

Sawtooth Valley, Idaho
January 16, 2023

Sawtooth Interpretive and Historical Association
POB 75
Stanley, ID 83278

Dear Lin, Erica, and members of the SIHA Board:

I appreciate being able to comment on the issues that SIHA faces and will continue to face as Sawtooth Valley encounters changing cultural, economic, and environmental conditions. I also appreciate the effort that so many of you have put into making SIHA and its programs work for the benefit of Sawtooth Valley, its residents, and visitors.

I have lived in Sawtooth Valley all or part of every year since 1953. In 1953 the valley was as full of people and their leavings as it is now. I grew up knowing that all lives leave bits and pieces of themselves in their wake, and these things constitute readable evidence of hopes, dreams, triumphs, and tragedies. History is a way to develop communities that span generations.

My courses in grad school touched on historiography, which analyzes how families, tribes, wards, and governments make stories. All stories start with a blank page, whether that page is made of paper, stone, tree bark, or ones and zeroes. Historians make stuff up. Good historians look over their own shoulders to make sure what they make up contains a high percentage of truth and a low percentage of wishful thinking.

My decades as a professor at the College of Idaho taught me how the internal structures of an organization dictate its behavior more often than deliberate decisions by the president or board of trustees.

Finally, I worked for the Forest Service as a wilderness ranger and firefighter every summer from 1969 to 1976. I was present at the creation of the SNRA. I witnessed the death of the salmon runs and the change of the Forest Service from a service agency to a regulatory agency. I also saw tourism turn from a local cottage industry into something that resembles feedlot agriculture. I saw the old ranches in the valley become trophy properties awarded to the winners in a financialized international economy, putting a medieval twist on SNRA's charge to preserve the area's pastoral values.

What I say here is more observation than criticism. Please read it as the testimony of a witness, not a critic.

SIHA in 2023

At present, SIHA is a Forest Service auxiliary. If anything, it should be the other way around, with SIHA providing historical and cultural perspective for agency decisions, particularly those concerning the preservation of buildings, trails, archaeological sites, mining claims and CCC projects. These are a disappearing or a disappeared part of Sawtooth Valley's history, and Forest Service policy has contributed to their erasure.

I can think of numerous instances where historical artifacts have been allowed to decay or burn because they presented administrative difficulties. The Doc Day cabin is an exception, but the Jack Seagraves cabin up Rough Creek, the Ray Jagers cabins at the head of Fisher Creek, numerous cabins in the 4th of July Creek headwaters, the German settlement in Joe's Gulch, and the area around Old Stanley all had structures that were in decent shape when the SNRA was enacted. They're mostly beyond restoration now.

The Stanley Plunge is gone—declared a nuisance and destroyed—in spite of its central cultural significance to 1960s Sawtooth Valley. The abandoned vehicles that used to be up every canyon and logging road were towed away and junked, even if they were collector's items. Historical trails all over the SNRA have been abandoned and left to deadfall, which has concentrated wilderness visitors in sacrifice zones around Sawtooth and Goat Lakes, Toxaway-Alice, and Redfish Canyon.

I recommend that SIHA rededicate itself to preserving the cultural and physical artifacts of Sawtooth Valley, starting with recognizing that Forest Service decisions have selectively removed or destroyed the valley's history when it resisted bureaucratic administration or got in the way of crowd control.

The current SIHA mission is to *“protect and advance the natural and cultural history of Idaho's Sawtooth-Salmon River Country through preservation and education.”* It is hard to disagree with this statement, but it's also hard to get excited about. There aren't any people in it, for one thing, and history without people becomes a dry recounting of facts, made drier because they've been sanitized.

SIHA's mission statement needs to contain a human narrative, an implicit explanation of why the organization exists, and a vision of its future—something like, “SIHA is dedicated to the strengthening of Sawtooth Valley culture by welcoming into our community all the people who have called this valley home.” Such a statement makes the past and its stories a part of the present. It also emphasizes the historical part of SIHA's current mission, which has been diluted by a false equivalence with natural history.

Natural history is not history to the extent that it excludes people. There are, however, lots of connections between the people who have lived here and the natural world. Those connections take the form of stories of trapping, Ted Williams's Trail Rides with the Sierra Club, the early trips down the Middle Fork by the Guth brothers, the miners and loggers and starved-out

farmers that tried to grow crops between summer frosts, the homesteaders who sold their ranches when their kids refused to stay in the valley. It includes the rock forts (possibly constructed by the Blackfeet) on a hillside out Valley Creek, the Redfish Creek rock shelter, the foundations of old cabins exposed by forest fires, and the makeshift camps of hippies that squatted in the gulches and hidden meadows of the foothills. A lot of these artifacts have been and are being overwritten, but are still there if you look for them.

