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Stories of Southern Oregon = Communities + Libraries + Museums + University

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CHARLENE PRINSEN is the Library Manager at the Eagle Point Branch of the Jackson County Library District. Her library serves a diverse population including new residents and heritage families in a community that is the gateway to Crater Lake National Park.



THALIA TRUESDELL is branch manager at the Ruch Branch of the Jackson County Library District. Ruch was largely settled in the 1850s as a gold mining community outside of Jacksonville, Oregon, and since then, has evolved into the mixed, individualistic Applegate Valley. She is a weaver of textiles, stories, and community.

Introduction

Southern Oregon's small rural public libraries serve as community centers, places where residents of all ages come together. These libraries are safe places, places where divergent opinions can co-exist, and the librarians and staff are very much a part of their towns. Dur-



ing the spring and early summer of 2017, the Eagle Point and Ruch public libraries engaged their communities to tell stories from their lives and families, part of a heritage work-life documentation project known as Stories of Southern Oregon.

The *Stories of Southern Oregon* documentation project was designed to collect oral histories of farmers, ranchers, miners, and forestry as well as photographs, poetry, and song. First funded on a small scale in 2015 by an Oregon Heritage Commission grant to Southern Oregon University, the project was continued and expanded in 2017 thanks to funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities Common Heritage grant program. Memories and photographs were captured at Story Day events conducted in association with the Southern Oregon University Sociology/Anthropology Program, the SOU Hannon Library, local public libraries, and historical societies and museums.

Charlene Prinsen and Thalia Truesdell, Library Managers of the Eagle Point and Ruch branches of the Jackson County Library District respectively, found that history was and continues to be very much alive in the retelling, in the photographs, and in the life stories of their communities.

Background

Southern Oregon's landscape has changed dramatically over the last hundred years. Historic family farms have yielded to housing developments, pear trees were pulled out to plant vineyards, and a single log load is a rare sight indeed. Mining and mills once dominated the landscape, giving way to environmental concerns and selective harvests. Southern Oregon's agricultural heritage, which dominated the region from 1885–1950, and the logging boom, which flourished from the 1950s to the 1980s, have histories worthy of preservation; however, most local museums and archives have focused on early days and pioneer stories.

In Eagle Point and in Ruch, two small rural towns, Prinsen and Truesdell knew where to find history and whom to talk with. These librarians understood that history is everywhere and strongest in the hearts and minds of their communities. They knew where to find the stories of Southern Oregon.



Southern Oregon University summer intern, Nathan White, interviews Thalia Truesdell about the Ruch Branch mural in the background at an Applegate Story Day. (Photo by Maureen Flanagan Battistella.)

The *Stories of Southern Oregon* project documents a way of life that is nearly lost to memory because of cultural change and economic pressures. Many artifacts and documents critical to the region's stories are already lost to family transition, migration, death, and disregard, escalating the serious nature of this project. It has become all too easy to throw out a musty box of old photos or to sell them on eBay. The most important aspect of the project was to collect the stories and the recollections of people who have lived and worked in this place that we call Southern Oregon.

The *Stories of Southern Oregon* project organized community forums about the region's agricultural and timber heritage in local museums and libraries, digitized family photos and artifacts, and has collected more than 175 video interviews. All this represents a rich historical and contemporary archive available for public use through the SOU Hannon Library's digital collections, the Southern Oregon Digital Archives (SODA). The archive increases awareness of heritage work-life and demonstrates the value and importance of preserving and sharing community values, because history is now and history is everywhere.



Brian Rabjohn dresses like he lives in the 1940s—it's an era he likes a lot because people were polite. Brian told stories of growing up on Thompson Creek at the McKee Bridge Centennial Celebration out in the Applegate. (Photo by Maureen Flanagan Battistella.)

The Eagle Point Experience

Eagle Point, Oregon, is key to the history and development of Southern Oregon. Long before the settlers came, the Takelma Indians called this area home. When gold was discovered in 1852, hundreds of settlers came to Oregon Gold Country. The settlers took out Donation Land Claims and began farming and ranching in this beautiful and fertile region. Logging was also a large industry in the Upper Rogue.

