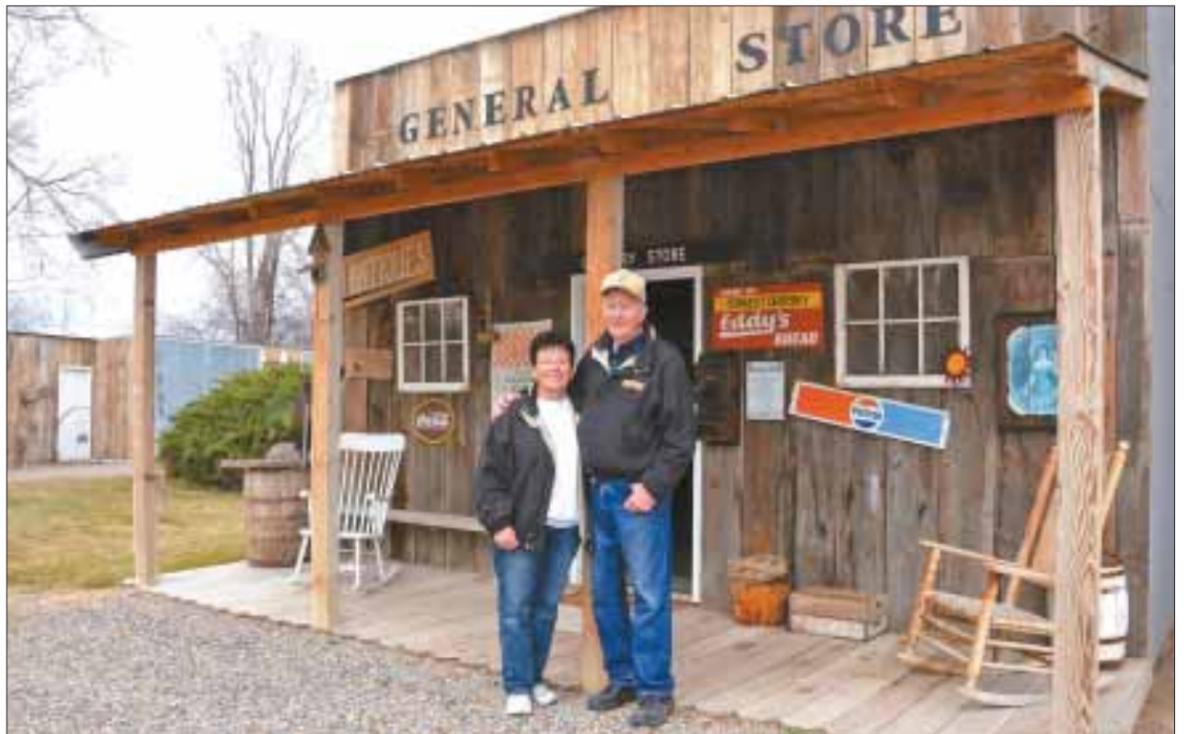


Jack and Belva Lawson of Grand View are living their dream

Story and photos by
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A little piece of Owyhee heaven

One day Jack Lawson asked his wife Belva, "Honey, you know all that tractor stuff I've got? Do you mind if I park it along our driveway?" She thought for a minute and answered, "Sure dear, if you'll build me a little western town for all my stuff."

The deal was made, and it was the beginning of an adventure that neither one could have guessed what the outcome would be. That was 17 years ago.

Today the couple operates a unique type of museum called "The Emu-Z-um" a few miles from Grand View, on the banks of the Snake River.

No, it's not an E-Museum and it's not an online store. These folks don't even own a computer.

This is a real place and something you would never expect to find out in the middle of the Owyhee desert. This is no small collection that grandma keeps in the china hutch, or grandpa throws on a shelf in the garage. This is an extraordinary collection of thousands of historical artifacts, many from the Grand View, Bruneau and Silver City areas.

The Emu-Z-um is a walk back 100 years in history for the serious or not so serious, the avid collector or the casual looker. For the uninspired, it's an inspiration. For the history buff, it's a gem. For the treasure hunter, it's a jackpot. For the photographer, it's hog heaven. There's a little bit of everything to please everyone at this "little oasis" in the desert.

The Emu-Z-um includes about a dozen buildings that are decorated on the outside and filled on the inside with anything and everything that can be collected. The displays are meticulously arranged and organized by types of items in beautifully decorated rooms that would put-to-shame any resort.

You can't call what the Lawsons do a hobby, because they completely build their life around it. You can't call it work, either, because they claim to enjoy it too much. But, you can call it a passion, because it is their labor of love to create these historical displays. This is a lifelong dream that has been created by two people who are obviously meant for each other.

Jack and Belva Lawson are high school sweethearts who have been together 54 years. Neither one ever dated anyone else. He was a shy kid who spotted her out on the basketball court and noticed her as a cheerleader. He was born and raised in Bruneau, she in Grand View. He was a Bobcat and she was a Devil. His family were cattle ranchers, hers were farmers. It

was a match made in heaven.

