

History tour links three communities

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Valley News staff

A recent bus tour aimed at turning back the clock for Temecula-era history buffs also helped forge new links with preservationists from Perris and Lake Elsinore.

The all-day tour gave about 40 Temecula-area residents a glimpse at dozens of little-known and off-the-beaten path locations in the Lake Elsinore, Meadowbrook, Canyon Lake and Menifee areas. It also introduced members of

three preservation groups to each other, a connection that could create local coalitions as they work to protect and promote the area's historical assets.

"We need to get some sort of exchange going," Linda Ridenour, who is active with the Lake Elsinore Historical Society, said to the visitors at one point. "We have so many treasures here."

About a dozen of her group's members assisted the tour as drivers, docents and museum guides. During a break, Ruth Atkins, who

heads Elsinore's historical and business groups, said there has been "very little" communication between the neighboring societies in recent years.

Atkins said greater cooperation could benefit endangered sites by building a network of historical advocates. "History belongs to everyone," she said.

Several Temecula historical advocates said they came away with a new appreciation of the historical preservation and site advocacy efforts underway elsewhere.



Members of the tour group make their way through "the tunnel" leading into Aimee's Castle.



Caretaker M.L. Austin speaks about Aimee's Castle in Lake Elsinore.

Paul Gallaher photos

"I'm really impressed with what [Lake Elsinore's] historical society has done," said Jimmy Moore, president of the Temecula Valley Historical Society. "It makes me kind of jealous."

Moore said his group will likely visit Perris landmarks on its next outing. A leader of Perris' historical society, as well as several of its youth docents, participated in last week's tour. The Temecula-area participants paid \$45 each to charter a bus and dine on a catered lunch in the museum portion of the Lake Elsinore Cultural Center, a former Methodist church.

The tour took participants to or past Indian sacred and archaeological sites, mines and historical buildings that ranged from meticulously preserved to boarded-up and badly deteriorating.

They also spotted or visited the former homes of muckraking writer Upton Sinclair, evangelist and faith healer Aimee Semple McPherson and movie legends Bela Lugosi, best known for his 1931 role of "Dracula," and Johnny Weissmuller, who won five Olympic gold medals and one bronze medal before he went on to star in 12 Tarzan movies from the 1930s to 1960s.

mec's Castle," a 10-year summer home built for McPherson, who was perhaps the most famous woman of her era.

She constructed the Angelus Temple in Los Angeles and was the founder of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. The denomination now owns the Moorish-style landmark that was built in 1929 for \$229,000.

The home, which contains some of McPherson's furniture as well as photographs and paintings of her, commands a 360-degree view that takes in Interstate 15 to the east and the lake to the west. It has retained its gold-leaf arches and ceilings as well as other flourishes that have survived 80 years.

Few of the visitors had previously ventured inside the landmark, which changed hands many times after McPherson sold it in 1939 to continue ministries that had become squeezed by the Depression.

"It's spectacular," Price said of the lovingly restored property.

A husband-and-wife caretaker team said the church, which purchased the property about five years ago for retreats and other gatherings, also aims to spotlight the life of McPherson, who was snared by

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Antique dolls sit on a sofa in Lake Elsinore's historic Chimes Building.

Developers were targeted at times by tour leaders for letting several key historic buildings crumble and for bulldozing fragile Indian sites.

At one point in her remarks, Atkins pointed out a treasured building that has "become a disgrace" since it was purchased by a cash-strapped developer.

Paul Price, a Canyon Lake artist and archaeologist who organized the tour, was equally critical of another developer's demolition of key Indian and historic sites on a sprawling Menifee tract once owned by Audie Murphy, a World War II hero who later became a popular Western movie actor.

Other key landmarks along the way included the sacred Luiseño site "Ringing Rock" in Menifee; widely scattered mines where gold, silver, coal and clay were extracted; an adobe building that once served as a stop along the Butterfield Stage route; an 1896 train depot; and vestiges of rail lines and hot springs, baths, beaches and other attractions of Lake Elsinore's resort past.

A highlight of the trip was "Ai-

controversy after she mysteriously disappeared for five weeks in May 1926.

McPherson died in September 1944 under equally mysterious circumstances in San Francisco at age 53.

"We try to keep the spirit of the Lord that she had alive," said Betty Austin, who looks after the property with her husband.

Toward the end of that stop on the tour, Austin invited Eve Craig, a founder of the Temecula historical group, to play a piano that once belonged to the radio station operated by McPherson's church.

Seated beside a large oil painting of McPherson, Craig played "Amazing Grace" and several other spiritual songs. She burst into a broad grin as she ended the medley amid enthusiastic applause from her rapt audience.

"That chokes me up to see Eve play a baby grand piano in Aimee McPherson's living room," Price said as the group prepared to leave the hilltop landmark.

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