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Ordinary Women/Extraordinary Lives: Oregon Women and Their Stories of Persistence, Grit and Grace

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Ordinary Women/Extraordinary Lives:
Oregon Women and Their Stories of
Persistence, Grit and Grace

by

Shannon Moon Leonetti

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

Thesis Committee:
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Portland State University
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Abstract

This thesis tells the stories of five Oregon women who transcended the customary roles of their era. Active during the waning years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, each woman made a difference in the world around them. Their stories have either not been told or just given a passing glance. These tales are important because they inform us about our society on the cusp of the twentieth century.

Hattie Crawford Redmond was the daughter of a freed slave who devoted herself to the fight for women's suffrage. Minnie Mossman Hill was the first woman steamboat pilot west of the Mississippi. Mary Francis Isom was a local librarian who went to France to deliver books to American soldiers. Ann and May Shogren were sisters who brought high fashion to Portland and defied the gender and social rules in both their business and personal lives.

These women were not the only ones who accomplished extraordinary things during their lives. They are a tiny sample of Oregon women who pushed beyond discrimination, hardship and gender limits to earn their place in Oregon's history.

*This is dedicated to my mother who is always with me,
Jan Stennick, my walking partner and best friend,
and
Richard, my husband, my strength and the most patient man I have ever known.*

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Introduction to “Ordinary Women/Extraordinary Lives”

Someone is always asking me, “Why did you write about *these* women?” Well, I chose these women because I have always loved independent, outspoken women who, when challenged or ignored, went ahead and did what they wanted to do because they were passionate about *it* whatever *it* was; real women, flaws and all, who rose above the ordinary through their own grit and determination.

When I looked back to my own childhood for strong and irreverent women (women I admired even as a young girl) three came to mind: my mother, my grandmother (my mother’s mother) and Pippi Longstocking. Well, Pippi had Astrid Lindgren to tell her story but no one tried to tell my mother or grandmother’s stories. When I asked personal questions, their answers were always something like, “No one wants to hear about me. What did I ever do?” They didn’t think their lives made a difference and I was too young to realize they were wrong.

Somewhere along the line, I began to notice just how many “ordinary” women there were whose lives had made a difference. Their stories were seldom acknowledged or recorded but they were powerful testaments to what a woman could be or do if she was willing to *just go for it*. The women in the following stories were these sorts of women.

Of all the stories I came across when I started my search for women with a local connection, these four were the ones that made my stomach flip flop with admiration. These were the untold lives I wanted to know more about. It didn’t

take me long to recognize that these particular women illustrated a unique piece of history that helped make Oregon what it is today.

At first glance, I didn't think they had anything significant in common. They all arrived in the Pacific Northwest as children and lived in Portland during the last half of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century. As far as I know, they never knew each other, although some of their paths crossed during the years when women were working for the right to vote. Two were married; the others were single. They were a steamboat pilot, a librarian, a black clubwoman/suffragist and a pair of sisters who were tailors.

What they did share was that each one, in her own way, challenged the limitations placed on her by society. At first I thought their obstacles were all gender-driven but that wasn't true. While two of the women challenged the barriers to what were considered men's jobs, the other women had to confront the scrutiny of their female peers when they didn't fit the stereotypes of what a woman ought to be or do.

Minnie Hill didn't want to be a schoolteacher. She wanted to pilot a steamboat. Hattie Redmond, the daughter of a freed slave, wouldn't settle for merely being someone's wife or caretaker so she took on suffrage and Portland clubwomen when that wasn't what a black woman did. Mary Francis Isom's passion was to deliver books to anyone who wanted or needed them and she was willing to leave behind the comfortable walls of the Portland Public Library to deliver them to wounded soldiers on the battlefields of France. And the Shogren sisters didn't want to be "just seamstresses working in someone else's sewing

room” so they opened their own haute couture business, designing one-of-a-kind dresses for women all over the United States, while building a real estate empire equal to any man’s of their time. Not one of these women expected society to provide her with anything other than a fair chance to do what she wanted to do and what she was capable of doing.

Why is it important that we cast a backward glance at what might be considered the first generation of the women’s movement in Oregon? Because these women, and others just like them, were the forerunners of a future generation of feminists, women who would push open closed doors.

How different were their experiences from ours? Not so different. They were raised by hardworking parents, who found ways to educate their children whether at home or in school. Their drive was not fuelled by whether they were raised in privileged families or by parents who struggled just to put food on the table. They all arrived in adulthood with a Christian-like viewpoint to do what was right, morally and financially, and to make the best of their God-given brains and skills.

While their lives make good tales, they were difficult to reconstruct because there was so little written record. I have tried to balance what can be known for sure through newspapers, government documents and a few letters and ledgers with the stories they told their families or their families told others. Their experiences will take readers to a different era to meet women who were not that much different from the women around us today. They were women we can admire, women of courage, wit and skill. They were ordinary women who led

extraordinary lives. They were Oregon women who demonstrated persistence, grit and grace.

(Figure 1)

Minnie Mossman Hill
1865-1946

Minnie Mossman Hill: The First Female Steamboat Pilot

West of the Mississippi

Like many children who grew up in the 1950s, I was enthralled by television. A huge television – the latest black and white from RCA, with rabbit ears balanced on top and a larger antenna on the roof – dominated our living room. I could watch it for only one hour a night so I chose my programs carefully – the *Mickey Mouse Club* with Annette Funicello on Saturdays, the *Lawrence Welk Show* with those lovely Lennon Sisters in their ball gowns on Sundays and, on Tuesday nights, the show I looked forward to most of all, *Tugboat Annie*.

Annie was like none of the other women I saw on television in those days. She cussed and wore overalls and smoked a corncob pipe. She worked as a pilot on the treacherous waters of the Pacific Northwest where I lived, and when her rival, Captain Horatio Bullwinkle tried to steal work from her, she won every time. When she ran into trouble and things looked hopeless, her face took on a determined look. Fearless and confident, she forged ahead until victory was hers.

I hadn't thought of Annie in decades until one day a few years ago, in a conversation about women in Portland history, a friend asked if I had ever heard of Minnie Mossman Hill. She was the first steamboat captain west of the Mississippi, my friend said. The image of Annie came to mind. Despite the name Minnie Mae, I pictured one of those rare, rough women I'd read about, who

dressed like a man to fight in the Civil War or hid their sex to ride in the Pony Express. What I found when I finally looked her up, however, was a woman like none I had heard of – one who could do anything a man could do while remaining fully a woman. This is her story.

* * * * *

It was a cold winter day in 1886 when Minnie Mossman Hill walked into the United States Inspector's Office in downtown Portland, Oregon. "I want to take the examination for second-class pilot's papers," declared the determined young woman. The U.S. Custom's building on 8th and Couch, home to the Inspector's office, was a foreboding building of whitish grey concrete, ionic pillars and a dozen high steps leading up to the front door. The building was about a ten-block walk from the waterfront where Minnie and her husband, Charley Hill, had tied up their scow (a scow is a small riverboat from 25 to 40 feet in length), a walk through the rougher part of northwest Portland.

This part of town was the home of rooming houses for sailors, dockworkers and laborers who were looking for day work and the taverns where they gathered. Rumors of kidnappings and stories of crime and gambling added a dark mystique to both the waterfront and this neighborhood. Minnie might have been the only woman out on the street even in the middle of the day. Although suffrage was a fervent topic in Portland, and women were confident enough to lobby for their rights, the world that they could walk comfortable in was very narrow and this wasn't part of it. Women who worked did so out of financial necessity and the respectable jobs were usually in areas south of Burnside

Street, the opposite direction from the Inspector's Office. On the south side, women could walk anywhere without questioning stares and were accepted working in offices or as shop girls. Moving about, they would have been part of a street scene that included their peers, neighbors, women who were shopping and those meeting their friends.

North of Burnside, there would have been few women for Minnie to greet or notice. There might have been a few working in shops or laundries but, for the most part, the ladies who lived or worked in this area worked at night and slept during the day.

None of the streets in Portland were very clean but these were among the worst. Dirt, dust and old newspapers were dumped in the gutters. Spittoons were emptied on the edges of the wooden sidewalks and fruit vendors threw rotten leftovers into the street. The only thing preventing the smells from being horrific was the cold of winter. On a more positive note, streetlights had arrived a year earlier.

U.S. Steamship Inspectors Edwards and Wynn were in charge of the Portland, Oregon office. Wynn was the front deskman and Edwards worked in an office, close enough to the front to always hear what was going on. These two men were not new to their jobs but Wynn probably thought he had misunderstood Minnie's request. I can hear him saying, "Would you repeat that, ma'am, please?"

By now, Edwards would have been standing next to him at the front desk. After Minnie repeated her question and reassured them that they had heard

correctly, the two government men would have been polite and very surprised. Minnie was the first woman to make such a request since either man had been on the job. They turned her down, certain that handing a license to a woman wasn't possible *because* she was a woman but promised to look into it further. This would not be the last Edwards and Wynn heard of Minnie.

* * * * *

Minnie Mae Mossman was born in Albany, Oregon in 1863, of true pioneer stock. Her mother, Nellie Mossman had come west with her family on an oxcart. Her father, Isaac Mossman, was a native of Indiana. A man with an entrepreneurial history, Isaac was said to have ridden with Buffalo Bill Cody before the Civil War. Cody, the romantic figure in the post-Civil War era, was an American scout, a bison hunter (thus, the nickname Buffalo Bill) and a Pony Express rider for several years before the Civil War.

Isaac had been in Oregon since 1853. He fought in the Indian Wars until he was wounded in 1856 and had to retire. That was when he went to work as an agent for the Pony Express. Before the Civil War, the Pony Express delivered mail, messages, newspapers and small packages from St. Joseph, Missouri, to California and up the Pacific coast. Somewhere west of the Rockies, according to the stories Isaac passed along, Cody and Isaac's paths crossed and they went on to share routes. When Cody left to fight in the Civil War, Isaac continued work as a rider on his own route from Walla Walla to Orofino, Idaho. In 1861, with help from the federal government, the telegraph reached the west coast and the demand for Pony Express messages started to wane. By this time, Isaac had

sold his route to Wells Fargo and was working odd jobs in Walla Walla, Washington.

There isn't any record of how Isaac met Nellie but she was living in Albany when they married and stayed there until he finished his Pony Express career. This is where Minnie was born in 1863. Sometime over the next four years, the family moved to Olympia, Washington.

Olympia in the late 1860s was a city of 1200 people. It had become the territorial capitol in 1859 and boasted healthy coal and logging industries, a newspaper, a Methodist Church and a public school. When the Northern Pacific Railroad chose Seattle over it for the railroad's terminus, it recovered quickly from the loss and used its strategic location near virgin forestland and the waterfalls at Tumwater to flourish as a sawmill town.

Isaac was a man who liked hard, physical outdoor labor. He would have preferred to be working in the logging industry but poor health prevented it and he began working a series of government jobs such as territorial librarian, county coroner, territory marshal and legislature sergeant-at-arms. These jobs suggest that Isaac was an educated man although there is no record of his childhood to verify that. He loved his jobs but poor health forced him to retire early. He and Nellie divorced in 1881 and Isaac spent the rest of his life in Oakland, California and southern Oregon. He died in 1912, in a home for old soldiers in Roseburg, Oregon.

When it came time for Minnie to look at the options for her future, she was living in a home with at least five siblings and parents who were either unhappy

or divorcing. She might not have seen a lot of options. Divorce was still a very rare event in the 1800s and without knowing what was happening with her parents, she had probably already decided that marriage was not the right answer. Her more traditional options included becoming a domestic or clean and sew for a wealthy Olympia family. Outside of domestic work, Minnie could have looked for work as a shopgirl or train to become a nurse or teacher. She chose to become a teacher and in 1882, she moved to Portland, Oregon, prepared to do just that. The move from Olympia to Portland was a big move for a young woman, and although the towns appeared similar they were very different

Portland was a city about the same age as Olympia but, unlike Olympia, it was growing faster than the infrastructure could handle. Its first European settlers filed land claims in 1843. In 1851 when it incorporated, Portland had 800 inhabitants, a sawmill, a log cabin hotel and a newspaper, *The Weekly Oregonian*. Portland's location, with access to the Pacific Ocean via the Willamette and Columbia Rivers and the rich, agricultural lands nearby made it a powerful draw for settlers from the East. By the time Minnie arrived in 1882, the town had grown to over 17,500. There were over 800 telephones around the city and street lighting was on its way.

Minnie probably used public transportation to get around. Streetcars pulled by horses or mules used old rail lines and ran up and down five of Portland's main streets. Minnie lived two blocks from the First Street line and about halfway down the line from its start on Burnside. The cars could carry up to

twelve passengers and were restricted to 8 miles per hour so a round trip from one end of First to the other and back took about an hour. It wasn't until 1890, when Minnie was out on the river, that electric cars replaced animal power.

Minnie seems to have arrived with a job in hand. No records show where she got her teaching certification or what school hired her but family stories say she had a job when she moved. Whoever she planned to work for probably helped her secure a room at the boarding house on Third and Jefferson that she moved into.

In the 1880s, Portland was beginning to discard many traditional restrictions and boarding houses were no longer segregated by gender. Having grown up in a household with two brothers and three sisters, the clamor of the boarding house probably made Minnie feel right at home. Likewise, being the oldest daughter would have come with enough household responsibilities to make the transition to life on her own easy and welcome. It was at this boarding house that Minnie met Charles Oliver Hill (Charley), the man she would marry.

What is noteworthy is that young Minnie, while watching her parents divorce, has prepared herself for a career that ensures her ability to support herself without having to depend on someone else. She secures a job and moves ninety miles south to start a life in a new city and what does she do? She consents to marry one of the first men she meets! This was not because she was insecure or without means of support, so there had to be some sort of electricity between Charley and her. He must have offered something different from what

she had seen in her parents' marriage and something better or more exciting than life as a schoolteacher.

Minnie and Charley's paths to Portland were so different. Despite her parents divorce, Minnie's childhood was somewhat traditional, in a nineteenth-century way. Minnie spent most of her growing-up years in one town, going to public school with family and friends all around.

Charley, on the other hand, was sort of a regular Horatio Alger. He was born in New York in 1853 to a wealthy New York merchant and his wife. His mother's death, while he was still an infant, ended any privilege or similarity to Minnie's life. As soon as Charley was old enough, his father dropped him off at a farm in New Jersey where he was forced to learn the value of hard, manual labor. Blaming his son for his wife's death, Charley's father only visited him once when the boy was about nine years old. He didn't care that the farmer was a cruel taskmaster or that Charley hated it there.

When Charley was twelve, he ran away. He took to the seas, finding odd jobs on steamers. When he got to the Pacific Northwest, he tried gold mining in Alaska and then logging in the camps near Seattle. When he arrived in Portland in the spring of 1880, his first job was working for the Kellogg Transportation Company. As a deckhand on the steamer *Toledo*, he ran the Columbia River between Washougal, Washington, and the Cowlitz River. The man that Minnie met in a Portland, Oregon boarding house had been on the move almost his entire life.

What was it that Minnie saw in Charley? Maybe she couldn't resist the man or his stories of life on the river and his dreams of being the boss over his own scow. Maybe it was the similarities between Charley and what the river life with had to offer her and her father's romantic tales of the Pony Express and the Indian Wars. Whatever the appeal, in just a few months, the 20-year-old Minnie and the 30-year-old Charley were married.

The February that followed the Hills 1983 marriage was cold. There is no record of whether they were married in rain or sunshine, just a cold so bitter it was mentioned in the newspaper. Their wedding picture shows a sturdy couple. Charley was a man of his generation, moustached, staunch and confident. Minnie Mae was a brunette, about five feet six inches in height and weighed about 140 pounds, pretty, with delicate features. She is dressed in a dark satin, high-collared dress of the times. Her pose is almost angelic, with her soft, delicate hands folded in her lap, hands that were to become chafed and leathery as they worked the ropes and endured the weather and scrubbing of her new river career.

The couple was probably married before a Justice of the Peace at the Multnomah County courthouse just a few blocks from their boarding house. Perhaps some of her siblings or her parents came down from Olympia and a few friends from the boarding house were by their sides.

At the time they were married, Charley was a purser on the *Toledo*, a job he kept for the following two years. There is no record of where Minnie lived during those years, but Charley is listed in the *Portland City Directory* at the

Jefferson Street boarding house. His name stays on the roster, off and on, until about 1886, so the Hills probably kept a room with all their things in it and a mailing address. Most of the time, Charley would have been sailing out of Monticello, Washington (present-day Longview) so Minnie must have been living there. Life on the river was probably more demanding, physically and personally, than a naïve Minnie might have imagined.

In those days steamboats were the only contact many of the river communities had with the outside world. Time was recorded by the arrival and departure of the riverboats and when steamers, like the *Toledo*, pulled into town it was an event. The steamer's bell brought people from miles away. It meant the mail was here, along with news and freight. Minnie couldn't help but want to part of it all.

