

Willamette Women: Our History is Our Strength

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Willamette Heritage Center at the Mill
(formerly Mission Mill Museum)

1313 Mill Street SE, Salem

The Past, Alive Again

Museum curators are drawn to enthusing how a certain object speaks to them, or how a specific photograph makes the past come alive. It is the curator's work to share this spark of life, to reanimate the long-dead for the rest of us. Their challenge is to select items that will create that same breathtaking sensation of lived reality that they themselves feel in a heady moment of successful research. The most worthwhile exhibit, by making the past feel "real," reminds us of our own mortality and inspires us to find our unique place in the scheme of time.

The Importance of Oregon's Women

Almost one hundred years ago, in November 1912, a seminal Oregon ballot measure passed that granted women the right to vote. The measure's success came despite fierce resistance and was due to the efforts of many. Although it occurred fairly recently in human history (we've made the Willamette Valley our home for an estimated 14,000 years), the arrival of women's suffrage is uniquely significant.

That's what Keni Sturgeon, current Director of the Willamette Heritage Center, believes. Ms. Sturgeon feels that the centennial of women's suffrage offers an undeniable call to examine the lives of Willamette women in history. She invited local museums to participate in an exhibition showing Willamette women from all eras of the past and into the future. Now, twenty-one museums, from the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians to the Oregon State Hospital Museum to the Forest History Center have cooperated to bring the public views of how women lived and will live here, starting in the earliest days when our land was inhabited by native peoples, through the settlement of other races and into the future, where women's possibilities are yet to be defined.

Ms. Sturgeon gives each of the twenty-one organizations its own special space. The result is a vast exhibition that will run from January 20 through March 10, 2012. The show, "Willamette Women: Our History is Our Strength" is made possible by hundreds of volunteers, each working with deliberate care to allow us to experience women's experiences with maximum impact. Some examples:

Bush House Museum

Ross Sutherland, Bush House Museum Director, was inspired to "defy the expectations for yet another account of the life of beloved Sally Bush" by a circa-1900 photo he discovered. The picture shows two female servants on hands and knees, scrubbing the floor of a wealthy family home. The women's hands and forearms are rough, their skirts are sopping wet. The elder looks directly at the camera with a face full of feeling. Mr. Sutherland chose to focus his contribution on the lives of female domestics rather than the more obvious ladies of the manor, and in this way to make his exhibit "more human, interesting and contemporary."

Sutherland partnered with Maureen Lavelle, history major at Willamette University, who joined him in developing the presentation. For her part, Ms. Lavelle was especially drawn to an ancient Pioneer Cemetery obituary that told of Addie Brown, a Salem domestic who died in 1898 at the age of nineteen from a work-related fire. Ms. Lavelle said, "We cannot assume that (Addie's) work as a domestic defined her life... but her story held a lot of resonance for me. The opportunities for young women were limited, and the work was hard and exhausting." The Bush House Museum's contribution is therefore dedicated to Addie Brown, who died long ago when her life had only begun.

Oregon State Hospital Museum

Kylie Pine believes that "stories, not objects" are what best express the famous State Hospital's past. Ms. Pine is conservator of over 10,000 papers, photographs and pieces of furniture collected during the 130 years of the State Hospital's existence. Her challenge, she says, is "to give voices to the voiceless" and, in doing so, overcome the longstanding stigma of mental health issues.

Assigned to illuminate the lives of women associated with the State Hospital, Ms. Pine's search led her in two very different directions. He first was to Elizabeth Meyers, a pioneer woman who traveled the Oregon Trail to the Willamette Valley in the early days of white settlement. Mrs. Meyers established herself here, living the hard homestead life with husband and family. In what Ms. Pine calls "a challenge to the stereotype of the pioneer," Meyers was committed to the state hospital in 1883 and lived there the last twenty-three years of her life.

By way of contrast, Pine offers the life of Clara Davidson, a doctor who defied the entrenched gender prejudice against female physicians. Facing resistance that would be inconceivable now, Davidson graduated from medical school in 1893 and served at the hospital as a "lady assistant physician" for many years. A photo of her, standing among the male hospital staff, is an evocative testament to her tenacity.

Silverton Country Museum

Working from a foundation laid by other devoted volunteers, Molly Murphy of Silverton presents the stories of diverse women who shaped the area. She's proud to introduce the achievements of Polly Coon Price, who named and platted (laid out the streets of) the town of Silverton in the mid-1850s. "Famous men plat other towns," Ms. Murphy told me, "but a woman who does it is kept in the background. We are excited to show a number of really important ladies you hardly ever hear about." Among her favorites is petite Zetta White Schlader, who served two terms as Silverton's mayor beginning in 1939.

Murphy also aimed for the unexpected. "We were inspired to show the past, present and future; all three," she says. She's thrilled to display the jerseys and other sports-related articles from the Silverton High Lady Foxes sports team. "It's still tough for our girls to be recognized for playing sports," Murphy says. "Our group thought it was important to present 'artifacts' from today, when women's lives are still continuing to evolve."

Yamhill County Historical Society

Gloria Lutz leads the volunteers who put together Yamhill County's contribution. Ms. Lutz's conversation often includes the word "perseverance" when she describes her four subjects. She is especially struck by the opposition overcome by Abigail Scott Duniway, the suffragist most responsible for bringing the vote to Oregon women.

Duniway crossed the plains to become an author, editor and reformer here, but her efforts to bring about suffrage were blocked, Ms. Lutz says, at every turn. Both the hostile climate of the time and Duniway's triumph are revealed in the photograph which is Ms. Lutz's personal favorite: the elderly Duniway casts her first, hard-earned vote while a man glares at her with scorn. "This shot shows volumes about how men felt and what that woman was up against."

Ms. Lutz sees perseverance also in the careers of Oregon's first and only female Governor, Barbara Roberts, and Joni Huntley, a Sheridan athlete who won the bronze medal in the women's high jump at the Summer Olympics in 1984. Huntley still holds the state high school record. "These women gave up so many things, and worked countless hours to reach their goals," Ms. Lutz says, "and because of their determination, they're still making a difference in our world today."

Oregon Forestry History Center

The Forest History Center, located in a tiny building near the Department of Forestry in Salem, may seem an unlikely place to find stories of Oregon women. But Alan Maul, a volunteer there, was excited by the chance to contribute to the women's exhibition.

"People have the expectation that the logging industry is all-male, but women have been out working in the woods all along," he told me. Mr. Maul will document the progress of women taking their "forestry milestone" steps in our state. They fought forest fires in the 1930s, they replanted trees in the 1940s and their participation greatly expanded in the 50s and 60s. Maul's final example is Nancy Hirsch, who was appointed Acting State Forester – the Department of Forestry's highest position – in 2010.

The Past Suggests the Future

A sign is posted on the window outside Keni Sturgeon's office. It reads, "This Place Matters." Although "history" most often focuses on the provinces of men, hundreds of individuals from 21 institutions have heeded Ms. Sturgeon's call to offer the passage of women between Then and Now in our own unique valley. From early Siletz tribeswoman to homesteader, from state governor to one-room schoolteacher, "Willamette Women: Our History is Our Strength" presents a huge spectrum of local human experience to reflect upon.

Sensitively selected objects have an innate resonance. Century-old handwriting, expressing the thoughts of someone long dead, helps us understand the mystery of time passing and our own small place in it. Part of this realization is to grasp that we who examine Keni Sturgeon's displays in 2012 will enter into history – and can also "make history" – as surely as any of the women shown. Although it's impossible to accurately imagine what our region will look like in another hundred years, or what the achievements of women then will be, this exhibition widens our understanding of the possibilities.