Many buildings and homes are still standing from the early days, most notably the First State Bank and the Butte Creek Mill. The First State Bank was one of three banks in Oregon that did not need to close during the banking crisis of 1933, and the Butte Creek Mill, constructed in 1872, was the center of commerce. Still operational, the Butte Creek Mill suffered fire damage on Christmas morning, 2015. The town of Eagle Point is actively engaged in the authentic reconstruction of the mill, bringing everyone together in a spirit of community. However, there is an influx of new residents, and most are unfamiliar with what has come before.

On May 11, 2017, the *Stories of Southern Oregon* project came to the Eagle Point Library for the kickoff event in what was to be more than two dozen Story Days in Jackson and Josephine counties.

Because of library manager Prinsen's relationship with the Eagle Point History Museum, contact with patrons, and the Friends of the Library network, Prinsen knew with whom to talk and invited several residents who needed to be there to share their story of historic Eagle Point. These patrons had lived in Eagle Point and could tell family stories of the old farming and logging days.

Southern Oregon University librarian Mary Jane Cedar Face provided document preservation advice and gave out archival supplies. Other SOU faculty scanned old photos and documents and videotaped stories. The Rogue Valley Genealogical Society coached participants on how to research family history. Several members of old families came out that day, including Helen Harnish Wolgamott, whose family owned the Harnish Livery and Feed Stable, and Harry Hanscom with his son Larry, who brought generations of logging photos into the project. Ron Hailicka came with photos of the rare woods he milled for the restoration of the U.S.S. *Constitution*, a wooden-hulled, three-masted heavy frigate of the United States Navy that was constructed for battle in 1794.

That first Story Day concluded with a presentation by Forest Service archaeologist (ret.) Jeff LaLande on the history of logging in Southern Oregon. Many newer residents of Eagle Point came to hear how important this industry was to the economic development of the region, as well as logging techniques and the transportation of timber to the mills. The feedback and comments on the day's events and logging presentation were very positive, and many were glad they came to share or to learn.

The Eagle Point Public Library was the first host of the Story Days and introduced the idea of heritage preservation and documentation to locals. That Saturday, a second Story



Stories co-investigator Vicky Sturtevant with SOU Hannon Library Archivist, Mary Jane Cedar Face. Harry Hanscom and son Larry share photos and tell stories at a Story Day at the Eagle Point Branch of the Jackson County Library System. Harry passed away in December 2017, a few months short of his 93rd birthday. (Photo by Maureen Flanagan Battistella.)



Day was held at the Eagle Point Museum in conjunction with the town's annual Vintage Faire. More families came with their stories, memories, and photographs.

The Applegate Experience

Deep in the Applegate, on the other side of Jackson County from Eagle Point, folks came to the Valley seeking harmony with nature, community, or gold, with room to grow, run cattle, or plant fruit trees. They joined the pioneers, raised their children, and one day realized they had become pioneers themselves. They were part of the community they had helped to nourish and the history of the valley, ever-changing and growing, molding its future, protecting and educating its children, and working hard.

Stories of hardships, connections, and successes abounded. Some pioneers had the foresight to record their experiences and struggles in journals and letters. Poems, quilts, photographs, and headstones in overgrown cemeteries also tell stories, some from over one hundred years ago, some more recent. Environmentalist and poet Paul Tipton remarked, "We are creating history now and you and I are community."

The *Stories of Southern Oregon* project began to document the history of the people in the Applegate Valley in June 2017 at the Centennial Celebration at McKee Bridge, the last covered bridge in the area. Huddled under a canopy while the rhythm of the rain kept time with the Old Time Fiddlers, local residents began sharing their stories, recording their histories, and scanning precious photographs. Unsure if they qualified to assume a place in the history of the Applegate, some residents approached cautiously, curiously, and were drawn in and encouraged to relate their relatively recent experiences of the last forty or fifty years, assured that their contributions are valuable to local history. One recited poetry, and another sang an old spiritual as the camera rolled. Environmental activist Chris Bratt spoke



Stories co-investigator Vicky Sturtevant with Diana Coogle at an Applegate Story Day. Diana lived for 40 years in a remote Applegate cabin and as a gifted storyteller, has written stories and poetry about the experience. (Photo by Maureen Flanagan Battistella.)



of his growing interest in preventing logging, mining, and herbicide use, and the success local groups achieved in that area. Community members went on to organize volunteers, raise awareness, and further nurture community.