"Can I sail with you sometime?" was probably all she needed to ask before her first adventure on the *Toledo*. Charley was a good worker and had been on the Kellogg crew long enough to know what was allowed and what was not. He knew the men she would be sailing with and he knew her. There was nothing for him to worry about, so sometime during those first two years, Minnie started sailing with him and the crew.

It wasn't glamorous. The steamers were very basic and Minnie would have had little privacy. On her first sailings she probably continued to wear the dresses she had worn in Portland, dresses for a schoolteacher, not a sailor. There would have been steps to climb and even a plain skirt would have been in the way. The Cowlitz ran in an area that received almost 60 inches of rain per

year and the average temperature was only 49 degrees....which means those long skirts were probably always wet around the bottom and Minnie always cold. Before long Minnie Hill had to put aside the tightly-bodiced, high-collared schoolteacher dresses she loved wearing and put on men's overalls.

Minnie was an eager student of both the ship and the river. Charley began right away to teach her how the steamer operated and how to be both a carpenter and a seam caulker. Eventually, Minnie joined Charley in the pilothouse where she learned the intricacies of piloting the various channels of the river, the light positions, the sandbar locations and the river rocks and snags. After a few lessons on safe stretches of the river, Charley began leaving her alone at the wheel and Minnie succumbed to the romance of the surging pitman and the spray-splashed paddle wheel.

On one of his runs on the Cowlitz River, Charley came across the *Jehu*, a one-masted, sloop in desperate need of repair. He had always wanted to be his own boss and the *Jehu* was a little sloop the Hills could afford. It was 1885 and the frugal newlyweds had saved the \$1,000 the decrepit sloop would cost them. It wasn't even sea-worthy so Charley and Minnie hauled it to Monticello and went to work rebuilding it themselves. The two of them cut it in half, added ten feet to its hull and installed a small engine, a sternwheel, a cabin and a pilothouse.

They had very little money while they were making the *Jehu* river-worthy so they made their home in a tent on the river. Anyone familiar with this part of Washington can imagine how miserable that must have been. Living in a tent in a rain forest that is always cold and wet meant lots of mud and little else.

Although both Minnie and Charley knew what they were getting into, the idea of no running water, no outhouses, no access to groceries or someone just to spend a few minutes in conversation with must have been hard on Minnie, a teacher and woman who made friends easily.

* * * * *

When Edwards and Wynn turned down her first application for a Pilot's license, Minnie appealed to C. C. Bemis, the district's supervising inspector in San Francisco. He could find no restrictions prohibiting her from receiving the license if she passed the examination. On her next trip into town, Minnie returned to that office prepared for whatever these men threw at her. Charley was by her side.

By now, Minnie probably knew more about the application process than the inspectors did. She met the minimum qualifications of one to two years' apprenticeship and backed it up with documents to show her time on board of an appropriately sized boat under the supervision of a licensed officer. When that was done, she had to take an exam. There were no manuals to memorize and no standards except the nautical "rules of the road." The choice of a written or oral exam would be up to the examining inspector. In her case, the exam was oral. And some of it was grueling.

There is no record of the exact exam Minnie took but the exams usually covered rules of the river, safety, boating equipment and technique. After two years on the river, these questions about steamsmanship would have been no problem for Minnie. The protocols of engine room bells, fog whistles and flags

were as common to her as baking a pie was to any other woman. For a First Class pilot's license she would eventually have to draw a map from memory of the particular stretch of river for which she was making an application. The map had to be drawn to scale, designating all of the cities, towns and streams along its banks. It had to include bridges, sandbars, reefs and other navigation hazards.

Minnie showed no signs of self-doubt and if Inspector Edwards had any questions about whether or she could pass his test, his questions were answered. What he didn't know about Minnie Hill was that she was a woman with enough self-confidence and courage to marry a man a generation older than she was, leaving behind the security of a job and the familiar comforts of a boarding house for an unknown future on a river and a vessel that was not much larger than her boarding house room or that she had been raised in a family where the pioneer spirit was in the blood and failure was not an option. After the exam was over, Charley told Minnie he thought those inspectors had given her an exam that was much more difficult than when he had taken his pilot's exam.

That same day, Charley took and passed the exam for Engineer. Now, he and Minnie could legally operate their boat by themselves (two officers were required for any vessel). Minnie had earned the right to take over her first command and I wonder if they celebrated or just returned, nonchalantly, to the recently rechristened *Minnie Hill* (previously, the *Jehu*).

* * * * *

The bitter cold morning on the Willamette River did not keep the crowds

from gathering at the Jefferson Street boat dock on December 1, 1886. They were there to see Captain Minnie Mossman Hill, the first female steamboat captain west of the Mississippi, take full command of her ship. Minnie heard a shout and a couple of cheers echo across the dock as she climbed into the pilothouse of the steamer that bore her name. She didn't know how everyone had found out but Portland was still small enough for word to travel. The city loved "events" and watching one of their citizens make history definitely qualified.

Minnie pulled the heavy white cord and a last throaty blast of the steam whistle announced that the gangplank was going up. A final small toot preceded a welcome quiet as the *Minnie Hill* moved smoothly away from the dock and headed downstream. Minnie breathed a sigh of relief; the departure was flawless. At twenty-three, Captain Minnie Hill had just accomplished something extraordinary. The next day's *Oregonian* newspaper would call her "the 8th Wonder of the World__A Female Captain__A Majestic and Incomparable Heroine!"

That *Oregonian* headline might have been a bit of an overstatement but there was no question that everyone was genuinely proud of Minnie. Stories ran in newspapers from Seattle to San Francisco. It was probably the first time a story about a steamboat pilot included much physical description, especially one like the *Oregonian's* description of Minnie: "beautiful, tall and stately, with perfect pearly white teeth, kissable mouth, large lustrous eyes, alluring and seductive, and very graceful and well-proportioned." While the suffragists and the reformers would have preferred the details of how tough her apprenticeship was or that she

had the courage to challenge the federal inspectors and pass their over-zealous exam, this was what they got. This was Portland, Oregon in 1886.

One hundred years later, Minnie might have been labeled a feminist for having achieved a level of success that still amazes and commands the respect of ship captains and riverboat pilots. She probably would have shunned such a label. Minnie was not an attention-seeker nor was she trying to change the world. If pressed, she would have shrugged and said that nothing had changed, she simply had a license to do the job she had trained for. She might have added that anyone should be able to do any job she is capable of and being a man or a woman shouldn't matter. *Oregonian* editor, Harvey Scott, brother of suffragist Abigail Scott Duniway, did not hide the fact that he was a fierce opponent of suffrage and most of the proposed new women's rights so it was surprising that the newspaper gave its front page to the story. It was not so surprising that Scott never applauded Minnie for doing the job she wanted regardless of whether it was labeled men's work or women's work.

It is said that a captain never forgets his or her first journey under her own command. Minnie was probably no different and the smooth departure was one she would remember the rest of her life. The *Minnie Hill* was a trading boat and Minnie's first license permitted her to run the Columbia River and its tributaries between Portland and Astoria, a distance of 110 miles. She and Charley bought stocks of goods on credit and launched into the trading business, stopping at most of the villages along the river. As hard as it might have been to get her first license, her work was just beginning.

With a licensed Minnie at the helm, Charley demoted himself to sitting in the engine room waiting for orders signaled by the captain's bell-ringing. In an age when it was almost inconceivable for a man to give up command of anything to his wife or any other woman, why would Charley have been so eager to let Minnie take control?

There are many possible answers as to why Charley was so willing to relinquish the pilot's chair. Charley was never shy about admitting that he preferred being in the engine room and working on the machinery and he knew he had trained Minnie to be the best pilot on the river. But there had to be more.

Charley had spent most of his life alone. He never knew his mother. He had never had any sort of home life. He married Minnie late in life and enjoyed her companionship. He needed and trusted her skills.

In the steamer world of the 19th century, the work stayed in the families; sons followed fathers while cousins, uncles and in-laws joined on in the engine rooms and pilothouses. Other than Minnie, Charley had no family to help out so he hired Old Jay, an affordable engineer, who turned out to be a drunk and pretty useless. When they were on the river, Charley had to be both the pilot and the engineer at the same time. He couldn't do it. Afraid to leave the engine room for any length of time, he began to teach Minnie how the steam engine operated. He taught her how to fire the boiler and maintain the water level in the engine. She learned to baby the cantankerous steam engine. When they were landing, Charley would be in the pilothouse and Minnie would position herself so she

could watch the old engineer and make sure he didn't mess up the signals he was receiving from Charley.

If Old Jay was sleeping off a drunken stupor when it came time to land, Minnie worked the engine room. This was the time when the greatest skills manipulating the controls were required and Minnie mastered them. If Old Jay was sober enough to do his job, Minnie took her place next to Charley during the landings, learning how to handle the wheel under varying conditions.

The Hills took on any work they could find. They took orders for groceries and supplies from the farmers and homesteaders along the river, filled them from the towns they passed and delivered them on their return trip. During really slow times, Charley would even go back to work on the *Toledo*.

The Hills' first big problem was a mistake of their own making. Their little 10-horsepower engine was underpowered. Its power was so slight that if an outgoing tide was really strong they had to tie up and wait for it to ebb. Minnie and Charley knew they could make good money and they wanted to be serious contenders on the local rivers and so the Hills began looking for a bigger engine.

Life along the Columbia River was changing. By the beginning of the twentieth century, towns were still few and far between but shorelines that had previously been inhabited by only Indian villages were now sprinkled with new residents. While locals might take an occasional trip downriver to Astoria to visit a dentist or upriver to Portland for shopping, it was the sternwheeler that brought the news. Papers such as the *Scotch Salmon Times* published daily schedules

and rates for persons and freight. Ship arrivals were occasions for entire communities to gather at their docks.

Minnie and Charley navigated what was considered the “lower river,” the routes between where the Willamette flowed into the Columbia and downriver to Astoria. They would have pulled into docks in towns with names like Skamakawa, Cathlamet, Clatskanie or Rainier before travelling up the Willamette to Portland or Oregon City. Homesteaders began asking the Hills to buy them certain supplies and merchandise in town and deliver them the next time they came by. One farmer might want a certain kind of farm implement while another might want seeds. They also did the banking for the settlers along the river and were known to carry several thousand dollars in their little cast-iron safe.

On the river between towns such as Clatskanie and Oak Point (today’s St. Helens), Minnie was usually at the wheel and Charley at the throttle. But these two were business people at heart and seeing the growing demand for their services they decided to stock the steamer with general merchandise, especially on their trips up sloughs adjacent to the Columbia. They began carrying groceries, tobacco, dry goods, drugs and the U.S. mail.

With more than three-fourths of the small steamer’s business done on some form of barter basis, the Hills usually ended up with more fresh products than they could use. They were good bargainers so they would go together and take the fresh goods, such as potatoes, cherries, apples, turnips and salmon, into the stores to trade them in for non-food supplies they needed on the boat. If

there were foods left over, they would sell or barter them for more farm supplies they could sell to the settlers in the villages where they docked.

Charley and Minnie split up the rest of the necessary chores. Refueling was Charley's job. Cordwood was used to make steam and the supply had to be replenished at every convenient stop. The *Minnie Hill* was only forty feet long and when she was loaded with cordwood and freight, the cabin was filled to the brim. While Charley was refueling, Minnie would have a good time stocking up on new hats, dresses and parasols or selling an occasional leftover. Sometimes, if she knew the preferences of the women in the village they were coming to, Minnie would put on a dress she thought they would like. Being a live mannequin worked; Minnie was quite the salesperson.

On one extra-busy trip, Minnie and Charley were on their last stop before returning to Portland to restock. Minnie had sold all the new goods she had loaded and the only dress she had left was the one she was wearing when they pulled up dockside. "I want one just like you are wearing," a young woman said to Minnie. Minnie didn't blink or hesitate. She said, "Just a minute, please," and went inside where she looked for something she could put on to get her home. After slipping into some old work clothes, she folded up the dress, nice and neat, and went out and completed the sale. "The customer didn't ask and I didn't offer any explanations," she said later.

Many years later, Minnie would retell the story and add that by the time they reached port in Portland, "I was fashionably clothed in a dress made out of flour sacks."

This story, warm and humorous as it is, says a lot more about Minnie than the fact that she was quick on her feet or a good businesswoman. Minnie was a lady. She didn't want to arrive in the city in old work clothes. It was important for her to be in a dress, regardless of what that dress was made of.

One of the largest groups Minnie and Charley dealt with was the local Native Americans. Most of them belonged to the Chinook tribes and were scattered in small camps along the river. Their language was unfamiliar to their white neighbors and to Minnie. To understand what they wanted to buy, she took the time to learn a little bit of it. This was not easy. It was very guttural and she struggled with the deep grunting accompanied by violent hissing and spitting sounds.

Minnie recognized that great tact was necessary in these deals. The husband or male Chinook would come aboard with his wife or woman. She usually had an infant tied to her back. They would stand around, looking at everything and the husband would emit an occasional grunt. The Chinook were barterers and their first choices were rarely what they wanted. Minnie learned early on not to offer to help - if she did, that would kill the sale. She also recognized the ritual of asking for and turning away items. She was a very patient woman because this could go on for quite a while. Once the right item was found, haggling would begin and a bargain had to be made. Most times, Minnie would have to wait the barterer out until her final asking price was the one the Chinook could live with. When all was done, he usually offered payment in furs, fish or fowl.

Minnie looked forward to most of her stops but a floating “hospitality house” run by a woman named Nancy Boggs was different. For reasons that were never explained, Minnie didn’t like Nancy or the bordello that she was running on the river. But Minnie was a conscientious businesswoman and Nancy’s well-paid employees and wealthy customers provided a very good, profitable business for the Hills. Minnie braced herself for the familiar hello.

“Hello, Minnie Mae! How’s the world using you? What have you got that’s new?” Minnie recognized the gleam of anticipation in Nancy’s eye for the new goods she was about to discover.

The riverboat-brothel operator took customers from both sides of the river and paid no liquor taxes to City Hall in the 1880s. The natural entrepreneur operated her two-story, 3,200-square-foot business up and down the Willamette River from Linnton to Oregon City, responding to local market demand. When anchored in Portland, between the east and west side Nancy hired boatmen in small rowboats, stationed on either side, to ferry customers to her “floating hospitality house.”

Each tie-up for Minnie at the riverboat was the same. Minnie would bring out her newest hats and lingerie. Minnie always set the selling price at 100% markup because cost was never the issue. Nancy thought that, like her own business, a person got what she paid for and the more expensive the item, the better it was. She wouldn’t even look at anything that sold for less than \$5 and she was always good for about \$30 worth of merchandise (\$750 in 2014 dollars).

Minnie was very willing to take advantage of this attitude. For Minnie, Nancy Bogg's "loose cash" was a reward for her patience.

Eventually the hospitality house tied up near the Pine Street dock. Portland officials got tired of her not paying taxes (they didn't care about the prostitution, just the money) and vice squads kept threatening to shut her down. This never happened because she had always maintained a very friendly, close relationship with Portland's finest but she eventually got tired of the games, sold the riverboat and opened a saloon and boarding house.

Minnie was probably relieved and this is curious. In many ways, these two women were so much alike. They both found very lucrative businesses catering to the needs of the fledgling communities up and down the local river ways. They both took their businesses seriously and carried themselves as proud women of their times. Nancy and Minnie both had the respect of their customers and the authorities they did business with. It seems they might have had some amount of respect for each other.

* * * * *

In 1887, Minnie passed the examination for a Master's license to operate any steamer on the waters of the Columbia and the Willamette Rivers. The Hills' business was growing to such proportions that they were able to buy a larger steamer. They sold the *Minnie Hill* and bought the *Clatsop Chief* for \$8,000. The Hills must have scrimped and saved to be able to take such a monumental step up. They had regular operating expenses and paid off a few old debts from

rebuilding the *Minnie Hill* and getting set up in business but still managed to save up the \$8,000 cash.

There is an interesting side-story that goes along with the sale of the Minnie Hill. The story goes that the *Minnie Hill* became a floating saloon, taking care of customers up and down the Willamette. The new owners let the little vessel continue to bear Minnie's name and it caused her much consternation. More than likely, this is a true story. There was a little boat, the same size, referred to as the *Whiskey Scow* that took to the Willamette about the same time as the Hills sold the *Minnie Hill*. As the story was told, a careless drunk set fire to it a year later. It was completely destroyed and I am sure Minnie breathed a sigh of relief.

Cities across the country never lost interest in Minnie Hill. Throughout the late 1880s and 1890s, a retelling of her story could be found newspapers as far away as Ottawa, Kansas, Louisiana and as close to home as the *Union Scout* in Union, Oregon.

On August 10, 1889, the *San Francisco Chronicle* retold her story under this headline, "Captain Minnie Hill, again. What Pluck and Energy Can Do if Properly Applied." This was supposed to be an article about her successful business but the reporter could not resist describing Minnie as the "captain who had won the hearts of every one by her happy disposition, her kindly heart and charming manners." The article included Charley in their compliments by describing him as "the engineer casually well-liked for his upright and manly qualities."

