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# The Jackson County Genealogy Library: Over a Half-Century of Helping People Find Their Roots

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CARA DAVIS-JACOBSON recently retired from a long and successful career with McGraw-Hill Publishing and is now the founder of Rogue Valley Renaissance Woman, which provides authoring and editorial services to a variety of clients across the country and abroad. Her fascination with genealogy is apparently unceasing.



ANNE BILLETER is current President of the Rogue Valley Genealogical Society, past Library Director of the Jackson County Genealogy Library, a past president of the Oregon Library Association, and “theoretically retired.”

When the first few folks who gathered together in Southern Oregon’s Rogue Valley to share their interest in genealogy and family research wrapped up their meetings back in the late 1960s, their “president,” Ora Strom, tucked their shared reference books under her bed for storage. Little did that small group know that they would come to embody the proverb, “From humble beginnings come great things.” Indeed, from those modest actions arose two significant and related Southern Oregon entities: The Rogue Valley Genealogical Society (RVGS) ([www.rvgsociety.org](http://www.rvgsociety.org)) and the



Jackson County Genealogy Library (JCGL) ([www.rvgslibrary.org](http://www.rvgslibrary.org)), which is managed by the Society.

In September of 2016, RVGS celebrated its semicentennial—50 expansive years of preserving the past so that others might benefit from the accumulated knowledge of so many who paved the way to create the society and library as they are today. RVGS and JCGL are gems that, these days, serve not only Southern Oregon but also researchers from all over the world. In fact, JCGL now houses the largest genealogical collection between Portland, Oregon, and Sacramento, California! For a modest membership fee, patrons gain access to a world of services and materials, including free special interest research groups, free and fee-based classes and seminars, and monthly programs open to members and the public at no charge. (Non-members pay a nominal daily visitor fee to use the library, and research requests are filled at special rates.) Society membership meetings are combined with public programs which occur nearly every month of the year. These popular talks delve into such topics as the Applegate Trail and settlement of our part of the state, the Orphan Train Movement, stagecoaching and stagecoach routes, historical visitors to and residents of Southern Oregon, and other historical and genealogical topics of interest.

In addition, there are monthly presentations open to the public on genealogy and quilts. These fascinating talks look at our unique Oregon history through the lives and handiwork of our residents, entertaining listeners with the unique stories behind specific quilts and the tales of those who made them. Some of the quilts are housed at the library, and others are in personal collections, both local and distant.

Moreover, classes and seminars are offered on current topics of interest, such as getting started with genealogical research, organizing research, digital and web-based applications, researching in specific geographic regions, accessing various types of records, such as birth, death, marriage, burial, land, probate, military records, and more.

Interest groups meet monthly and are aimed at those who wish to share information regarding German research, Irish research, software user groups, and DNA and genetic genealogy. At the end of September, the society offers classes and other events as part of a free “Genealogy Week” at the library and, in conjunction, related courses are offered through Southern Oregon University via the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI).

The library itself has shown amazing growth over the years, thanks to many dedicated volunteers, donors, and visionaries. Its first permanent location was chosen in 1970: library materials were housed at the Latter Day Saints Church on Juanipero Way in Medford. By 1978, the society had developed Articles of Incorporation, granting non-profit status. After donations of both additional library materials and funds in 1982, the library was relocated to the Franklin Building in downtown Medford, occupying a growing-but-still-modest 540-square-foot space upstairs. Thanks to ambitious and ongoing acquisition efforts, book donations from across the county, fundraising endeavors, and other programs, the library moved to a 1,800-square-foot space in nearby Phoenix in 1990.

In 1991, the first computer was donated to the library, and the library’s digital age began. Gatherings for computer users were added to library offerings, providing support to researchers who were making use of the new technology. By the late 1990s, the library had several computer stations and once again was outgrowing its space. Rent had risen enough for the society to consider a pledge drive to raise money to buy a building of its own. In 2001, that goal was achieved, and a building in nearby Phoenix was located and purchased.





1990 location, Phoenix, OR.



Current location, Medford, OR.



Current location, Medford, OR.

Within the next decade, even that location was bursting at the seams, and the library moved once more to its present location on Highway 99 at the south end of Medford. With the help of a successful “Leave a Legacy” campaign and numerous generous donors, the mortgage was paid off in five years. This location—with some 5,800 square feet, a large meeting room that can be separated into two meeting rooms, and 16 computer stations—has brought RVGS and JCGL into the 21st century.

The mission statement of the 501(c)3 non-profit Rogue Valley Genealogical Society, Inc., is to inspire interest in genealogy, inform and educate the public, and maintain a growing sustainable library with a strong online presence. The society and library have grown from the initial modest collection of books and handful of members to become a vibrant society of 829 members capable of running an important and all-volunteer library. There are 89 active volunteers serving as librarians, indexers, proofreaders, landscape maintainers, board members, researchers, teachers, genealogy research mentors, interest group facilitators, and other roles too many to enumerate.

In addition to computer and genealogical research mentoring stations, JCGL has a constantly growing and impressive book, map, and media collection of over 19,000



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cataloged items. Additionally, the library subscribes to many essential online genealogical research sources such as Ancestry, Fold 3, American Ancestors, My Heritage, Find My Past, and HistoryGeo. Holdings include: numerous family histories; Jackson County pioneer files and records; land, court, and death records; obituaries and cemetery information; state, county, local and genealogical periodicals; records for adjacent Josephine County; Daughters of the American Revolution lineage books; Mayflower descendant and family books; the New England Historical and Genealogical Register; the American State Papers; and an index to the great Register of California (1890).

The library also maintains a microfilm and microfiche collection with film/fiche readers and printers. In addition, the library is the repository of a historical quilt collection donated by the Jacksonville Museum Quilters (for more information: [www.msquilters.com](http://www.msquilters.com)). The society has two electronic publications that serve its membership: the monthly *eNews*, which covers upcoming events, issues of interest to the membership, and library acquisitions; and *The Rogue Digger*, which features research-based articles written primarily by the society's membership.

Yes, from humble beginnings have come great things, especially here in Southern Oregon! We at RVGS invite everyone to come and make use of our Oregon gem, the Jackson County Genealogy Library. Society members and librarians are dedicated and knowledgeable family historians and teachers who take pride in helping all seekers learn more about genealogical research and techniques. Come and visit—or, better yet, join us and help us grow toward our centennial! 

