

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #7 - Side B

Subject: Genevieve Slater On Harney County Library

Place: Burns, Oregon

Date: October 11, 1976

Interviewer: Pauline Braymen

PAULINE BRAYMEN: This is Pauline Braymen; I am talking with Genevieve Slater on October 11, 1976. Gen gave a talk at a recent retirement dinner for several library board members who had retired, including Chet Felt who had been treasurer for many, many years. And she gave a good deal of history about the Harney County Library. Could you tell us about this now?

GENEVIEVE SLATER: Thank you. Things have really changed since 1942 when Chet became a board member. It is sort of like back in the dark ages and I mean that literally because the old library, which was down at the old city hall, was really dark. They had the string lights, which they probably had when the city hall was built in 1927, and they were the kind of lights that were used when electricity was installed. You really had to have good eyesight to find anything. Even the front windows were covered over with dirt. When I first came they had an old coal furnace and it put out soot quite badly. Mrs. Jenny Dennison, who was the librarian before me, a dear old lady, and I thought a great deal about her, but she was about seventy at least when she retired. Getting up on stools wasn't down her alley so she wasn't able to keep things as clean. When she first came back to visit me after she had retired she said, "Well you cleaned the windows didn't you?"

As to the physical aspects of our building it was about forty feet by forty feet. We

were fortunate in having a fire engine, in fact two of them right next door. We had a police station, which was very small in the rear, and we had the city jail in the basement. Well, the prisoners often did their own cooking in those days, so on Saturday afternoons we could look forward to having the aroma of boiled beans coming up through the floor.

Wednesday nights it was kind of spooky, especially in the wintertime. In the summertime there were people going by all the time. But prisoners down there would sometimes, no doubt, hear people walking about above them so they would pound on the pipes and they would sing and sometimes they would whistle. I was not familiar with Morse code so I really didn't know what message they were sending. I was really glad to get out of there at 9 o'clock on some nights.

When I first went there I did the janitor work and we had an old wood floor with lots of oil on it. We had a big wide oil mop, which was used for oiling floors. So quite often I was glad that the fire department was right next door because I had no place to put that old mop, except in my office which was under the stairs.

They put in linoleum tile about three years after I became librarian, and they also furnished a janitor to do the work. That was really a great step forward. I cleaned the tops of the shelves, which also had coal soot on them, about twice every year. It was a little bit hard to keep climbing up and down the ladder, which I had there, so we had an old table, which was quite good with casters on it --- it moved quite well. So I would get up on that table with my scrub buckets and push myself down the side, I even got so I could turn the corners good. And that saved me a lot of work. The walls, in the time that I was down at the old library, which was twenty years, were painted about three times I believe, and they let me choose the colors. I always chose a very light green or a light yellow, which would reflect light and make it a little bit cozier. It was quite a long time before I had a phone; it was about ten or fifteen, near sixteen years.

I had an office which was under the stairs going up to the city hall. My office was about six by four feet and of course the ceiling was slanted. It had an old stained sink, which had probably been put in, in about 1927, when that building was erected. I never could get the stains out of it. It was pretty crowded in there by the time we got a few boxes of books, and typing table, and a typewriter, and all of your equipment for mending books and any-thing else extra. So I thoroughly enjoy my nice big office at the present time. And also have our big room to work in at the Harney County Library.

Well, the library had its beginning in 1903 when twelve ladies bought twelve books and came to the house of Mrs. Phoebe Geary. They had paid twenty-five cents dues; this was later raised to a dollar a year. They kept adding more members and this was the way the Burns library was started. At that time it was called The Ladies Library Club. But when they moved to the new city hall in 1923, that was the old city hall, which later burned down, they changed the name to the Burns Library Club, and by this time they had 600 books. It was really too much to have in a private home, and Mrs. Phoebe Geary had offered her services as librarian at that time, and they were in her home for about four years.

Well, they moved to the old city hall in 1923 and some of the members of the library club would donate their services twice a week and kept the library open. Their main object was to help maintain a public library. It created a free library board. They decided to build a new city hall in 1927, with room for the library on the first floor, and the clubrooms above. The library club was able to donate \$1000 toward this building, and they were never charged any rent for its use.

Mrs. MacKenzie was the first librarian to serve from 1923 to 1949, when I took over. Actually now, its been twenty-eight years that I have been connected with the library, though I have been retired two and a half years.