* * * * *

By the late 1880s, Portland was a growing bustling city. The city was in the process of uniting its east and west sides, both with legislation and with the building of the Morrison, Steel and Hawthorne Bridges. The downtown area sported a new City Hall, a luxurious hotel and an exposition building, making Portland a epicenter for the Northwest. *Oregonian* editor Harvey Scott wrote that in spite of its shortcomings, “Portland was a city of civility and refinement.”

The waterfront was lined with two-story wharves built so they could be used at both high and low river levels. The two levels were extremely important during spring runoff when the river was high. The bottom levels, under constant wear due to storms and runoff, were perpetually shabby-looking. Almost all of the wharves were privately-owned and, for profits’ sake, were only rebuilt when it was absolutely necessary.

The riverbanks were marked by a powerful combination of sights and smells. They were mottled with sewage outfall pipes from which foul-smelling and unhygienic substances discharged and, when river levels were low, the residue clung to the wharves and riverbanks.

New Year’s of 1889 rang in a prosperous new start for the Hills. The purchase of the eighty-four-foot *Clatsop Chief* had provided them with a ship capable of mustering enough power to buck the ebb tides, the period between high tide and low tide when the water was flowing away from the shore. This was something the *Minnie Hill* could never do when she was loaded with supplies and enough cordwood to fuel an entire run.

This was the year they would form their corporation, The Dalles-Portland-Astoria Transportation Company. Before incorporating they bought a new riverboat. The *Governor Newell* cost them \$7,500 and the *Clatsop Chief*. The *Governor Newell* would become the sternwheeler Minnie piloted for most of her career.

Built locally in 1883, the 112-foot-long towboat was plain and undistinguished but it was a workhorse. Minnie and Charley used it to move scows heavily laden with jetty stone from the Fisher's Quarry up the river to a dock fifteen miles east of Vancouver, Washington. At this point, the Hills released the scows to be unloaded or picked up by another ship that would haul it's load up the Cowlitz River or down to Astoria. Minnie's pilothouse was so high above the water she felt as if she were perched on Mount Hood. Reminiscing, she said she always felt like the "Queen of the Columbia River" when she climbed into it.

Minnie was always a hands-on captain. She earned a reputation for being as efficient and capable as any captain on the river. When she gave orders to the roustabouts, Charley got no special treatment and followed her commands with the rest of the crew.

Under Minnie, that crew consisted of two deckhands, two firemen, two engineers and a Chinese cook, all of whom worked round the clock when they were towing barges or log rafts. She was stern in the discharge of her duties and those who knew her said she was respected for having reformed many river

men. Having a female for a captain often stopped the flow of cuss words that the river men characteristically used.

There is an oft-repeated story that Minnie only swore three times and each time was for the benefit of the Inspector of Steamboats, James L. Ferguson, when her license was being renewed. Ferguson took such pride in Captain Minnie that he kept a photo of her on the wall over his desk along with the oath she swore. The oath read:

“I, Minnie Hill, do solemnly swear that I will faithfully and honestly, according to my best skill and judgment and without countenance or reservation, perform all the duties required of me as master by the laws of the United States,” signed *Minnie Hill*. (A photograph of this swearing-in is hanging in the Maritime Museum docked on the Willamette waterfront in Portland.)

For the first years after receiving her license, Minnie’s true skills were tested. First of all, she competently towed scows loaded with rock from Risley’s Landing Quarry, near Oak Grove, to a spot known as the “boneyard,” a graveyard for old vessels and a recycling center for parts that could be salvaged and used to repair working vessels. The waters near Oak Grove were very shallow and, with a ship heavy with salvage, only the most watchful captains could unload their cargo without grounding or damaging their riverboat.

The river traffic was growing as fast, if not faster, than Portland itself. The waterfront was now congested with both tall ships and steamers. Regular ads

were running in the *Oregonian* announcing riverboat runs from Portland to Astoria, leaving at 7 a.m. and returning from there at 7 p.m. Local freighters were hauling lumber, farm products, salted salmon and livestock for market and to resupply families who lived along the Columbia River. All of this ran smoothly unless Mother Nature decided to intervene.

Wind and rain were strong adversaries on both the Willamette and Columbia rivers and Portland could not always hide from their wrath. Late January of 1890 saw one of the worst storms in Portland history. Heavy rains caused the Willamette to rise above flood levels, inundating the streets of downtown Portland. The sidewalks along Front Street appeared to billow from the wind blowing water and spray across the sidewalks. Pedestrians were forced to keep their eyes open to avoid manholes and chuck holes that had opened during the flooding.

The water level rose and fell very quickly, dropping five and one half feet in just two days. Every cellar on the riverside of Front Street was in need of pumping and steam engines were in demand to do the job. A fire engine was called in to pump out the cellar of the brand new Washington Building. High water marks still adorn the buildings today as a reminder of the depth, power and danger that can be presented by the seemingly gentle Willamette River.

The Ainsworth dock, one of Portland's biggest, was too badly damaged to allow for the weight of the steamships to tie up. Most of its pilings had washed away and the south end of the dock was sinking and settling. The Hills, with their

“small” steamer, had no problem coming in and discharging their loads. This would become an added bonus when the storms began to subside.

The Steel Bridge was closed, temporarily, to both heavy traffic and bridge lifts, while inspectors examined it for structural damage. Ships that were too tall, many of which tied up at the Albina flourmills, were prevented from moving up and down the Willamette and steamers waited out the storm out on the Columbia. Until the storms stopped and the river levels started to drop, the Hills were part of a fleet of small ships that worked together to get people and freight where they needed to be. This was a time when competition took second place to helping each other get the work done that needed to be finished for the good of everyone involved.

Similarly, captains (Minnie included) had enough respect for both their peers and for the unpredictability of the river, that they were always willing to set aside their rivalries to help each other out. If a steamer couldn't finish its run into Portland because the river was too high another steamer coming downriver from The Dalles might take on some of its freight and passengers and bring them into the city. It would then pick up both their own cargo and the outbound freighter's load and take it back to a dock where the Willamette and the Columbia Rivers met. No one worried about charging the other steamer or the extra time such an exchange might take because they knew that the next time their positions could be reversed.

One frosty, fogbound morning in November 1893, the Hills had their steamer the *Governor Newell* tied up at the Jefferson Street dock. The steamer

Elwood was coming down the Willamette and whistled for the Madison Street drawbridge to open. As it opened, a streetcar, inbound to downtown Portland, tried to stop but its brakes locked the wheels and they slid on the icy rails like a sled. The car, with thirty people aboard, crashed through the flimsy gates, tottering on the brink before it plunged into the icy river below. The *Elwood* couldn't stop so the pilot switched off the stern wheel and coasted over the bubbling water where the streetcar had disappeared.

Minnie was sitting on the pilot's deck when she heard bloodcurdling screams. Looking out the window, she sat paralyzed as she took in the horrifying scene of the trolley passengers thrashing around in the cold river. Minnie wanted to run to their assistance but she couldn't. She was sworn to stay at the helm of her own steamer, the *Governor Newell*. Charley, on the other hand, saw what was happening and had the presence of mind to launch a skiff. Managing to be one of the first to reach the scene, he went to work pulling out some of the twenty panic-stricken people who managed to get out through the streetcar windows. Many years later, Minnie continued to be haunted by those screams.

* * * * *

The Hills' success was due to the fact that they specialized. They moved scows heavy-laden with jetty stone from Fisher's Landing rock quarry, near today's Camas, Washington, downriver to meet a U.S. Army Engineers towboat. They traded their full scow for an empty one, returning to the quarry while the jetty stone continued on to Astoria. Today, visitors to Astoria see the fruits of those hauls in the Gray's Harbor Jetty built between Astoria and Warrenton. The

heavy freight took its toll on the *Governor Newell* and it became “too soft” to continue so it was taken out of service.

The *Governor Newell* was dismantled in 1900 but not scrapped. In May 1902 a “new “ sternwheeler named The *Governor Newell* was launched for Captain Charles Hill. Charley had a new hull built but lifted the machinery and cabin of the old steamer from its hull and transferred them to the new one. In an *Oregonian* announcement covering the launching, Charley said, the new boat was “practically a new steamer and would take the place of the old *Governor Newell*, well-known on the river.” Some other riverboat men said he did it only because he was so frugal, but it is also possible that a sternwheeler was so full of fond memories that he didn’t have the heart to scrap it.

Over the years, the Hills owned at least six sternwheelers (the *Minnie Hill*, the *Clatsop Chief*, the *Governor Newell*, the *Tahoma*, the *Paloma* and the *Glenola*). The *Governor Newell* was their most famous boat and the one that Minnie captained the longest. Each steamer sported a steam whistle and each had its own melody described as a “swelling burst of harmony that sounded from the water and echoed from the surrounding heights.”

Captain Minnie made good use of her Master’s license for fourteen years. In September 1894, the 31-year-old gave birth to her only son, Herbert Wells Hill. The young Herbert joined their life on the various boats until he was old enough to start school. Then, in 1900, Captain Minnie Hill “swallowed the anchor,” retiring from the river to devote herself to raising her son. There is no record of her being on the *Governor Newell* in 1900 and Charley is listed as Master and

Pilot, so Minnie probably went ashore to give birth to her son. For the next two years she made occasional trips when an emergency left any of the three boats they owned without a captain, but her life on the river had ended.

Charley continued to work the river but he could see the need for steamboat hauling along the Columbia diminishing. The Union Pacific Railroad was now Portland's largest employer along the waterfront. It owned a large number of the wharves and handled a tremendous amount of the freight coming off of the trains, ferries and steamers. In 1903, the Captains Hill sold their transportation company and bought a lumber mill in the town of Bunker, Washington, just a few miles from Chehalis. Charley didn't give a specific reason why he wanted to move to this particular spot. There are several likely reasons. It was near where he first lived when he arrived on the west coast; it was a business both he and Minnie knew from their pre-steamer days; and it was near the river that he loved. He worked the forest until he retired in 1920.

Minnie retained her unique position as the only woman on the Pacific coast licensed to command a steamer for twenty-one years. In 1907, seven years after she retired, Gertrude Wiman, wife of Captain Chance Wiman of the Puget Sound steamboat *Vashon* was granted her second-class Master's and Pilot's license. (Second-class was a term saved for tugboats so this suggests that Wiman was not authorized to move a boat but was the second mate or bosun on her husband's tug.)

In 1893, the Chicago World's Fair, also known as the World Columbia Exposition, sent Minnie an engraved invitation to be their guest for two weeks.

She politely said, “No, thank you.” At first glance it is hard to figure out why she might have received such an honor but it was the celebration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ arrival in the New World. There were replicas of ships such as the *Viking* brought from Norway. Women were celebrated with their own Women’s Building filled with great American female artists and craftsmen. So Minnie’s contribution to the maritime history of America was probably the reason. If she had gone she would have seen electricity-powered buildings and exhibits. She might have ridden America’s first Ferris wheel or met Buffalo Bill Cody, the same Buffalo Bill her father had known fifty years earlier!

The public never lost their interest in Minnie. Between the years 1930 and 1937, several Hollywood studios approached her with offers to film the story of her life. Minnie was an intensely private person and turned them all down. Later, Minnie would defy any comparisons to either the real or the fictional *Tugboat Annie*, famously portrayed in a 1933 hit movie starring Marie Dressler and Wallace Beery. This story portrayed a comically quarrelsome middle-aged couple that operated a tugboat off the Washington coast. The legend was that the real-life Tugboat Annie was Thea Foss (1857 – 1927). She and her husband were Norwegian immigrants who launched a tugboat company in Tacoma, Washington in 1889. Thea Foss was the founder of Foss Maritime which would become the largest tugboat company in the United States.

Minnie was terrified of the media and did not want to be described as a rough woman. She wanted to be known as a refined, feminine well-mannered lady. She refused to see any likeness to the coarse Tugboat Annie with her

seaman's cap, overalls and corncob pipe. Probably the only thing they shared was a love for the "blow of the landing" when the steam created a timbre and melodic quality that was impossible to duplicate even by the steam of a locomotive engine.

Minnie's son, Herbert Walker Hill, went to Yale University and graduated with a degree in economics. After college he returned to Oregon and accompanied his father on a train to get insurance for Charley's profitable lumber business. While they were gone, and before they could purchase the insurance, the business was destroyed by fire. Minnie and Charley moved back to Portland and the 1920 City Directory lists Charley's occupation as a logger. He died in 1944 at the age of 89.

A degree from Yale could not squash the adventuresome spirit that Herbert had inherited from Minnie and Charley. He refused to work in an office and, much to Minnie's regret, chose to become a cab driver in San Francisco. In the end, Minnie lived with Herbert, his wife and two granddaughters in an apartment in San Francisco. During that time, Minnie became a Christian Scientist and, following her religious rules, refused to see doctors. She eventually died from an illness that would have been curable with medical treatment. There is no record of the actual cause of death but it was probably complications from diabetes.

Minnie died in 1946 at the age of 83. In accordance with their wills, hers and Charley's ashes were scattered over the river they loved.

(Figure 2)

Harriet (Hattie) Crawford Redmond
1862-1952

Harriet Crawford Redmond: Suffragist
And Cornerstone of the Portland Community

I was first introduced to Harriett (Hattie) Crawford Redmond through an article in *The Skanner*, a local newspaper, dated July 2012. To mark the hundredth anniversary of the passage of suffrage in Oregon, she and three other campaign workers were being honored for their work leading up to that vote in 1912. The article said that Hattie would soon receive the headstone she'd been deprived of since her death in 1952. The article caught my attention because Oregon's leadership in the vote for suffrage was something for a native Oregonian to be proud of and here was an African American woman being recognized for her contribution!

I made it to Lone Fir Cemetery, where Hattie is buried, on a cool October day in 2014. The cemetery was so quiet there wasn't even the sound of car traffic passing by. Her headstone was a simple one made of chalk-gray concrete no different from the sea of other gray markers and tombstones surrounding it. Etched into it were these few facts:

Hattie Redmond
1862 – 1952
Black American Suffragist

In my hand was the original newspaper article with its brief description of the ceremony placing headstones on the graves of four Portlanders: Hattie, Esther Pohl Lovejoy, Martha Cardwell Dalton and Harry Lane. Three were

familiar names in Portland history. Only Hattie's name was new to me. I knew a fair bit about women in Portland's history. Why had I heard nothing about her?

I tried googling her name. What I learned could be summarized in one sentence: Hattie Redmond was a black woman who fought for women's suffrage and her name was included in Portland's "Walk of the Heroines." I knew there had to be more but I couldn't find it. Although she was well known in her time, she kept no journals and wrote no letters. She outlived her husband and most of her siblings so they never told her story. She had no children. There was no one left to write her legacy.

As I dug further, though, I found newspaper clippings that mentioned her, campaign stories that included her name, City Notes (a local society column) about her family's comings and goings and church activities, and documents chronicling Portland life that paralleled hers. I went to the Oregon Genealogical Forum and looked at national and local census, legal reports, and church and women's club histories at the Oregon Historical Museum. I told anyone who had written about the local suffrage campaign that I wanted to write about Hattie.

From my findings, I managed this thumbnail sketch from which to start forming a profile of her: Hattie was the daughter of a former slave who bought his way out of slavery and, after bringing his family to Oregon, raised his eldest daughter to fight for another piece of freedom: suffrage. Eventually I discovered much more.

* * * * *

It was a hot September evening in 1912. It was only two months until Election Day and the biggest issue on the Oregon ballot was the vote for women's suffrage. Hattie took a deep breath and brushed her hands down the front of her dress, nervously straightening what didn't need to be straightened. "Good evening, ladies," she began. "Thank you all for coming."

As she looked out across the activity room in the basement of the Mount Olivet Baptist Church, she saw fourteen women and probably a hundred empty chairs.

"Where was everyone?" she must have wondered. She had sent invitations to women's church groups, social clubs and all the suffrage organizations in the area. She knew there were over two hundred and fifty black women in Portland who would be eligible to vote; women whose husbands, brothers and other male friends' support would make the difference in success or failure of the ballot measure.

Hattie was scared. She, along with so many others, had worked tirelessly to get other women involved. The next day she would explain to an *Oregonian* reporter that the low turnout was probably two-fold: Women continued to be influenced by husbands who didn't want their wives involved in politics and too many women didn't understand the benefits to be derived from the vote. She wondered what she could say to convince even fourteen women that the power of the vote was more than just electing officials to the state government. It was

about forcing legislation to improve the health and safety of their children and advocating for better protection in the workplace for women.

For Hattie it was personal. She had been working for the vote for women for thirteen years. It was not easy being a black woman in Portland, Oregon, a city that was comfortable in its racist attitude. It wasn't easy taking care of her siblings and her husband, working wherever she could get work and then standing up in front of a room full of Nob Hill club women or church groups that were not her own and speaking in a voice that made her one with them. She was the daughter of a freed slave. For most of the people in her audiences, slavery was not something they had personally experienced and stories about slaves came from places far from Portland, Oregon. She must have asked herself what was she doing up there.

