Exhibit at the Chippewa Valley Museum to reflect recent history

By Andrew Dowd
Leader-Telegram staff

Mike Peterson agreed to go into the lion's cage for a brief volunteer stint as a lion tamer.

It ended quickly as the manager of Eau Claire's first mall got a minor bite from the big cat.

That kind of duty just came with the territory back then, as London Square Mall brought in circus animal acts, farm shows, boat shows, bubble-gum bubble blowing contests and other promotions to draw in customers.

"We did quite a few crazy things and it worked," said Peterson, who managed the mall between its opening year in 1971 up until 1992.

Most of London Square Mall, formerly along Mall Drive, was demolished by then-owner Lehman Brothers of New York after the last retailer, Younkers, moved out in 2002. Many other stores already had relocated to the newer and bigger Oakwood Mall, 4800 Golf Road.

Festival Foods, United Health Group, Savers, HOM Furniture and several other storefronts occupy the former London Square Mall site, leaving the legacy of Eau Claire's first mall only in the minds of Chippewa Valley residents.

"I still run into people that remember the promotions we did," Peterson said.

But the mall that once kept a 1,400-pound steer before giving it away as a prize is a place his grandchildren never have seen for themselves.

Chippewa Valley Museum in Carson Park plans to change that through an exhibit that will connect recent history to the region's distant past.

One challenge in pulling together an exhibit on recent history is people don't often consider everyday events from their lifetime to be historic.

"You don't really think the shopping bag you got at London Square Mall would be something the museum would want," said exhibit developer Melissa Holmen. "But that is something we do want."
Holmen's eyes and smile widened as she peered into a box that arrived at the museum last week from former mall co-owner Jack Shenkman.

It contained snapshots of bustling mall crowds, news clippings about development near the retail mecca and fliers from promotional events.

Although the box did not include a photo of "Bruce the Spruce" - a talking evergreen used as a Christmas promotion for Prange Way discount stores - that Holmen has been wishing for, it did contain lots of snapshots of people gathered in the mall.

Before the box arrived, the museum mostly had photos of a store opening and aerial shots of the mall, but few showed people or the mall's insides.

Shenkman's donation had the first interior mall views that Holmen - a North Dakota native - had seen of London Square Mall.

After gazing at the shot of the main corridor, she saw how "Little Ben" - a 12-foot-tall model of London's "Big Ben" clock tower - fit into the mall. The real "Little Ben" now stands in the museum's storeroom and will be incorporated into the exhibit, which will be laid out like a mall.

But the exhibit - dubbed "Intersections" - will include much more than the story of the first major shopping center in the Chippewa Valley.

"Intersections" also will tell stories about the Uniroyal Goodrich Tire Co. plant, Hmong immigration to Eau Claire, origins of UW-Stout in Menomonie, importance of the medical community and value of small festivals in revealing a community's identity.

An underlying theme of the exhibit will be how the regional character of Chippewa Valley people responded to forces and events through history, Holmen said.

That character is shown in the ingenuity used to continually adapt the Uniroyal tire plant to keep up with the times and employ people for about seven decades. While the retooling and innovation kept the plant open longer than other tire factories, it closed 20 years ago. After it closed as a tire plant, developers turned the 2-million-square-foot property into Banbury Place.

A welcoming attitude associated with Midwesterners also made the Chippewa Valley a popular place for Hmong people to relocate to, even if they first arrived in other parts of the United States.

Refugees from Laos, the Hmong people began coming to the U.S., and many to Eau Claire, in 1976. Eau Claire's Hmong population reached 600 by 1982 and blossomed to more than a thousand by 1993.

Reserved for 5,000 square feet now occupied by two exhibits - "Paths of the People" and "Settlement and Survival" - "Intersections" will be one of the museum's larger installations.
"It's really a big endeavor for us," Holmen said.

Work on "Intersections" began in 2009, but the exhibit's sheer size and the museum's limited staff means it is not expected to open until 2014. In addition to the main exhibit, there will be a book, history kit and sessions to teach educators on how they can present lessons from the exhibit.

As the research and work on the exhibit is being done, pieces of it can be found at ChippePedia.org, the museum's online encyclopedia modeled after the website Wikipedia.

"It gets the information out right away," Holmen said.

Peterson's tales of the mall already are online. Other articles, including recollections of local polio cases, a family's struggle to make ends meet and some hunting anecdotes, have been added to ChippePedia's collection of about 500 entries on Chippewa Valley history.

The museum strives to have modern-day connections sprinkled throughout all its exhibits to help visitors relate to distant history.

"We try to bring virtually all our research up to the present," Holmen said. "It really helps people connect with the history of the area if they can see how it connects directly to their own lives."

"Intersections" will begin with recent history - as late as 2005 - and work backward to 1650.

Connecting history to modern-day life is especially important to the museum's youngest visitors, Holmen said.

"If we explain to kids that we're talking about 300 years ago, it might as well be 30," she said.

Peterson, gone from the mall job for 20 years and now serving as Washington Town Board chairman, acknowledged his old workplace has become part of the area's history.

For a smaller community like Eau Claire, to get an enclosed mall was unheard of in the early '70s, he said.

Although London Square Mall struggled to keep up with the times and eventually was replaced by the bigger, flashier Oakwood Mall, Peterson said it still lives on in the minds of people who visited it.

"We all grew up in the London Square Mall," he said.

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