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Johnson's Journey - Hands On! exhibit to examine history, evolution of city, offer glimpse at what future might be



Old city postcard scenes (Contributed / Hands On!)

By Rex Barber
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No one is left who can remember walking around Johnson's Depot, much less Johnson's Tank.

Beginning Saturday visitors to Hands On! Regional Museum will have a

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Should states require teen-age girls to be vaccinated against human papillomavirus?

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chance to visit Johnson City's former states and also envision the future.

"We're celebrating 150 years since Johnson's Tank came into being," said Trish Patterson, executive director of Hands On!

What is Johnson's Tank? It's the name of the small half-acre of land on which Henry Johnson opened a small post office, train depot and built his home.

Trains going through would fill up with water there, hence the "Tank" part of the name.

Today the city of Johnson City thrives. To show the evolution of the city, Hands On! is opening the Johnson's Journey exhibit.

"It has really been a community effort," Patterson said of the two-year process of developing the exhibit. "We have had volunteers from all over. It's been a true pleasure to work with the people who have come in. They have been exciting, creative and pleasurable."

The name Johnson's Journey shows a process of ongoing change for Johnson City.

Upon entering the exhibit visitors will be treated to the old Blue Plum Post Office, where children can sort the mail and design their own stamp.

Other notable exhibits include a model train display set in the middle-1800s, an old photograph gallery, a treasure hunt and a unique future of Johnson City exhibit called the Blue Plum Village.

Johnson City is trying to brand the downtown "Blue Plum Village." Therefore the final leg of the "journey" will be the Blue Plum Village, where children can drive "plasma" cars, build the future Johnson City and try out careers they may be interested in by dressing up as firefighters, police officers, doctors and many others.

The treasure hunt will offer children a chance to learn about prominent figures in Johnson City's history.

"The kids are going to go through a treasure hunt to understand the people of Johnson City through its history," Patterson said.

One unique aspect of the exhibit is the century-old statue of a woman that was once on display in the city's Fountain Square. The 100-year-old Lady of the Fountain will be on display for the length of the exhibit. The landmark statue is on loan from the city, usually standing in the lobby of the Municipal

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“It’s amazing,” Patterson said of having the statue. “We think that that will bring in learners of all ages.”

Visitors, both young and old, will have the chance to contribute to the city’s history by writing down their stories.

“While they’re here (museum visitors) we’ll invite them to share their memories of Johnson City,” Patterson said.

Hands On! may share the memories or archive them as a way to continue adding to the city’s history.

A photo gallery also will chronicle the journey of Johnson City. Old black and white photos of the city during the 1950s, 1960s and before are accompanied by new color photos of the same shot. The photos are from many places around the area.

“We wanted to display some regional history as well,” she said. “Regional history and culture.”

Franci Sloan, exhibit coordinator at the museum, said the photos were her favorite part and will be something that can interest adults.

“History is an abstract concept for children and it helps them to make it concrete,” Sloan said. “I look at Johnson City differently now.”

Patterson said the exhibit was indeed designed to appeal to a broad audience.

“Well, we wanted history to be fun,” she said. “We wanted history to be inviting. We wanted it to be kid friendly but we wanted it to be multigenerational,” she said. “We think it’s comparable to any display put on in any child museum in the United States,” she said.

The exhibit opens at 10 a.m. Saturday and will run until Sept. 16.

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