She might have remembered the day in 1899 when she first heard another black woman speak out. That woman was Lucy Thurman and she was in town to talk with the "Colored Women's" branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Lucy was what the *Oregonian* called an "orator of great ability." To Hattie, she was an example of someone who had the courage to speak out for what she believed in. She reminded Hattie of someone else, someone much closer to her heart: her father, Reuben Crawford.

The story of how Hattie got from that WCTU meeting to speaking out on behalf of woman's suffrage begins with Reuben Crawford.

* * * * *

Reuben Crawford was born in Missouri in 1827. There is no mention of his parents and little information about his childhood but by the time he was thirteen he was already indentured. As a young slave, Reuben was sent by his owner to St. Louis to become a ship's caulker. This would turn out to be a valuable trade offered to him by a very generous slave-owner who also provided Reuben the opportunity to buy his freedom when the time came. Reuben did this in early 1862. He continued working in the shipbuilding industry and, as a skilled laborer doing war work, he was protected from fighting in the Civil War.

By the time of his emancipation, Reuben had enough money to buy Freedom Passes for both himself and his future wife, LaVinia (Vina) Blue. In 1862, those passes cost about \$500 per person (over \$4,500 in today's dollars). It is not clear when they married, if they did, but the custom among slaves was to marry as soon as they were freed. The Crawfords immediate goal was to get out of the South. Vina had a brother in California so their intention was to head west.

Hattie was born in 1862 while the Crawfords were still in St. Louis. Six years passed between the time that Reuben and Vina were freed and the time they actually headed west. By then, Hattie had two younger brothers, William and Cupid, and she was old enough to help Vina look after them. Their lengthy stay in St. Louis, where Reuben continued to work at the shipyard, enabled him to strengthen his skills and allowed the Crawfords enough time to secure rail passage west and to save money for food and rooms along the way. When they finally left town, the Crawfords first stop was at Vina's brother's home in northern California where she gave birth to her fourth child, Susan.

There is no record of how the Crawfords financed their passage but there are two possibilities. First, there was the Freedman's Bureau, a resource providing emancipated slaves American railroad passes to move away from the war-torn southern states. Second, and most likely, was that Reuben's future employer paid his family's way. In either case, travel was hard. Reuben and Vina, already in her late thirties, were traveling with young children. There were few, if any, hotel accommodations available for traveling African Americans and minimal amenities on the trains. After the stop in California, they travelled north and arrived in Hood River, Oregon, in 1869, at the home of Michael Nye, Reuben's employer.

It isn't clear how the two families found each other but in early 1869, Nye and his son-in-law, Dr. B.W. Mitchell, bought a 320-acre Donation Land Claim from the estate of William Jenkins. The land was a plum site in the heart of what would become the thriving town of Hood River, Oregon. The story goes that Mitchell was a Southerner and he wanted an African-American family to help with the farm work. Nye offered to underwrite an emancipated black family from the South and the 1870 census of Hood River County shows that Nye sponsored the Crawford family. They are listed as Reuben and Vina Crawford, "farm laborer and domestic," and their children. This is where the Crawfords' daughter, Mary, was born, leaving Hattie to care for four younger siblings while her parents worked.

In an encyclopedia about Hood River County, there is one reference to the Nyes and the Crawfords: "Although Meriwether Lewis' servant York was the first

African-American to pass through the Hood River area, in 1805, the distinction of being the first African-American residents goes to the Crawford family of Missouri.”

The arrangement with the Nyes was short-lived. In 1870, Michael Nye became very ill. His eventual death brought an end to the Nye-Mitchell partnership. The claim was sold and it was time for the Crawfords to move on. This family of freed slaves, who had moved across the country to work on the farm of a displaced white, pro-slavery southerner and his extended family, was now on its own in a state that opposed slavery while forbidding blacks the right to settle there.

(In 1857, over twenty years before the Crawfords made their way to Oregon; the Oregon State Constitutional Convention had passed a resolution that stated:

“No free negro or mulatto, not residing in the state at the time of adoption of this constitution, shall come, reside or be within the state or hold any real estate, or make any contract, or maintain any suit therein, and the legislative assembly shall provide by penal law for the removal by public officer of all such negroes and mulattoes, and for their effectual exclusion from the state, and for the punishment of persons who shall bring them into the state, or employ or harbor them.”)

When Reuben and his family arrived in Portland in 1870, their first recorded address was near Second and Couch streets on the west side of the

Willamette River. Most likely this was a boarding house. There were few single-family dwelling in that area and blacks were not allowed to own property.

Because there were so few housing options for the working classes near the docks, Hattie, her family and other blacks or Chinese would have shared the boarding house life with white laborers. There was nothing desirable about life along the docks and boarding houses in the 1880s and 1890s were not pleasant places.

The typical boarding house had a parlor on the main level, a kitchen and maybe a communal eating area. Sleeping rooms were up two flights of stairs, sometimes three or four. There was no electricity until the 1890s so lighting was left to a few oil lamps. If the Crawfords were fortunate enough to have a room with a window facing a street, they might have had some light from street lamps. While indoor plumbing was slowly coming to the newer, more expensive private homes, it would not arrive in the dock or lower Burnside area until about 1900. If Hattie or her siblings had to go to the bathroom during the night, they went down pitch-black stairs to an outhouse somewhere behind the building. Back steps had a tendency to be wet, slippery and filthy. The streets were infamous for smelling like garbage and sewage and there was no guarantee that the backside of a boarding house was protected from whomever was wandering around in the middle of the night.

The Crawfords were not the only African Americans moving into this part of Portland. Until the end of the century, the lower Burnside area was a neighborhood of choice for blacks because it was close to the waterfront and the

types of jobs available to them. There were always plenty of jobs available and many of the owners of businesses along the docks and the lower downtown area found ways to work around the discriminatory laws to hire these hardworking laborers.

According to local historians, most Portland citizens, regardless of race, got along fairly well until the end of the 19th century. As more Easterners and white Europeans moved into Portland in the early 20th century, racism gained a stronger foothold, causing the city to resemble many of the Midwest and Eastern cities that had been dealing with an influx of freed slaves for years.

African Americans were slow to migrate to the West. It was a long way from the Deep South and most freed slaves, looking to resettle, moved to where family or friends were already settled. When they did come west, they stayed because they saw Oregon as a land of opportunity and were willing to accept the racial problems that existed.

The Crawfords were eager to involve themselves in the small but growing black community. One of their first opportunities came when they joined the A.M.E. Zion church and attended the church's winter social. The program was advertised as a variety show and there was a call for members of the congregation to participate. Reuben signed young Hattie up and she was introduced to life in front of an audience.

The *Oregonian* newspaper reported on January 16, 1874, that "Hattie Crawford, a little miss not above seven years, came forward and recited in a

clear, distinct manner a poem entitled, 'I'm so Happy' which won the juvenile speaker a *meed* of applause."

Hattie was actually twelve, not seven, when the *Oregonian* recorded her public speaking debut. This special benefit for the A.M.E. Zion church was her father's way of introducing Hattie to the idea that a person has a responsibility to support the causes he or she believes in. It is almost as if Reuben knew that there was a public dais in Hattie's future. From this point on, the Crawford family story unfolded quietly.

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Reuben and Vina wanted Hattie and her siblings to go to school. Before the Civil War, African Americans from the parts of the United States were forbidden the opportunity to learn to read or be educated. Now, they saw schooling as both a necessity and a benefit from their newly-gained emancipation. Hattie's father, Reuben, was more fortunate than other slaves. He was trained in a skilled trade and had some ability to read. He wanted even more for his children. As soon as they were settled in Portland, Hattie and her siblings were enrolled in the Portland Colored School.

Getting to school was not easy. From where the Crawfords lived in the lower Burnside area to where the school was located (at what is now 4th and Hall) was about a mile. This wasn't an uncommon distance for school children in rural areas at the time, but was extraordinary and should have been unnecessary in a city like Portland.

Every morning, Hattie and her younger siblings walked to school. With Reuben working and Vina caring for her preschoolers, Hattie had to be the grown-up, the chaperone.

A mile is a long ways when you are eight years old. When you are eight and black, walking from one end of downtown Portland to the other in 1870 might seem like ten miles. Hattie and her siblings had to pass mostly white-owned shops and businesses. Although there were no reports of problems from either the business owners or the children's families, that doesn't mean the children didn't feel nervous or intimidated. Their route would have been on the wooden sidewalks that passed the downtown storefronts or, where there were no sidewalks, on muddy streets. The children were probably well-schooled in keeping their eyes down and not attracting attention. The businessmen who watched them pass might have been the same ones who opposed allowing the African American children into their own children's schools; a fight that had already been fought before the Crawfords arrived in Portland.

The battle to educate Portland's black children started in 1867, several years before Hattie and her family arrived, when black parents decided to speak up: They wanted their children educated in the public schools. Their first attempts to enroll their children in established schools resulted in the children being sent home. Educating all children was a local responsibility but the city's white fathers, who really didn't want to put black children in white schools, procrastinated while trying to find other ways to fulfill their obligation.

School officials were slow to react. They either underestimated, or didn't care, how important formal schooling was to Portland's black families where the parents had reached adulthood before Emancipation. These illiterate or semi-illiterate parents probably valued education more than their white peers because they had been forbidden access to it. For the white parents, integration was a scary unknown and there were only two public elementary schools. Did they have to admit black children to white public schools or was there another way, they wondered.

According to Thomas Alexander Wood, a frontiersman and lawyer, change came when "a colored man named William Brown, a boot and shoe maker," went before the school board requesting that his children be allowed to attend school. His request was denied without debate. "He came and begged me to assist him to get his children into the Public Schools," Wood wrote in his autobiography. Sympathetic to the children's case, Wood prepared a forceful cause to present to the school board.

Wood began by finding sixteen children who were eligible for public school. Then he met with the school directors, who recognized the claim of these children but said, "If we admit them, then next year we will have no money to run the schools." The school directors offered a "separate but equal" situation where they would reimburse the children's families \$2.25 per student to rent a classroom and hire their own teacher. "This I positively declined," said Wood, because the cost for a school, fuel and a teacher would come to at least \$35 per head.

“The colored people would have to put up \$160 out of their own pockets. That is unfair. They are by law entitled to enter the public school. That is more than they pay taxes to support the school and if you will rent a house and employ a competent teacher, the colored people will send the children to this separate school.”

The school board declined again to enroll the children and Wood initiated a lawsuit. On the following day, wrote Wood, “I met with Mr. Failing, the chairman of the Board of Directors, and he gave me a going over that amused me, while his temper was at a white heat.”

Wood had the federal government on his side. In 1870, 519 black persons were living in a city of 62,046 and were entitled to the same basic civil rights, including education, as everyone else. Local lawmakers were left with almost no options.

The case never went to court. When several offers for compromise were put on the table, Wood stood his ground until a separate but equal system, as required by state law, was secured in the fall of 1867. Money was allocated to build and open a separate school for black children. Instead of erecting a new building, the school board rented a “suitable” house at the corner of 4th and Hall and employed a teacher. No one ever explained why the school had to be so far from the neighborhood that blacks were restricted to living in. When the school opened, twenty-five children attended. The enrollment had grown by the time Hattie started school, in fall of 1870, but it never attracted the majority of the black children who were eligible.

There is no record of what the Crawfords and other parents thought of the education their children were receiving; it was their only option. The rumors that black parents thought a separate but equal system was only a little better than no school were probably true because the question of whether or not to continue this system was brought up to the school board annually. In 1872 the separate but equal system was abolished by the Portland schools administration. In December 1873, the Colored School was closed and thirty black children were enrolled without trouble in the previously all-white schools.

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Reuben's first job in the city was as a *jobber*, a day laborer, but it wasn't very long before he found permanent work in the local shipyards as a ship caulker. The job as a skilled tradesman brought respect and status beyond his higher-than-average income, in both the black and the white community.

He worked on the *Monitor* family of iron-clad ships and was present when the original *Monitor* was retired. He stood sponsor for two Portland ships, the *Beaver* and the *Wakena*. He was proud that he never missed a ship launching at the local yards. These ships were his hobby. He worked in the shipyards until he was 80 years old.

When Reuben and his family moved to Portland, in 1870, Oregon's black population was only about 150 persons. Reuben and his family, like most blacks living in Oregon, were freed slaves and endured being legally free but not really free. There was a poll tax, continued selective enforcement of exclusionary laws and a ban on interracial marriages. Oregon refused to ratify the 15th amendment,

granting African American men the right to vote, until after 1870, when an Oregon Supreme Court judge affirmed the rights of two black men who had voted in Wasco County. Despite these obstacles, Portland offered considerable improvements over the places most blacks came from and they encouraged their friends and relatives to join them, boasting that there were jobs available and people willing to rent them rooms. Many who came, without sponsors or jobs, found live-in employment with white families as domestic servants or slaves.

While Reuben was making his way at the shipyards, black-owned businesses were thriving. Because of segregation, African Americans were not allowed to eat in white-owned restaurants so black-owned restaurants and saloons prospered, accommodating locals and railroad and ship crews passing through town. The Golden West Hotel is a perfect example of one successful response to both need and discrimination. Built as a residence for transient railroad employees, it had a restaurant, saloon, barbershop, ice cream parlor and candy shop. The hotel became a gathering place for much of black Portland.

By the late 1800s, Portland's *City Directory* was listing the addresses and jobs of local blacks. According to the *City Directory*, the two most common jobs were cook and bootblack while jobs as hotel waiter and railway porter were coveted because of the high tips.

The *City Directory* did not do a very good job of reporting on the women who were employed. Hattie was included in the *Directory* some years and not others. This was not always the *Directory's* fault. Many women were domestics or took in laundry or sewing and didn't consider that as formal employment when

reporting their family status. Others, who worked in retail, salons or factories, only reported their husband's jobs or were working when the census taker came to record their family's information.

The tracking of women's employment didn't really take place until the beginning of the 20th century. There were very few details about where women were working or how much they were paid. Even when it became acceptable for white women to go to work in white-collar jobs such as retail and office work, employment for black women remained restricted. The department store Meier and Frank hired black women as maids, and Olds and King, another department store, hired them as elevator operators. Most black women were working in servitude for white families or as laundresses.

Early on, Hattie listed herself in the *City Directory* as a hairdresser, a domestic or a janitress, so she was probably always doing some sort of work outside her home. It is interesting that Hattie was never employed in a skilled trade similar to Reuben's. Did she want something else and he wouldn't help her or was there nothing available? At the same time, holding down what would have been considered blue collar or lower class jobs did not deter her from being totally comfortable with people of all income levels. Portland was already a class-conscious city, so it is reasonable to think that Reuben's stature and respect within Portland's African American community helped Hattie as she ventured into her own political and social world.

Reuben thrived in the social and political clubs supported by African American Republicans. Along with several of his peers, he was most active in

the Lincoln and the Republican Clubs. The Republican Club was aimed at enhancing the political and economic conditions of its members. The group lobbied hard and their work eventually paid off with members receiving newly created civil service jobs. One of the more important new jobs would eventually be that of George Hardin, who became Portland's first black policeman in 1894.

Holding regular meetings was one way to keep Portland's small African American community close but not all political meetings kept their agendas exclusively for issues and elections. On a fall September evening, in 1879, Reuben was installed as secretary of the Portland Colored Immigration Society (PCIS), whose purpose was "to encourage the immigration of colored people from other states to Oregon." According to the morning edition of the September 10, 1879, *Oregonian*, "after the close of the business meeting, the hall was cleared and dancing indulged in for some time. There was an abundance of refreshments served and a social pleasant time experienced." Reuben's willingness to share his own history of slavery and emigration gave him a sense of authority and identification with the newcomers.

As time passed, the PCIS's reputation became more controversial, as it moved away from its original mission of helping the *Exodusters* (people moving far away from the post-Civil War South) resettle. In the spring of 1881, Reuben would disassociate himself from it. All he ever said was that the PCIS had ceased to represent Portland's black population. By then, several political clubs and fraternal organizations had been organized to provide assistance and help in assimilation.

In scanning the newspaper social columns it is easy see that the Crawfords kept very busy and stayed in the social limelight. As early as 1883, civic organizations such as the Masonic and Odd Fellows lodges, a black Elks lodge and the Rose City Lodge were forming around Portland. For the African American community, looking for a way to spend time with peers, membership in a lodge was highly sought after and provided a sense of belonging. Organizations such as the Elks and the Masons included most of Portland's prominent black citizens and church leaders.

Women's auxiliaries quickly evolved from these organizations. The auxiliaries would turn out to be more than social clubs. Hattie and other women like her were the true pioneers, raising money for charities, speaking out on the necessity of moral standards in their communities and providing nursing care for sick members.

