

Olmstead Place State Park offers a glimpse of Ellensburg's pioneer roots



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Olmstead Place

Olmstead Place State Park includes a 217-acre farm, a farmhouse and a smaller cabin about 10 minutes from Ellensburg. The farm dates to 1875.

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By Danny Schmidt staff intern |

The tables are set with plates and cups, clothes are in the closets, tools are out on the porch and the kitchen is full of cooking utensils. Walking through, some may think people still live in the farmhouse at Olmstead Place State Park, but nobody has since 1981.

“All of the stuff in the house ranges from 1908 to the 1980s,” said Maria Broadsword, interpretive specialist at Olmstead. “Pretty much everything in there is the family’s.”

Olmstead Place State Park is about a 10-minute drive east of Ellensburg, and is part of the Washington State Park system.

Broadsword is fairly new to Olmstead. She transferred from the Dry Falls Interpretive Center in March. The differences between the two parks are vast. Dry Falls had about 100,000 visitors each year, compared to the 20,000 Broadsword was told Olmstead gets.

Broadsword is the only employee of the park and while she has volunteers, she is in charge of the office work, mowing the lawn, giving tours and everything in between.

Tours are free, unless it's a large group. During the summer, most of the tours are not arranged ahead of time. People typically just stop in and want to look around, Broadsword said. Many people see the sign on Interstate 90.

During the year, school field trips and other groups stop at the park. Broadsword loves giving tours to children because she said they are always fascinated with the house.

History

Olmstead's 217-acre farm has two houses: a farmhouse and a smaller cabin. After he was discharged from the military, Samuel Olmstead and his family moved to the site in 1875, the same year Ellensburg was platted. Olmstead built the cabin out of cottonwood logs from around the Yakima River Canyon and finished in 1876.

Olmstead and his wife, Sarah Frances Yale, had three children. Their oldest, Clara, who was 14 when the cabin was built, married George W. Smith in 1881, in a ceremony in the cabin.

Samuel Olmstead died a month after his daughter's wedding at age 51. After the death, Sarah Olmstead and her two sons, Phil and Jack, were in charge of the farm.

Clara and George Smith, who lived in the Kittitas Valley, had three daughters, Leta May, Claretta Smith and Ruby. Clara died at age 31 and Ruby died two months later, when she was 14 months old.

Sarah Olmstead raised the two girls, because in those times, it was unheard of for a man to raise two daughters alone.

In 1908, the family built the farmhouse, which is much bigger than the cabin. Sarah died in 1918, in her house in town at 801 Washington St.

Leta May was responsible for doing chores around the house, and Claretta ran the ranch and business. George visited the girls periodically throughout the year, but didn't help with the ranch. He died in 1948.

Claretta and Leta donated the farm to the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission in 1968. When they donated the farm, they said they wanted it to be left alone, and kept the same way it was when they died. For the most part, it was. The house still features plenty of antiques from the early 1900s.

Gardens

One of the park's features is the flowers in the yards scattered around the property. Dorothy Stanley, Annette Williams, Donna Umland and Ruth Harrington have volunteered in the gardens for upward of 15 years.

Stanley said years back, Grace Elkins, a volunteer, told her a park ranger was planning on mowing over everything and killing the roses in the garden. Instead, Stanley asked the ranger if the volunteers could work on the gardens and maintain them, and he was all for it.

“Everybody was overwhelmed because there was so much to do out here,” Stanley said.

Afterward, a woman from Seattle, who also wanted to help with the gardens, put on gardening programs at Hal Holmes Center.

“She became a consultant for a few years,” Williams said. “We received permission from state parks for gardening. We got books on gardening, took out old seed. It was overrun with native species.”

The state only supplies water for the park, so the volunteers needed a way of making revenue. They asked the state if they could have an annual plant sale, which was approved. Olmstead only sells historic plants in the sale.

“We’ve been plugging away. We have our crises every now and then, like trouble with deer,” Stanley said. “The reason we like it is because we’re avid gardeners. We hope when we’re gone, the garden is still here.”

HopeSource sends about 20 people to the park, twice a year, to help out with the gardens and other chores around the park. Stanley said they are incredibly helpful.

“They come through here like a hurricane,” Stanley said.

Volunteers

Since Broadsword is the only employee at Olmstead, she tries to get as much help as she can.

“We cannot operate without volunteers,” she said.

While Howard Teasley isn’t employed at Olmstead, Broadsword said he is her No. 2. He helps with whatever Broadsword needs.

“I’m the Lone Ranger and he’s Tonto,” Broadsword said.

Whitney Petrey has taken on the daunting task of organizing and cataloging artifacts of the park. Petrey is a master's candidate at East Carolina University.

Broadsword also has Lorinda Anderson helping her. Anderson works for the Central Washington University Civic Engagement Center. Broadsword said she organizes visits for students who want to go to the park to volunteer and earn community service hours.

The Kittitas Valley Early Iron Club also helps, Broadsword said. The club has a threshing bee and antique equipment show at the park each September.

With few volunteers, Broadsword often finds herself working long hours. The work can be stressful but Broadsword said she has the best job.

Parking problems

Broadsword thinks one reason the number of visits has decreased is because of Olmstead’s parking situation. Attendees are required to purchase a Discover Pass. Passes are either \$10 per day or \$30 for an annual pass.



Many people see the \$10 fee and continue driving, she said. She hopes the state makes a change soon.

“State Parks needs to just have a group fee and not add on all these expenses. It’s killing these parks,” she said.

The majority of Olmstead visitors are not local. Many of them are driving through and stop by the park for a tour or a place to rest and/or have a picnic.

Broadsword said it’s important for people to know that such a historic place is so close. The park has commonly been used for weddings and other celebrations, but not recently. Every car attending the wedding would need a Discover Pass, instead of the group fee Broadsword hopes is implemented.

“There have been no weddings this summer,” Broadsword said. “I think the cost scares people off.”

Future plans

Broadsword has high hopes for the park. In the near future, she hopes Olmstead will feature a playground, barbecues and a teepee, which people could rent for weddings or parties, and she said she wants to put on more evening programs.

“My first year here, I just wanted to get my feet on the ground,” Broadsword said. “My next step now is to start a Friends of the Olmstead State Park.”

She also wants to put in cement pads for farm equipment to rest and hopes one day soon there will be a small souvenir shop on site.

“Hopefully, that might attract the tour buses,” Broadsword said. “With all of the history here, this is the only park of its kind.”

(Brian Myrick / Daily Record)

