The Old Wasco County Courthouse

Still Making History after 152 Years

by Karl Vercouteren

The Old Wasco County Courthouse in The Dalles is an unassuming little building that boasts a significant history and houses a hidden treasure. It was commissioned by the Wasco County Court on August 3, 1858, during territorial days, when the county encompassed 130,000 square miles from the crest of the Cascade Mountains to the Great Divide in the Rockies. Local builder W.C. Wallace completed construction two months after statehood, in April 1859, when the current state line became the east boundary of the county — half the size but still a large county. It is a peripatetic little building. After twenty-four years housing the sheriff’s and treasurer’s offices, jail cells, and an upstairs courtroom, the small wood-frame structure was replaced by a large, formal brick courthouse built on a larger site a block west. The old building served as The Dalles’ city hall until 1909, when it was moved by city fathers across the street while a new city hall was built on the original site at the corner of Third and Court streets. On completion of the new city hall, the old building was purchased by Matt Schoren, who moved it three blocks to the east and remodeled it for a residence, after which it became a rooming house and remained on this third site for fifty-two years, gradually becoming almost unrecognizably altered and deteriorated. In 1961, its continued existence was threatened when Brady’s supermarket bought the structure and planned to replace it with a parking lot. A group of citizens insisted that the building be saved, and they successfully moved it to city property at Thompson Park on West Second Street. There, it languished until 1973, when the city declared it a nuisance and proposed to destroy it. Alf Wernmark, a member of the group trying to save the building, literally stood in front of the bulldozer. After that success, it took several years to organize a preservation commit-
The greatest portion of our total 146 audiotapes is recordings of Regional History Forum programs that began in 1980 and continue to the present. It has been my privilege to line up speakers and make the audio recordings. Although some programs were not recorded, most of the Saturday afternoon lectures covering many historical subjects were preserved on tape. The 1980 series illustrates the range of topics and was the most ambitious, running from January through March.


By 1984, a more modest four-week series was presented, and in 2002, the Regional History Forum settled into its current structure of programs on the four Saturdays of February. That year, they included “Jane Kirkpatrick on Her Combination of Historical Research and Historical Imagination”, “The Dalles-California Highway”, “Indigenous People ‘Discover’ Lewis and Clark”, and “History of the Wasco County Pioneer Association.” I was instrumental in recording other programs presented at the Original
Courthouse Preservation’s annual meetings, helping preserve additional individuals’ oral histories and taping programs given at the building during a new event: Historic The Dalles Days.

The Original Courthouse is gradually transferring its collection of audiotapes into CD format so that digital versions will be available to persons researching topics covered over the years — the hidden treasure will be shared. Regional History Forum programs since 2008 have been recorded via digital video, including the planned February 2011 offerings: “Train Wrecks and Other Rail Mishaps in Wasco County”, “Rocks from the Sky: Meteorites from Oregon and (Far!) Beyond”, “Abigail Scott Duniway and the Northwest Suffrage Movement”, and “Celilo Village Through the Years.”

A final project of the Original Courthouse bears mention. The old slide-tape programs dating back to the 1970s (and in one case, earlier) have been re-mastered in digital format. Copies are being made for the courthouse’s in-house use, for distribution to area schools and public libraries, and for sale to the public. Titles available in DVD format are Farewell to Celilo/Return to the River (the former was the 1957 production of The Dalles Camera Club and the latter a brief film of the inundation of Celilo Falls), Raising Wheat with Horsepower, The Craft of Wheelwrighting, Early Wasco County, and Wasco County Cherries/To See and To Do in The Dalles.

The Original Wasco County Courthouse is located at 410 West Second Place in The Dalles. For further information, including an order form for the video programs, see the OWCC website: http://www.historicthedalles.org/wcoc/original_wasco_co_courthouse.htm, or write to Original Wasco County Courthouse, P.O. Box 839, The Dalles, OR 97058.