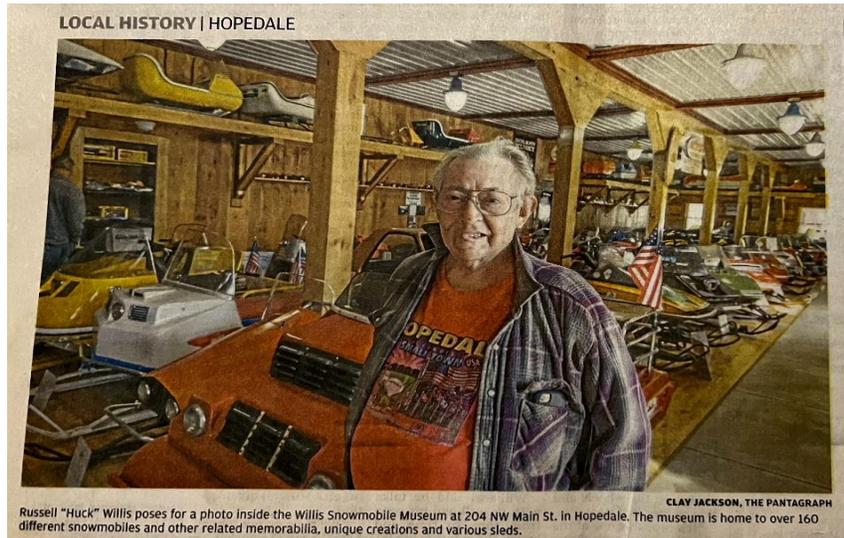


ISC 2023 June 6th Car and Motorcycle Ride



Family Museum showcases passion for snowmobiles.

By Mateusz Janik

Hopedale - What started out as a simple hobby for one Hopedale family has turned into a sprawling collection of antique snowmobiles spanning as far back as the 1920's.

"I know t one time we had 15 sleds and we worked on the one day and got them running to take pictures," said Russell "Huck" Willis, 81. "We thought that was it, but ended up with a lot more than that".

The Willis Snowmobile Museum, NW Main St. in Hopedale, is home to over 160 snowmobiles and other related memorabilia, antique creations and various sleds.

Russell, who owns the museum with his sons Danny, Darin and Donny, said the interest started when is oldest son Donny was given a Sno-Pony by a local resident. Danny and Darin restored it in 1978, and while they eventually traded it for a minibike, they have since gotten the Sno-Pony back.

"Once we finished it, we rode it around a little, but then it just got put up because we were working on other ones," said Danny, 61. "that's how you get crazy."

Danny said over the years, they would visit swap meets and auctions in northern Illinois and buy up snowmobiles from brands like Arctic Cat, Polaris and Ski-Doo. They now have over 450 snowmobiles across multiple sheds.

"A majority of them are not even in here," Danny said of the museum itself. Can take all the sleds out of the museum and put all different ones."

While they were collecting and riding snowmobiles Danny said they ended up joining the Antique Snowmobile Club of America, a group of dedicated snowmobile enthusiast who preserve and restore snow machines.

Danny said the family bought the 106-year-old building on Main Street in 1997 during a tax auction and has been renovating it ever since – even incorporating the 24 different types of wood from around Hopedale. They opened the museum in 2016.

Today, all three floors are, lined with antique snowmobiles, and each snowmobile has its own personal story. The walls are adorned with photos, old manuals, memorabilia and various articles.

Some of the more unique models include a 1972 Auto-Ski that has never been ridden; a "mystery snowmobile " they called "Double-Trouble" because it has two engines; a 1941 Eliason Model T Motor Toboggan powered by a 25-horse -powered Indian Motorcycle brand engine and a 1923 Ford Model B equipped with aftermarket snow chains on the wheels and skis on the front end.

"it probably one of the nicest personal collections you're ever gonna see in the area, " said John Williams , co-owner of Mickie's Farm to Table in Hopedale, just down the block from Willis Snowmobile Museum. "To find something like this in a little town is special, and they deserve some recognition."

Williams said he talks with Russell and his sons from time to time and he know the museum is a labor of love, what with all the work they have put into restoring the building and the snowmobiles.

Russell said the museum which has no admission fee, is funded by donations and by the family's own money. They're working to receive nonprofit status as a 501c(3) organization.

"we are using our own money (to run the museum), but we do need a place to store (the snowmobiles)" Russell said. "We want to keep it all going".

The museum is open Thursday through Saturday from 5 to 8 p.m. Appointments can also be made by calling Danny at 309-303-0916.