

TRAILBLAZERS

HOW A COMMUNITY SAVED ITS MOUNTAINS

EXHIBIT BRIEF



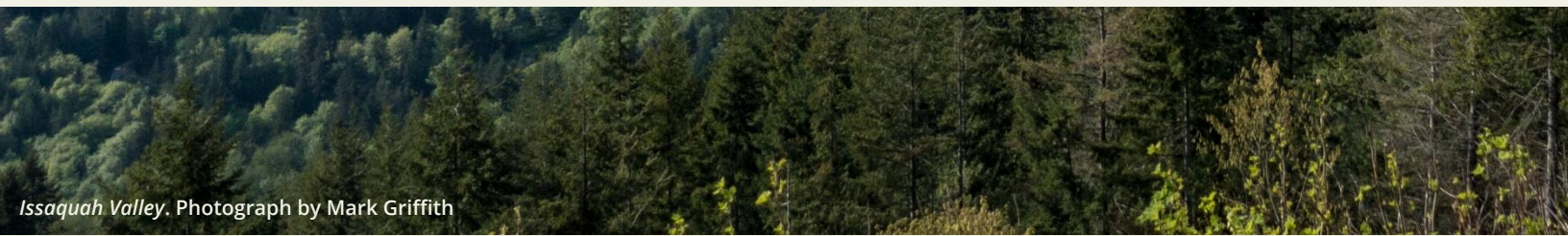
THOMAS MCNULTY & NEIL G. PEZZONI

Thesis Exhibition Project with the Issaquah History Museums

UW Museology Class of 2026

Advisory Committee: Dr. Meena Selvakumar,

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BACKGROUND

Issaquah History Museums (IHM) is a historical society for the city of Issaquah, Washington, a former mining and lumber boom town which has evolved into a fast-growing community on the inland edge of the Seattle metropolitan area. Over the past few years, new management at IHM have crafted a vision for a new exhibit to be displayed in the historic Issaquah Depot Museum. Starting in April 2025, IHM, represented by collections manager Katarina Volchek and director Paul Winterstein, recruited us two UW Museology students to refine this vision and bring it into reality.

Our exhibit, ***Trailblazers: How a Community Saved its Mountains***, is a showcase for the environmental history of Issaquah, which is surrounded by a trio of forested peaks poetically known as the Issaquah Alps. This exhibit recounts the history of land use in the Alps, from resource exploitation of the 19th and 20th centuries through to their modern status as protected recreation destinations. Through the story of this transformation, we highlight the people and events responsible for defining the fate of these mountains, concluding with the message that conservation work is an active process which is never finished. Our collaborative design process began in earnest in September 2025 and concluded with the exhibit's opening on April 23, 2026.

The Issaquah Alps are a draw for Issaquah's residents and visitors alike, and the availability of nature and wildlife so close to home maintains a deep connection to the city's culture. A local connection to the natural world can also benefit mental health and a sense of belonging among residents. Yet many Issaquahans are unaware of the work which has gone into ensuring that the mountains and their second-growth forests continue to recover from the community's early days. This disconnect between awareness and appreciation is an opportunity for IHM, which is looking to establish more relevance in the community through messaging which focuses on curating a hopeful future, not just a preserved past. A small formative evaluation study at the onset of the design phase affirms our beliefs about residents' values and level of knowledge regarding the Alps. Since 2022, the Issaquah Depot Museum's 400-square-foot main exhibit space has been occupied by an exhibit focusing on collections objects relevant to Issaquah's broader culture, though with minimal interpretive text and no unified design philosophy.

Trailblazers offers a refresh for the exhibit space, helping IHM forge a new identity which is better aligned with the principles and interests of Issaquah's residents. In addition, a new exhibit is an opportunity for both IHM's staff and us students to develop exhibit writing and design skills.

LIMITATIONS & SOLUTIONS

Our design philosophy developed from a number of unavoidable constraints, beyond IHM's small budget and exhibit space. We approached these constraints as sources of inspiration for the exhibit, so they deserve some elaboration as intrinsic components of our decision-making process.

