



*The remains of the Panhandle Lumber Company (originally the I & WN Railroad) roundhouse immediately after the 1939 fire. —Courtesy of Forrest Spencer*

## ***Historical Spirit Lake, Idaho and Vicinity***

by Keith and Jan Spencer

The following excerpt is from Keith and Jan Spencer's upcoming book to be released in late September.

### **Disaster Strikes**

#### **The Spirit Lake/Blanchard Fire**

My father awakened me about 2:00 a.m. on an August Sunday in 1939. He said, "Come out and look at this." Rubbing my sleepy eyes, I followed him to the front porch near the edge of the water on the eastern shore, a spot which provided an excellent view in a 180-degree arc. This five-year-old boy immediately saw both an amazing and terrifying sight. Off to the right, behind the mountain ridge, I beheld a blood-red glow with tongues of yellow-orange fire occasionally leaping from behind the ridge. As we stood there transfixed, the fire reached the ridge and the white-hot tongues of flame gradually moved along the

ridge, crowning through the huge pine trees as if they were exploding. Even though we were in no danger, I was shaken to the core. It took a long time for sleep to return.

The next morning was terribly smoky and one could not see the lake even though the shore was less than 100 feet away. I walked down to the dock and discovered the water was completely covered with ash and burned needles. The lake looked like a giant concrete parking lot. Later a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) fire guard, watching for spot fires, stopped by. We talked a little, and then I walked a ways with him up the road, promising to tell him if I saw a fire. I walked up and down the road for the rest of the day looking for fires. This was rather absurd since there was neither a telephone nor a car. Between walks, I eagerly listened to the radio broadcasts reporting on

little but the massive fire. Harry Lantry, a Spokane newspaper reporter, had rented an airplane and flew around the Spirit Lake area, which was entombed by smoke. Harry repeatedly reported he could see very little and it was anybody's guess whether Spirit Lake would still be around by morning.

However, let's start from the beginning. It was very dry, a typical August weekend in the Inland Empire. Many hikers and campers, anticipating the arrival of fall, were out hiking, camping and enjoying the very salubrious weekend. Huckleberry pickers were no exception, and one group had camped about two miles northeast of Mt. Spokane's summit. After enjoying the fine quiet evening, likely roasting marshmallows, they watched the fire burn low and then retired. About 3:30 a.m. Saturday, August 5, a strong wind arrived picking up and scattering embers from the nearly dead campfire into the tinder dry grass and brush. The 30-mph wind quickly turned the small blaze into a roaring inferno. The Mount Spokane fire lookout almost immediately discovered the fire, but by then the battle had been lost. The largest forest fire in north Idaho since 1910 was off and roaring!

The fire raced northeasterly into both the Blanchard and Brickel Creek drainages burning, in an ever-widening swath, everything in its path. Moving in both virgin timber and cut-over land, the blaze devoured all. First to go was the small Pitt's Mill, soon to be joined by Bill Cuddy's slaughterhouse, near Coleman. By late afternoon, with the strong wind driving the fire rapidly down Blanchard Creek, it was nearing Blanchard with nothing between the town and fire but a small alfalfa field. The town appeared doomed, then the first of a number of miracles occurred. The wind shifted, blowing the fire back over previously burned areas and new acreage toward the south and Spirit Lake. With heroic effort, Blanchard was saved. There were losses around Blanchard, with several ranches savaged. Fielden and Louis Poirier both lost barns and livestock. John Sullivan, a resident since 1887, lost his newly built house. He had just moved in, replacing a house that had burned earlier. The following statement taken from the August 8 Spokane Daily Chronicle clearly describes the intensity of the situation at Blanchard: "After fighting desperately to save his logging crew, equipment and horses, F. L. Poirier of Blanchard saw four sections of his virgin yellow pine forest swept to ashes Saturday afternoon. "It was only by minutes that we saved our crew from the fire, he related . . . . It was the worst fire that I have ever seen. We were helpless to do anything about it . . . . I saw the fire jump a mile-and-a-half from one mountaintop to another."

As darkness fell, the fire, fed by both the strong wind and heavy timber/slash, was a raging cauldron of flames along a 40-mile front from Mt. Spokane easter-

ly to State Highway 41 near Spirit Lake and northerly to the Diamond Lake highway. At the Mt. Spokane end, the flames briefly invaded the state park, but park crews were able to quickly suppress that end with little damage.