I went to Jenny Dennison's retirement dinner, and when they said she had been there as librarian for 16 years I thought that was an eternity. Little did I think that I would be connected with the library for this length of time. My first board was Mrs. J. D. Walker, Mary Bennett, Charlotte Huffman, Chet Felt, and Nona Hotchkiss. The first year we met possibly two or three times, maybe four times. Then the time of meeting became farther and farther apart. For a while there we were meeting about every three years or so. We didn't have much money to spend. We had received some money from the city and not very much toward books, most of it was toward my salary, so they figured there wasn't anything to meet about. In 1955 I received my first raise, then in 1956 they hired a helper to put books away. They were high school students, which would come down. They would come down maybe once or twice a week and help put books away. This did help a great deal.

Inez Ausmus became a member in 1958 and we were having a few more meetings then. She became president in 1964. Inez, who is a very fine worker, public-spirited person, decided we should meet a little oftener. So we began having regular meetings and the talk of the new library was originated. Phyllis Zreliak was rehired as my full time helper, our budget was increased and our book expenditure doubled from 1949.

In 1965, Inez decided it was time for action --- we needed a new library. We should get it on the ballot by November. Some state people came in to help us plan what was to be done and they also informed us that at the time the library services act would provide 45% of the needed funds, and we would have to have the other 55%. We began going before city groups telling of our problems. Inez talked, and I talked, and Corky Corbett talked and we were going great guns when that summer we received ten thousand dollars cash from Jim Fellows. Well this was a great addition to the small amount we had towards the library. Then, not too long afterwards, we received another

thirty-five thousand dollars which sort of changed our plans. With the matching funds from the state we could plan a larger library than we originally had ideas of.

So we decided not to put it on the ballot in the November. Within eight months Jim Fellows passed away, that was shortly after the first of the year. And about in February we were notified that we were to receive fifteen-sixteenths of his estate.

So again our plans were graded upward as for the library. There was no need to put it on the ballot at any time. We called in people from the State again and told them what we had, and by that time they said we could have 49% of the funds, so we were pleased with this addition of several thousand dollars to our building fund. The library board got in touch with several architects and had them draw up plans for us and we finally decided on George McMath from Portland. We started going around to different libraries, among them one over in Prineville, which George McMath had built. And we went to John Day and saw the library there. When I was in Portland I visited several small libraries that George had built. He specialized in library buildings, so were quite pleased with him as an architect.

The library services act now said they would supply 49% of the funds. The library board at that time was Inez Ausmus, Berneace Shelton, Ruth Liimatta, Helen Jenkins, Roger Tiller, Chet Felt, and Corky Corbett. We had lots of meetings and we had lots of fun getting together and discussing our problems. And by April, George McMath had a model of his library and what he would have in store for us.

We had given him some ideas and told him how much money we would have to spend. And we wanted it to be representative of Harney County, so he said that he would do the best he could. He brought new models to our April meeting. It was really different, we agreed, we all liked it. However one of the members of the state services act, in fact he was the head of it, really didn't think much of our new library. He was quite

conservative and he believed in libraries built in a rectangular fashion and to look like the old fashioned libraries. Well he thought something different would be outstanding. So he and George McMath I heard went back in the same car, but there was kind of a coolness between them for sometime afterwards. However, his name was Mr. Solomon, I believe he was no longer with the state library after a year or two. But there was nothing he could do about it so he had to adjust to it. The bids were opened in July 24, 1968. Andy Wooster Construction Company had the winning bid. On August 5 we had a meeting with the County Court, members of the City Council, and Library Board. And I turned over the first spade full of earth, that was in August 1968. They worked on it all year and by August of 1969 we were able to move in.

We had our dedication on September 19th of that year. We had a very good attendance at our program that day, and the first number on our program was the invocation by Reverend Frank Goodwin, pastor of the Christian Church in Burns, Oregon. The opening remarks were given by Miss Eloise Ebert, who is a librarian at the Oregon State Library. Comments were made by Mayor Voegtly, from the City of Burns, and Mayor Hudkins of the City of Hines. A history of the site was given by Mr. John Scharff, who was President of the Harney County Historical Society.

The available land for the building was donated by Mrs. Anna C. Cater who was also instrumental in providing land and money for the museum. This property was formerly owned by Mrs. William Hanley.

Then the history of the library club, which did so much for the library in the early years, was given by Mrs. Jesse Cecil. The history of the building program, Mrs. Inez Ausmus, who was president of the library board at that time. The presentation of the building was made by John Wooster, general contractor. George McMath, who was the architect, also made presentation remarks. The acceptance of the building was made by

Mr. Newton Hotchkiss, who is the County Judge.