Reuben was a strong advocate of the nationwide celebration of Emancipation Day, the day set aside by President Lincoln to honor the signing of the Compensated Emancipation Act. As far as Portland was from the battlefield of the Civil War, the city still participated for several years.

On April 16, 1893, Lincoln Memorial Exercises were held at the A.M.E. Zion Church to celebrate Emancipation Day. Both Rueben and his son Cupid were listed as vice presidents and participated in the ceremonies. A special invitation was sent out to Grand Army members and "all respected men of color." While women of the Crawford family could not attend this particular celebration,

they supported the activity and joined the men a few days later at “the colored Knights of Pythias” for another celebration with A.M.E Zion Church members.

Neither Hattie’s early introduction to life in front of an audience nor Reuben’s sense of obligation to both his history and his politics are unique or foreshadow her political future, but together they produce a young, upper middle class black girl growing up surrounded by, and part of, Portland’s African American social and religious community. Very soon, Hattie would be a young woman, well-prepared for the suffragist movement. She would never be held back for fear that women should be seen and not heard.

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Hattie had much in common with the majority of black Portland women working for suffrage in the early 1900s. These were women who were second or third generation suffragists. Their forefathers were either slaves or born free from parents who had fought slavery. They were more educated than many of their white peers and often came from the more successful black families of the Portland area. In Hattie’s case, both her parents were emancipated slaves who supported abolitionist causes. Her father, Rueben, was a man with a skill who made sure that all his children, both sons and daughters, had some education and were instilled with a quest for freedom and full citizenship.

Hattie appears to have been the only Crawford to follow in her father’s activist footsteps. As a child, she tagged along with him wherever children were welcome and watched him participate in organizations such as the Lincoln Republican Club and the Portland Colored Immigration Society. The one thing

the entire family did together was to join the newly-established Mount Olivet Baptist Church and make it their church home. Within the comfort of her own church, Hattie used sewing circles, reading clubs and public service to advocate for women's suffrage. This is the place where she would hold suffrage meetings and lectures in 1912. Enthusiasm for her campaign did not come easily even with a built-in audience.

While immersed in all kinds of programs and activities that benefited their community, very few African American women recognized that they did not have a voice in shaping the work and programs that were needed. Early in the fight for suffrage, Portland's Nob Hill women welcomed their black peers. By the time Hattie and other politically aware women earned the attention or interest of their own churches' congregations, their peers in the white churches and social clubs had walked away from the loose coalition of women who had originally come together for social, moral and political causes that benefited everyone. There were several reasons for the alienation. White suffragists were all about expediency and worried that the politics of race would alienate too many white male voters. Now, the African American women had to demonstrate that they were willing and able to fight, alone, for interests that benefited everyone but especially their families.

This was not a fast process. African American women were very conservative, both in their ideas and their circle of friends. It took time for them to realize that if there was ever to be equal justice and fair play in public policy

they must have an opportunity to express their preferences through the vote.
The suffrage campaign really began to grow out of this recognition.

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It was September 1912 when Hattie found herself standing before that group of churchwomen from a variety of religious faiths one more time. It was hot and there was only two months until Election Day. This would be the sixth time Oregonians would vote on the franchise for women. The slow momentum of the suffrage campaign in the black community had been frustrating and this meeting probably looked like many others.

Hattie probably kept her introductions short and to the point: "My name is Hattie Redmond. I am here to talk to you about your right to vote."

Gazing out into the audience, Hattie would have looked into the faces of a few concerned black women, probably uncomfortable from both the heat and the subject matter. Every once in a while a white or Chinese woman might be standing along the back wall with a few men, usually husbands, curious about what their wives were hearing.

Intently watching and listening, the audience saw an attractive black woman, her dark hair with wisps of gray incongruous with someone in her early 40s. A short string of pearls or a locket probably graced her high collarbones. Anyone who had not heard Hattie speak would have been surprised; she was not just another pretty face with a big warm but serious smile. When Hattie began to talk, slipping into her message about the importance of the vote, all superficial, genteel appearances faded away.

Contrary to many of the anti-suffrage arguments, Hattie and her peers did not want control of anything. They were interested in causes; causes that seemed trivial or unnecessary to male legislators. Their goal was to convince the men who already had the vote that all citizens, black or white, male or female, could be trusted to make decisions regarding bettering their lives and vote accordingly.

Hattie had watched and listened to preachers long enough to know how to engage her audience. She would have done her homework and begun her talk with a personal story or one close to her audience maybe citing an incident in the community. She would have had to draw them in with her eyes and soft voice. While her tone of voice might have stayed even, the fervor behind that evenness would have increased as she went on. She was there to grab and rally the women to her cause.

Alcohol abuse was one of the social and political issues that brought women together, drawing from all races and religions. Early campaigners used personal stories to start conversations because alcohol abuse was something most families had experienced. Absolute abstention from alcohol was the mission of the temperance movement. Early on, enthusiasts realized that one way to get their liquor laws passed was to give women the vote.

A local connection between temperance and suffrage developed when Lucy Thurman, a lecturer from the National Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), came to Portland. Most women had not seen or heard black

women with her charisma and speaking ability and she was brought to the city to get the local African American women excited.

Because of Portland's early advocacy for both temperance and suffrage, Thurman added the city to her speaking tour before she headed back east. Although her home was in Jackson, Michigan, Thurman travelled the country, especially the South, championing education, voting rights, nutrition and sanitation for women. She spent ten years of her life pleading temperance among black women and then convincing the WCTU to establish a National Department of Colored Work. Afterwards, she spent another seventeen years on speaking tours advocating for its cause.

In anticipation of an 1899 visit to the city, Thurman sent invitations to all the black women of Portland "to organize and work for higher ideals, progressive ideas and a pure home life." She wanted a pledge of total abstinence. Over time, local members acknowledged that total abstinence was not realistic and if they couldn't adhere to the WCTU mission they needed to drop away. In 1912 the local WCTU changed its name to the Colored Women's Council with the mission of helping "poor and unfortunate women."

Soon afterwards, Hattie and other members of the Colored Women's Council took up the suffrage campaign as a primary issue. The Council lasted until 1917 when it merged with similar groups to form the Oregon Federation of Colored Women's Club. This club's purpose was to educate women and girls, work to improve the economic and social welfare of women and children, and protect their rights.

Before the campaign for universal suffrage really gained momentum, women thought the enactment of the 14th and 15th Amendments would eliminate their cause or at least help move it forward. Neither happened. The 14th Amendment made all persons born or naturalized in the United States citizens of the United States. Since women were citizens they thought they had just become eligible to vote. When the 15th Amendment's first clause declared that a "citizen's right to vote shall not be abridged on the basis of race, color or previous condition of servitude" they thought there would be no doubt. They were disappointed both times.

For African American women the political struggle developed on multiple levels of consciousness as the movement progressed. Of course race and gender were key but class (not limited to income or where a person worked) was also a huge issue. The majority of white women who participated actively in the organized movement were among what was considered the middle class in their day. Hattie and the majority of black suffragists were in a higher class than the masses of black women. Like most black female suffragist leaders, Hattie was educated in both academics and the arts. But Hattie had been encouraged by her father to take her place in any social situation and to stand up for what she thought was right.

By the time Hattie was ready to take on voting rights, she knew her way around Portland's social community, both white and black, and her family was always on the local "who to invite" list. For example, in August of 1892, a bishop from the Tenth Episcopal district of the African Episcopal Methodist Church in

Texas was holding a conference in Portland. He was to speak at the A.M.E. Zion Church. According to the *Oregonian*, Hattie and her family were on an invitation list that included “both white and colored” and attended “with much of Portland’s better-known Black community.”

In a situation very distant from her church activities, and reminiscent of the young Hattie on stage at twelve, she continued to act, sing and recite poetry in public. On January 9, 1893, the *Oregonian* announced that the annual celebration of the Sumner Lodge, Independent Order of the Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samaria, was being held at the Masonic Hall. Hattie was listed in the cast of the play, *Don’t Judge by Appearances*. There is no record of what the play was about but in the 1920s Garland Anderson, an African American bellhop from San Francisco, took credit for writing and eventually producing a play by the same name. It was the story of a black bellhop who was unjustly accused of raping a white woman. If this is the same story and not just a coincidence of names, it is entirely believable that Hattie would take up such a politically challenging play. It is impossible to know because no script survived. The newspaper article did mention that Emerson and Hattie’s siblings were in the audience.

Over the years, Hattie’s father Rueben maintained the respect and interest of citizens throughout the city. The June 21, 1902 edition of the “*New Age*, a black-owned newspaper founded in 1896, reported that on “Monday evening a number of friends of Mr. Reuben Crawford tendered him a surprise party.” It was truly a surprise celebration in honor of his 80th birthday, it. “The

company waited until he had retired, when they came loaded down with good things to refresh the inner man, and compelled him to dress. Songs, music and repartee caused the hours to speed swiftly by and after trying to get rid of the good things they had brought, the merry party took their departure and permitted their host to retire to his peaceful slumbers.”

While Hattie and Reuben were doing their best to make Portland a better place to live, Hattie’s brothers were more than unruly. William was the first to leave the fold in the early 1890s. He had a good job as an apprentice at Oregon State Stove when, all of a sudden, he packed up and moved to Mexico. There are no personal or court records to suggest why he made such a big change but the rumors were that he was about to be charged with embezzlement. He came back to visit in 1902 and again in 1906 but he never stayed.

Hattie’s brother Cupid was always involved in some sort of crisis. He was married and worked as a horseshoer or blacksmith. For a while, he owned his own shop near Main and Second Streets. He must have been good at his work because people liked him and every time he was in trouble, things just seemed to turn out okay. When Cupid was in the hospital for a week with an infected foot the *New Age* reported, “Mr. Cubit (sic) Crawford,” our popular horseshoer is able to get around again although his foot is still very painful caused by blood poisoning.”

In 1907, The Oregon Electric Railway Company tried to condemn a small lot in southeast Portland that Cupid owned and he decided to fight back. “Crawford is a colored man and bitterly contested the right of the railroad

company to enter his property,” reported the *Oregonian* on May 7, 1907. Cupid refused their offer of \$250 so the issue went to court. The jury decided in his favor and awarded him \$500 for a 17-foot strip of land across his property in South Portland.

In 1910, Cupid was accused of contributing to the delinquency of a minor, an underage white girl. The charges were quickly dropped. Rumors had it that the charges were nothing more than an attempt to discredit Hattie and her suffragist friends who were “raising people’s hackles.”

People seemed to pay little attention after that to Cupid’s exploits until 1911, when he successfully fought for the right to bathe in a public bath and got into a gunfight with a man named Broadnax in Crawford’s home. Broadnax died and Cupid was found innocent because the shooting was self-defense. Cupid’s notoriety continued for as long as he was alive and Hattie seemed to rise above them all.

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The persistent lack of attendance at pro-suffrage meetings was a big problem. One of Hattie’s peers stated their shared frustration when she said, “There are thousands of opportunities out there, opportunities to right an unjust or better our children’s lives, but unless we have a say, unless we have a vote, who is going to listen?”

Hattie and Katherine Gray, fellow suffragist and Hattie’s friend and mentor, used every opportunity to push for suffrage and found ways to use the local newspapers even when the papers were trying to ignore them. For example, the

social calendar in the *Sunday Oregonian* on September 22, 1912, announced what it would have considered a safe notice: a fundraising service at the A.M.E. Zion church. There were very few details except that the event was to raise money for home and foreign missions. A quick scan of the program note made it easy to overlook that Mrs. Hattie Redmond was singing a solo and Katherine Gray was speaking on Women's Suffrage, a subject most persons would not associate with "missions."

Hattie knew that the path to larger attendance was publicity but in Portland that was tough. Suffrage received little coverage in the local press and in the African American community even less. Portland's leading newspaper was the *Oregonian* and its editor, Harvey Scott, the brother of Abigail Scott Duniway, the leading activist for suffrage in Oregon, was very much against enfranchising women. For example, the *Oregonian* stayed quiet when other Oregon newspapers published famous campaign arguments, such as one by Susan B. Anthony, in which she said that "women were the only class (not guilty of crime) taxed without representation, tried without a jury of their peers and governed without their consent."

Lack of publicity was not the only difficulty the black suffragists encountered. Early in Oregon's attempt to secure the vote, most of the women's organizations crossed racial and socio-economic lines to work together. That changed as the campaign progressed and by the early 1900s, classism and racism had divided the women. A May, 1906, *New Age* article found "the Nob Hill" district of Portland overwhelmingly against women's suffrage for all women.

The fear of enfranchising large members of blacks and Chinese prodded the women of the upper class neighborhoods to vote against suffrage completely.

Hattie and Gray were probably the epitome of what the Nob Hill women feared. Any woman looking at them from Nob Hill saw Hattie, president of the Colored Women's Equal Suffrage League, working as a janitor at the federal courthouse and Gray as an attendant at a public park bathroom. She probably didn't know where to fit assertive black women campaigning for the same rights as she was when they didn't hold jobs she considered acceptable, such as a secretary or clerk in a dry goods store.

Snobbery did not slow Hattie and Gray down. Hattie could not have cared less about what other women thought of how she supported herself; this campaign was about something bigger than what they did nine-to-five. To get their job done, both women continued to meet with almost every women's organization in Portland and to invite these groups to their meetings.

* * * * *

Although newspapers were not a new institution, their importance and personal contribution to Portland's daily character was evolving. Hattie was fortunate that she could read. She was a product of a new generation of freed slaves, many of whom grew up in the South and had been denied access to books or newspapers, who made sure their children could read and looked for opportunities, mostly informal, to read or practice their reading skills. They held reading salons and devoured information about public affairs and politics. The

African American community supported two black-owned newspapers. One of these papers was the *New Age*.

Adolphus Griffin, editor and publisher of the *New Age*, wrote that his mission was simply to keep readers apprised of “the crucial racial issues of the day.” He would succeed. Griffin included opinion pieces, local news and lots of advertising. It is easy to assume that Hattie and Reuben read the *New Age* to keep up on local events.

The four-page weekly strived for an audience that went beyond the black reader. There was national news on the front page. Griffin sought out and picked up stories from correspondents in Montana and Washington State to cover the region. Inside were news stories featuring Portlanders and editorials focused on racial issues. The newspaper successfully protested lynchings while selling advertising space to white-owned businesses.

Portland’s black community was a small close-knit family and the *New Age* strived to keep its local news personal. Because Hattie and her family were prominent citizens in Portland’s African American community, they were frequently included in what some people might call the gossip columns. Columns such as “City Notes” and “Portland Hotel Notes” passed along bits and pieces about what individuals were doing, where they were going and who was sick, healthy or in trouble.

The *New Age* was upbeat and published profiles of locals. On June 3, 1903, Reuben was the subject of one of its sketches:

“Born in St. Louis in 1828...In 1869 came to Oregon...is a caulker by trade...beginning in 1841 under William Thomas at the floating docks in St. Louis. In 1852 he married to Miss Vinnie Blue; 15 children were the result of that union, seven of who are still living. Although 74 years of age he is still whole and hearty, able to do a full day’s work, and is looked up to as one of our influential and respected citizens...one of the deacons of Mount Olivet Baptist Church in this city...one of the leading members of New Northwest Lodge, No. 2554, G.U.O. of O.F. In politics he is a staunch Republican...As a caulker he stands second to none in this city, and is always sure of work if there is any being done. Recognizing his ability, the union does not try to discriminate against him on account of his color. He holds a responsible office in the Caulkers Union of this city.”

Social columns alerted locals when their neighbors were on vacation, out on the town or in need of help. In columns appeared pieces about Hattie’s life and that of her extended family. From these personal notes, anyone could see that Hattie, as the oldest sibling, always had her hands full. She was the caretaker when Reuben was suffering from the grippe or when her sister Blanche had typhoid. When her sister Mary had “brain fever” the neighbors knew. When the Crawford house was robbed or Hattie’s brothers were in trouble, at least one of the local papers picked up the story. Although this might seem inappropriate in the 21st century, these columns filled the gap that telephones soon would,

spreading information that neighbors and one's church community wanted to know.

When Hattie and Emerson Redmond were married on November 22, 1893, it was an item for that week's *Sunday Oregonian* society column. The notice simply mentioned that Hattie married Redmond in her parents' home on Grant Street and she was attended by her sister Mary.

Growing up in a family where her parents seemed to have a strong marriage, Hattie probably wanted the same thing. At the time of their marriage, Redmond was a waiter who worked at some of Portland's finest restaurants, including the Portland Hotel, and on the Northern Pacific Railroad.

There is no record of how or when Hattie and Redmond met but one of the first mentions of them at the same event came in the September 18, 1892 issue of the *Oregonian* when they attended a "grand mid-summer soiree and literary carnival." The event was in the Myrtle Hall at 107 First Street and Hattie sang a solo, "I Love my Love." Without knowing if they were simply both in attendance or if they were already a couple, Hattie could have been singing to the audience or just to Redmond. From then on, both of their names show up at the same social and religious affairs.

