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Buried treasure in the Oregon State Library

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One day a man traveling through Bethany stopped at several houses to get some grease to fry some venison, but nobody had any, so he boiled his meat. He named the community Scanty Grease. That was the first name it ever had. Later it was voted at the church that they should name it Bethany.

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In early times people gave the creeks many names. Each one had a name for every creek they came to. They all belonged to the church. One day the preacher was riding a saddle horse across Silver Creek. He had a bag of silver with him. He dropped

it in the creek where the current was swift. The silver was carried down stream. Then he said that he would name it Silver Creek, and it has been that ever since.

Buried Treasure in the Oregon State Library

By Stephanie S. Kocian
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The above vignettes were written by Lee Grinde and Lewis Nicol, fifth graders from Bethany School in 1936 for the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), and are part of the Special Collections held at the Oregon State Library. These are only two among

thousands in this collection waiting for discovery and are touching examples of the history gathered by Works Progress Administration's (WPA) FWP field workers.

Franklin D. Roosevelt and Congress created the WPA in 1935 as a work relief program to aid the growing number of unemployed and indigent during the Depression. Each state had a WPA Federal Writers' Project, whose sole goal was to hire as many white collar workers as possible in the smallest amount of time. These workers included artists, writers, journalists, musicians, actors, playwrights, photographers, and an assortment of supporting staffers, such as secretaries and clerical workers. The task of FWP workers was to collect information about the state, such as town histories, immigrant and pioneer biographies, geographical, and weather statistics – everything from cattle and sheep grazing to ethnicity and industry. Workers also compiled travel guides pointing out significant tourist attractions. The information was used to create state guide books as part of the American Guide Series, and in Oregon the information gathered was used in creation of the *Dictionary of Oregon History*, and *Willamette Landings* by Howard McKinley Corning and several other publications completed after the close of the program in 1942.

At the program's end, Oregon FWP workers had gathered hundreds of boxes of written and photographic information. The collection is made up of 20

separate series. Series 1 is the largest; it has 103 boxes filled with Oregon folklore, town histories, fort and battlefield sites, and information on transportation and agriculture. A significant part of this series contains the original scripts from a radio show promoting the armed services called *Radio Soldier of the Air*. Some of the other series containing information specific to the individual counties of Oregon were used to generate individual county guide books. Lastly there is the photographic series, which contains original photos used in the guide books.

This collection is the largest single collection of Oregon history collected by one agency. WPA workers gathered information from newspapers, church records, county records, and state legislative records as well as from personal interviews and diaries of early pioneers. Just as important as the size of the collection is its nature, which is a testimonial to the early settlers, pioneers, and immigrants whose stories collectively constitute our state's history.

Some of them are unexpected:

- A 14-year-old Finnish boy was asked to step down as student body president of Astoria High School because he had socialist sympathies.
- A Basque sailor who left the Pyrenees Mountains, sailed around the world to San Francisco and eventually made it to Malheur County. He settled there and then sent for the rest of his family, and they brought with them their skills as sheepherders and their colorful traditions.
- Chinese rail workers were run out of Portland in the 1870's and 1880's by bands of unemployed whites who terrorized them and, on occasion, dynamited Chinese dwellings.
- Four young nuns from The Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary overcame town prejudice and hatred in Jacksonville. These young sisters turned their school into a hospital and cared for the citizens of the town during a smallpox epidemic.

Most of the manuscripts in this collection are in fair-to-good condition, but some newspaper clippings that have become brown and brittle require photocopying and preservation. Parts of the photographic collection are in desperate need of repair. Several photographic plates require re-silvering and many photos need to be copied before they fade and crumble. Efforts by state library staff and volunteers are underway to catalog each document in the collection in preparation for microfilming and preservation. This will make the collection accessible to the public.

I have had the fortunate opportunity to read and to work on cataloging this collection as part of my work towards a bachelor of arts degree in History from Pacific University. I often say that working with FWP documents is similar to being in a candy store for history majors. Each document is an important part of Oregon's history and the history of the United States. 