
Attendees of this year’s National Council on Public History (NCPH) conference in Portland were within walking distance of the Oregon Historical Society (OHS) and History Museum, situated on a shaded, picturesque avenue in the city’s Cultural District, just north of Portland State University. The society, established in 1898, opened an office and museum in Portland City Hall. Members collected artifacts and developed a research library. The organization relocated to Portland’s Public Auditorium in 1917, and moved to its present location in 1966.1 Today the museum is a major heritage attraction in the Pacific Northwest, functioning as Oregon’s de facto state museum in the absence of an official institution. It is one of six Oregon museums currently accredited by the American Association of Museums (AAM). After visiting, it is easy to understand why the outstanding institution is worthy of this nationally recognized seal of approval.

The challenge of any state historical society is to communicate a shared cultural, economic, environmental, political, and social past in ways that embrace its many stakeholders. OHS accomplishes this through its accredited museum, its exceptional research library, and its varied educational programs. Oregon’s aggressive, liberal social movements—often surrounding the use of its natural resources—provide stimulating material for use in fulfilling the institutional mission to “preserve and interpret Oregon’s past in thoughtful, illuminating, and provocative ways.”2 Unfortunately, economic challenges, including the loss of its curators, have diminished the institution’s ability to expand its holdings and programming to include more of the recent, debate-driven past. Controversies, such as the protection of Northern Spotted Owls, which pitted the logging industry against environmentalists, and the state’s urban growth boundaries, which some perceive as one explanation for high housing prices, are provocative issues that merit interpretation as part of Oregon’s story.

The museum easily captures a visitor’s attention, starting with its permanent exhibit, Oregon, My Oregon—recipient of an Award of Merit from the American Association for State and Local History. Avoiding regionalism and denying attention to prominent individuals, the exhibit focuses on Oregon’s everyday people. A large display of hats and shoes from the museum’s artifacts collection greets visitors, signifying broad inclusion in the historical interpretation that lies ahead. The exhibit’s themes follow a chronological sequence and include “The First Oregonians,” which displays artifacts from native peoples; “Lure of the West: Exploration and Trade,” featuring European and American explorations of the north Pacific coast and trade develop-

ment with Native American tribes (1500s–1840s); “Lure of the West: American Re-settlement,” which focuses on missionary immigration to the area (1840s–1870s); and “What Shaped Modern Oregon,” featuring immigration, industrial growth, and transportation (1860s–present). Among the more unique artifacts is a nine-thousand-year-old pair of sagebrush sandals discovered in Oregon’s Great Basin.

Recognizing that the story’s context reflects the traditional paradigm of American westward migration and conquest, one perceives a shift in focus to the state’s more unique twentieth-century identity upon reaching “Oregonian Culture,” the last section of the exhibit. Visitors may sit at the original Newberry Lunch Counter, salvaged from the downtown Portland store, and view short videos selected from countertop jukeboxes. The two- to three-minute videos feature sound bites from Oregonians expressing different sides of well-known controversial issues. Jukebox selections are titled Education, Air and Water Quality, Taxation, Racism, Urban Growth, Forests, Fish, Rural vs. Urban, Assisted Suicide, and Indian Casinos. These political and social debates were born in the recent past and continue to inform Oregonians’ daily lives. Individuals featured in the videos—old and young—are obviously from different cultural, occupational, and social groups. Identified only by names and locations listed in order of appearance in mock “menus” anchored to the counter, the onscreen anonymity effectively restricts their collective identity to that of being Oregonian, whether intentional or not. The menus further provide links to Web sites offering more information on each particular topic. Unfortunately, the print is small and difficult to read. Visitors interested in this information should come prepared to take notes. The display received a 2005 Silver MUSE award in the History and Culture category from the AAM.

The final display case, with disappointingly few artifacts, attempts to engage the viewer in Oregon’s many well-known firsts, including the first initiative and referendum laws (1902), the first direct primary law (1904), the first state gasoline tax to fund highways (1919), the first mandatory beverage container deposit law (1971), and the first Death with Dignity Act (1994), to name a few. The display and interpretation of artifacts is inadequate to tell the story of Oregon’s last century. This fact is acknowledged by executive director George Vogt, who promises that Oregon, Yours, Mine, Ours—a permanent sesquicentennial celebration exhibit under development—will fill that void: “We are trying to get people to think about the big issues that have shaped the 20th century sense of ‘Oregonian-ness.’” At this time, the exhibit’s completion and opening depend upon adequate funding. In the meantime, visitors can enjoy temporary exhibits that also fill the museum’s more than 20,000 square feet of exhibit space. This year, Tall in the Saddle: 100 Years of the Pendleton Round-Up celebrated well known champions and memorable moments from the Pendleton Round-Up—an internationally recognized rodeo—with a rich and

varied display of artifacts and photographs. Sand on the floor and catchy fiddle music added to the multisensory experience.