It appears that the marriage did not last. Redmond was rumored to have been an unfaithful husband and he definitely had a temper. In one story, Redmond and another black waiter got into a fight at the Portland Hotel, where they were both employed. "It was just after the dinner hour and the waiters were assembled in their dining room in the basement. The men had been 'guying'

each other and both became abusive but were separated by the other waiters,” reported the *Oregonian* on January 10, 1892. “After complaining about Redmond’s treatment of him, the other waiter stabbed him with a penknife which he held in his closed hand. The cut was not serious and no arrests were made but Matthews, the waiter with the knife, was fired.”

Details about Hattie’s personal life are sketchy but her daily life was full of backbreaking work. Chores from laundry, done by hand using big heavy washtubs and washboards, to ironing everything that was washed with smoothing irons to marketing and housecleaning were physically demanding. When the daily work was done, there was probably mending or other needlework to close out the day. Regular chores combined with seasonal work such as spring cleaning, canning and setting fires at night left little time for the social and leisure activities that everyone enjoyed.

In the summer of 1900, Hattie went to Meacham, Oregon, to work for the summer. She never gives a reason why she left Portland but there are several possibilities. Hattie had only ever worked in domestic jobs and, because Meacham was a railroad town, she may have heard about opportunities for well-paid work during the tourist travel season. She may have gone to work the summer harvest or any of the miscellaneous jobs serving the railroad. Or she may have just wanted to get out of Portland for a few weeks and thought that whatever the work was, it was better than that at home. When Hattie returned to Portland, she was reported to be visiting her father, not her husband.

In 1901, the Crawford home was damaged by fire. Reuben formally accused Redmond of starting it. There was not much damage. “The action of Crawford getting me arrested,” Redmond told an *Oregonian* reporter, “was just for spite... I married his daughter and she and I have not been together for three months.” The case was never solved.

In 1907, Redmond ended up in Edgefield, the county poorhouse fifteen miles east of Portland. The facts get a little blurry here. In the 1900s people ended up in the poor house because they were sick, really old or couldn’t take care of themselves. Redmond was only in his 40s so he wasn’t old but he was probably really sick and they were probably just so poor Hattie couldn’t get him appropriate medical care so he was sent out to Edgefield.

Rumors were that Redmond had gonorrhea or syphilis. When he died the official cause of death was a thrombosis of the heart but heart and rheumatoid problems are also symptoms of gonorrhea. Redmond was there only ten days before his death on March 26, 1907. The Redmonds never had children.

* * * * *

The *New Age* was constantly reminding Portland’s African American residents that each individual had a responsibility to earn a living and participate in “the entertainments of the black community.” Throughout its ten years in print, the paper never shied away from criticizing its own community. A note in the “City News” column on June 21, 1902, reminded its readers “the Negro must get and have something of his own, if he would amount to much and be respected. A dependent people are never thought much of and such is a fact.”

A few years later the paper would still be addressing the same issue. Another editorial in a December 1906 the *New Age* read, "The new Blacks are responsible for the negative white impression of the Black Community."

"The slums of the earth making their home, for they are making things very bad for the race here. They are either stealing or doing some disreputable tricks," pronounced the same paper, a few days later. "No wonder colored persons cannot walk down a street without being sneered at, or snubbed by some white people. We hope those who are here and those who come from elsewhere will come with character and try to upbuild their race."

The *New Age* urged the formation of relief or social assistance services. "Let it be said," wrote editor Griffin, "that we take care of our paupers and unfortunates." Out of this cry for assistance came the Ladies Aid Society, charged with caring for the anticipated destitute cases caused by the black population increase in Portland. The Mount Olivet Baptist Church, where Hattie and her father were respected members, took strong advocacy roles in the social and political goings-on in Portland and so she was probably actively involved in the Ladies Aid Society.

"Slavery days, and what Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation meant to the Negroes, were spoken of at the African American Episcopal Zion Church last night," reported the *Oregonian* on January 2, 1911. "Reuben Crawford, an octogenarian, was one of those who told of experiences before freedom was granted the black men of the South."

This was not the first time Reuben had addressed the subject and he always urged people to never forget where their families came from and never let their freedoms be wasted. This was the legacy that Hattie was obligated to carry on and she was not alone.

As opportunities developed for blacks in Portland, it became more and more difficult for them to rent houses in the city. On October 13, 1906, a *New Age* editorial urged blacks to purchase their own homes. This would not really begin to happen until 1913 when the opening of the Broadway Bridge made it convenient for black families to move across the river. Because of segregation, they could not buy houses in city neighborhoods so they migrated to the Alameda Ridge above the train yards and just outside of the city limits.

The Crawfords stayed in the downtown area. They moved at least three times around the Burnside-Couch area. Hattie and Redmond were married in what was then the family home at 287 Grant (between 4th and 5th). Their last address was 327 17th Street.

* * * * *

On November 2, 1912, just a few days before the vote that would finally give Oregon women suffrage, the *Oregonian* headline cried out in big bold print, "Suffragists are Warned!" The story called on the "friends" of suffrage to be careful on Election Day. In response to warnings from election officials, presidents of all the suffragist organizations issued a joint proclamation to their members and friends of equal suffrage that they resist canvassing and approaching the polls. They were to "obey strictly the letter and spirit of the law"

because the “fitness of women in making laws in the future” was at stake.

Signers of this plea included Abigail Scott Duniway of the Oregon State Suffrage Association, Emma Wold of the College Equal Suffrage League and Hattie Redmond of the Colored Women’s Equal Suffrage League. No one was arrested and everyone’s votes were counted.

On November 5, 1912, women’s suffrage became law in Oregon. There is no question that it wouldn’t have happened without the support of Hattie and many women just like her.

After the celebrations had died down, Hattie remained in the public eye, mostly through her church and social club activities. Bits and pieces about her in the local papers suggested that she would always be respected within the Portland community. Her name is included in meetings where local organizations are protesting incidents of discrimination and lobbying for the passage of a public accommodations bill in the state legislature.

Reuben had retired in 1910. He continued to be active in both his church and the local social clubs. When he passed away, the April 10, 1918, *Oregonian* called him the “Veteran Shipworker” who aided building and launching *The Monitor Fifty Years Ago*.” Thomas Corwin, a close friend of Reuben’s, said his life was more than ship work. “He stood up for equal pay.”

In October 1914, Hattie joined a group of African American women at the Public Library to organize the Colored Women’s Republican Club. They organized in support of Republican candidates such as Robert Booth for United

States Senator and C. N. McArthur for Congress and would eventually support the entire Republican ticket.

After the first meeting of the Colored Women's Republican Club, the entire party went to the courthouse where they registered to vote as Republicans. Hattie was elected vice president of this group where several women spoke in determined support of the Republican ticket. The organization continued to hold meetings throughout the campaign and worked to get more black women to register to vote so they, too, could vote for the Republican ticket.

In November of 1919, Lucy Thurman was back in town, at the A.M.E. Zion Church, speaking to a group from the W.T.C.U and Hattie was present, in her role running the Sunday schools.

"Janitress Lauded for Long Service," read an *Oregonian* headline on March 17, 1939. "Mrs. Hattie Redmond, 65, Negress, who as charwoman in federal employment, has had the special job of keeping the chambers of federal judges at Portland neat and clean for the past 29 years, was the proudest person in the government courthouse Thursday." Hattie was about to retire. Along with the pension and good wishes she had earned over the years, she received an autographed picture and a letter from Jim Farley, the postmaster general. She said she would keep the picture and letter as "one of her most valued mementos."

There was no mention of her other accomplishments such as her work in the suffrage movement, her social welfare activities or her artistic talents. Even looking back at these activities, the campaign for the woman's right to vote was

only a small part of who Hattie Redmond was. Early on, she recognized that the power to vote, this piece of United States citizenship, was something that belonged to all women and the obstacles such as being African American in a racist city would not slow her down. She fought for the franchise for all women and she never feared that audiences, whether black or white, male or female, rich or poor, might trivialize what she had to say because she was a simple working class woman.

Hattie died in June 27, 1952. The newspapers reported nothing more than a simple death notice.

(Figure 3)

Mary Francis Isom
1865-1920

Mary Francis Isom: The Good Soldier

I found Mary Francis Isom when I was rummaging through the aging and battered oak files on the second floor of the Multnomah County Central Library. These old files are treasure chests of references to old Oregon newspapers, people and events, and like the old papers they refer to, they never disappoint. Thumbing alphabetically through the old card catalogue, Mary Francis Isom was the first name I recognized. The Central Library had become a second home for me and I recognized Mary Francis as the woman who had started it all so I decided to see what was in her file.

Mary Francis' note cards, like all the rest, were yellowed and curling along their top edges from previous *thumbers*. The cards themselves were filled with beautiful cursive notes in smudged pencil or fading blue ink. They bore abbreviated references to dates when her name was found in the *Oregonian* or the *Journal*, Portland's two daily newspapers. I wasn't looking for anything in particular; I was just looking. The card that caught my eye didn't have a newspaper reference. It said "Letters, 1918-1919." Whatever these letters were, they were in a folder in the Closed Stacks and anyone could check them out. So I did.

The librarian handed me a thin, beige file folder. It looked and felt as if it hadn't been opened in many years, perhaps it never had. On top was a typed cover letter that was so faded I could barely make out that it was addressed to someone (whose name was too faded to read) at the Library Archives Service in

Washington, D.C. Using a magnifying glass, I made out that these were copies of letters she had written to the librarians at her home library in Portland. I started to read.

“I should not choose the Bay of Biscay for a summer’s sail,” the first one began. The paper was thin and more gray than yellow, not aged but the opaque color of carbon duplicates. It felt so delicate in my hands. I couldn’t put it down.

She was writing from France where she spent only a few months in the waning days of World War I. Most of the letters were typewritten. A few were handwritten in a beautiful cursive different from anything I had ever seen.

“Library Association of Portland” was stamped across the bottom of each page.

Most of the letters in the folder were not addressed to any one person but I felt as if they were written to me, a lost friend she had left behind for that few months in Europe. As I continued to read, I was with her on her overseas voyage, in Paris and on the Front where every dirty, cold wet hospital camp was full of wounded soldiers eager for the books she could deliver. This was not the beautiful Calais of my summer vacations, but a ravaged, broken world as shattered as the soldiers who were lying in a battlefield hospital.

Almost one hundred years later, I was able to put myself in her shoes. I wondered what had made her do this? What led her, a single woman at the height of her career, to volunteer to go to war-torn France in the dead of winter? Was it simply to deliver books to those who needed them? Or was there more to her story?

Everything else I could find said that Mary Francis was the stoic stereotype of a librarian. But here was one daring event, a singular episode that showed she could do more than catalogue books or confront the Library Association. Behind her warm, matronly smile was a brave, adventurous woman.

* * * * *

It was a very cold November in 1918 and World War I was in its darkest days. Mary Francis Isom, Multnomah County's first librarian, was just finishing an almost two week pilgrimage to France to do what she did best: delivering books to people who wanted to read. The only thing different about this delivery was that she was taking the books to wounded soldiers in war-torn France. The fifty-three-year-old librarian had accomplished everything she could in her job in Portland, Oregon, and needed a new challenge. She loved sharing all sorts of books with enthusiastic readers and she didn't want to give that up. She knew that this was not a time in her life to move to a new library in a new city. When she was offered this opportunity to deliver books to the battlefield hospitals, she knew this was the answer to her prayers.

Joining other librarians who left cherished careers and the security of their home and country to travel the war-torn countryside to set up libraries in the field hospitals, Mary Francis was beginning what she later described as "the most interesting work" of her life. Single-focused and intense, she was on her way to deliver books to soldiers. She took with her only a few possessions and a genuineness and ardor that would leave a lasting impression on other librarians,

Red Cross volunteers and the wounded and idle soldiers she met along the way.

It was two months to the day from when Mary Francis accepted the call to go to France that she found herself in Paris. She probably paid her own way starting with a strenuous train trip to New York City. In those days, the trains were overly crowded with soldiers and other volunteers and Mary Francis probably travelled as frugally as was possible. The arduous, weeklong Atlantic Ocean crossing that followed was complicated by bad weather, poor food and seasickness. Like many of her fellow passengers, Mary Francis spent much of the crossing ill. Travelling by herself on a ship teeming with Red Cross workers, French soldiers, and sailors from the United States and Italian navies, she was surrounded by people anxious to make their contribution to the Great War effort.

Her all-night train ride from that port ended in Paris on the morning of November 11, 1918, the day the armistice ending the war was signed. After locating a room for the night, the short, plump woman with willful eyes and gray hair, marched into the American Library Association's (ALA) French War Service bureau and announced that she was ready to go wherever she was needed. "I will never forget the first time Mary Francis came into my office in Paris," wrote Burton Stevenson, director. "No one could have failed to be impressed by her sincerity, her earnestness, her rigor."

If Mary Francis had any question as to whether she was needed or not after the armistice, Stevenson would have quickly put her mind at ease. Both, he and Herbert Putnam, Librarian of Congress and general director of the service in France, were aggressively asking for more books for soldiers. The demand was

as great if not greater with the cessation of hostilities in order to boost the morale of the soldiers. A million additional books were requested and General John Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) was said to have cabled the War Department asking that everything be done to expedite the shipment of books.

The American Library Association's Paris office was at No. 10 rue de L'Elysee. Paris, that November, was particularly cold and rainy. Mary Francis had ten days to experience the city and get her paperwork in order. She secured her worker's ticket and made sure her picture was forwarded to U. S. Army General John Pershing. She also volunteered in the public library and met with local officials.

With museums closed, Mary Francis went looking for external monuments that were still standing. She stood in awe before the Eiffel Tower and the Arc d'Triomphe. Walking the streets of a city that had had over fifty loads of bombs dropped on it, seeing piles of rubble and abandoned buildings, she was enamored with the battered city. When she left for the battlefield hospitals, she wrote to her friends at the library in Portland, that, in the midst of war-torn chaos and looking forward with trepidation....the City of Lights was "a living, throbbing thing with a soul."

Born in Nashville, Tennessee, on February 27, 1865, Mary Francis was the only child of John and Francis Isom. John Isom, an army surgeon during the Civil War, remained stationed in Nashville after the war's end to deal with the

aftermath of one of bloodiest conflicts in history. Mary Francis and her mother returned to their home in Cleveland, Ohio, where John joined them when he had done all he could in Nashville. Mary Francis' mother died when Mary Francis was only eighteen. At an age when most young women were dreaming of college and marriage, Mary Francis found herself filling the role of the hostess required by her father's military and social ranking. The result was a cultivated, poised and very capable young woman. She managed one year at Wellesley College before coming home with chronic unexplained health problems.

Mary Francis continued as her father's hostess and constant companion until his death in 1899. Never showing an interest in marriage and apprehensive after her first attempt at college, she placed herself under the tutelage of an old family friend, Josephine Rathbone. Rathbone encouraged the young woman towards a career and Mary Francis spent two years studying librarianship at the Pratt Institute Library School. It was at Pratt where she met Herbert Putnam, the man who would return several years later to choose her for the European service.

After graduation, Mary Francis spent a few months at the Cleveland Public Library. She was 34 years old when she was offered the job of cataloguing the valuable John Wilson book collection bequeathed to the citizens of Portland, Oregon, and in trust to the Library Association of Portland. With no real ties to Cleveland, she readily accepted what she considered her first challenge in library service. It was May 1901 when she arrived in Portland and her intention was to stay about a year, cataloguing a specific donation and then moving on.

Eventually, though, she assumed full responsibility for what became the transition of the library from private subscription to public facility.

“When the Portland Public Library reopens its doors,” noted the *Oregonian*, on February 11, 1902, “a new library will occupy the place filled by D. P. Leach since 1897, and from the executive head of the institution down, not a man will be on the staff, except the janitor.” Her salary was publicized at \$90 per month and she was expected to introduce “modern library methods that will be of value.”

Portland was unfamiliar terrain to Mary Francis when she was given charge of the city’s new public library. From the beginning, she was resolved to create a strong central library that would be used by all of the city’s citizens. In 1903 the library became a county library reaching out to all citizens through a multiplicity of outlets and branches. “Miss Isom was determined to reach everyone in the county,” remembered fellow librarian, Alice M. Taylor. “She consistently held before her eyes that ideal of the library as a great democratic agency, a possession of the people to be administered always with their needs foremost in mind.”

In a speech given at the opening of the present Central Library building in Portland, Mary Francis explained her personal and professional guideposts:

“Many years ago the public library was called the ‘University of the people’, an apt phrase today, for these shelves point the way to self-education, their volumes offer the means of the broadest culture or of special training. The public library is the peoples’

library, it is maintained by the people for the people, it is the most democratic of our democratic institutions.”

