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Oregon Digital Newspaper Program: Preserving History While Shaping the Future

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Before the advent of the internet, cell phones, television or radio, newspapers served as one of the most consistently utilized mediums of communication and cultural expression in the modern world. Throughout the past several centuries, newspapers have not only reflected cultural norms, they have also shaped our worldview, often instigating social change with the viewpoints expounded within their pages. Newspapers have provided a record of local, national, and international events, as well as given voice to grassroots perspectives by publishing fictional stories, poems, political cartoons, and editorials. While they do not always represent an objective account of reality, historic newspapers are an essential primary resource for anyone with an interest in the past, as they embody the general history of common folk as well as more prominent figures in the timeline of humanity.

Up until recent years, those wishing to delve into the historical record provided by old newspapers had to venture to a physical library and scour stacks of printed pages or microfilm reels to find what they were looking for. The University of Oregon Knight Library houses an extensive collection of both historic and contemporary Oregon newspapers on microfilm through which students, faculty, and members of the public can peruse at any time during the library's hours of operation. Inter-library Loan has allowed us to share our collection with library users near and far, but with some limitations; reels can only be used by one person at a time, and access to microfilm readers continues to impede usability.



A patron uses a ScanPro machine to view historic newspaper content on microfilm in the UO Knight Library. Photo by Amanda Garcia, UO Libraries.

However, the UO Libraries' Oregon Digital Newspaper Program (ODNP) is taking historical newspaper-based research to the next level by providing a free, keyword-searchable online digital collection of Oregon newspapers, accessible to a worldwide audience of students, researchers, and the global community at large.

The Program

Founded in 2009, the ODNP has remained in operation with grant funding from the Library Services and Technology Act, the Oregon Cultural Trust, the Oregon Newspaper Publishers Association (ONPA), and private donations. Additional grant funding came from the Library of Congress and National Endowment for the Humanities' National Digital



Newspaper Program, a collaborative effort to build a free, searchable, digital repository of historic newspaper content from across the nation, starting with publications from 1836–1922. Content from 16 of the 52 historic Oregon newspaper titles digitized to date are currently available on the national *Chronicling America* website (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>), along with titles from 27 other states.

The ODNP's Historic Oregon Newspapers website (<http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu>) went live in mid-December of 2010 and has since drawn over one million views from over 65,000 visitors all over the world, including Canada, the United Kingdom, India, Germany, Australia, Brazil, France and Turkey. Residents of Oregon are the most active users, followed by Washington, California and the rest of the United States. The site currently hosts 52 titles of over 220,000 pages of content, with another 300,000 pages to be processed over the next year. Slightly more than half of visitors to the site are returning users.

Despite the advances in technology that have allowed for keyword searching of historic newspapers online, microfilm is still the most reliable preservation medium and is integral to a newspaper's journey from printed page to computer screen. According to the Library of Congress, "digitization, for a wide variety of technical problems, is not generally accepted as a preservation technique" (*Preserving Newspapers*, 2012), and prevailing standards recommend that digital newspaper images be created from scanned preservation microfilm print negatives (Philosophy, 2012). While microfilm preserves historic newspaper content, digitization increases access to the content.

The UO Libraries have been preserving newspaper titles on microfilm since the early 1950s; however, specific dates and date ranges are often missing from microfilmed versions due to the unavailability of those issues at the time of filming. Additionally, the quality, condition, and readability of newspaper pages on microfilm, and thus online, depends solely on the condition of the original papers and the way in which they were filmed. For example, newspapers that were microfilmed as bound volumes have a center binding that creates a gutter shadow and page curve, making text more difficult to read. When microfilm is scanned to create digital images, obscured text of any kind reduces Optical Character Recognition (OCR) reliability for keyword searching.

