

July 2014

The Oregon authors committee: Documenting Oregon's literary heritage

Jey Wann
Oregon State Library

Recommended Citation

Wann, J. (2014). The Oregon authors committee: Documenting Oregon's literary heritage. *OLA Quarterly*, 5(2), 10-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1518>

© 2014 by the author(s).

OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

The Oregon Authors Committee:

Documenting Oregon's Literary Heritage

by Jey Wann
Oregon State Library

For many years, amid the hustle and bustle of the annual Oregon Library Association conference, a small publication has appeared: *Oregon Authors*, a bibliography listing works published by Oregon authors in the previous year. Taken for granted by many, this bibliography can trace its beginnings back over 50 years.

The earliest ancestor of *Oregon Authors* was a list in the 1933/34 edition of the *Oregon Blue Book*, compiled by the Oregon State Library (OSL). Through the 1954 edition, OSL continued to provide the *Blue Book* with information on Oregon authors. Various titles *Oregon Writers of Today*, *Oregon Writers of Today Recognized*, and *Who's Who of Oregon Authors*, the lists were generally only a few pages long. The early lists included brief biographical information about the authors, but later lists were simply annotated bibliographies. The 1937/38 list was compiled by the

Federal Writers Project. OSL also published periodic supplements to *Who's Who of Oregon Authors* from 1949 to 1955.

The predecessor to the current OLA Oregon Authors Committee was the Current Biographical Data on Oregon Authors Committee, which was formed in 1950 to work with the Current Biographical Data Committee of PNL (Findley, 1955). The Committee was closely tied to OSL, which supplied personnel and supplies for the work of collecting data on Oregon authors. In fact in 1952 the State Librarian sent a letter to the OLA president stating that "Data col-

lected belongs to the Oregon State Library and not to OLA, although the results of the research are given to OLA" (Findley, 1955).

In 1952, the committee became a standing committee of OLA. Initially called the Bibliography Committee, its name was changed to the Committee on Oregon Authors in 1953 (Findley, 1955). What caused the switch from biography to bibliography isn't clear. The published reports of both OSL and the committee have always emphasized bibliographical, rather than biographical, information. At this writing, the OLA Executive Board is considering many changes to the procedural section of the OLA bylaws, including one to change "biographical" to "bibliographic" in the description of the work of the Oregon Authors Committee. There may have been confusion in the written description, but it's obvious from half a century's worth of documentation that the committee, in whatever form, has always been dedicated to collecting bibliographic information on the works of Oregon authors.

The close cooperation between the committee and OSL is reflected by the fact that for the bibliographies published between 1961 and 1967, it's unclear exactly who was responsible. The 1961/63 and 1967/68 edition are titled *Report of the Oregon Authors Committee*; the 1964/65 through 1966/67 bibliographies give no information about who published them, but the State Library classified them as publications of OSL, not OLA.

Another indication of the close ties between the committee and OSL is another section of the OLA by-laws also due for change. The current by-laws state that the committee chair is "usually... a member of the Oregon State Library staff." Until OSL's recent change in mission, this did make sense, as OSL had a significant commitment to collecting works by, and infor-

A selection of 1985 Oregon authors.



mation on, Oregon authors. However, a review of the committee rosters over the years shows that committee chairs have come from all types of libraries in all parts of the state. Committee membership has also been diverse. Until recently, school librarians regularly served as members. The 1970/71 committee included Winifred Layton, representing the Oregon Poetry Association. From 1972 to 1976, Oregon author Walt Morey was a committee member.

The amount of information in the bibliography has increased over the years. The 1965 edition included the first necrology, listing Oregon authors who had died that year. This feature remained through 1980, with a few exceptions. The 1965 edition also included news and a list of Oregon authors who had received awards. The only other edition to include this information was the 1986 edition. The 1985 edition included a short directory of Oregon publishers. The 1986 edition added codes indicating Oregon content, juvenile reading level, and honor or award winners. The Oregon and juvenile codes are still used. The title index first appeared in the 1989/90 edition.

The definition of "Oregon author" has been consistent throughout the decades. To be included, an author must have lived in Oregon when he or she wrote the work. Textbooks and very technical publications have always been excluded. The length of the bibliography has varied greatly. Early editions frequently were only a few pages, including perhaps 30 or 40 books. Recent editions have been nearly 30 pages, listing over 400 works. The increase is obviously due in part to the increased population of the state, but inconsistencies between editions indicate that there has also been a difference in the amount of information gathered by different committees.

Recent editions have been consistent in the information provided: author's name and place of residence; title of book; place of publication; publisher; number of pages; price; ISBN; address for small publishers; and occasional annotations. This is merely an expansion of the information included in the early editions and *Blue Book* lists.

There has, however, been a major change in the appearance of the bibliography. Some of OSL's early *Who's Who of Oregon Authors* were attractive, professionally printed pamphlets. But most editions were serviceable typed and mimeographed lists: useful, but not particularly nice to look at. In 1985, committee member Rebecca Hassman decided to change that.

Hassman wanted to give the bibliography a more professional look. She located what she called a "budget-friendly photographer," who provided photographs of artistically-arranged Oregon author books for the cover. Hassman and her committee, along with staff from the State Library, keyed the bibliography into a word processing file, which they gave to a professional printer. The printer provided



*Oregon
Authors
1995*

camera-ready copy, which the Committee then manually cut and pasted, and returned to the printer. The result was the first eye-catching edition of *Oregon Authors*. The next year, Hassman switched to doing the input and design on PageMaker. The most recent editions have used word processing software such as Microsoft Word.

