Portland, OR – March 19, 2020 – How do we stay connected and rooted in community while practicing social distancing? What is the role of cultural institutions during this unprecedented time?

Like many museums and attractions that have closed in response to the COVID-19 virus, the Oregon Historical Society (OHS) will be largely moving online, sharing Oregon history virtually through social media, blogging, and our digital platforms like the Oregon Encyclopedia, OHS Digital Collections, and online curriculum. At the same time, as the repository of Oregon’s history, OHS has a responsibility to record this moment for future generations – a moment that practically no one on earth has experienced in their lifetime.

That is why the Oregon Historical Society is asking you to share your stories: your personal reflections on living through this pandemic. In this period of isolation from friends and family, what stories of Oregonians from the past or present are giving you courage? How are you spending your days in this strange new “normal?” What have you learned about yourself, your friends, or your family, that is giving you strength amidst chaos?

The Oregon Historical Society invites community members to share their personal reflections by submitting a letter through an online form or by mailing a handwritten note to the OHS Research Library (1200 SW Park Avenue, Portland, OR 97205). All written and electronic submissions must include the author’s full name, location (city, town, or reservation), and the date.

“Some of the most priceless treasures in the Oregon Historical Society collections are the handwritten diaries and journals of individuals who made their way across the Oregon Trail. As we persevere through this new uncharted trail, we invite Oregonians to document their thoughts and experiences and to share them with OHS, so we, in turn, can share them with future generations,” said Oregon Historical Society Executive Director Kerry Tymchuk.
While we are lucky to have technology to stay connected during this time of social isolation, sometimes, pen and paper is best – it is of course the letters, journals, scrapbooks, and photographs that the OHS Research Library has collected for decades that students, educators, researchers, authors, filmmakers, and many more use each day as they discover stories from our past. In the coming weeks, staff will send letters to OHS members for whom there is no email address on file, asking them to mail back their stories. Those staff whose regular job duties have been disrupted by the public closure are eager to support this outreach, ready to mail letters from home.

“We all recognize the need to check in on our family, friends, and neighbors,” says Tymchuk, “and our staff asked how they could reach out to our members and others who might be feeling isolated. We hope this is a project that will bring a bit of connection, reflection, and hope.”

OHS encourages families to participate in this project as well, as a way to add to the historical record during this time of school interruptions. In the coming days, we will be reaching out with more resources for learning at home, including inviting students grades 6-12 to participate in a virtual Oregon History Day contest later this spring.

The Oregon Historical Society will add a selection of the stories and reflections submitted by mail and online to the OHS Research Library collections, where future generations will go to understand what this unprecedented moment in Oregon history was really like.

About the Oregon Historical Society

For more than a century, the Oregon Historical Society has served as the state’s collective memory, preserving a vast collection of artifacts, photographs, maps, manuscript materials, books, films, and oral histories. Our research library, museum, digital platforms & website (www.ohs.org), educational programming, and historical journal make Oregon’s history open and accessible to all. We exist because history is powerful, and because a history as deep and rich as Oregon’s cannot be contained within a single story or point of view.