In Spokane, residents were awed by what is best described in the August 7 Spokesman Review: "Hundreds of Spokane residents viewed the spectacular picture Mt. Spokane made against the reddened clouds early Sunday morning and last night again were viewing the glare. At 1 o'clock Sunday morning, when Spirit Lake summer colony residents were evacuated, as flames menaced the area with flying embers, the terrific fire's light silhouetted the entire outline of Mt. Spokane for Spokane observers. Some said that not since 1910 has a forest fire in this section created such a scene for Spokane. The fire was 40 miles from Spokane, giving an idea of its wide expanse to outline the whole mountain."

In Spirit Lake, Panhandle Lumber Company crews and 400 Civilian Conservation Corp workers were expecting the worst and prepared for disaster. They trenched all night and placed as many pumps and as much hose as they could muster. Coeur d'Alene offered their best rural fire engine. Rathdrum provided additional hose and the company's automatic sprinkler system in the lumberyard was activated. Spirit Lake would not go down without a big fight. In addition, crews were pouring water on the plank-bridge connecting the north side of the lake and Panhandle's holdings up Brickel Creek as flaming embers fell like giant snowflakes.

Mrs. J. F. Carlton, wife of the pioneer operator of Silver Beach Resort on the north side of Spirit Lake which, for a time appeared directly in the path of the flames, said they were told to evacuate about 1 o'clock Sunday morning. They and their neighbors left in a hurry. Meanwhile, the W. H. McBrooms of Spokane were at their cabin on the south side of Spirit Lake. They reported they felt no real danger but viewed an awesome spectacle. The entire mountainside along the north side of the lake was on fire. Flaming embers and smoking pieces of bark were raining down on Spirit Lake. It was better than the Fourth of July.

By morning flames were licking down the mountainside directly towards the Panhandle Mill, the only barrier between the fire and the town of Spirit Lake. The fire burned down to trenching at the west edge of the mill complex and, as documented in the August 7 Spokane Daily Chronicle, a second miracle occurred: "A switch in the wind Sunday afternoon was unquestionably the only reason for the town of Spirit Lake being in existence today. The fire swept down a mountainside toward the mill of the Panhandle Lumber Company that seemed destined for ruination.



*Two Spirit Lake residents, with their belongings, waited on the school grounds hoping the fire would spare Spirit Lake and their homes. The lady on the left is Maggie Lowden and on the right is Mary Roush. It is not known if this was during the first or second time residents had to leave their homes in panic. If it was during the big blowup one week later, the residents of Spirit Lake were fortunate as the wind shifted slightly and the fire, which was heading directly for the town, veered slightly and burned through just north of town. Several buildings at the extreme north edge of town were burned. During the fire, the Panhandle Lumber Company, owner/operator of the Spirit Lake water system, turned off the town's water supply, opting to use the limited resource to save the mill and associated buildings. This decision did save the mill, but prompted serious and lasting hostility amongst the Spirit Lake residents. Courtesy of Dave and Peggy Esterly. —MNI photo Spi-17-1*

Like magic, the wind swung from a NW direction to SW, turning the fire back over the smoking course. However, for a considerable time great flames shot skyward as the heavens were filled with burning embers, some of which reached as far as Coeur d'Alene and Hayden Lake." The weary firefighters breathed a sigh of relief as nothing at either the mill complex or in Spirit Lake had burned.

By Sunday night, over a thousand fire fighters were on the lines struggling to achieve control on the fire's southern border, especially up Brickel Creek on the eastern reaches of Mt. Spokane. In places, the fire burned down to and along the north shore of the lake itself, a most helpful situation. Most of the firefighters were CCCs, rapidly deployed from Montana, Idaho and eastern Washington. Two hundred CCCs arrived from the Puget Sound area. The balance of the firefighters included mill employees, volunteers and Forest Service employees. The Governor of Idaho authorized Franklin Gerard, Idaho State Forester, to take full charge of the fire area in Idaho. He quickly set up fire camps. Melvin Van Dyke, fire warden for the Pend Oreille Fire Protective Association, was placed

in charge of firefighters. The Red Cross had moved a strong support group into the area to provide whatever help they could. Surprisingly, most of the displaced residents needed little help. Since there was plenty of National Forest land north and east of the fire area, USFS officials monitored the situation, but initially declined to directly enter the battle.