The historical society’s research library, upstairs from the exhibit spaces, claims to have one of the most comprehensive local, state, and regional history collections (noncirculating) in the country. Shelves in the reading room hold treasures such as Pioneer Index Cards, numerous books published by the Daughters of the American Revolution, Oregon and Washington Gazetters, and Sanborn Fire Insurance maps of Portland from 1879 to 1965. The library’s holdings include over 35,000 books and pamphlets, 14,000 linear feet of manuscripts, over 3 million photographs, 30,000 maps and aerial photos, 8.5 million feet of moving images, and 10,000 sound recordings, as well as serials, government documents, newspapers (on microfilm), vertical files, and scrapbooks. An online public access catalog can be found at http://librarycatalog.ohs.org/eosweb/opac/. Intellectual access to the holdings is provided not only through finding aids and collection guides, but also through the knowledge and familiarity of the materials maintained by archivist and library manager Geoffrey Wexler and his staff of professionals and volunteers. Unfortunately, the economic reality currently felt by all heritage institutions has brought changes to both the availability of the OHS research staff and to public access hours. As a consequence, the normally comfortable and accommodating reading room is crowded during its reduced public hours. Those interested in conducting research in the facility should also be aware of an admission fee required of nonmembers. See the library’s Web site for current hours and admission fee prices.

The historical society’s presence is not limited to its complex in the Cultural District. Programs also include offsite guest lectures and traveling exhibits. The Mark O. Hatfield Distinguished Historians Forum provides opportunities to attend lectures given by prominent scholars and writers within the historical community. The 2010 schedule featured Ron White, Douglas Brinkley, James McPherson, and, during the NCPH conference, Patty Limerick. Among the institution’s traveling exhibits is Oregon Is Indian Country, a collaborative project that brought together the OHS and Oregon’s nine federally recognized tribes. Aware that Native Americans should interpret their own pasts, both unique and shared, OHS collaborated with the tribes through its Folklife Program to bring together artifacts, photographs, and Native voices. The exhibit includes three themed sections—The Land, Federal Indian Policies, and Traditions That Bind—that are borrowed and displayed by museums throughout the northwest. See viewing schedules on the OHS Web site.

Virtual visitors can explore Oregon’s past via the online Oregon Timeweb. The interactive display places thumbnails of documents, photographs, maps, and artifact images along a timeline that link to larger images, associated descriptions, and metadata of the items. Serving as bookends to the more than eight hundred items from the research library’s archival collection are a

1. The 1970s was a time of increased acrimony between those working in the timber industry (whose power had somewhat eroded) and environmentalists (whose power was increasing). The Endangered Species Act passed by Congress in 1973 allowed the Department of the Interior to list the northern spotted owl as a potentially endangered species. The use of the forest (and the future of jobs) became ensnared in public debate over many issues with the fate of the spotted owl being the poster child for the conflict.

French map of North America believed to have been produced in the 1750s and the marriage license of a same-sex couple issued during the short period in 2004 when the legality of same-sex marriage in Oregon faced question. Timeline materials are broad in scope, providing snapshots of the state’s cultural, economic, geographic, political, and social past. Oregon Timeweb is found at http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/timeweb/.

Whether visiting the museum, conducting research, attending offsite programs, or exploring the attractive and informative Web site, visitors will be tempted to return again and again. The Oregon Historical Society is located at 1200 SW Park Avenue in Portland, Oregon. Online exhibits, program information, hours, directions, and parking information can be found on the OHS Web site at http://www.ohs.org.

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Washington State Archives

The World Forestry Center Discovery Museum, Portland, Oregon. GARY HARTSHORN, president and CEO.

The World Forestry Center Discovery Museum is an interesting paradigm for the modern public history museum. Taking on a potentially controversial topic—the role of forests in modern society—the Discovery Museum does an admirable job of not offending environmentalists or the logging industry. Pulling this off in Portland, Oregon (one of the nation’s greenest cities and home to major players in the timber industry) is no mean trick. But before looking at the museum today, it is worth taking a moment to see how it has morphed over the past hundred years.

As part of the 1905 Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition, the timber industry built the world’s largest log structure to house forestry exhibits. After the close of the fair, the building was turned into a museum with a focus on Native Americans and the lumber industry. Sadly, the popular attraction burned down in 1964, but civic pride was strong enough to finance the construction of a new building in 1971, located in Portland’s Washington Park. In 2005 the museum was temporarily closed and the thirty-year-old exhibitions were totally renovated. Today, the 16,000 square feet of exhibitions in a handsome modern wood building continue to attract the local community (about 60,000 visitors in 2009).

The renovation came at a relatively tranquil political time. However, even with the spotted owl wars largely over, the development of the exhibitions