

Museum History

The following was prepared by by Joan H. Smith from “Washington County Historical Society: 50 Years of Guardianship,” with appreciation to Richard P. Mathew and Winnifred Herrschaft for Research Assistance.

The Washington County Museum (WCM), formerly known as the Washington County Historical Society, has been the dedicated guardian of the county’s notable history for over 50 years now. But the museum’s roots



reach much further back than 1956, when the present organization incorporated. Many of the thousands of immigrants who poured into what is now the State of Oregon over the Oregon Trail settled, ultimately, in what is now Washington County. For most this was a remarkable life-defining experience that demanded to be memorialized and remembered. Thus it was that people began to form groups, gathering to share stories of the trail, to reminisce, and to celebrate their mutual unique accomplishment.

By 1899 numerous statewide and local organizations, such as the Native Sons of Oregon, had organized into groups called “cabins,” named for the log cabins where they met. Our county boasted the John Smith Griffin Cabin. Its rich purple satin banner, heaped with gold braid and bearing an oil painting of a cabin, is one of the museum’s proudest possessions. All of these pioneer memorial groups met and merged throughout the early part of the 20th century. Then in 1956 several pioneer groups fused to found the Washington County Historical Society (now called the Washington County Museum). In a separate development in the early 1930s, two farsighted individuals, Albert Tozier and his sister Edyth Tozier Weatherred, donated to the people of Washington County their large personal collection of household and farm implements and documents, in the hope that it would become the nucleus of a county museum.



This collection led a nomadic life for many years, housed first in the basement of the County Courthouse, then in the basement of the Hillsboro City Library (on the corner of Second Avenue and Lincoln Street), thence to Shute Park Hall (near the present Hillsboro Library), and then to a house at 641 E. Main St. in Hillsboro. Modest public monies supported its care and housing. But from the outset WCM demonstrated its stewardship of our history by actively caring for, exhibiting and housing the

artifacts. (In fact, in an early example of public-private partnership, WCM actually purchased the Heidel House with privately raised dollars to house the publicly owned collection!)

Another modification came about in 1975 when a Museum Commission recommended to the County Commission that the museum become an agency of county government. A full-time museum administrator and half-time curator came to lead the work of caring for the collection, expanding the joint work of the county and the society into educational programs, publications and exhibits.

Still, the dream of a new museum in a permanent home continued to lure the members of the society. The Heidel Home was a cramped place that had no central heating and in winter its pipes froze regularly. WCM led a sustained effort over many years to find just the right spot and circumstances to realize the dream. There were many determined attempts and as many disappointments.

In 1978, WCM embarked on a county-wide fundraising campaign to raise the money to build, furnish and equip a new museum building on the Rock Creek Campus of Portland Community College. The Hillsboro Coffee Club contributed \$10,000 and Stimson Lumber Company, M. J. Murdock Charitable Trust and Tektronix Foundation each gave \$50,000 to the successful campaign. Groundbreaking was in early 1982, with the building occupied in July of that year and dedicated with memorable pomp and speeches in January of 1983. A long-held dream dating from the 1930s was realized.



But institutions never stand still. The intertwined and complex relationship of the museum and county took yet another turn in 1987. Acting on their Plan 2000, the County Commission realized that maintaining a museum was beyond its scope and focus. In a huge decision (the type of decision which, by now, was routine for such a committed group), the museum stepped up to meet this new challenge. The transfer occurred in September 1987. From that point on, WCM has had total financial and administrative responsibility for the museum. Washington County continues to recognize its duty, as the legal owner of the collection, via annual support that reflects the core expense of caring for the collection.

The Washington County Museum has worked hard to involve ever greater constituencies in the awareness and appreciation of our heritage, to reach out to the entire county, to develop engaging in-house and traveling exhibits, to increase its collection, to develop special events and programs, to publish, and to nurture sound financial support from a broad array of sources.

About the author

Joan H. Smith is director emeritus of the Washington County Museum, which she served for more than 25 years. Joan was initially associated with WCM in the mid-1970s as a member of the board of directors. She chaired a capital campaign, The New Museum Fund, which raised funds to build and equip a new county museum on the Rock Creek Campus of Portland Community College between 1979 and 1982. She was named executive director in 1982. Five years later she led WCM to the assumption of full responsibility for the Washington County Museum's financing, administration and programming. In the ensuing years the museum expanded programs, educational outreach, publications and exhibits. It also became a countywide organization and increased its annual budget from \$45,000 to \$250,000. She diversified the museum's funding base to include planned giving, investment income, special events, earned income, grants, in-kind giving and major gifts.

This content was created and published by Five Oaks Museum, copyright 2020.