- *Trailblazers* is an exhibit focused towards relatively recent events which were mostly overlooked by previous IHM curators. As a result, there are few options in terms of relevant 3D collections objects to display, especially compared to the previous object-focused exhibit. Our solution was to prioritize crafting our story around interpretive panels with a strong graphical identity, rather than display cases. Panels can also incorporate and enhance the visual impact of 2D collection items relevant to our theme, such as magnified photographs, maps, and posters.
- *Trailblazers* would need to be installed in a small historic space: the former men's waiting room at the Depot Museum. There are few existing wall mounts and lighting solutions, and the wood paneling of the floors and walls must stay unharmed. Our solution was to mount interpretive panels within custom-built wooden stands, which protect the walls and maintain the room's rustic aesthetic.
- The exhibit space depends on natural lighting via tall windows on three of the four walls in the room. These windows add another space constraint, but they also could not be blocked by more than a few exhibit elements. Our solution was to design several different types of display stands: tall stands to lie against the walls or form a partition in the middle of the space, and shorter stands which could lie in front of the windows without blocking any light. This required some revision to the flow of the exhibit's story, but we eventually arrived at a layout which respects both the visitor experience and the limited space we had to work with.

LAYOUT

Display Stands

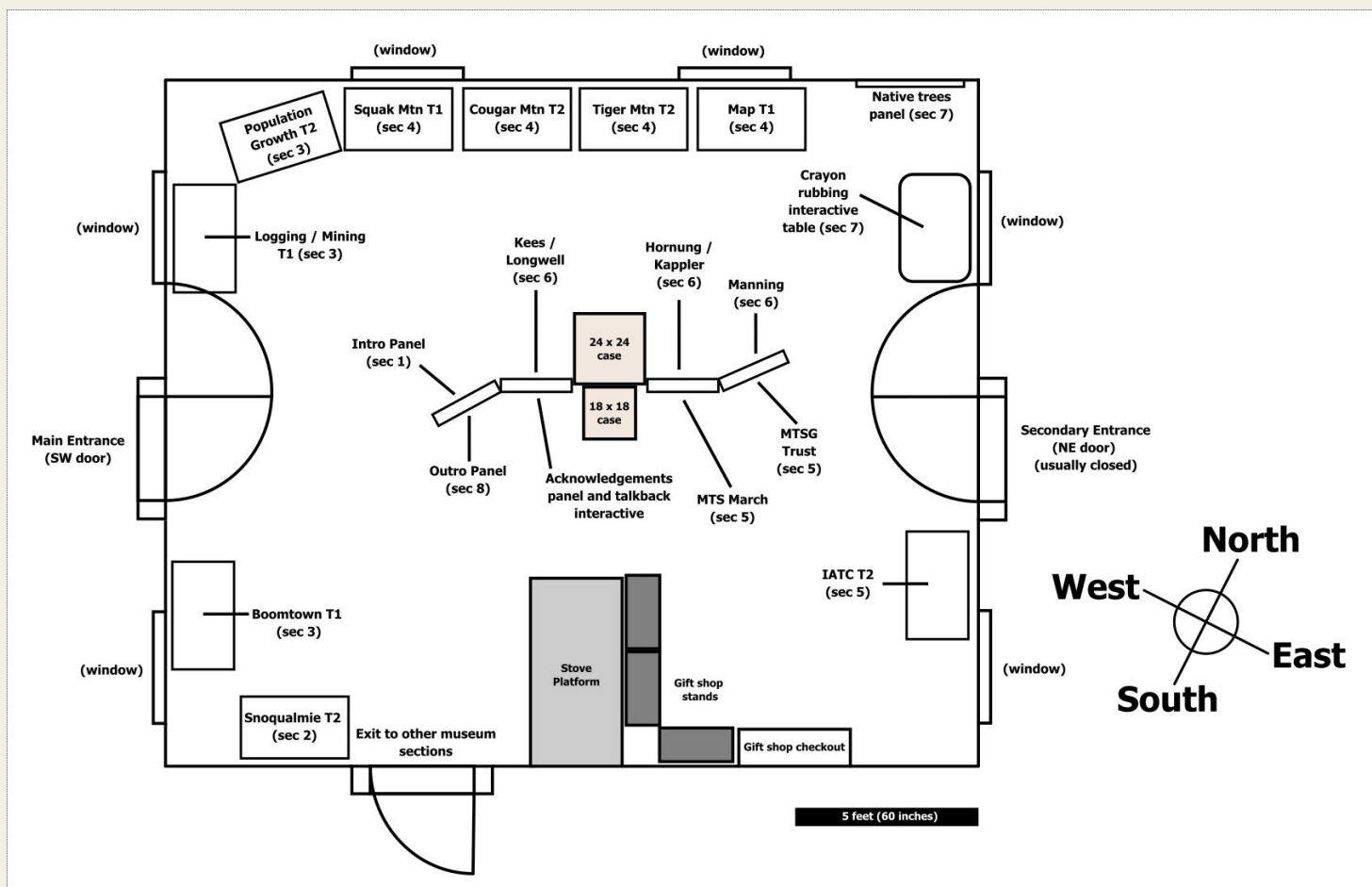
Wooden display stands are the fundamental unit of design in *Trailblazers*. Our wooden display stands were refined and built by Issaquah's Timber Ridge Sawdusters based on dimensions provided by us.

