

ST. BONIFACE ARCHIVES & MUSEUM

Sublimity, Oregon
by Henry Strobel

St. Boniface Archives & Museum lives in the southwest corner of the former convent just across the street from St. Boniface Church, one of the oldest original church buildings in Oregon. The town of Sublimity and the church of St. Boniface share a fascinating history.

Every Oregon Catholic community should have its "archives" to collect, preserve, and share the history and inspiration of its church, its people. This article describes the one in Sublimity. We have historical records, photos, family histories, oral histories, artifacts, and memoirs from 130 years of St. Boniface parish and 160 years of life in this place uniquely named Sublimity. We encourage young and old persons, old families and new, to contribute their stories and share in our archives project so these memories, this heritage will not be lost but continue to grow a feeling of home and belonging. Seeing where we came from can help us understand where we want to go.

The Portland Archdiocesan Historical Commission, founded in 1972, encourages and advises parishes on the collection and preservation of historic resource materials. With its Bishop Leipzig award it cooperates with the Oregon Catholic Historical Society in recognizing persons who have contributed to the preservation and publication of Catholic history in the Pacific Northwest. One example is Fr. Wilfrid Schoenberg SJ, who wrote the official history of the Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon, *These Valiant Women*.

The centennial of St. Boniface Church in 1979 saw a renewal of interest in local history with the parish publication of *Let us Remember*, a hardbound pioneer photograph



Home of St. Boniface Archives & Museum

album compiled by Dr. Raymond Heuberger. The 125th anniversary in 2004 saw greater historical interest, research, and an extensive display in the former convent building, now the home of St. Boniface Archives & Museum. St. Boniface' 125th anniversary was coincidentally the 1250th anniversary of St. Boniface' martyrdom in 754 AD. I noted this in the St. Boniface web site, relating it to the concurrent celebrations in Europe. With the planning of the web site in 2002, I had also begun a simple, linear *Illustrated History of Sublimity, Oregon*. (See *OCHS Newsletter of Fall 2006*.) Town historians Vera Boedigheimer, Evangeline Ripp and other Sublimity residents helped expertly and generously. This was always intended as a history of the town and community as well as of the church. (Installments from it are sent out with the municipal water bills!)

Sublimity's history is in three "layers," that of the Native Americans, the United Brethren and Sublimity College to the Civil War, and the German Catholics from the Midwest. I don't have space here to retell the story, but would like to interject one convoluted example of how retelling history can connect communities:

In 1884 a group of young ladies seeking a religious order of their own arrived by rail from Minnesota in the Jordan colony, just southeast of Sublimity. With them were their elders and the preserved body of their late German immigrant pastor. After many trials they were established as the Sisters of the Precious Blood in Sublimity, with ties to several local families, such as the Boedigheimers. In 1891 the Sisters were called away to Beaverton to run an orphanage. Fr. Joseph Fessler, who had built St. Boniface church, went with them. In 1894, the Sisters began building a new convent in Beaverton. In 1898 Mr. and Mrs. Bruno Boedigheimer of Sublimity gave them the bell that to this day sounds their Angelus. Sr. Pulcheria Sparkman, SSMO wrote a wonderfully readable (I might say “Sparkling”) history of the order, *And So It happened, and Not by Chance*. Vera Boedigheimer showed me a copy of the annotated manuscript that she had had for about forty years. When I inquired about it at Beaverton, the “irrepressible” archivist (and former Superior General of the order), Sr. Fidelis Kreutzer, surprised me with a typewritten, annotated copy of its sequel, *And So It Happened, and Not by Chance, Book Two*. I typeset both of these for the Sisters’ and for our archives. At the Spring Event of the OCHS in April, 2008, Sr. Fidelis showed us through the order’s archives - and we heard the Boedigheimer bell, rung vigorously by Sr. Ruth Etzel, a native of Sublimity.

The name “St. Boniface Archives and Museum” has a nice ring, but we know who we are - volunteers, not professional archivists. All our participants are interested and some are very knowledgeable, personally steeped in their own local history. We are fortunate - not everyone wants to be an



A typical Tuesday morning meeting

historian! We have a core group of about a dozen regulars who come to most weekly meetings. Some of the most productive people in any field are the *amateurs*, i.e. *lovers* of their subject. About half of our volunteers are computer literate, but all contribute their interest and knowledge of local history, sharing the work of sorting, archival storing, and housekeeping (picture hanging, coffee making, and such). They are also ambassadors welcoming visitors and encouraging others to participate. A student from Willamette University did research here for her thesis *Sublimity: Shared Visions in a Rural Community*, published on our web site.