Suddenly, the wind died!

On Monday morning the situation looked a lot better. Crews were doggedly digging fire lines around the 40-mile perimeter of the fire. However, within the perimeter, a seething cauldron continued to burn. Major Walter Peck of the 41st Aviation Wing attempted to define the boundaries of the blaze, but was thwarted by the smoke. Upon approaching the fire area, the plane was engulfed in smoke, and he was forced to fly on instruments at 7,500 feet.

By Tuesday, both smoke and fire had eased allowing measurement of the fire area both by ground and air. Crews were now able to penetrate toward the center of the fire cutting snags and anything else that might spread fire should the wind rise. Other crews were digging and widening 40 miles of fire line. Fortunately, winds remained calm. The fire had cut a swath approximately 10 by 20 miles; nearly 20,000 acres of mostly forest had been lost. While the fire started in Washington, most of the damage occurred in Idaho with acreage fairly evenly split between Bonner and Kootenai Counties.

Word spread quickly and there were many interesting stories and close calls. In one case, fire burned around all sides of one house but spared it while torching the nearby icehouse. In another instance, the fire took the house, but spared a rather large garden. Walter Mires and Edward Strange had a very narrow escape from the fire. They were asleep in Strange's logging camp up Blanchard Creek when the flames roared in. According to Strange, they survived only by running, leaving their clothes behind them. Amazingly, other than numerous cases of heat exhaustion, there had been neither death nor major injury. According to an exuberant Panhandle Lumber Company official, the danger had passed. Forest officials were also optimistic but warned that if the wind stiffened, the situation would quickly become very dangerous, including the possibility of a major blowup. The battle had been won or so they thought.

## **The "Blowup" and Dire Consequences**

By Sunday night, the fire had been stopped- partially by the Herculean efforts of more than 500 CCCs and Panhandle Mill employees and partly because the wind changed, blowing the fire back onto itself. By Monday morning, even though smoke hung heavy,



*Panhandle workers continued to fight a hopeless situation in the lumberyard. In spite of gallant efforts, the hoses were too few and the fire too intense to quell the blaze as darkness neared. It took a miracle and a wind change to save the mill and associated buildings. —MNI photo Mil-16-53 photographer K. D. Swan*

the situation was much improved. In addition the wind had died. Relieved Panhandle Mill managers and Spirit Lake officials declared the crisis was over and many refugees began to return. However, fire bosses warned the fate of the Panhandle Mill, the town of Spirit Lake and nearby forests were solely dependent upon the wind remaining calm.

As the week wore on, firefighters widened fire lines, cut burning snags and attempted to quell hot spots. More importantly, calm prevailed with little more than gentle breezes wafting over the area. The mill returned to its endless sawing, the town's citizens attended to their daily business and the fire crews were reduced to a force of about 200. Complacency had set in, particularly at the Panhandle Mill and mill yard. Yard sprinklers were turned off allowing the abundant grass between the lumber piles to quickly dry. Hoses were secured and all water sources returned to normal distribution lines. Life was pretty casual around Spirit Lake—perhaps too casual.

On Friday afternoon, August 11, a strong west wind suddenly arose. Neither fire patrols nor the Panhandle Lumber Company were prepared for what happened next. A big "blowup" began within the existing fire lines; dropping flaming embers both at Spirit Lake and north of Spirit Lake across Highway 41. The fire line was quickly breached in two places.

First, the tinder dry grasses in the Panhandle lumberyard ignited, in turn, igniting several equally dry lum-

ber piles. Employees desperately attempted to quell the flames but with the sprinklers turned off and few other resources immediately available it was a futile effort. The fire jumped south from pile to pile toward the mill and planer and easterly toward a large lumber shed and the Panhandle Roundhouse. There was nothing but parched forest between the roundhouse and the little town of Spirit Lake.

