Sidney Herald NEWS

8-ton rock centerpiece of new museum exhibit

- PERRY BACKUS pbackus@ravallirepublic.com

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Ravalli County Museum Board member Dennis Moore helps Donaldson Brothers employees Vern Weidow and Mark Jessop set an 8-ton glacial rock into place on the museum grounds. By mid-June, the rock will become the centerpiece of a new permanent exhibit about Glacial Lake Missoula and its impact on the Bitterroot Valley.

Ravalli County Museum Executive Director Tamar Stanley and museum board member Dennis Moore stand next to the newly delivered 8-ton boulder that will serve as the museum's new permanent exhibit that explains a portion of the natural history of the Bitterroot Valley.

To fully understand the significance of Ravalli County Museum's newest exhibit, visitors will need to come armed with imagination and a willingness to look skyward.

The 8-ton rock that was carefully lowered into place on the museum's lawn Monday is there to take them on a journey thousands of years back in time.

The first thing they might do is look toward the towering Bitterroot Range just west of Hamilton.
It was once home to the huge boulder that geologists call a glacial erratic. It found its way to the valley floor through the upheaval caused by glaciers more than 15,000 years ago.

And then for thousands of years more, its home was the bottom of the massive Glacial Lake Missoula.
To get an idea of the depth of the lake that would have covered Hamilton back then, visitors can lift their eyes to the top of the museum's cupola and then imagine six of those buildings stacked upon each other.
Ravalli County Museum Executive Director Tamar Stanley is planning for a mid-June opening of the new permanent outdoor Glacial Ice Age Exhibit.

Three years in the making, the exhibit will include a series of informational panels that will explain the origin, lifespan and the immense impact Glacial Lake Missoula had on the Bitterroot Valley.

Glacial Lake Missoula was created after an ice dam blocked the Clark Fork River near the east end of Idaho's Lake Pend Oreille. Behind the 2,000-foot-tall dam, water backed up into the valleys of western Montana.
Periodic rupturing of the ice dam resulted in cataclysmic flooding that swept across eastern Washington and down the Columbia River Gorge.

In the Bitterroot Valley, the area around present-day Lake Como served as its terminus.

"The physical evidence of the buildup and breakdown of the dam at the southern end of the valley is discernible if you know what to look for," Stanley said. "This exhibit will be instructional, intuitive and user-friendly for multi-generation understanding."

The museum partnered with the Bitter Root Cultural Heritage Trust, Montana Natural History Center and the Missoula Chapter of the National Ice Age Geological Institute. The Montana History Foundation, the Rapp Family Foundation and the Montana Office of Tourism helped fund the exhibit.

The glacial boulder was identified by local geologist George Furniss. It was donated by Don Bell, who climbed on it as a youngster while living just a mile down the road from the museum.

Donaldson Brothers volunteered its crew to move the boulder to its new location.

"All of these local entities have a stake in sharing the rich and incredibly riveting history of our landscape," Stanley said.

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