- Type 1 (T1) stands are designed to sit under a window and hold a single landscape panel (36x24 inches) which slants towards the visitor. The exhibit used four T1 stands in total.
- Type 2 (T2) stands are designed to sit in front of a wall and hold two panels: a lower landscape panel (36x20 inches) which slants towards the visitor, alongside a higher portrait panel (36x48 inches). The exhibit uses five T2 stands in total.
- Type 4 (T4) stands are designed to stand freely as partitions in the center of the exhibit. As a consequence, they have two sides, each of which can hold a narrow portrait panel (24x48 inches). The exhibit uses four T4 stands in total. These four stands can be divided into two pairs, and the two stands per pair are connected to each other using a pair of hinges and an additional support plank at their base. The hinges helped us fine-tune the position of these stands during installation, while the hinges, support plank, and metal weights together provide stability to prevent the stands from tipping over.
- Ultimately we did not need to build a type 3 (T3) stand, which would have held a single vertical panel (36x36 inches) against the wall and above an interactive table. As it turns out, there was an existing wall mount exactly in the right position to fill the same role, so we decided against devoting resources to a custom stand for only this one panel.

The display stands are constructed from a framework of repurposed wood, specifically KDHT (kiln dried heat treated) douglas-fir lumber which is bolted together and stained to a deep brown hue. Thinner sheets of wood panel are stapled onto the lumber framework as backings for the interpretive panels.

The interpretive panels are foam board, covered on the outside by a low-gloss vinyl print. They are mounted onto the display stands using strips of double-sided foam tape along each edge. Transparent plastic clamps provide a second line of protection for some panels in case the tape loses its potency.

Exhibit Sections



The exhibit space is a roughly square-shaped room (22x19 feet), with its main entrance a door centered on the southwest wall. A secondary entrance is centered on the northeast wall, but it usually remains closed outside of special events. The southeast wall is filled up by a gift shop, a historic stove, and a passage towards other areas of the depot museum. Apart from natural lighting through the building's large windows, the exhibit space also makes use of a pair of vintage lamps which hang down from the ceiling on chains.

Our exhibit covers the entire northwest wall, alongside parts of the southwest and northeast walls on either side of each door. In addition, four T4 stands and two display cases define a southwest-northeast partition through the space. The intent is for visitors to move clockwise through the exhibit after entering (i.e., to move left and circle the central partition), though the space is small enough that this is not a necessity. The story of *Trailblazers* extends across eight thematic sections:

- Section 1 is the **Introductory Panel** (curatorial statement), which fills up the west side of a T4 stand near the southwest entrance. The T4 is positioned so that the introductory panel should be centered in a visitor's field of vision as soon as they enter.
- Section 2: **The Snoqualmie sdukʷalbix^w** focuses on the history and current activities of the Snoqualmie Tribe, the native people of the Issaquah area. It occupies a T2 stand (two panels) in the southwest corner of the exhibit.
- Section 3: **Shaping the Land** focuses on Euroamerican colonization, resource extraction, and population boom of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is split across two T1 stands (one panel each) followed by one T2 stand (two panels). The T1s sit under windows on either side of the main entrance, while the T2 sits in the northwest corner.
- Section 4: **A Tale of Three Mountains** focuses on efforts to conserve land on the three major peaks which make up the Issaquah Alps: Squak, Cougar, and Tiger mountains. It occupies most of the northwest wall. Squak Mountain corresponds to a T1 stand (one panel), while Cougar and Tiger follow with one T2 stand (two panels) for each. This section also includes an overview map on another T1 stand.
- Section 5: **Trailblazers in Action** focuses on broader events (such as the Mountains to Sound [MTS] march) and conservation organizations (such as the Issaquah Alps Trails Club [IATC] and Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust [MTSG]). The IATC has one T2 stand (two panels) on the northeast wall, between the gift shop and the secondary entrance. The MTS and MTSG together fill up two panels on the south side of the two T4 stands furthest from the main entrance.
- Section 6: **Trailblazers up Close** highlights five individuals responsible for improving conservation activism in the Issaquah Alps. Their five summarized biographies are split across three panels on the north side of three T4 stands, near the introductory panel.
- Section 7: **Meet the Locals** focuses on native plants in the Issaquah Alps. It does not require any wooden display stands in the finished exhibit (though earlier drafts made use of a "T3" stand). Instead, it includes a single wall-mounted panel about native trees, alongside a plastic table for a crayon rubbing interactive. Both components sit at the northeast corner of the space, to the left of the secondary entrance.
- Section 8 is the **Outro Panel**. It is mounted on the opposite (east) side of the T4 stand which holds the Introductory Panel.