Forrest "Skip" Spencer (my Dad) was loading logs above Twin Lakes. He somehow got word that the fire had broached the lines and that the roundhouse was in danger. He immediately left the job and hurried toward Spirit Lake. Police were not letting anybody continue to Spirit Lake and stopped him at Seasons Hill. He talked his way through the roadblock claiming he had to help his family. In truth, his family was in no danger but he wanted to rescue his numerous tools from the roundhouse. By the time he reached the roundhouse, its roof was on fire. He hustled in and rescued several toolboxes and other items. He then noticed a locomotive had been moved into the roundhouse just prior to the blowup. He quickly climbed into the cab and discovered there was still steam in the system. His winter job was maintenance of Panhandle's rolling stock so he knew how to operate the locomotive. As the flames roared and the roof sagged, he was able to move the locomotive to safety. For a short period of time, he was a minor hero with the Panhandle brass.

Spirit Lake was in peril and the August 18 Rathdrum Tribune said it best: "Destruction of the sawmill at

Spirit Lake and the town itself seemed certain for several hours last Friday afternoon, when blazing embers from the burning forest on the ridge across the mill pond ignited the mill yard."

Spirit Lake was in pure panic and for the second time in a week, its citizens loaded up their important belongings and skipped town. The following excerpt from Fannie Lockling's diary entry on August 12 well reflects the anxiety of the townspeople: "The fire has been raging all the time so about 1:30 it began to return in the direction of Spirit Lake. We could see there was danger as it was getting worse and worse. About 2:00, I decided to take a bath, but the fire was getting so intense I didn't know whether to start or not, but finally after dashing out and looking at this fire several times, I went in and took it with heart pounding all the time. Then I drew a tub of water to have on hand should the water be turned off, which it was just a few minutes later. By that time the fire was into the lumberyard with huge sparks flying all over town and no water. We started packing again and we loaded up those cars. Hid some things in the corn patch, kissed our beloved belongings good bye . . . and headed for Rathdrum again."

In the meantime, down at the mill, the situation was going from bad to worse. Panhandle Lumber brought in 10 pumper trucks to supplement their own fire suppression capability but the fire had already destroyed a large lumber storage shed, the roundhouse, and was at the Spirit Lake city limits. The wind was blowing flaming embers and scorching heat onto and into all the main mill buildings. By now, the entire yard was ablaze. Even lumber stacks immediately adjacent to the mill and planer were burning so employees concentrated their effort on dousing these, hoping to keep the nearby smoking walls from catching fire. Men with hoses were on every roof hosing down the area but the situation seemed impossible. It looked as if both the mill and city were doomed for the second time in a week. Another miracle occurred when the still-strong wind turned to a more northerly direction. Flames and embers no longer threatened and the scorched Panhandle Mill complex was eventually saved. The fire turned just a bit northward sweeping along the northern city limits. Only one house near the lumberyard (the Georgieff family home) and a few outbuildings burned as the fire roared by.

After a nervous dinner, Dad took Mom and me uptown. During the mile drive we met numerous vehicles of all descriptions, piled high with belongings, leaving town. They must have thought we were nuts heading towards town. We parked near the hospital and walked over to the bluff overlooking the lumberyard. The entire 40-acre yard was now fully engulfed with flames soaring 200 feet into the air. It looked like we were about to enter Hell. It was an awesome spectacle. The wind must have already changed as we had clear

visibility of the fire and there was neither smoke nor embers to bother us. We stood there quite a while transfixed by the roaring cauldron below us. A couple days later Dad took me down to the remains of the yard and the burned-out roundhouse. Gruesome. That is how the carnage was best described. There was nothing left. Only five lumber piles had not burned. Cast-iron lumber car wheels had melted and puddled around the seriously twisted rails. It had been very hot. I turned and looked south and could hardly believe my eyes. The entire Panhandle Mill complex was still sitting there untouched by the flames.

Driven by the wind the two breakouts merged and by the time the fire was approaching Clagstone (about five miles further), the wall of flames was eight miles wide. The flames were approaching National Forest land so the Forest Service finally threw additional firefighters into the battle. Between reinforcements and reduced wind velocity, the fire was finally stopped at Clagstone. The Mt. Spokane-Blanchard-Spirit Lake blaze had now consumed nearly 35,000 acres. It turned out to be the largest fire in North Idaho in many years. The Forest Service lost a bulldozer and several trucks to the flames. The battery in the dozer failed at a critical point and the vehicle was destroyed before a replacement could be installed. Workers continued to be blessed during this epic struggle. There had been only one death, a lady in Spirit Lake who succumbed to a heart attack.