But it's not all work - it's also something of a clubhouse. Elder raconteurs bring their zest and stories. This is our community. Most (not I) are retired. Naturally we gravitate to congenial tasks. One will end up as archivist or librarian, another as secretary, specialist historian, interviewer, photographer, information technologist, or gadfly (that would be me: "let's move along now.") Many are necessarily switch-hitters. Some work on their own outside of meeting times. Such key persons accomplish a lot - God bless them!

There's always the background concern: “What if the volunteers disappeared?” It seems unlikely, but we try to make sure that

what has been entrusted to us is cataloged and safely stored to survive a future dry spell - or worse. We didn't go to this trouble to have it lost!

The name "Archives & Museum" indicates two divergent purposes: conservative archival **storage** vs. display and easy **access**. We catalog and store the original documents and photos in acid-free boxes, sleeves, and files. We have a no loan policy (we make photocopies on request) and a white gloves policy. And - to an ever increasing extent, we place material on the internet. This can satisfy both the need for (surprisingly) safe backup as well as for (obviously) easy access everywhere.

Cataloging is critical but difficult. Resources dictate to what detail this can be done, but everything should be listed with a signed accession form showing what, from whom, when, etc. The catalog listing might necessarily have to be rather general at accession, e.g. "about a hundred old family photos from the Joe Spenner family," and later cataloged with more precision. Everything we have is at least listed, with its location, in a computer document called *What's in the Archives?* which, like many things described here, is available on the web at www.saintboniface.net

A computer is essential for organized record keeping and backup, but it cannot be depended on to store primary information. For that we need paper! Unless zealously maintained, digitized photos and documents will eventually succumb to operator error, equipment failure, program obsolescence, or media deterioration.

Where practical we use copies for display. We have about five-hundred square feet of "bulletin board" wall display donated by a local building supply, not acid-free, but safe enough for copies in acid-free clear sleeves.



Tony Beitel, 99, invited us to his history-packed farmhouse.

Such copies have to be considered replaceable because of some inevitable fading. These displays are full of old 8x10 family, wedding, town, school, and farm photos. They are popular with young and old visitors, often seen pointing out or discovering ancient relatives or homes.

We have found that three-ring binders with transparent archival quality sleeves are most convenient for organized, labeled, accessible shelf storage of photos and documents, even originals. White gloves are then not needed; it's safer than handling loose items from a boxed folder, and they can be photocopied while in the transparent sleeve.

One of our volunteers made the horizontal plexiglass covered display case in the center of the room for displaying small three dimensional objects. Adequate display space is always a consideration - where to put the antique liturgical vestments, spinning wheels and school desks? So far we have managed..

We have to keep a sensible perspective, appreciating the worth of what we can preserve, but philosophical about what is beyond our reach and resources. Our volunteers do it for the good of the community, for their families, partly for the fun - and all for free!

Oral history can be an easy and effective way to preserve local heritage. Choose a few elders with interesting lives and reliable memories, preferably born talkers. (We seem to be blessed with them.) A camcorder, out of the way on a tripod, does not seem to make old people uncomfortable - perhaps the opposite. A skillful interviewer who knows the background and is a friend of the subject is best. Unexpected gems have emerged in this process - not merely tales of early Sublimity but some great war stories. We simply put it on a DVD and don't fret about the editing. It's easy to zip back and forth and instantly replay - you can't do that with an audio or video cassette. (Portions could, of course, resources permitting, be transcribed or edited later.) We have a DVD viewing station that visitors can use without tying up the archives computer. We can also make DVD copies to borrow or buy.

St. Boniface Archives & Museum had a humble beginning in a basement festooned with overhead pipes. Our first concern was to request the church council to install a remotely connected fire alarm system. Then to change the lock and establish a simple key control system - no one gets his own key but borrows it from the church secretary as needed. It was wonderful when we ascended to the present well-lighted first floor space with both front door and ramp access. We had "arrived." Many of our visitors (not to say staff) are not as mobile as they once were, and the basement stairs had not been popular. Our web site pictures our progress and chronicles weekly what we do in the *St. Boniface Archives Record*.



We thrive thanks to these competent volunteer leaders.

We don't have regular open hours, but our occasional open houses are popular, usually scheduled to coincide with picnics or other special events. We produced a "place map" for the last parish dinner. Printed on both sides with local history and a walker's map, it produced a bumper crop of visitors. We were asked to bring it back again this year.

Our regular meetings, at which anyone is welcome, are 10:AM Tuesday mornings, but anyone can arrange a special visit for research, to share their own history, photos, or artifacts with us, or just to look around.

The author is a member of the Portland Archdiocesan Historical Commission and publishes www.saintboniface.net, which features the weekly *St. Boniface Archives Record* and the *Illustrated History of Sublimity, Oregon*..