Then there was a special dedication for the Jim Fellows adult reading room by Raymond Voegtly. The dedication address was given by Robert F. Smith, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, of the Oregon Legislative assembly. The benediction was given by Reverend Frank Goodwin, and ribbon cutting by myself. Ilda May Hayes provided the music. Later we had open house.

In June 1970, Clair McGill Luce, who is the wife of Henry Luce III, Time and Life Magazine, decided to give the library a thirty thousand dollar fund, giving one thousand dollars every January. She was a Harney County girl and dearly loved this country where she grew up and went to High School. So, she had seen the library, she hadn't been in it, but at the time it was being built she was here for a relative's funeral, and went all around the library and looked at it. She thought that this would be a good way to do something for Harney County.

Well she passed away after the first thousand dollars was given to us; she passed away the next June 22nd. So eventually our twenty-nine thousand dollars, which was coming to us, was converted to 123 shares of Time Inc. stock. So we still have the interest for that every year, and we still have the principle, which worked out very well for us.

Our only complaint about the new library when the plans were first discussed was that we didn't have air conditioning. When we were making the plans everyone seemed to think that with this high ceiling and nice light it would automatically be cool. All the heat would go up above and we would really be very pleasant. But, it didn't work out that way. All this nice light, which we thoroughly enjoyed at the library, gave a place for the sun to come in, and this was about the hottest building I think in Harney County.

We could have demonstrated for solar heating equipment. Then in June of 1973,

Mr. Luce, the husband of Clair McGill Luce, was here for the anniversary of her death. By the way, he was a perfectly charming man, very easy to talk to. He just seemed so interested in everything there. We thoroughly enjoyed him.

Well on this particular day it was quite warm. We had a meeting in the back room. After the others had gone and he was leaving, he told me good-bye. He was just going out the door when I started apologizing for the warmth of the building, but I said we did have some money and eventually we hoped to have enough money in order to get air conditioning. Well he turned around and came back and he said, "Just how much money do you need yet to finish this fund?" And I said, "Oh, about \$2550 dollars, well about \$2600 to be exact." And he didn't say anything, he went on out. We left on vacation for about three weeks the next day, and when I came back there was a check for \$2600 from his mother. He told her about it. Well we didn't waste any time getting air conditioning in. It cost over \$6000, but life was worth living again through the summertime.

There was lots of controversy about the architecture of our library. But it is like so many things, people in our own hometown are not appreciative, it takes people from out of town to appreciate you. The same was true of the library. Many librarians came here, some architects, people from all over the United States have stopped in here and they have been loud in their praise. Some of the local people we found out didn't think much of the library when it was first being built.

For years we have had donations from many sources including: The Jayceetes Memorial Fund which was two thousand dollars given for non-fiction books, our Foley Memorial Bookshelf has been a big help to us through the years. Then we have had the Mother's Club give us money, the Elks Club, Barbara Eggleston has given money in memory of her mother, the Library Club, which practically kept the library going through the first few years, but finally folded up in 1965.

Nona Hotchkiss has probably been our biggest library book donor. She belonged to a great many book clubs and as soon as she finished reading them she would bring them up to the library. Her books amount to hundreds and hundreds of dollars.

Lee Frazier gave us our basic fund for our air conditioning and we have had numerous other donations for memorial books when people have passed away, or they just wanted to give a book in memory of someone.

Book circulation in 1949, when I first became librarian, was 6183. Last year it was 27,777. In 1949, we had 300 new books that year; many of them had been donated. Of course the price of books has about tripled since that time. We bought 1026 new books last year.

In 1949 we had approximately 7000 volumes in the library and we now have approximately 20,800.

Our records go back to 1933. When Chet Felt first became a member of the library board, which is in 1942, the members consisted of Jesse Cecil, Mrs. Dillman, Mrs. W. J. Biggs, Mr. Merle Bennett, Mrs. J. D. Walter and Chet Felt.

Now the library members can be on the board for four years consecutively. But Chet Felt served us for 34 years. These were years of faithful service because it was during this time that we had lots of extra works when we built the new library, and we do appreciate all of his faithful help. It was a pleasure working with him.

PAULINE: Well can you think of anything else of the library history that you would like to add?

GENEVIEVE: Well not at the moment.

PAULINE: Well we can always add some more.

GENEVIEVE: This has hit some of the high spots.

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