Forestry officials stated the fire would continue to smolder and be a danger until the heavy November rains came.

Actually, both the Panhandle Lumber Company and Spirit Lake were very fortunate. Spirit Lake, itself, escaped with little damage and while 40 million board feet of lumber was a lot for the Panhandle to lose, the loss was well-covered by insurance. Besides the mill complex had been saved. With lumber sales and prices sagging, there were those who said the company made more from the large insurance payment than they would have by selling the lumber. The mill was up and running in just a few days sawing timbers to provide new supports for the lumber piles and to build a new tramway out into the scorched yard.

By September 25 the Panhandle had completed foundations for the new lumber piles and the mill began running a double shift, cutting about 450,000 board feet a day. They were trying to salvage yellow pine burned by the fire before the bugs got into it the next summer. Burned trees made fine lumber and there was no shortage of logs. The mill continued to saw in a semi-panic mode into early January 1940 when John Dimeling, the mill manager, announced all logs in the millpond had been cut and the mill would close until spring. Neither he nor the town had any idea an impending new disaster was about to befall Spirit Lake.

## From the Board President

With my election to the Museum of North Idaho board in 1998, I began my education in the world of museums. Now as President of the Board and sixteen years later I have come to many conclusions and have developed much enthusiasm for the future. The foremost goal has been, and still is, a new museum facility including more exhibit, work, programming and storage space. Personally, my interest runs heavily to educating and instilling the areas' history into the minds of all our populace. Most residents of the Coeur d'Alene region are fairly new to this area but, thanks to the lectures and tours of Robert Singletary, the never-ending promotions of Director Dorothy Dahlgren and books published including my *When the Mill Whistle Blew*, there are ample educational opportunities available.

So, my point is, if you tend to take your local museum for granted, have never been inside the building, and no idea how to answer a curious tourist when they ask for directions, it is time to get on board and become involved.

If you haven't visited our current feature exhibit detailing the development of our local REA (Rural Electrification Association), let me extend my personal invitation to come and visit. Bring your out-of-town visiting friends and relatives you don't know what to do with – they will be fascinated.

As for myself I had a running start on local history. As a boy I helped my grandfather tend his acre of garden and he had a long, long list of stories. He and his family were local homesteaders here starting in 1888. (You really do need to read *When the Mill Whistle Blew* if you haven't.)

Thank you for your past support if you have done that. If you haven't, come and visit us. Then tell your friends and neighbors. You will be surprised at how many services are available at the Museum of North Idaho. Hours are Tues. through Sat. 11 to 5 until Oct. 31. Free parking and members get free admission.

## Museum Assessment

The Museum of North Idaho has been chosen to participate in the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) assessment program (MAP) administered by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). The Museum has completed an extensive self-study taking an in-depth view of its mission, goals, programs and strengths and weaknesses.

Peer reviewer Holly Beasley Wait, director of the Pearce Museum, Corsicana, Texas will review the self-study and meet with the staff and board Sept. 10 and 11.

The goals for the assessment are:

- \* Guidance in planning for the growth of the organization and a new facility
- \* Refining our strategic plan
- \* Reviewing, updating and creating policies in preparation for expanded operations

The Museum of North Idaho serves as the regional repository for historical materials of the Coeur d'Alene region including Kootenai,

Benewah and parts of Shoshone counties. Because of generous donations of historical materials and regional growth the Museum has outgrown its current facility. They have been actively planning for expanded programs, facility and staff for several years.

Participation in the Museum Assessment Program (MAP) will help the Museum to better serve the citizens of the Coeur d'Alene region by facilitating its meeting and exceeding the highest professional standards of the museum field.

The program is funded by the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and throughout its 30 years has been administered by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). As part of the IMLS National Leadership program, MAP advances best practices and fosters improvement in museums. Considerable human and institutional resources have been invested into the assessment.

People interested in meeting with the MAP reviewer can contact Director Dorothy Dahlgren at 208-664-3448 or dd@museumni.org for more information.

MAP is a confidential process of self-study, peer review and implementation. Museums use the assessment process to strengthen operations, build capacity, and enhance communication throughout the organization and in response to community needs.