Two weeks later, the Story Project continued at the Ruch Branch Library, the hub of that rural community in the Applegate Valley. The library is the place to be in the Applegate Valley; the community room is a busy place, and many patrons are there daily to use the computers. It is the perfect place to share stories, jokes, and zucchini, and the librarians hear it all. The library is the center of that small rural community so the librarians knew who had history, who would share that history, and who to encourage to share their stories.

At the Ruch Story Days, the environmentalists' point of view was balanced with stories of mining for gold in the 1980s and 1990s. Gold miner Glenn Wadstein was pleased with the work he accomplished in leveling the tailings piles at the old Sterling Mine, improving the land and bolstering the local economy. He brought with him videos showing his crew of men and women operating equipment to retrieve the gold overlooked by earlier miners. He drew great satisfaction from his research into mining and working in the community. "Thank you, thank you, for encouraging me," Glenn Wadstein said to Truesdell. "Now I know my life's work will not be forgotten."

"It was not always such a cohesive community here. Having the library as a gathering place helped with all that. The valley was changing fast after the back-to-the-landers moved in during the 1970s and 1980s, and lots of organizations started up, which gave people common goals and really brought people together. We worked for many years to get this library here. Now THAT was a community effort if ever there was one," one resident said.

Today the Ruch Public Library serves an eclectic community as a repository for local history, as well as a comfortable place to meet and continue to create and develop commu-



Vicky Sturtevant and David Laws at the Smokejumper Base Museum in June 2017. David Laws was a long time Smokejumper and was one of the caretakers of the Base Museum outside Cave Junction. He passed away in September 2017. (Photo by Maureen Flanagan Battistella.)



nity. As in the past, in a community where strong and often divisive opinions could threaten peace and progress, the Ruch Public Library has provided a forum for conversation and exchange leading to compromise and consensus. The work of area artists is featured, and programs of interest to residents occur regularly. The school is on the adjacent property, so the youngsters in the valley are part of this community hub.

Residents understand the importance of heritage documentation and are eager to participate. "I am grateful we can all be recognized as valuable to future generations," commented Tipton, "and that they will have access to our tales and the history of the Applegate Valley in our libraries through the *Stories of Southern Oregon* project."

Publishing the Stories

The *Stories of Southern Oregon* project is about collecting stories and images and sharing that heritage in the broadest sense through the Southern Oregon Digital Archives (SODA) at Southern Oregon University (<http://soda.sou.edu>). Video interviews are edited in Adobe Premiere, and images are scanned and edited in Photoshop. No physical artifacts are retained at Southern Oregon University; instead, stories and images are shared back to participants in digital form, by email, on flash drives, and on DVD. In the small town of Butte Falls, Oregon, so many people told stories that the town is organizing a film festival, and the interviews on DVD will be added to the Jackson County Library District collection.

Developing an information architecture to house hundreds of video interviews and thousands of images and documents was not a simple task. Creating a user-friendly interface to navigate the collection was similarly challenging. The SOU Hannon Library's digital portal uses CONTENTdm, and the librarians devised a metadata template with more than thirty descriptive elements and expanded the publishing platform to handle video hosted on




Leroy James Thompson spent a lifetime logging in the Rogue River National Forest, Butte Falls Ranger District. Leroy's story was about a big white pine that collapsed in on itself and by some miracle no one was hurt. Leroy told his story at a Butte Falls Story Day that started at 6 a.m. in the Sugar Pine Company Café. (Photo by Maureen Flanagan Battistella.)



YouTube. In a new approach, information was organized by topic and geographic area, which made it easier for users to find the stories and photographs they'd contributed to the project.

Outcomes

Jackson County's small, rural public libraries have been central to the success of the *Stories of Southern Oregon* project, and new Story Days are scheduled for Eagle Point, Ruch and other small towns. Isaiah Boaz is a young man who grew up in the Applegate Valley and has depended heavily on Ruch Library. Isaiah feels strongly about the importance of history. "Local history needs to be preserved and cared for," he stressed, "We all need to learn about the origins of the present."

Thanks to the knowledge and insight of local public librarians, the *Stories of Southern Oregon* project has increased community awareness of Southern Oregon's work-life heritage and improved access to important cultural documents through public exhibits, local history programs, and Southern Oregon University's digital archives. The collected images, artifacts, and stories of heritage farm families and loggers enrich local and regional collections, provide content for research, and enhance pride of place, documenting a rich, productive heritage. 

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