SIHA has as its raw material the artifacts and testimony of people who once made communities here. In those people lies the solution to declining attendance at lectures, as well as dwindling support from both the Forest Service and philanthropy, and a lack of enthusiasm among interns.

There are two organizations concerned with natural history in the valley. These are the Forest Service and the Idaho Fish and Game Department. If SIHA wants to be more than a handmaiden to either of these, it needs to see human history as its niche, and the preservation and elucidation of the valley's history as its mission. History is a moral endeavor as much as it is a scientific one, and as such it is badly needed in the valley.

It's not too much to say that you cannot have a community without a historical narrative.

SIHA Survival

Nothing guarantees SIHA's survival into the next twenty years except the dedication of its volunteers and supporters. The board needs more philanthropists and the dedicated attention of charitable foundations. I'm not saying anything new here, but vacancies on the board need to be filled by people who are willing and able to raise funds for the organization.

As I listened to the board meeting in December, it became clear that Lin Gray is overworked. This is worrisome because the tendency of cultural organizations is to burn out conscientious and hard-working executive directors, who leave for easier jobs and tend to be replaced by someone not so good at a higher salary. I also was dismayed at the proposal to reduce the number of lectures, mainly because the lectures have been, to my mind, a strong connection between SIHA and the community.

It also looks to me that some interns require more energy to supervise than they give back to SIHA. That should change, and quickly.

The interns can do much more than they're doing. Calling them naturalists is steering them in such a vague direction that they can end up polling tourists at the Iron Creek Transfer Camp. That's wasting their time, and that's among the worst thing you can do to a young person (or any person, for that matter). They need to specialize and they need to work from within their own career perspective. They need to gain experience that will impress anyone reading their vita. If they find new and active interests along the way, so much the better.

A model for a successful internship program exists in Sawtooth Valley at the Salmon River Clinic. The clinic confers a deep individual responsibility on its interns, gives them real-world experience that will apply to their life's work, and ties in closely with their educational institution.

SIHA can do the same, but it will require establishing connections with colleges that have specific departments that aspire to national excellence.

SIHA needs:

—Two event planning interns to organize and supervise the lecture series and the Visitor's Center programs. These are complex jobs with steep learning curves, but they also fit with any number of careers within the hospitality industry.

—A history/historiography intern. Sawtooth Valley contains the raw stuff of history, and as such represents in-the-field experience for a historian. You seldom get to work with primary sources in academe, and the valley represents a great deal of primary-source material.

—A museology intern. Here's the description of the Museology graduate program at the University of Washington:

Grounded in research-based best practices, the Museology Graduate Program values innovation, critical thinking and leadership. It is a two-year interdisciplinary course of study designed to cultivate the tools and knowledge for students to advance the work of museums, informal learning environments and other valuable cultural institutions.

When I was writing for *Travel and Leisure*, the first place I would visit at a new destination was the local museum, which always made it into the "what to do" section at the end of my article. Stanley's museum needs rotating exhibits, no closed off sections, more interpretive displays, and more space, but it can become one of the valley's highlight attractions.

The Redfish visitor center needs a reason for being. I know that there are forces within the Forest Service that see it as a liability, and would tear it down if it weren't a shining example of mid-century modern architecture. I suggest it be transformed into a museum of tourism.

Tourism to the residents of the valley is like water to fish. It's all around us, but we ignore what an odd phenomenon it is, even as it represents the largest human migration ever. Scholars of tourism say that it is a better marker for the Anthropocene than H-Bomb radionuclides or plastic. A tourism museum would distinguish the valley in a way moldy taxidermy and natural history narratives never could, and it would bring the vast world-changing power of tourism into focus. Redfish Lake Lodge has started to display artifacts of tourism, but a museum could provide perspectives on its power as a cultural and environmental mutagen, and show land and resource managers that it represents far bigger issues than just people-management.

As a side note, I suspect that the Quonset hut that contained the Stanley School when I was a first-grader will someday be replaced with a new building. At that time there will be an opportunity to move it next to the Shaw cabin and recreate it as it was when Mattie Hansen and Phyllis Williams taught there.

—Archaeology interns, with a project ready for them when they hit the valley. This will require Forest Service cooperation, which will also serve as a litmus test for the agency's commitment to history.