The Oregon Digital Newspapers Program has enabled a re-visitation of the UO Libraries' microfilm holdings, allowing missing content to be regained and image quality revamped through partnerships with historical societies and public libraries statewide and across state lines. For example, in the fall of 2010, 11,960 pages of the *Astorian* were re-microfilmed, since it had originally been filmed over fifty years ago as, "bound volumes of issues that were often in an exceedingly poor state of preservation" (Stone, 2010). The Astoria Public Library provided the ODNP with well-preserved bound print copies, which were then carefully disbound, allowing each page to be filmed flat to produce a cleaner and more readable image. A steam iron was used to flatten wrinkles and creases in the papers, and "rips and tears were mended with Filmoplast, a non-reflective adhesive tape specifically designed for archival paper documents," (Stone, 2010). This same process was put to use again this year to re-film several titles from The Dalles, in a collaboration spearheaded by the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center, in order to fill in content that had previously been missing, as well as to improve image quality since the titles had originally been filmed bound.





Image Services technician Heidi Scheidl steam irons an original printed page of The Daily Morning Astorian in preparation for microfilming. Photo by Amanda Garcia, UO Libraries.

The Content

Every detailed inch of a newspaper page—the size, font, layout, rhetoric, author and writing style, in addition to the actual content, including mistakes and typos, advertisements and images—can reveal a plethora of information about the culture in which the newspaper was produced. The wealth of information that our historic newspapers have to offer can serve a wide array of disciplines and interests, and while it may seem overwhelming to sift through all of this rich content, the ODNP also offers resources that guide users to interesting topics and starting points for engagement with the database. Essays for each digitized title inform users of the cultural environment in which the papers were started and an overview of the papers’ philosophies, perspectives, and content. Periodic blogs (<http://odnp.wordpress.com/>) provide project updates and highlights on potential topics of interest, and the Historic Oregon Newspapers website offers K–12 resources for themed curriculum such as women’s suffrage, the Lewis & Clark voyage, Native American trade, the Oregon Trail, and Oregon-specific industry and environmental issues (<http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/k12/>).

The ODNP Advisory Board, comprised of librarians, curators, journalists, historians, and educators from across the state, plays a fundamental role in selecting titles for inclusion in the ODNP to ensure representation from the diverse geographical regions, political interests, and cultural perspectives. However, due to public domain copyright restrictions, we have only been able to digitize titles published before 1923, an era in which, with a few exceptions, Anglo American men dominated the newspaper industry. Although racism and other modes of discrimination abound in historic newspapers, much can be learned from the errors and injustices of the past. While most mention of Native Americans, Chinese immigrants, and other cultural groups in Oregon’s newspapers came from an Anglo viewpoint, every now and then unique perspectives from the people themselves can be found,



such as the “Umatilla Account of the Whitman Massacre,” highlighted in the ODNP blog (<http://odnp.wordpress.com/2010/03/03/an-umatilla-account-of-the-whitman-massacre/>).

The growth of Oregon’s economy, transportation, and natural resource industries can be traced through the pages of titles from various regions of the state, and researchers can witness first-hand the development of forestry, fishing practices, railroads, and Oregon’s mining boom. Salem’s *Willamette Farmer* (1869–1887) was Oregon’s first paper to focus on environmental, economic, and political issues related to agriculture, and was one of the first publications to point out the trend toward decline in wild salmon populations (Robbins, p. 137). The ODNP collection includes this and other key titles of importance to Oregon’s history as well as the history of the United States.

The oldest title in the Historic Oregon Newspapers web database is the *Oregon Spectator* (1846–1855), published in Oregon City thirteen years before Oregon became a state. The first newspaper to be published on the west coast (California’s first paper came seven months later; Washington had no newspaper until 1852), the *Spectator* was initiated by the newly formed Oregon Printing Association, consisting of several prominent citizens of Oregon Territory, including Francis W. Pettygrove, who gave the city of Portland its name, William G. T’Vault, the *Spectator*’s first editor, and Oregon’s first territorial governor, George Abernethy, whose influence dominated the publication (Turnbull, p. 25). The *Spectator*’s voice fell short of unbiased reporting, and one of the paper’s editors, George L. Curry, was fired early on for refusing to cater to Abernethy’s political interests. As a direct protest to the *Spectator*, Curry started the *Oregon Free Press* in 1848 with the motto: “Here shall the Press the people’s rights maintain, un-awed by influence, and un-bribed by gain.” The *Free Press* was only published for six months due to the outflow of Oregon readers to the gold mines of California, but Curry went on to become Secretary of the Interior for Oregon Territory as well as one of the youngest governors of Oregon, in 1854. The *Spectator* and the *Free Press* laid the foundations for opposition in Oregon’s print journalism between protest papers and the dominant political and social perspectives of the times.

