

Source: Theresa Bembnister, 785-532-7750, tbembnister@k-state.edu

Website: <http://beach.k-state.edu>

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Art from the deep: Iconic arched-roof cellars subject of research project, upcoming Beach Museum exhibition

MANHATTAN -- Native stone, arched-roof cellars, a part of many pioneer homesteads in the Flint Hills, is the focus of work by artist Tom Parish, who is seeking the public's help with a collaborative research project. This work will help with his upcoming exhibition at the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art at Kansas State University.

These subterranean shelters or cellars were once common throughout the Flint Hills. Parish is documenting the history of these underground structures, which are in danger of disappearing. He will conduct three public forums to collect stories and photographs about them. The forums will be 7 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 28, at the Rock Creek Valley Historical Society, 507 Burkman St., **Westmoreland**; noon to 1 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 5, at the Riley County Historical Museum, 2309 Claflin Road, **Manhattan**; and 7 to 8 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 19, at the Pottawatomie Wabaunsee Regional Library's Alma Branch, 115 E. Third St., **Alma**.

At the forums, Parish will discuss his photographic documentation of the cellars. Attendees are invited to share their own memories or photographs of these structures. According to the artist, since very few of these cellars are found outside of the Flint Hills region of Kansas, they have become an icon of sorts of the region's shared history and community.

The stories and photos gathered at the forums will help Parish with his project for the Beach Museum of Art, which has invited him to create a multimedia installation of high-definition images of the interiors of these underground structures. "Take Shelter: An Installation by Tom Parish" will be on display Feb. 4-May 25, 2014, at the museum. The work is based on photographs, maps, written text and sound recordings Parish has collected in the last two years to convey the history of the cellars and their significance to the region.

The exhibition and Parish's research are being funded in part by a grant from the Kansas Humanities Council, a nonprofit cultural organization promoting understanding of the history, traditions and ideas that shape our lives and build community. The council has provided funding for gallery displays in the exhibition and public programs that will bring Parish's creative and historical research to a wide audience.

"Work on this overlooked subject offers insights into the formative years of pioneer settlement that are in danger of being lost," said Theresa Bembnister, Beach Museum associate curator. "The cellars are often the last remnants of pioneer homesteads. Presentations of historical and oral history research and Parish's evocative and beautiful photographic art will encourage a dialogue about these structures and shed light on how they were built and functioned."

For additional information on Parish's project, contact Bembnister at 785-532-7750 or tbembnister@k-state.edu