Mary Francis was a natural take-charge person. When the time came to design and build the main library, she was the guiding light. Working with architect Albert Doyle, she was responsible for most of its remarkable interior. She chose the inscriptions for the stonework and the authors’ names on the concrete benches surrounding the building. Similarly, when, in 1904, Mary Francis saw the value in organizing the Oregon Library Association, she successfully invited all the librarians from around Oregon to join with her. She encouraged the Oregon Legislature to establish the State Library Commission in 1905 and brought its first State Librarian, Cornelia Marvin, to Oregon from Wisconsin. She founded the Pacific Northwest Library Association in 1909 and served as its second president from 1910 to 1911.

“When Miss Isom took charge of the library she did not sit down and wait for ‘customers,’ not she,” wrote Louise Bryant for a March, 1914, article in the *Oregonian*. “She looked out of her window and saw all the people of Multnomah County as possible clients and she decided to have books to suit each and every one of them.” According to Bryant, Mary Francis wanted to create a demand for books among “the high and the low” and she took giant strides to bring book and reader together.

To keep her commitment to the people, Mary Francis used storefronts, schools and public buildings such as firehouses and police stations for branch libraries. She made sure the neighborhood libraries were welcoming to

immigrants and schoolchildren. She took a keen interest in the foreigners moving into the southeast Portland area from 1914 to 1918 and invited them to Sunday afternoon gatherings at their local branch library. People of all ages and backgrounds came. Free to speak in their native Yiddish or Italian, they read from foreign posts about the growing unease in Europe and shared refreshments. Alice Norton, a fellow librarian, reminisced in a letter to Mr. Van Horne that she believed “many people of foreign birth and recent arrival got their first encouragement due to Miss Isom’s interest in them.” In retrospect, these experiences seem providential in her eagerness to participate the book programs for soldiers and the special skills or experiences to do the work that would be demanded of her.

On the eve of World War I, the 53-years-old Isom had done just about every thing she could to enhance the library services in Portland, Multnomah County and the greater Northwest. As the war in Europe progressed, the ALA requested that public libraries maintain a “superficial face of neutrality” by exhibiting materials supporting all sides of the conflict and compiling bibliographies of peace literature. When the United States entered the fight, “all appearances of neutrality quickly dissipated,” and support for the war grew both nationally and locally.

* * * * *

Prior to the outbreak of the Great War, the ALA had been seen as a small professional body, wrapped up in tradition, settled in its habits and occupied with technical details. Herbert Putnam, Librarian of Congress, saw the war as an

opportunity to change that image so he sat down with General Pershing and broached the subject of furnishing books to the American Army. Pershing was a reader and took little convincing.

In April 1917 the first committee to mobilize a library war service was organized. By late June, the ALA presented preliminary plans to furnish reading materials to the soldier to relieve “depressing tedium” and “dangerous temptations.”

The goals were to prepare book lists and to recruit librarians to manage the camp collections. Originally there were to be 32 camps at bases around the U.S. with a central library constructed on site. These books were to be “invisible armor” and be comforting in times of stress. There were no government funds for this project and libraries and social service organizations went on major fundraising drives, approaching organizations such as the Carnegie Foundation. In October, Putnam resigned his Librarian of Congress job to run the Library War Service (LWS) for the following two years.

“The charge to provide library service for the armed forces became the Association’s most compelling challenge,” said Putnam. As the program expanded, hundreds of librarians were recruited for service in the domestic camps and in Europe. Librarians seemed to understand that if they succeeded in this enormous undertaking they would become a national force and gain a respect that they had never known. They also knew that if they failed they would be seen as not being worth anyone’s support.

Female librarians were never excluded from war work. At first they were denied opportunities to work in the camps but the female librarians, a majority of library professionals, became defiant, seeing the war as one big opportunity to break new ground. They were eager to serve. Once again, Putnam took a strong lead, stating that there was no reason why women, already volunteering in some of the non-librarian jobs in the camps, couldn't be in the libraries. "If a woman can serve tea in the hostess house she can serve books in the library," he said. By October 1917 women were working in the camps.

The number of librarians allowed into France was restricted so the ALA made as much use as possible of its best librarians with support from the Red Cross. Over the course of two and a half years, ninety librarians would serve in France. Among the librarians who were personally selected by Burton Stevenson, the man in charge in France, was Mary Francis Isom. He wanted the best available because he didn't want the project to turn into nothing more than a dumpsite for a lot of miscellaneous books.

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"BOOKS GO TO SOLDIERS" ran the *Oregonian* headline on September 17, 1917. "These are busy days for Miss Mary Francis Isom, librarian at the Portland Public Library." She and her staff were preparing hundreds of volumes of books to be shipped to the soldiers stationed at forts in Oregon and Washington. Another 4000 books had been collected and donated for soldiers as they prepared to ship out to Europe.

She was not alone in her work. Across the country, librarians were looking for ways to show their support for the war effort. They were among the first to be morally charged in what appeared an almost spiritual struggle. According to Arthur Young in his book, *Books for Sammies*, “the sacrificial ideal and the heritage of the library as a moral arbiter of reading tastes were strong undercurrents in the library profession.” As soon as war was declared, the ALA announced programs of service to “preserve democracy” and “meet the challenge of the war.”

According to Bernard Van Horne, Mary was profoundly disturbed by the war but threw herself into war work with “her accustomed vigor.” Under her direction, the Multnomah County librarians circulated war-related materials, censored materials suspected of being disloyal or seditious, and were overseers for food conservation and the growing of Liberty gardens. They collected books for camp hospitals and libraries, too.

In January and February of 1918, Mary Francis and other local librarians collected and shipped over 40,000 additional books to soldiers throughout the Northwest. “The greatest single demand that has come from the soldiers,” Mary Francis told the *Oregonian* on more than one occasion, “is for trigonometry texts. We especially need right now six sets of *Everyman’s Encyclopedia* to go with six contingents of soldiers that are leaving soon for the front.”

Librarians collected money for War Savings and Thrift Stamp programs. They bought Liberty Bonds with their own wages. For most librarians this

support was not an issue. Unfortunately, it was a very big problem for one of her most trusted assistants and, consequently, for Mary Francis.

The dissenter was Mary Louise Hunt, an unshakable conscientious objector who opposed all warfare. Hunt fulfilled every other war activity assignment but she refused to spend her own money to purchase war bonds.

Because she did not believe in war, Hunt refused to lend the government money (buy bonds) to support the fighting. Mary Francis talked to her. The Liberty Loan bond workers talked to her. The U.S. District Attorney talked to her. On Friday, April 12, 1918, the *Evening Telegram* carried the story about the “librarian who refused to support America in the war.” The Library Board, the local newspapers and almost every civic organization cried out for her removal.

When interviewed in termination hearings, Hunt said she never intended to cause a public scene or embarrass her co-workers. She never intended to put Mary Francis in the position of taking sides in an emotional public debate between a public employee’s personal freedoms during wartime and the power of her employer. She never intended to catch the nation’s attention or bring grief and community hostility to Isom.

A special board meeting was held that same evening to discuss Hunt’s future. In a brief statement, Hunt assured the board of her patriotism but held steadfast to her constitutional right to hold a minority opinion. Mary Francis, who personally and professionally supported the library’s war efforts, defended Hunt’s right to free speech. The Library Board reluctantly agreed and passed a

resolution confirming their decision that Hunt was within her rights in refusing to buy Liberty Bonds.

An irate citizenry wanted no part of that decision and, with the help of the *Oregonian* newspaper, kept the debate hot over the weekend, led by board member W.F. Woodard who repeatedly questioned the loyalty of Miss Isom. “Heated accusations that in other days would have led to coffee and pistols for two at early dawn were made yesterday noon at the special meeting of the directors of the Library Association,” reported the *Oregonian*, on April 16, 1918.

Mary Francis was not about to be intimidated. “Miss Isom, seated across the table from her accuser, leaped to her feet and in a voice tense with emotion said, ‘Mr. Woodward, you are an insulting man!’”

Before the meeting closed, a vote of confidence was called for Mary Francis by board president Ayer. In a lead-up to the vote, Ayer said, “Mr. Woodard’s statement is yellow; he is yellow all the way through.” He went on to remind board members that officially Miss Isom had done more than should be expected of her and that her loyalty was above reproach. A later newspaper story again vindicated Mary Francis’ contribution to the war effort by listing some of her war activities. Besides the professional programs she initiated within the library, Mary Francis donated to three issues of liberty loans, donated to a Polish relief fund and supported a French orphan. The vote of confidence for Mary Francis was almost unanimous. To spare the library additional embarrassment, Hunt quietly resigned and returned to her home in Portland, Maine.

This entire episode, especially the affront to her patriotism, was traumatic

for Mary Francis. For a woman who was frustrated and uncomfortable being at the center of public scandal, the impact of public censure were more than she really wanted to deal with.

“LIBRARIAN WILL LEAVE,” was the *Oregonian* headline on September 10, 1918, referring to Mary Francis. Her colleague Herbert Putnam, Librarian of Congress, had offered her the opportunity to go to France and help establish war libraries. “Miss Mary Francis Isom has been appointed one of the four librarians of the country to organize a soldiers’ library in each of the four American rest camps in France.” Prior to the appointment, she had been in charge of libraries at Fort Canby, Fort Columbia, Fort Stevens and the Vancouver Barracks. Mary Francis, the field surgeon’s daughter, with service in her blood and a keenness to share her passion for books, had accepted immediately.

* * * * *

Mary Francis’ first assignment was near Mesves-Bulcey, a three-hour train ride from Paris. This was a sprawling military installation of fifty army and navy camps. This network of twelve base hospitals served as the temporary home for 26,000 soldiers.

It was November 27, 1918 and Mary Francis was greeted by driving rains and a welcome mat of yellow mud. There would be no taxicabs, streetcars or daily newspapers, only the sprawling base with its 190 book huts (small libraries).

Rooming with a Red Cross nurse from Canada, Mary described her shelter as “bare concrete floors, whitewashed walls, one toilet for eight persons and thin mattresses with blood stained sheets.” This was just the beginning but it

foreshadowed the days and camps ahead. With the weather biting cold, Mary Francis picked up a persistent cough that plagued her the rest of her stay.

Mary Francis spent her time with homesick, maimed and mutilated men who were confined to cold, concrete wards with stoves but no fuel to warm them. She found wounded soldiers bound to their stretchers by brown wool blankets and smelled the stench of bloody war wounds and burnt bodies. The sounds were excruciating. Inside the wards, she could not escape the painful cries for relief. Although the war was officially over, ceaseless deafening alarms continued to announce incoming planes or lights out. Mary was not a complainer. She only mentioned these conditions to her friends in Portland one time. "I can stand anything, now," wrote this stoic woman. "I can even look at the most horrible war wounds without flinching."

Stories and letters from most of the volunteers recorded the same conditions: incessant rain, strange customs, a foreign language and homesick soldiers. Volunteers were used in more ways than just outreach in the hospitals. In order to get the books to the camps, some volunteers remained near the ports to unload books from the ships and send them through Paris to the camps. Others received the books, instructed the camp workers and salvaged books from military outfits about to return home. Volunteers routinely wrote that unloading books was never a routine activity.

Books arrived at the hospital camps at about 50 tons per month (75,000 books). The motto of the ALA's war service was "a book for every man." Each camp's constraints were a learning experience. At Camp BH40 (many camps

were labeled only by map location), Mary Francis had one hundred and eight boxes of books (eight thousand volumes) to be sorted and cataloged before the soldiers could get their hands on them. Bringing out what she described as her deep-seated tenacity, she spent two “wasted” days waiting to get permission for one single hour’s distribution. She found a Red Cross worker with library experience to help her. A volunteer writes, “Soldiers in the camps were highly appreciative of the chance to read. There was a book hunger the like of which I did not believe possible.” Lines started forming at the book huts before breakfast and kept up nearly all day.

Delivering the books was exhausting for Mary Francis. Too often exhaustion would lead to self-doubt and she would begin to question why she was there. Then as if by magic or divine intervention, something would happen to bring solace or healing. One day when she was still very new on the job and unsure of procedure, she found herself without any support to set up the camp. Then she found a contingency of idle and demoralized young boys. “Do you boys want books?” she asked them. She saw a spark and watched them come alive. Fifteen volunteers helped her unpack and catalogue the books, singing while they worked.

Another night, she returned to her “little cell” from the “long wards of mangled broken men all tied up in apparatus of some sort” to find a small black cat nestled into the wooly steamer rug covering her bed. Instead of tossing him out, Mary simply snuggled in next to him and the two guileless souls provided each other warm comfort for the night.

In mid-December, she moved to another camp near Mesves-Bulcey, where she and fifteen hundred men were without water for cooking or washing and had only sporadic electricity. She fell ill, again. This time she had laryngitis. Forcing herself to concentrate on the books, she reminded herself of the good work she was doing. She wrote, "You have no idea how melancholy and miserable, how hopeless it all is over here. I pin on my smile as I put on my *arctics* when I put my feet out of bed in the morning...I keep thinking it is all a bad dream and I must wake up."

Not every day was full of despair. One afternoon Mary escaped from her tireless work in a camp that suffered from scarce water and no food. She wandered toward the town of Bulcey, stopping at nearby farmhouses looking for eggs. She was unsuccessful until she told a French soldier of her pitiful condition. Without hesitating, he took her to a little *auberge* under a narrow causeway and persuaded the madam in charge to fix her an *omelette* with some bread and cheese. On another afternoon, she attended a church service where 500 to 600 men crowded into a Red Cross hut to hear a twenty-five minute sermon and sing and pray the 23rd Psalm. "I could write forever about this place, unhappy, miserable, sordid, wretched as it is, but it is very human, there is no pretense. There is a certain picturesqueness if you get far enough away from the suffering to see it."

The last week in December, Roma Brashear, a librarian from Austin, Texas, joined Mary Francis at the Mars Hospital Center. One of the two main hospital centers in central France, it served 20 smaller camps with about 10,000

soldiers living there on a temporary treatment basis. According to Ms. Brashear, Mary Francis was sick but felt compelled to get at least the first five thousand books distributed. She would not back off. “These men are restless, idle and homesick,” she said to Brashear. “They have nothing to do but count the bricks on the wall.”

Brashear saw a woman totally forthright with both the Red Cross and the soldiers. Later she described watching Mary work. “She approached the wards with decorum, asking the ward master if she could talk to the men about books.” Mary Francis explained to Brashear that “the point was to let every man standing on his feet know there was a library he could use and to approach every patient and find what he would like to read.” While passing among sights that made her “want to fall down and weep,” Ms. Brashear kept repeating how Mary Francis laughed with the soldiers, never letting sympathy or horror reflect on her face.

New Year’s Day 1919 found Mary Francis sitting on a trunk in a camp that had no chairs but in a room warmed by a large stove that actually worked, writing a letter home. She reminisced about a walk through the beautiful French countryside near the Mars-sur-Allier. “Miss Bell, a Red Cross worker, and I are trudging over muddy roads, past fair fields and picturesque farm houses looking for food. We couldn’t find anything in any of these villages. Finally, we started knocking on farmhouse doors. A generous Frenchman was willing to fix us *omelettes* with bread and butter!” She closed her letter by saying only: “two more stops and I plan to go back to Paris for repairs.”

A persistent cold and cough forced Mary Francis back to Paris on January 20. She stayed until the end of January, when she left for Angers, where she ended up a patient in the hospital for a week, before heading off to Nantes, St. Nazaire, and eventually Le Mans.

For six months Mary Francis walked or begged rides on anything from a mail wagon to a donkey engine to a commanding officer's touring car to get from camp to camp. Before she was done, she had established 40 libraries. "I don't know which thrills me most, to glance into one of the little library rooms through the clouds of smoke and discover the men packed together and every chair filled, each with a book," she wrote, "or, to stand at the end of a long ward of bed patients and see books propped up in front of men with useless hands or held by others, all happy, all being transported into another world where, for a time, anguish and homesickness are forgotten."

Demand for both fiction and nonfiction had escalated during the waning days of the war. With army morale at one of its lowest points, soldiers were wanting anything by Mark Twain or Zane Grey, Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*, Owen Wister's *The Virginian* and *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair. The same soldiers who craved up-to-date engineering and math books could be heard reading poets such as Kipling, Service and Milton.

Mary Francis' first two tours out of Paris were alike and most setups happened with no more trouble than a snarling sergeant. Her third and last trip was different. Mary Francis left Paris on March 7, 1919, for Chaumont. She found that as the tensions of the war had diminished so had the interest taken by

the camp staff. She traveled through Chattillon-sur-Seine to Remaucourt and Gondricourt. The patients had changed. There were no more battle casualties. "The cream of our youth" had sailed home and most of the remaining soldiers were so sick or diseased she was not allowed to see them. Camp librarians were giving the books away or, in some of the outlying camps, never taking them out of the crates.

On March 18, 1919, Mary Francis wrote that her work was done. "I am anticipating the pleasures of a clean, warm cot with hot water and a ride there in a closed car." On April 21, she boarded the New Amsterdam for her journey back home.