The issue of women’s voting rights is prevalent in almost all of Oregon’s early newspapers, but *The New Northwest* (1871–1887), is most prominent in leadership and advocating for equal suffrage, workers’ rights, racial equality, immigration, and human rights, in the face of fierce opposition from the general press. It was published in Portland by Abigail Scott Duniway, a women’s rights and human rights advocate who came to Oregon via the Oregon Trail. Duniway’s brother, Harvey W. Scott, was the editor of *The Oregonian* at the time *The New Northwest* was founded, and she opposed his Republican stance directly through her progressive publication with an “energy and intelligence equaled by few publishers of her day,” (Turnbull, p. 165). With the help of Duniway, women in Oregon gained the right to vote in 1912, almost a decade before the United States government passed the 19th amendment, making 2012 the women’s suffrage centennial in Oregon. Now remembered as “Oregon’s Mother of Equal Suffrage,” Duniway finally witnessed the passage of the Oregon Proclamation of Women’s Suffrage, which she authored and signed, at the age of 78. Digitization of *The New Northwest* was one of the ODNP’s top priorities, and although the UO Libraries’ microfilm holdings for the title were incomplete, the Oregon Historical Society loaned original print material and the University of California Berkeley’s Bancroft Library offered their master negatives for digitization, allowing for a comprehensive collection of digitized issues from this monumental Oregon title.



Oregon's first African American newspapers are also part of the ODNP's collection: *The New Age* (1896–1905) and the *Portland New Age* (1905–1907), published in Portland by Adolphus D. Griffin, offer a unique perspective on Oregon's cultural history, given that African Americans were legally excluded from the state from 1857–1926. As a leading advocate for African American equality in the Pacific Northwest, Griffin was twice elected as a Republican delegate to the state convention, and his newspaper kept readers aware of the many issues facing America's black population. The *Portland New Age* included national news items such as an annual announcement from Booker T. Washington for the National Negro Business League (1906), as well as Griffin's own freely expressed opinions on African American involvement in business, politics, and academia. Readership extended beyond the greater African American community to include Anglo readers as well. *The Advocate* (1903–1936), openly confronted racism in the state and strongly promoted racial equality with a positive outlook for the future. It was published in Portland by Edward D. Cannady



Image from page five of *The New Age*, June 29, 1901.

and later by Beatrice Cannady, the first African American female lawyer in Oregon and founding member of the Portland NAACP. Although *The Advocate* was published weekly well before 1923, only post-1923 issues can be found in the UO Libraries' microfilm collection, excluding the title from the online collection at this time.

Several factors limit the inclusion of titles like *The Advocate* in the digital collection, including missing microfilm negatives, no content available in the public domain copyright date range, poor quality or condition of microfilm, and funding limitations. But, with




over 1,300 Oregon titles currently preserved on microfilm at the UO Libraries, we have just begun to skim the surface of the deep well of possible content that may eventually be included in our web database. Several institutions across Oregon have contacted the ODNP with questions about the preservation and digitization process and have expressed interest in partnering with the UO Libraries to include specific newspaper titles in the ODNP collection. We encourage these inquiries.

Looking through historic newspapers online is like looking backwards and forwards in time simultaneously. It is almost impossible not to make comparisons between the content and views expressed in historic papers and the way things are today, leading to thoughts of what the future might bring. It can be shocking to see how much our world has changed,



A political cartoon, published on page one of The Madras Pioneer on July 20, 1911, reveals that although much progress has been made in the past 100 years, society has remained the same in many ways.



from word usage to fashion styles and market prices, as well as the ways in which our society has remained the same over the years: personal and classified ads continue to be quite popular, and many of the same political and social issues continue to crop up in modern papers. More wondrous still is the notion that the people who actually read these newspapers on the day of publication would probably never have believed that the internet could exist, or that in the span of a century their daily and weekly newspapers would be preserved and made freely accessible online for the world to see. With that in mind, let us look toward the future with curiosity, creativity, and confidence that modes of preservation, access, education, and outreach will continue to improve with the passage of time, and ideas that we have not even imagined yet will likely become the reality of future generations. 

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