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Photos by Jackie Gorski, TIMES-UNION

Pictured is Lawrence D. Bell's office as he had it in his Texas office, as displayed at the Lawrence D. Bell Museum in Mentone.

Pictured is one of the aircraft the Lawrence D. Bell Museum has on display.

Bell Aircraft Museum Reopens For Sunday Tours

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Jackie Gorski, Staff Writer

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MENTONE – People can now start visiting the Lawrence D. Bell Aircraft Museum, 210 S. Oak St., Mentone, since it has reopened effective June 14.

Bell Museum Board President Tim Croy said the museum will be open every Sunday from 1 to 5 p.m. Board member Linda Cochran said the museum is open at other times by appointment. Croy pointed out there is a list of people on the museum's front door with their phone numbers.

There are some scheduled events for the museum.

On Sept. 12, Rotors over Mentone will be held at the museum.

"Well, we're going to bring in a Huey, which we do every year. They come in out of Peru," Croy said. "It flies in. An actual Huey will fly in and land here. We normally get some people from around the area. We've had some as far as Michigan fly helicopters in. So we invite as many helicopters that want to come in because we land them even around (First Baptist Church of Mentone) in their yard. We always invite Samaritan and Lutheran Air to come in."

Starting July 16, the Bell Museum will go back to holding Bingo. Croy said Bingo will be held the third Thursday of every month from about 5 to 8 p.m. However, Cochran said it won't be held in December because it's too close to Christmas.

"We're opening with precautions," Cochran said, noting the museum will spread tables out. "We're hoping that people don't forget us."

Other precautions Croy mentioned is he thinks the museum will have hand sanitizer and Cochran said if people feel comfortable wearing masks, they're welcome to do so.

Lawrence D. Bell Aircraft Museum is dedicated to Bell helicopters, personal and historical items related to Lawrence D. Bell and the U.S.'s aviation history.

The museum is named after Lawrence "Larry" Dale Bell, who was born in Mentone April 5, 1894, to Isaac and Harriet Sarber Bell. He went to school in Mentone until 1907 when his family moved to California, according to the museum's informational pamphlet. Bell and brother Grover built a plane of their own after attending the U.S. Air Show at Dominguez Field, near Los Angeles.

Bell spent 44 years in the aircraft industry. He became chairman of aircraft firm Bell Aircraft Corporation. Bell Aircraft Corporation produced the U.S.'s first jet propelled airplane, the world's first commercial helicopter and the world's fastest and highest-flying airplane, the Bell X-1A. The corporation also produced the first jet vertical take-off and landing plane.

"At one time, the property that's directly east of the ACE Hardware here, on Main Street, Bell wanted to buy that and build an aircraft factory so they could build aircrafts here. They couldn't get that done, so they moved and went to Texas, so the big Bell headquarters is in Texas right now," Croy said.

There are several things people can see while at the museum. There's a corner in the museum with items from Bell's office in Texas. Croy said it was set up exactly how Bell had his office. "It was all brought up and it's exactly how he had it," Croy said. Board member Cochran said Bell willed the items to the town of Mentone.

The Bell Museum has also acquired several aircrafts, with three currently displayed at the museum, including a replica of Bell's personal helicopter.

However, one aircraft is not being stored at the museum.

"We just acquired from overseas a Bell 48," Croy said. Supposedly, it is the only one left in existence. "And we had that shipped over here. It's being stored outside of town, but we're wanting to completely redo it." Croy said it was originally going to be scrapped before it was acquired by the museum and it had to be reshipped several times before it got to its destination.

Cochran said there's also a lot of things, like pictures, that can't be displayed at the museum. It has approximately 4,000 negatives that the museum put on a computer. The pictures ranges from pictures of airplanes to workers at the Bell factory.

Croy said the museum keeps things on genealogy, noting one person came from California, "finding out that his family owned part of the north part of town. He spent a couple days here researching his family," he said. Croy said the museum has several people come in and do genealogy research.

"There are things here that can't be replaced," Cochran said. "There's a lot here."

The museum doesn't charge admission, but it does take donations, which is how the museum continues to go on, Croy said.

With the coronavirus, the museum has suffered. People don't necessarily have to visit the museum to give donations, as they can be mailed to them at P.O. Box 411, Mentone, IN 46539. Another way of funding for the museum is holding Bingo games.

Cochran also said the museum is open to people on bus tours. The Kosciusko County Recreation and Visitors office lists the museum as an attraction and the tour takes about an hour.

There are ways for people to get involved with the museum. Croy said they are looking for board members. Currently, there are eight board members and the board can have up to 15 members. "We're even having trouble finding board members," Croy said.

"And some of us are getting older. Not all of them, but some of them," Cochran said. She noted Mentone's history is shown at the museum, so it's important to Mentone people, as well.

"It's not just sitting here on Sundays," Cochran said. "There's a lot of work here."

People interested in becoming a board member can call Croy at 574-551-7662. Croy said the board members will interview a prospective member, so the person would know what to expect. He also said the board members like to have people help on a Sunday, once a month or every other month. Extra help on Bingo nights also is appreciated.

There is also Friends of the Museum, Cochran said. "We have a whole list of people that we can call on for help." She also noted that people will ask her if they can help. "And I just put them down."

"It's good to have more than one person," she said, in case one person is busy when other people come in.

Cochran said if someone wants to become a member of the museum, they can do that.

"They wouldn't actually be a board member, but they'd be like an associate member, where they could join the membership and we try to get people to renew every year to help with expenses," Croy said.

Cochran said they do collect dues every year, usually at their annual meeting.

Membership levels are: \$5, student; individual, \$40; family, \$50; and corporation levels at \$250, \$500 and \$1,000.

People interested in helping people can call the museum at 574-353-7318 or look up the museum on Facebook or its website bellaircraftmuseum.org. Croy also said people helping out don't have to be Mentone residents.