Downtown exhibit sheds light on Boise's past
Downtown exhibit sheds light on Boise’s past

Sep 29, 2010 Posted By Suzanne Craig In News, Sub Feature Tagged Education, Student Life

Today Downtown Boise is a vibrant place filled with bustling shops and cultural landmarks, but around 50 years ago much of the current Downtown area was nothing but dirt. Thanks to an urban renewal plan that resulted in the destruction of hundreds of iconic buildings for a planned downtown mall complex that was never completed.

Doctor Todd Shallat, working in conjunction with College of Social Science and Public Affairs and its dean, Melissa Lavitt, has put together an exhibit featuring the era before the renewal project called, “Lost City, Boise Before Urban Renewal.”

Featuring pictures by past Idaho Statesman photographer Leo J. “Scoop” Leeburn, along with corner stones of old buildings and a cross from St. Margaret’s Hall, the exhibit’s pieces were either donated by other organizations or found by Shallat.

“I found this pile of stones at the Old Pen and I still don’t even know what half of them are,” Shallat said. “One of them was the cross from St. Margaret’s, and another was this plaque from the first public school in Boise.”

Another large piece of the exhibit is an old neon sign from a club that used to be a major college hang-out, The Cub Tavern.

“That sign is my favorite part, I just like the old neon,” Shallat said. “And we get people who see the sign and just walk in and start telling stories about how they used to go there when they were in college; who put the bullet hole in it, how sleazy it was. It is just really neat to get all of that history from people who had sort of forgotten about it.”

The exhibit also has a small lounge area near the front where there are books about Idaho and its history, as well as its future and Boise’s own future as a growing metropolitan area. On a wall right next to the door are panels that describe the common architecture of the era, lent to the exhibit by the Smithsonian, which features local sights such as the Ada Theatre and its Egyptian theme.

The future of the exhibit is one that looks to put historical markers and signs around the Downtown area, hopefully sparking its own cultural renewal by exploring the past of Boise all the way back to its founding as a camp for Union soldiers in the Civil War.

“The idea is to put some of the Boise in Boise State,” Shallat said. “We’ve always been a part of the city, and this just serves to emphasize that.”

The exhibit is located BSU’s Center on Main in the Alaska Building at 1020 W. Main Street. It opens Oct. 7 during a grand opening celebration at 7 p.m. The exhibit will be there until at least January.