

# The Old Wasco County Courthouse

## *Still Making History after 152 Years*

by Karl Vercouteren

THE ORIGINAL 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-

tee and secure a site. The committee's breakthrough came in July 1975, when the courthouse was recognized as a historic landmark by The Dalles Historic Landmark Commission, and Original Courthouse Preservation, Inc., negotiated a location on Chamber of Commerce property overlooking Mill Creek on West Second Street. The building was moved in September 1975, using volunteers and loaned equipment. Restoration architect Alfred Staehli was hired to prepare drawings, specifications, and cost estimates. The preservation group busied itself seeking grants, local funding, and new members. Soon, \$30,000 was raised. Restoration work proceeded under the direction of Bill Alsup, with much of the labor provided by the preservation group's members and other community volunteers. In 1976, the restoration was completed, the building dedicated, and the Original Courthouse was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

There would be one additional move. At the expiration of a twenty-year lease for the land on which the building was located, the Chamber of Commerce and the courthouse board did not agree on a new lease. After 1996, floods undermined the building's less-than-sturdy foundation, and Original Courthouse Preservation, Inc., moved the building to a property owned by Wasco County at 410 West Second Place, under a long-term lease. Bill Martin ran a bingo game in the early 1980s that paid off the original construction loan and put the operation on a solid financial footing. Walt Ericksen took over the bingo from

the mid 1980s to mid 1990s, raising an endowment that underwrites the continued operation of the courthouse.

The Original Courthouse is of architectural and historical interest. It was built in a vernacular version of the Federal style and represents a transition during the 1850s from timber frame to balloon construction. It is the first of three Wasco County Courthouses, all of which are still extant. Original Courthouse Preservation employs a docent and provides volunteers to keep the building open for tours during the summer months and by appointment throughout the year. Some of its furnishings date from between 1859 and 1883. Of special interest are handcuffs, ball-and-chains, and an "Oregon boot" on display in one of the jail cells.

There is another treasure located in the Original Wasco County Courthouse: local history in the form of audiotapes dating back to the 1970s and DVDs of more recent years. An early employee of the courthouse, Paul Kuiper, interviewed ranchers and wheelwrights and taped old-time musicians between 1976 and 1979, using the recordings to create a series of slide-tape programs funded by Oregon Council for the Humanities (OCH, now Oregon Humanities) grants. Those programs were available to local groups, tourists, and school field trips visiting the courthouse. Marilyn Ericksen and others interviewed older members of the community to produce oral history tapes in later years.

The greatest portion of our total 146 audiotapes is recordings of Regional

Courtesy of Susan Buce, www.HistoricTheDalles.org



*The original Wasco County Courthouse is located today on W. Second Place in The Dalles. This is the building's sixth site since construction in 1859. It hosts annual programs aimed at preserving the area's history. The pointed spire of St. Peter's Landmark is visible in the background.*

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. Titles include: "Saving the Original Courthouse," "The Upper Mill Creek Community," "Fruit in Wasco County," "Columbia River Fisheries," "Sam Hill and the Columbia River Highway," "The Craft of Wheelwrighting," "Wildlife in Wasco County," "An

Oregonian's Bicentennial Trip," "A History of Mosier," "Raising Wheat by Horse Power," and "Steamboats of the Columbia."

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

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*A display case in the original Wasco County Courthouse features leg irons and handcuffs used to constrain prisoners in days gone by. The ball and chain (left) was a widely used, effective tether, while the “Oregon Boot” (right) had roots in the Pacific Northwest. Such restraints were used when prisoners moved from first floor jail cells to the upstairs court room via an outdoor stairway.*

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.historichthedalles.org/wcoc/original\\_wasco\\_co\\_courthouse.htm](http://www.historichthedalles.org/wcoc/original_wasco_co_courthouse.htm), or write to Original Wasco County Courthouse, P.O. Box 839, The Dalles, OR 97058.