Other Panels

- The title panel of *Trailblazers* is a wide (36x8 inch) panel attached onto the top of the T4 stand which holds the introductory panel. The title panel is connected to the stand via wooden blocks screwed onto the stand's structure.
- There is a separate introduction panel for section 4, 24x24 inches, which hangs above the Squak Mountain T1 stand using picture wire and preexisting window curtain mounts. Most sections have their introductions incorporated into the first interpretive panel in the section, but we decided that the Squak Mountain T1 was too small to properly introduce section 4 as a whole. A separate hanging panel was the workaround we found.

Display cases

- Two vitrines (display cases) are placed in the middle of the room, between the two pairs of T4 stands. Each display case is reused from previous exhibits. Each case has a roughly cubical acrylic top on a vinyl pedestal with a faux marble pattern. One case is medium sized, with a 24x24x24 inch top. The other is smaller, with an 18x18x24 inch top (longest dimension is height). These cases hold a few 3D objects which the museum was able to acquire for the exhibit, mostly trail signs and management documents (see Objects section). IHM designed and printed labels to supplement the display cases, which were a last-minute addition once we determined that we had the space and objects to justify their inclusion.

Interactives

- Section 7 includes an interactive crayon-rubbing activity themed around native plants. This interactive has five components: 3D-printed stencil plates, a wooden tray to hold the stencils, a set of small 16-page booklets with fun facts and spaces to leave crayon rubbings, homemade crayons (taken from the museum's existing educational material), and a plastic table to support the activity. In addition, the table holds laminated infographics of over 20 native plants in the Issaquah area, complete with photographs of plant pressings sourced from the Burke Museum's herbarium. From these infographics, we selected seven plants for the booklet. We digitally traced their pressing photos to develop outlines for the stencil plates. Visitors are encouraged to fill out a booklet and take it home as a keepsake.
- The T4 stand immediately to the right of the outro panel has space for an acknowledgements panel (for donors and contributors), as well as a talkback interactive. The talkback interactive consists of a clipboard hooked onto the stand, sticky notes, thumbtacks, writing utensils, corkboard panels taped onto to stand's wooden panel backing, and a prompt to encourage visitors to leave their thoughts: "What role do you want to play in the future of these mountains?"

GRAPHIC IDENTITY

The 2D design for *Trailblazers* relied on a careful balance of impactful text and engaging imagery. Much of the imagery comes from IHM's collections, including historic photographs from the 19th-20th centuries, scanned land management maps and sketches, a few evocative posters, and newspaper clippings. In addition, landscape photographer Mark Griffith has graciously provided us high-resolution copies of some of his photos. We used these more recent views of natural environments and landmarks in the Issaquah Alps as backdrops for several panels, especially in section 4.

Our design aesthetic is meant to be sharp yet friendly, with an emphasis on straight lines and symmetrical formatting which evenly balances text boxes and imagery. There are a few flourishes in line with the trail guide theme, such as boot-print icons next to quotes and thin dashed lines linking between nearby panels.

Fonts

Trailblazers makes use of four fonts in its design:

- Glaser Stencil. This is a blocky all-caps typeface with a dashed line design which reminds us of a boot print. We use it for section titles and a few large subsections, such as for the individual mountain stands in section 4. Typically 200 pt.
- Bauhaus Apex Display. A design similar to Glaser Stencil, though with a solid line design which is more readable at a smaller scale. We use it for section subtitles and most headings for smaller subsections within a panel. Typically 70-80 pt.
- Open Sans. A clean and easily readable sans serif font, which we use for body text and captions. Typically 28-34 pt for body text and 20 pt for captions.
- Lacquer. An all-caps scrawl meant to resemble hand-drawn notes. We use it for quotes. Typically 34 pt.