## The 1970s Thursday, Aug. 28 at 7 pm

Coeur d'Alene in the 1970s is the topic of Robert Singletary's lecture at the Coeur d'Alene Public Library's community room on Thursday, Aug. 28 at 7:00.

The series is the fourth Thursday in Sept. and Oct. and then in Nov. and Dec. it is the third Thursday. Call Robert at 755-1308 or Dorothy Dahlgren at 664-3448 or dd@museumni.org to let us know what you think was important in Coeur d'Alene in the 1970s through 2000s and if you have photographs or artifacts to donate.

## At The Fair

From August 20-24, the North Idaho Fair will be showcasing the heritage and legacy of the region as we celebrate the 150th Anniversary of Kootenai County. An entire exhibition building, 40x100, will be used to promote and educate the public about the history of Kootenai County and North Idaho.

Robert Singletary, the Museum's Program and Marketing Director, has contacted all the local museums, historical societies and other history-related organizations in North Idaho and invited them to have a free booth with an exhibit they create about the history of their community and information about their organization.

The following were contacted:

Bayview Historical Society  
Crane House Museum & Historical Society  
Farragut State Park Museum  
Friends of Spokane House  
Hayden Lake Historical Society & Preservation Commission  
Inland Northwest Historical Society  
Kootenai County Exhibit  
Kootenai County Preservation Commission  
Old Mission State Park  
Pappy Boyington Field Museum  
Post Fall Hist. Society & Museum  
Powder Magazine - NIC  
Spirit Lake Historical Society  
Staff House/Museum Kellogg

## Memorials

- For Diane Higgins (School Field Trip Fund) from Patrick & Michelle Franz

All memorial donations go into the Endowment Fund. The endowment is important to the financial health of the Museum and your help in building the endowment will ensure the Museum's future.

To make a memorial donation use the form on the back of the newsletter.

## Corliss Painted

The 100 year-old Corliss steam engine, located in the parking lot next to the Museum at 115 NW Boulevard received a new paint job this spring thanks to a matching grant from the Idaho Heritage Trust and generous donations from Jim Popp, owner of Sharky's Custom Painting and Rodda Paint.

For close to 50 years the engine was the heart of the Edward Rutledge Timber Company (the Potlatch Mill). This engine, and others like it, provided power to over 70 mills in the Coeur d'Alene region into the 1960s.

In 1987 the Rutledge unit property was sold to Hagadone Corporation to become the Coeur d'Alene Resort Golf Course. In early 1988 the last log was run through the mill and Potlatch Forest, Inc. donated the Corliss engine to the Museum. A great community effort by volunteers, individuals and businesses made it possible to move the 75-ton engine to the parking lot next to the Museum, reassemble it, paint it, put a fence around it and put up a historic marker. Again through community support we continue to preserve this piece of timber history. Donations of \$1,269 are needed to match the Idaho Heritage grant. Donations can be sent to MNI, PO Box 812, Coeur d'Alene, ID 83816-0812. Come by and see the engine.

## Artifact Donations Since May

Beverly Hyde: Maps and posters.

Vernon Wagoner: Photos of the Dudley family who settled Dudley.

V. Ruth Spencer: Baby clothes.

Don Morse: Scale, adding machine



*Jim Popp of Sharky's Custom Painting, painting the Corliss Engine this spring.*

and wood planes.

Dorothy Dahlgren: Women's riding pants circa 1940.

Ray Johnson: Lumber piler's leather gloves, water pump, Kootenai County map.

Gerald Cochran: Book "Memoirs of General Sherman" by W. T. Sherman, 1890.

Richard Straw: Wartime meat recipe booklet.

Larry O'Leary: 1956 Waring blender.

John Pederson: Clem Pederson's Forest Service diaries.

## Cash Donations

Ray & Eleanor Grannis  
Dick & Shirlee Wandrocke  
Robert & BJ Campbell

## Building Fund Donations

Ray & Eleanor Grannis  
Sally Simundson  
Ramona & Joe Baldeck

## Bids Needed

For Fort Sherman Chapel exterior painting, rebuilding steps and handrail, landscaping and plumbing. Dorothy at 664-3448 or dd@museumni.org.



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## Museum of North Idaho Mission Statement

*The Museum of North Idaho collects, preserves and interprets the history of the Coeur d'Alene Region to foster appreciation of the area's heritage.*

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