—An oral history intern to survey, catalog, and fill in the blanks of the area's remaining oral histories.

—A blacksmith intern.

This would be a start. SIHA's internships can attract the attention and financial support of high-powered academic departments and their high-powered students. It is essential that such internships be real experiences with real responsibilities. Much depends on how you set up expectations for both interns and lecturers. You don't want anyone, intern or lecturer, to look at their experience in Stanley as an excuse for a vacation, with their mere presence the price of admission. Audiences can tell when someone isn't taking them seriously, and when they're not taking themselves seriously, and you can certainly tell when an intern would rather be someplace else.

It's important to develop strong perennial relationships with academic departments and to make sure that a specific professor is connected to the internship program.

Interns should know that they're doing important work that will add to their academic record and life experience. They shouldn't be given unimportant work or kept from challenging responsibilities.

Other miscellaneous thoughts

SIHA represents the Sawtooth Valley community at its best. It deserves an authoritative place at the table when the valley's future is discussed.

But it needs to decide how large it wants to be, and if it wants to become a formal educational and research institution. It needs to emphasize that it is a force for good and take on the visible and vocal presence that doing good will demand. In other words, it needs to have a fierce confidence in its own contributions to community in the valley.

That said...

One area of concern is SIHA's possibility of becoming a landlord. Interns need secure places to stay. But ownership of lodging would represent a huge change in the structure of the

organization with large liability implications. It would involve setting up an LLC, probably with a separate administration. Commercial interests might see SIHA property as employee housing. Maintenance costs can be high. Disputes can arise. All of the issues that come up when you run a campus will come up, so at the least there will be a need for another administrator.

Something else: Sawtooth Valley isn't ready for the onslaught of immigrants/the unemployed/refugees that could hit it in the next five or ten years. I don't think businesses in the valley are ready for extreme fluctuations in the price and supply of energy or the possibility that vacationing here will become too expensive for a large percentage of Americans. I know we're not ready for the legal climate that will result from more and more of the ultra-rich putting second and third and fourth homes in the valley. None of us are ready for the politics and climate that we'll see by 2030.

I do know that Sawtooth Valley's survival as a community will depend in part on SIHA's ability to define a narrative that includes more people rather than fewer. Compared to the community that was here in the 1950s, Sawtooth Valley is now a kind of anti-community, and as such it's not an improvement. SIHA can be part of a needed rebuilding of bonds between people, past and present.

Which brings up a possibly trivial subject, but one that affects how SIHA is perceived by the residents and visitors to the valley: Everything is politicized these days. SIHA materials that list preferred pronouns are political. Salmon are political, as will become ever more apparent as the Pacific Northwest has to choose between salmon runs and reliable electricity. Scenic easements are political. Wilderness is political. Denying territory to the enemy is political, particularly when that enemy is the public.

A not so trivial political statement is the repeated announcement that Sawtooth Valley is in the traditional hunting/fishing grounds of two Shoshone-Bannock bands. Nez Perce treaty rights have caused some conflict with this claim in the past, and the possibility that there are Blackfeet structures out Valley Creek will cause plenty of conflict in the future, should anyone try to publish a monograph on the subject.

SIHA should avoid taking sides in controversies where historical claims are obscured by faction, tribal interests, lying for political or financial advantage, and the government-sanctioned destruction of peoples and cultures during the 19th and 20th centuries. Although a great amount of cultural and historical knowledge has been lost or suppressed, SIHA needs to recover what it can without embellishment or bias.

SIHA can and should adopt the perspective of historical objectivism. Just as in journalism, there are methodologies that help historians get closer to the truth, even if they can never completely reach it.

Objectivism is of course political, and has been put through the postmodern wringer. But postmodernism is on the wane, having become a force for oppression, and historians are

demonstrating sophisticated ways of looking at the past that give it meaning independent of the observer.

In any event, if you're worried about attendance at lectures and visits to the museum, coming down on one side or another of a cultural divide can cut your constituency in half. The lectures should be seen as educational opportunities, not preaching to the choir, which means, if at all possible, you shouldn't post keep-out signs, coded or not.

It would be nice to describe SIHA as a quality educational institution: a definer of culture in Sawtooth Valley, a repository of critical thinking, and a frequent commentator on how administrators, businesses, and builders can respect and even honor the people who have lived and flourished (or not) in the valley before they were born.

Those old people are just as real as we are. If you don't believe me, just wait a hundred years.

Thanks for your attention. If none of this makes sense, remember that free advice is worth every bit of what you pay for it.

Sincerely,

John Rember