Colors

#395e2a (“Hunter Green”) Our primary panel color, used frequently as a text box background in several sections. In some sections (2, 5) it is fully opaque, in section 4 it is an 80% opacity overlay, and in other sections (3, 6) both options are used. Also often used for section and subsection heading text whenever #f0f1e4 occupies the background.	#f0f1e4 (“Erratic Shimmer”) Another primary panel color, used as a fully opaque background for section headings and for some text boxes from most sections. In some sections (2, 6) its text boxes are fully opaque, in others (1, 4, 8) it is an 80% opacity overlay, and in others (3, 5) both options are used. Also used for subsection heading text in section 6.
#fe9086 (“Kokanee Salmon Spawn”) An accent color. Used for quote box backgrounds and some subsection heading text in sections 2, 6, and the Squak Mtn. panel of section 4.	#91cfde (“Mountains to Sound Blue”) An accent color. Used for quote box backgrounds, impact text, and some subsection heading text in section 5 and the Cougar Mtn. panel of section 4.
#ffcf70 (“Vintage Map”) An accent color. Used for quote box backgrounds, impact text, and some subsection heading text in section 3 and the Tiger Mtn. panel of section 4.	#70b356 (“Vine Maple”) Used for a dotted line graphic element throughout the exhibit. This line is meant to evoke a trail on a map, providing continuity between panels.
#212121 (“Charcoal Grey”) Used for caption boxes at a low opacity (usually 40-50%).	Section 7 uses several additional shades of green (#67996a, #568203) and reddish-brown (#7a372a) for tree silhouettes. These colors were inherited from earlier experiments with our exhibit’s color story.

OBJECT CHECKLIST

Object	Display case type	Object ID
Lake Tradition trail sign	Medium	IHM 2026.003.010
Clay Pit trail sign	Medium	IHM 2026.003.009
Dieter Spring trail sign	Medium	IHM 2026.003.007
Lone Rock trail sign	Medium	IHM 2026.003.008
Shy Bear trail sign	Medium	IHM 2026.003.012
TMT trail sign	Small	IHM 2026.007.001
<i>Squak Mountain: An Island in the Sky</i> (book)	Small	IHM B-2004-001
<i>Tiger Mountain State Forest Citizen Advisory Workbook</i> (book)	Small	IHM 2005.021.001

TIMELINE

Spring 2025:

- April 2025 - Selected IHM as our thesis project sponsor. Carried out a literature review on the benefits of environmental history exhibits as part of MUS 570.
- May 2025 - Defined and finalized the parameters of our project proposal after meeting with IHM and obtaining access to their exhibit planning system. Defined outcomes, activities, and a front-end evaluation plan as part of MUS 570.
- June - July 2025 - Presented our project proposal to the Museology department as part of MUS 570. Met again with IHM and other community figures as part of a celebration in honor of Harvey Manning.

Fall 2025:

- September 2025 - Hosted a booth for IHM as part of a community event (Salmon on Sunset), where we promoted our evaluation survey. Started to check in with IHM every Friday as exhibit development ramped up. Researched lingering historical questions to assist exhibit text drafting.
- October 2025 - Promoted our evaluation survey at another community event (Salmon Days). Started drafting exhibit text and design elements. Finalized our thesis committee.
- November 2025 - Continued exhibit text drafting and editing. Hosted our first thesis committee meeting.
- December 2025 - Developed a design timeline for winter quarter. Drafted more detailed room layout and display stand ideas.

Winter 2026:

- January 2026 - Defined and nearly finalized room layout, section selections, and display stand parameters. Developed font/color ideas. Reviewed IHM's newest text draft (rewritten over winter break). Started to check in with IHM twice a week on Wednesdays and Fridays as design work ramped up. Provided access to IHM's canva account for 2D element design work.
- February 2026 - Refined 2D element design (text, graphics, pictures). Developed a block puzzle-style native plant interactive.
- March 2026 - Refined and nearly finalized 2D element design (text, graphics, pictures). Finalized room layout. Hosted our second thesis committee meeting. Refined the native plant interactive into a crayon rubbing activity. Display stands delivered to IHM, alongside printing proofs.

Spring 2026:

- April 2026 - Deinstalled former exhibit. Installed *Trailblazers*. Helped host the private opening on 4/23 and the public opening on 4/24. Developing final thesis deliverables.
- May - June 2026 - Finalizing thesis deliverables (poster, presentation, exhibit brief) for committee review and approval. Graduation!