Today they still live in the same area they grew up in, and neither one has any desire to go anywhere else. They are home, and home is where their hearts are.

The Lawsons have spent most of their lives collecting things. They started collecting before collecting antiques was popular. For years, they collected all kinds of things that nobody else wanted.

"We got started in this because I always went to all the farm sales," Jack says. "I always needed nuts and bolts and then at the end of the sale, they would sell a pile of junk for just two or three dollars. My wife thought I was crazy for bringing home all that extra stuff, but I would always find a few treasures in there," he said.

"And now, what we are doing is a lot more fun than farming," Belva added. "I've always told him, the harder you work, the longer you'll live."

Each of them credits the other with making the Emu-Z-um a success. It's a team effort, for sure. "She's the real brains of the outfit," he says. "He can build anything," she says.

The Lawsons have found their little piece of heaven near the Owyhees. They've got peace and quiet, a beautiful view of the river on the east side and the lovely sunsets on the Owyhee mountains to the west. After a life of farming and ranching, the couple has two grown children and six grandchildren. All they want to make their life complete, is a few more people to stop by and take a look at what they have built.

By the way, the dream they have now had its origins in a very different dream. One day, back in 1989, they saw an advertisement in a magazine about a "hot new trend"

of raising and selling Australian birds, called emus. The Emus were introduced in this country as an animal with lean meat, which was low in fat and cholesterol. But the real attraction of the Emu's was their oil, which is valued as a healing ointment for cuts, scapes and burns.

The Lawsons started with six baby birds, and eventually they raised more than 300. The animals were supposed to sell anywhere from \$800 to \$1,500 per mating pair. But about the time they got started in the business, the economy dipped and the market wasn't there, so they sold all but a

few of the birds, at lower prices. Today they still have one bird that is 25 years old, and it is their last one.

The small buildings in the western town are made from former birdcages. The town's boardwalk is made from the wood fencing that housed the birds. The Emu-Z-um is a play on words, because of the Lawsons' bird business.

Jack and Belva have continued to add new collections and buildings over the years. They have welcomed motorcycle clubs, Corvette clubs, military groups, church groups, students and visitors from all over the country. Six couples had weddings on the property. But Jack and Belva are always ready to welcome new visitors to the Emu-Z-um.

Jack is a devoted collector. Since he was a boy, he has collected bottles of all kinds, arrowheads and knives. Belva is gifted with knowing how to organize and create displays. She is the ultimate decorator. "I'm the kind of person who wakes up in the middle of the night with an idea," she says.

Much of what they have acquired has come to them through family, friends and neighbors. Some of the memorabilia on

display are about people they have known over the years.

"People always ask what my favorites are, but I don't have a favorite. I like everything," she said.

As Jack and Belva happily embark on a tour of the premises, it is obvious how each of them takes a tremendous amount of pride in what they have accomplished.

They have a general store, barbershop, doctor's office, a seafaring room, animal trophy room, old hotel rooms, a 1950s kitchen, a church, a western town with a saloon, sheriff's office, bank, tool room, post office, jail and school house, sports displays, a model railroad, horse racing displays, carriages, bottles, toys, Native American displays, a 1950s ice cream parlor, antique furniture, a mining display and old mine shaft, cameras, clocks, army uniforms, a driftwood wall, dishes, dolls, and more.

The couple has been collecting so long that they eventually converted their original house into a museum and built a newer house about six years ago overlooking the river. The barber shop building is the original homestead on the property. They are not worried about running out of space for any new collections. "We've got plenty of space," Jack says cheerfully. They just recently raised the visitor's price from \$5 to \$10 and they offer tours.

Some of the most valuable of the Lawsons' collections are from the Silver City School House Museum, which was privately owned. The owner passed away a few years ago and the Lawsons purchased the entire collection, to ensure that it would stay completely intact and remain in Owyhee County.

The most recent addition to the property is a doctor's office complete with old examination tables, x-ray equipment and various medical instruments that belonged to a Dr. Proctor who practiced in Grand View in 1907.

The Lawsons are knowledgeable on the history that belongs to each of the items they have at the Emu-Z-um and they eagerly share their knowledge with newcomers.

"Pull up a chair on the porch and we'll sit and visit awhile," Jack says.

"Come on out, anytime and we will be here," Belva says with a smile.

"We are easy to get along with," Jack says as he offers a handshake.

This little oasis feels so comfortable. Here are two people who welcome you, just like family to their home, their beautiful home that they call the Emu-Z-um.



The Lawson's Emu-Z-um is located at 22142 River Road about one mile off Idaho highway 78 between Oreana and Grand View. The museum is open weekends from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and weekdays by appointment. Call (208) 834-2397.