Museum Board Room.
26	Exhibition closing: Prophets—Paintings by Hilary Baker.
29	Senior Day. 9:00 am–5:00 pm.
30	Museum Event: 250 in the West: Citizenship. 6:00–8:00 pm. Doors open at 6:00 pm. Presentation begins at 6:30 pm. Reception with no-host bar, light appetizers at 6:00–6:30 pm. \$12. Members 20% off. RSVP here .
	To RSVP or register, click the link next to the event description or call 541-382-4754.