

Author Chronicles Priest Lake

By Caryn Lawton/WSU marketing

PULLMAN, Wash.—A new book, *Wild Place: A History of Priest Lake, Idaho* (Washington State University Press), offers the first comprehensive, accurate chronicle of Priest Lake. Author Kris Runberg Smith's family has had ties to the area since her great-great grandfather, a timber cruiser, arrived in 1897. Yet despite being a location one local newspaper branded “a cult with many vacationists,” no one had ever properly recorded its history—at least according to one family member. “As a kid I listened to my grandmother complain about each self-published memoir, claiming they didn't get the stories right,” Smith explained. Now a professor of history at Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Missouri, she set out to change that.

Smith and Tom Weitz, a longtime resident and president of the Priest Lake Museum, spent a couple of summers there cataloging collections. Their work allowed them to utilize newly discovered historical sources and images as they pieced together the tale of an idyllic place long wrapped in myths.

Paying particular attention to significant, yet lesser-known accounts, the authors trace human survival there through multiple generations. They examine the enduring tension created by the mix of public and private lands bordering its shores. They also explore a variety of influences that impacted the region, including failed attempts at mining, the logging industry, the Forest Service, tourism, summer cabins, and fires.

The book describes one example through the words of Betty James. Threatened by fire in 1926, vacationing families buried valuables in the sand and fled to an island on the lake. “Some seventy years later I can still recapture the terror I felt,” she recalled. The season's fires were devastating, and in the aftermath, the Forest Service decided to replace much of the burned acreage with more marketable timber, permanently altering the makeup of Priest Lake forests.

Smith and Weitz answer other questions, too, including how and why Priest Lake escaped grand turn-of-the-century development to remain relatively wild, how Idaho came to own its eastern half, and why its surrounding land is divided between federal and state governments.

To celebrate publication of the book, the Priest Lake Museum has created a summer 2015 exhibit to highlight topics related to *Wild Place*, and the Priest Lake Chamber of Commerce has designated “Priest Lake Memories” as the theme for their summer programs.

With a list price of \$24.95, *Wild Place* is paperback, 8.5" x 11", and 240 pages in length. The volume is available through bookstores nationwide or direct from WSU Press (800-354-7360 or wsupress.wsu.edu). A nonprofit academic publisher concentrating on trade-oriented scholarly books with a cultural or historical relationship to the Pacific Northwest, WSU Press is associated with Washington State University located in Pullman, Washington.