

The 'herstory' in Oregon's History

By Barbara Curtin

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The newest exhibit at the Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill views Oregon history through the lives of women. "Willamette Women: Our History Is Our Strength" opened Friday. The second annual Heritage Invitational features mini-exhibits from 21 other Mid-Valley museums, schools and organizations. It runs until March 10.

"Until the past couple of decades, women weren't active characters with the histories that were told," explained Peter Booth, the museum's executive director. "History has focused on great men and great events, but with a couple of exceptions, women were moved to the sidelines."

Museum staff organized this show in hopes of sharing fresh stories, Booth said. They also wanted to honor the centennial of women's suffrage in Oregon. The state beat the nation, which didn't allow women to vote until 1920.

The show mentions a few well-known Oregon women, including women's-suffrage pioneer Abigail Scott Duniway and the state's first female governor, Barbara Roberts.

Far more common are women whose lives are remembered by few but their families.

The Oregon State Hospital Museum lists reasons that women were diagnosed with insanity, including pregnancy, childbirth and menopause. The Bush House Museum shares photos of servants who made the Victorian home run smoothly.

The Willamette Heritage Center chose to exhibit a bicycle whose front wheel rises more than 4 feet high.

"Bicycles were a very liberating thing for women in the late



Timothy J. Gonzalez | Statesman Journal
A scrapbook from the Salem YWCA is exhibited in the entrance of the Willamette Heritage Center as an introduction to the new show.

if you go

What: Willamette Women: Our History Is Our Strength

Where: Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill, 1313 Mill St. SE

When: Through March 10, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily except Sundays and some holidays

Admission: \$6, \$5 for ages 55 and older, \$4 for students, \$3 for ages 6 to 17 years old and free for ages younger than 6 and everyone on Tuesdays

More information: (503) 585-7012 or www.willametteheritage.org

Participants: Keizer Heritage Museum, Forest History Center, Polk County Historical Society, Yamhill County Historical Society, Hoover-Minthorn House, Linfield Anthropology Museum, Lord & Schryver Conservancy, the Gordon House, Oregon State Hospital Museum, Bush House Museum, Old Aurora Colony Historical Museum, Historic Deepwood Estate, Brooks Historical Society, Salem YWCA, the Jensen Arctic Museum, Willamette University Archives, Western Oregon University Archives, Silverton Country Historical Society, Mount Angel Historical Society, Aumsville Historical Society, and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians

1800s," Booth said. "They were a form of transportation that women used as a form of empowerment." Among the innovations that followed: bloomer dresses so women could ride modestly and safely.

A 1905 letter from Gertrude Schwab, a 9-year-old at Mount Angel Parochial School, demonstrates the careful cursive taught by the nuns there.

"Mama promised me ten cents for every 90 percent in my monthly report ... When the term was over, I had one dollar," she wrote.

The Oregon Forestry Center offers a menacing tool called a hazel hoe that clearly required strength to wield. Nearby is a 1938 photo of women using the hoe to fight the Jefferson Fire — while wearing skirts.

Many visitors will be surprised simply to learn that the Mid-Valley has at least 21 organizations dedicated to preserving history.

"This gives (the cooperating museums) an opportunity to tell an aspect of the story they are trying to preserve," Booth said.

In addition to the exposure, the show gives some small, volunteer-run organizations a chance to learn about creating exhibits, he said.

The Heritage Center is devoting this year to exhibits on women. The previous show, "Treasures From the Trunk," featured quilts that came across the Oregon Trail or that were created by trail survivors.

The next show will focus on Native American women in the Valley. It's being curated by the Cultural Resources Department of The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.

"History on Tap," the final show in this series, will focus on brewing in Oregon — a story that involves women in surprising ways, Booth promised.

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