

# Wildfire destroyed an Oregon community center, but the cleanup uncovered a time capsule

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By [Samantha Swindler | The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)



Walter Wilson, in blue, looks over the remains of the Vida McKenzie Community Center. The building was destroyed in the Holiday Farm fire in September 2020. The words "SAVE WALLS" were spray painted on walls the community members hoped to salvage, but they were deemed too unstable to keep and were demolished.  
Samantha Swindler/The Oregonian

Walter Wilson, the unofficial mayor of Vida, anxiously watched as an excavator clawed the ground in the northeast corner of the former community center.

“I’m hoping beyond hope that there’s actually something there,” he said. “I’ve heard about this for some time now, but I have no way of verifying it.”

Wilson, a handful of his neighbors, and about a dozen workers with the state of Oregon’s wildfire debris management task force had come to the small Vida community, east of Eugene, to see if the stories were true – if, under the charred slab of the former [Vida McKenzie Community Center](#), a time capsule remained.

If found, its contents would represent the only tangible pieces of the community center’s history to survive the [Holiday Farm Fire](#), which last September roared along the McKenzie River valley in Lane County, destroying about 430 homes and businesses and taking one life. The community center, hand built by locals in 1949, was a total loss.

“We’ve had memorial services there, monthly bingo, birthday parties, baptisms, marriages,” said Gerry Aster, vice president of the Vida McKenzie Community Center board. “All those markers in life, it all happened here for the residents of this valley.”

Wilson, the board’s president since 2003, thought he’d done the smart thing by making duplicates of historic files on hard drives kept both at the community center and at his house on the other side of the river.

When both buildings burned, he lost everything.

“Old photos are all gone, of people working on the building of the building, the foundation going in, the framing for the building going up, the old presidents of the clubs,” Wilson said. “I had a lot of documentation of members that have come and gone, board members and things. It’s all gone.”

But perhaps a time capsule had survived, buried under the building’s cornerstone.

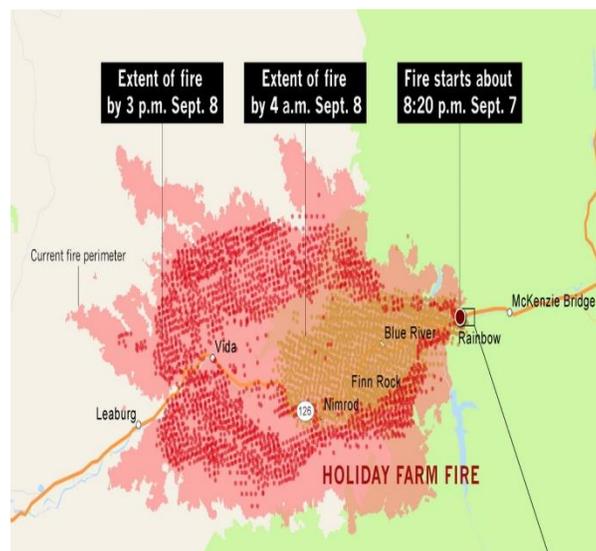
“This will give me something to have, I guess,” Wilson said. “Something old, to look at and see what they were thinking about in 1949.”

And so, Wilson assembled a group of onlookers, contractors and media to witness the cornerstone’s removal among the rubble.

“Anyone who had anything to do with the time capsule has passed,” Aster said. “So, I think the real special part of the time capsule will be just sort of touching those elders in some way. What they put in that capsule, we have no idea.”

They were also prepared for the possibility that there would be nothing under the cornerstone, or that the contents would be ruined from the intense heat of the wildfire.

“It’s alright, we’ve had plenty of loss up here and plenty of disappointments,” she said. “We may be surprised or disappointed, we don’t know. But we’re still hopeful.”



A map shows the spread of the Holiday Farm fire in September 2020. Mark Friesen The Holiday Farm fire [began on Labor Day 2020](#), east of Blue River on Oregon 126. From there, the flames traveled about 20 miles west to Vida.

An official cause for the fire hasn't been determined, but [a lawsuit filed](#) in Lane County Circuit Court contends that it began after two local utility companies failed to de-energize their power lines, despite widespread forecasts for extreme fire weather.

Aster was asleep in bed when, shortly after 1 a.m. on Sept. 8, 2020, she received a cell phone alert to evacuate immediately. She grabbed the dog and a single change of clothes and drove west.

“None of us believed it would happen, we just got out of there,” she said. “I spent the night at our church in Walterville and waited. I was there for three days.”

It would be a month before she could return to her home, which was miraculously saved from the fire. Meanwhile, five of her immediate neighbors, including Wilson, lost everything.



Excavation begins around the cornerstone, set in place on March 20, 1949.  
Samantha Swindler/The Oregonian

In October, the board members met to assess the damage to the community center. No one had expected the building with a metal roof and concrete block walls to succumb so fully to fire. In the end, even the remaining walls where hopeful members had spray painted the words “SAVE” in black lettering were not sound enough to stay.

The property needed to be wiped clean.

And it turns out the community center – which had never had any loans or a mortgage – was underinsured for fire loss. The board set a \$755,000 fundraising goal to rebuild.

Over the past year, they've hosted monthly fundraisers and drive-thru bingo games. The “Blue River Bottle Boys” collected bottles and soda cans for a “Rebuild a Dime at a Time” campaign.

When locals built what was then called the McKenzie River Club on donated land in the 1940s, members of the club – loggers, heavy equipment operators, plumbers and carpenters – volunteered their services for the project. In a similar spirit, local businesses and contractors have pledged in-kind donations to rebuild it.

It all added up. The capital campaign had raised close to \$400,000 when, on Aug. 16, the community center [announced its largest contribution](#) to date. Vida's two state lawmakers, Rep. Cedric Hayden (R) and Sen. Floyd Prozanski (D), each promised \$240,000 in [federal relief money](#) toward the project.

As lumber and construction costs have risen, Aster worried their original \$755,000 goal wouldn't be enough. Now, it seems they are on track to hit her goal of breaking ground in January and holding a grand reopening on Sept. 8, 2022.

But first, the demolition.

The excavator operator, finding nothing buried along the outside of the cornerstone, began to push on the wall above it. Within seconds, the entire northern wall collapsed, sending up a white cloud of dust.

With the cornerstone block now on its side, a translucent circle was visible at its base.

“Ohhh, wow, can you believe that!” Wilson said.

It was a glass bottle, laid into the cement of the first block. A member of the crew chiseled around it to extract a handful of rolled up papers.

With shaking hands, Wilson unrolled the aged paper, on which was typed a history of the center and a list of its membership in 1949.

“The McKenzie River Active Club was organized November 4, 1941, by members of the McKenzie River Grange, for the purpose of having a social organization that would also work for the welfare of the McKenzie River country,” he read.

The find was small – no photos or trinkets – but Wilson was emotional. He recognized the names on the membership list, friends he once knew, now long deceased.

“You just don't know what this means to me,” he said.



One of the pieces of paper recovered from the time capsule was a typed history of the McKenzie River Club, whose members constructed the building.  
Samantha Swindler/The Oregonian

Aster and Wilson are already planning what they'll put in their own time capsule under the new community center. They've decided the papers from 1949 should stay, and they want to add an updated membership list, along with some mementos from 2021. This time, they might use something larger than a soda bottle.

In time, they hope new generations will dance and celebrate, more babies will be baptized and more couples will be wed inside the hall.

And underneath it all, encased in cement, will be a handful of old papers, the names of its founders, and the story of the fire that left the community stronger than before.

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Link to UTube video article by *Samantha Swindler* Video Producer  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CY02xMxg2\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CY02xMxg2_A)