The bibliography has maintained the professional look since then. The 1989/90 edition has a colorful cover designed by staff at the Albany Public Library. The 1990 edition utilized the talents of an artist who was doing community service work at the State Library. The covers of the 1991-1995 editions were designed by staff and family of staff at the State Library. For the 1996 and 1997 editions John Hawk used art from older Oregon books in the University of Oregon's special collections. For the 1998 edition Craig Smith solicited designs from art students at a Salem high school.

For years, *Oregon Authors* was distributed free of charge. That changed when the more professional look resulted in higher production costs, and the bibliography has been sold ever since. Libraries are the obvious buyers for such a publication, but Dee Iltis took the marketing efforts beyond the library community. Iltis built two mailing lists: one of Oregon authors and publishers, and one of Oregon libraries and other potential buyers of the annual bibliography. Since these lists were compiled in the early 1990s, the committee has sent out two annual mailings: one to authors and publishers, asking for information on works by Oregon authors published in the previous year, and one to libraries and other buyers, announcing availability of the new bibliography. To compile the lists, Iltis used information from previous editions of the bibliography and the State Library's Oregon library mailing lists, and shared mailing lists with Literary Arts, Inc. Iltis also

contacted Oregon college and university public relations offices for information on faculty who are Oregon authors. The two mailings have ensured that the Oregon literary community and libraries are kept abreast of the activity of the Oregon Authors Committee. In fact, Literary Arts, Inc. frequently requests an early draft edition of the bibliography to use in helping select nominees for the Oregon Book Awards.

Especially since the establishment of the mailing lists, much of the information that is eventually published in *Oregon Authors* comes from the authors or publishers themselves. For much of its history, however, the Oregon Authors Committee has also relied on a press clipping service to which the State Library subscribes for information on new works by Oregon authors. The clipping service is particularly useful for getting information about small, self-published works, frequently dealing with local history. And, of course, a major task for committee members is seeking out information on Oregon authors.

Much of the information, especially that submitted by authors and publishers, is complete and ready for inclusion in the bibliography. The same can't be said for information from clippings, or even for information in the books themselves. Clippings may not include the name of the publisher, date of publication, or any ordering information. Dust jackets of books are notorious for saying the author "lives in northwest Oregon," or other phrases equally unhelpful to bibliography editors trying to pinpoint the author's home town. Tracking down and verifying information is one of the major jobs of committee members.

Rebecca Hassman, in reminiscing on her time on the Oregon Authors Committee, referred to "the excruciating process of trying to get every detail right." As co-editor of *Oregon Authors* from 1991 to 1997, I experienced an increase in the amount of information that was easily available. For the first few editions I edited, *Books in Print*, OCLC, and the phone were my main resources. Phoning, while time consuming, frequently resulted not only in the specific information I was seeking, but also in discovering information about new Oregon authors, or additional books by the author about whom I was inquiring. The advent of the World Wide Web greatly expanded the resources available for verifying information. Amazon.com, Powell's website, publishers' websites, and shared catalogs such as Orbis provide valuable bibliographic information. And, when all else fails, directory sites such as Switchboard made verifying an author's city of residence much easier. In fact, I suspect that I'm not the only editor who has had trouble knowing when to quit when searching the vast resources of the Web: surely I'll be able to find out how many pages that book has if I just search one more place!

Less interesting, but no less important, is the work of laying out and proof-reading the bibliography. The

Committee has made changes to the font and layout over the years in order to improve readability. Then there are the thorns in the side of many editors: the column break that insists on occurring in the middle of an entry, or the late, but important, addition that throws off most of the page breaks in the entire publication. Once the publication is in its nearly-final form, proof-readers take over. It's impossible to say too much about these folks, who sometimes have been innocent by-standers who were talked into helping out. Proof-reading text can be hard enough; proof-reading ISBNs is a real task!

The Web has changed the way editors verify information for *Oregon Authors*. In the near future, it may also change the way the bibliography is published. 1998/99 committee chair Craig Smith is investigating using the Web for an online, frequently-updated version of *Oregon Authors*. Smith hopes that the online version could become just one piece of an Oregon Authors Clearinghouse, which would include cumulative editions of the bibliography plus information from the State Library's and other libraries' Oregon authors files. The 1977 edition of *Oregon Authors* included an "Oregon author list cumulation progress report." While recognizing the immense amount of work involved, the committee recommended that a cumulation should be undertaken, and that "the resulting effort should be made part of a computer-access system and maintained in a data bank for future on-line access." Over 20 years later, this vision may soon become a reality.

Writing in 1902, John B. Horner speculated thus on the future of Oregon literature: "Of the future literature of Oregon it may be said that peace, home, and prosperity will be the probable themes—agricultural and pastoral life will not be slighted. Nor will the sons of the men who made the country permit to be forgotten the legends incident to the life of the settler, and the trials of the Indian who was gradually crowded out of his home" (Horner, 1902). In almost a century, Oregon's literature has fulfilled that prediction and more, giving voice to poets, philosophers, historians, storytellers, diarists, and others from diverse backgrounds and cultures. OLA can be proud that the Oregon Authors Committee has helped document that heritage for over half a century. **Q**

REFERENCES

Findley, E., 1955. *History of the Oregon Library Association, Organized June 14, 1940*. The Association.

Horner, J., 1902. *Oregon Literature*. Portland: J.K. Gill Co.

Oregon Blue Book, 1933/34-1954 editions. Salem: Secretary of State.

AND all of the editions of *Oregon Authors* I could lay my hands on!