* * * * *

Mary Francis probably spent much of her trip home thinking about how she had spent the past six months. She might have asked herself if it had been worth it. Had she accomplished anything bigger than her personal desire to help in the war effort? Her response to these questions should have been a resounding "yes."

Unsolicited commendations from soldiers, senior military officials and private citizens confirmed what librarians wanted to hear: the ALA had reached a new level of acceptance. In a post-war report written by the ALA, special credit was given to the young library workers, especially the female librarians, saying, "female librarians had overcome their prudish image."

Mary Francis returned to Portland exhausted from the illnesses that had hounded her across France. She remarked to co-worker Alice Norton that she

hoped she would not have to take a physical examination because she definitely would not pass. Her suspicions were not groundless. Soon after returning from France, she wrote to Cornelia Marvin Pierce, telling her that a recurring pain in her left arm was an incurable cancer.

Mary's time was running out. Her return to the library and to the work she loved was short-lived. Eventually, she worked from home. Her co-workers came to her house as long as they could and, gradually, she communicated by phone and by letter. She did not allow self-pity or the apprehension of death to fill those last days.

On April 11, 1920, the *Oregonian* told Portlanders that their librarian, Mary Francis Isom was critically ill.

Mary Francis died in her home on April 15, 1920. The next day the *Oregonian* announced her passing with a simple headline, "MISS MARY F. ISOM, LIBRARIAN, IS DEAD."

Mary Francis left a small legacy to the Library. The Wilson Collection that brought her to Portland still exists. A \$5,000 fund designated to seed a retirement fund for the librarians accomplished just that and her beach home, at Neskowin, Oregon, is still frequented, as a retreat, for Library employees.

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Today, visitors are reminded Mary Francis Isom when they walk up the stairs from the second to the third floor of the Multnomah County Central Library. In this bronze portrait she seems more like somebody's grandmother sitting in a rocking chair keeping vigil over each patron as they trudge up the stairs to the

Arts and Literature Room. Famous for her “books for everyone” attitude, Mary Francis brought light to thousands of soldiers and left behind the legacy of a library system that lends more books than any other in the United States except New York City.

(Figure 4)

(Figure 5)

Ann Shogren
1868-1934

(Figure 6)

May Shogren
1861-1928

The Shogren Sisters: *Modistes* Fashioning a Business in Portland

In the closets of a 1908 arts and crafts bungalow near Ocean Park, Washington, some threads of Portland history hang unseen. They are the tea gowns and calling dresses fashioned and worn by Ann and May Shogren, spinster sisters and dressmakers. For Portland, Oregon's turn-of-the-century genteel, the Shogrens fashioned high-waisted opera gowns of blue and beige satin and draped necklines trimmed with ecru lace and little bustles, dresses subtle and beautiful enough to have earned their place in the Smithsonian and a few Northwest museums. Today, the un-archived handiwork worn by the Shogrens themselves hang in wardrobes, vulnerable to the salty sea air, mold and dampness permeating an ocean cabin, aging ungracefully and seen only by an occasional guest. Left exposed, this will be a sad ending for the remnants of *M & A Shogren, Importers, Dressmakers and Ladies Tailors*; a story that began in 1885 of two sisters, May and Ann Shogren, and their American dream.

I first heard the story of the proprietors of M. & A. Shogren Dressmakers from a friend who worked at the Oregon Historical Museum. She told me about beautiful dresses, made by the Shogren sisters, that had been included in an exhibition titled "One Hundred Years of Oregon Fashion" held at the Museum many years earlier. Her words were "These old spinsters were way ahead of their time and did all the things women weren't supposed to do!"

What she didn't mention was that over 100 years ago, May and Ann Shogren were among Portland's celebrated citizens. Unmarried and independent in a world where there were three to four men for every woman, they made themselves women-of-independent-means by becoming purveyor's of high fashion, equal to anything found on the East Coast or in Europe. In an era when gender boundaries were capricious, Ann and May crossed them all. They travelled. They bought and sold real estate They climbed mountains with the newly formed Mazamas, rode horses with the Hunt Club and enjoyed every aspect of Portland's thriving arts and social scene.

Their story began when Portland was flooded with *nouveau riche* businessmen who wanted their homes to look like European villas or Southern colonials. Their wives were women who felt proper attire was essential for every event whether it was chintz at breakfast or donning their satin and lace tea gowns to visit a friend's home. These women expected their clothes to make a statement, to set them apart as different and special. This was a tall order. The two sisters, Ann and May Shogren, frequently described as aggressive, smart, tall and elegant all in the same sentence, would be the ones up to the challenge of dressing Portland's highest society.

May Shogren, born in 1861 and eldest of the two sisters, led the way. Her first job, at age 20, was working for Henry Litt, a local tailor. She was a star and quickly promoted to forelady. This was a good, secure job for a respectable, unmarried woman and she could have stayed there but she wanted more. By the time May was 28 she was in business for herself making beautiful dresses for

the finest ladies. Ann, May's younger sister, joined her and their business prospered. This led to a series of moves that reached its zenith in a beautiful Victorian house at 10th and Yamhill where horse-drawn carriages waited outside the Shogren establishment while their mistresses were inside, being measured, pinned and draped.

"When Drip City society women (a comment on Portland's rainy reputation) dressed to thrill, they sported the best label money could buy and it was made in Oregon," said an *Oregonian* article in 1998 in describing how essential, albeit expensive, it was to own a Shogren dress.

Molly Grothaus, *Oregon Journal* fashion writer, defended the expense, explaining that Shogren dresses involved an "amazing amount of handwork, especially in the detailing. Hundreds of hours went into each dress with their personally designed intricate trims." While a young lady could buy a well-made street dress for \$25 to \$50, a woman might pay \$100 for a Shogren gingham housedress and anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000 for the most expensive Shogren gowns. [In 1905, one of their custom-made day dresses cost about \$400 – the same price as a Model A Ford.]

This snippet of the Shogren story is not just the province of costume historians. The dresses they created are merely backdrops to a short moment in Portland women's history and the two young entrepreneurs who created the life they wanted in a rapidly changing society. Ann and May walked through every door that was left slightly ajar and never looked back.

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It was the cusp of the twentieth century when the Shogren business was at the height of its prominence. The shipping, lumber and banking industries were making a lot of Portlanders very wealthy and many of them wanted nothing more than to mimic eastern society. Their houses were mansions, their attire was formal and they vied for memberships in social clubs like the Arlington Club, The Multnomah Athletic Club and the Waverly Golf Club. Wives were active in the arts, their churches and joined women-only social clubs and the ladies guilds attached to the men-only clubs. These cultured, well-mannered and elegant women were known as the “ladies of Nob Hill.” They garnered that nickname because of where they lived. In the late nineteenth century, the wealthy Portland businessmen built their homes on the rising slope of land northwest of central downtown Portland. It was called Nob Hill because it was the place where the *nabobs* of commerce went home for the night (and to their wives, the Nob Hill ladies).

An Oregonian's Handbook, published in the 1890s, described Portland as a city that attracted wealth, the best elements of society and as the home of progressive, intelligent and cultured people. In a 1963 recollection on the elegant history of early Portland, Mrs. Barbara Hartwell, daughter of one of the Shogrens' customers, said Portland was settled largely by New Englanders who balanced plain-living with high-thinking, read *The Atlantic Monthly* and Emerson's *Essays* and attended fashionable balls with string orchestras playing Strauss.

In reality, Portland was more a city of contradictions than the cultivated city it wanted to be. While the elite continued to amuse themselves with fancy

dress balls, theater and music clubs or driving fast horses, city coffers were almost empty. Public services, such as clean water, sewers and streetlights, were very slow to meet the demands of the rapidly growing population.

Portland could not shed all of its “old west” character. In 1889, the same year Portland tagged itself the “rose city” because of its freshness and beauty, Rudyard Kipling came to visit and is said to have commented, “Portland is so busy that it can’t attend to its own sewage or paving.” He thought Portland was a great place to make money but its unwillingness to spend it kept the “town several measures short of civilization.” As late as the 1905 Lewis and Clark Expedition, when the Shogrens were stitching together a profitable business, visitors were still complaining about the city’s “sorriest and shabby streets.”

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Ann and May were the daughters of Henry and Sophia Shogren, Swedish immigrants who were both born on the same day, August 31, 1835. Although they spent their childhoods only a few miles from each other in rural Sweden, they didn’t meet until fifteen years later in Douglas County, Minnesota, where both of their families had settled. Sophia and Henry brought their family to Oregon as part of a wave of foreigners who migrated west when the transcontinental railroad made that journey much easier. In 1872 their trip would have taken them to San Francisco by train and then a stagecoach north to Oregon.

Although there are no early records of their first home, the family most likely lived in a boarding house in downtown Portland. After the completion of the

Morrison Bridge, in 1887, Portlanders no longer had to rely on a ferry to cross the Willamette River. Henry and Sofia moved to East Portland, a more rural setting reminiscent of their European childhoods. Their first home was in an undeveloped area on Southeast Grand Avenue where they were surrounded by lots of trees.

Henry was a jack-of-all-trades and an old-fashioned craftsman. As early as 1883, he was listed in the *Portland City Directory* as a carpenter, a blacksmith and a patternmaker for industrial machinery. In 1890 Henry went to work as a patternmaker for Willamette Iron Works. He used his skill as a pattern maker to make his own violin, which he played and always kept several hanging in his garage. Henry was a potter and a glassblower and had probably apprenticed with artisans before he left Europe. Ann and May spent some of their earliest profits buying their father a kiln.

There were seven Shogren children: Ida, Ann, May, Daisy, Ruth, Lizzie and Fred. Beyond public school records, very little is known about their early years. Ann and May attended the Harrison Street School and Portland High School. Their home must have been an innately creative environment. Henry and Sophia taught all the children to appreciate music and art in a classical Renaissance manner. All the children played a musical instrument. There are photos of one of the daughters playing the violin. It was not uncommon to see the Shogren children named in the *Oregonian's* society columns as they participated in church or theatrical events around the city.

With such a large family, Henry's wages could not cover family expenses so the children were expected to work and contribute to the family income. Fred found his artistic talents lay with a camera, becoming a well-known photographer for the *Oregonian*. (It is because of his photography that a Shogren archive exists.) Ida was the daughter who stayed home and helped her mother until she got married. Ruth was regularly listed as the guest or church organist for at least two of the largest churches in Portland, the Unitarian Church and the Baptist Church where her family was a member. Daisy was said to have been a talented milliner but like her sister Lizzy, she went off to teach school. And May and Ann, of course, became seamstresses.

May was twenty-two when she went to work at *Henry B. Litt, Cloak and Dressmaker*, tailor for Portland's growing Jewish community on Southwest Morrison Street. *Litt's* was like most customhouses: a man owned it but women did the work. In general, tailor shops had reputations as sweatshops because the work was hard, the hours were long and the pay was poor. Fortunately for May, who would spend the next four years there learning about the custom-dress industry, *Litt's* did not have that reputation.

If May's training followed a standard course, she was hired as an apprentice and worked her way through four sets of skills: the fitter who cut the dress, the sewer, the draper who fit the dress and the finisher who handled the delicate materials and had the ability to do delicate handiwork. By the time May was 26-years-old she was a forelady. In 1889, two years after making forelady,

May was tired of working for someone else and was ready to start her own business.

Chances are that before either sister was old enough to think about supporting herself or her family, she was taught basic sewing skills by her mother, Sophia. It is likely that May passed on the more sophisticated skills she learned at *Litt* to Ann, subtly tempting her into the business. In 1893 Ann was working beside her sister and in 1895 the business name changed from *Miss May Shogren* to *M. & A. Shogren*.

Seven years younger than May, Ann was the businesswoman and had a talent for behind the scenes organization. While she preferred to work more with paper than fabric, she shared in the task of helping clients choose their dresses by presenting them with elaborate loose-leaf fashion plates to see dress styles and detail ideas.

May and Ann were attractive women. They wore their brown hair swept up into stylish chignons and kept their own clothing quiet and understated using cotton ticking, broadcloths and chiffons instead of the rich satins and lace preferred by their clientele.

According to fashion historians, the uniqueness and desirability of the Shogren designs was due to cleverly bringing together the elements of color, embellishment, silhouette and fabric. This is true but it doesn't go far enough; the sisters had real design talent. Ann and May looked around and saw women wearing beautiful European-like clothing with long skirts, full sleeves and lacy ruffles that couldn't stand up to a city where dust, mud and unpaved streets were

the norm. They were inventive enough to nudge those basic European designs into ones fit for Portland streets without compromising their patrons' needs to demonstrate both their social status and individuality.

Because of the dirt and grime and a minimal expectation of propriety, brown was a mainstay in every woman's closet (sort of the "little brown dress" of the 1890s). Relying on an innate sense of what looked good and what would wear well in Portland, Ann and May took it upon themselves to change the tastes of Portland's *grande dames*. Whether it was a European worldliness or the artistic genes they inherited from their father, the sisters began to move the local women into everything from tweeds to dark rich grey satins to kidskin leather; clothing more suitable for the lifestyle of Portland than New York City.

In the 1909-1910 *Portland Blue Book*, the caption for *M. & A. Shogren* read "Importers and Designers of Evening, Street and Tailor Gowns/Hand Embroidered Blouses, Lingerie, Frock/Evening Coats and Wraps."

As their clientele list grew so did their need for space and a sequence of moves from a studio to the Dekum Building to their Victorian salon. These moves not only gave them more space to work but it taught them the basics of the local real estate business and made them comfortable in an arena that was not readily open to women.

The dignified old Victorian house was a dressmaker's paradise. The downstairs, with its main entrance, was divided into a hall with a grand stairway, a reception room, two fitting rooms and a restroom. May always tried to greet her clients in the downstairs parlor, decorated like a private home with

upholstered chairs, desks and big mirrors. On the second floor were the bookkeeper's office, the tailor's room, another restroom and a room to store bolts of fabric. They had added a large room to one side of the house with big windows that faced east and west. The room was state-of-the-art with gas irons, several electric sewing machines, a hemstitching machine and worktables.

Whoever said, "A Ford assembly line had nothing on these two avant-garde *modistes*," had it right. Each woman working for the Shogren House was a specialist in her own small area. One young woman cut nothing but petticoats, one skirts and another sleeves. An apprentice seamstress began by sewing on hooks and eyes, specially made with a hidden catch. The hooks were buttonholed on with exactly so many stitches. From here the apprentice graduated to the hand-sewn bindings that finished the insides of all darts and seams. Everything was boned. It took a long time before an apprentice worked up to sewing a petticoat with pleated dust ruffles, a Shogren trademark, or sewing on the inner waistband that had the hand-written Shogren label woven into it. Each dress took at least three fittings and the head fitters took instructions directly from May.

"I went with my mother to her fittings," reminisced Marie Louis Feldenheimer in a 1968 *Oregon Journal* article. "There was a fitter for each different thing. The client stood while Shogren assistants held fabrics up to her for the approval of May who sat nearby, never touching anything. She decided which style dress, fabric and color was suitable for the occasion and her customer. My mother also went there to be fitted for her sidesaddle riding habits.

They had a headless dummy horse with a saddle so a woman could be properly fitted. I loved to play on the horse.”

Every outfit was delivered to the client’s home, packed in special boxes with “M & A Shogren” printed on them. The garments were wrapped in so much tissue paper they could be taken right out of the box and worn. There was never a wrinkle. “How wonderful for someone eight years old to hook my mother into a Shogren dress and see her go off in a horse-drawn cab, her tiny feet in carriage boots,” said Hartwell in 1963.

Ann and May enjoyed using a little theater to get their future customers excited about their styles. They pulled bolts of fabrics from bookcases for the customers to see. They offered their clientele damask, lace, tulle, silks, chiffons and gingham, ornamented with sequins, beads and lace. They used trumpet skirts, high-boned collars and bustles to enhance each client’s figure. Before long, Portland’s fashion-savvy women wanted to be recognized in a dress that was distinctly “Shogren.”

“Miss May had such a sweet face and disposition,” said a grandniece many years later. “She could just tell the clients what they ought to wear and they did it!”

May put her all into a creative personal touch for every dress. She turned out afternoon or reception-gowns using experimental combinations of traditional fabrics and less common textiles. In 1901 she was taking tulle, ivory lace and ivory silk and combined them with moiré, a very ahead-of-its-time fabric. (The

moiré was calendered, an innovative way of processing and folding naturally smooth fabrics, causing them to look watered or ribboned.)

In the spring of 1912, while most women were focused on the suffrage campaign, May was absorbed in a heart-stopping evening gown. Its foundation was champagne silk jacquard with metallic yarns and ivory lace. That would have been beautiful if she had simply stopped there but she dared to add metallic ball fringe, rhinestones and wax flowers. She turned the simply beautiful into something stunning.

Fashion is very personal and Ann and May wanted nothing less than each client to feel an intimacy and uniqueness every time she stepped into a Shogren dress. In the 1968 newspaper story, Mrs. Earl Whitney recalled accompanying her father (dean of the Oregon Medical School) to a convention in the East. “I had a black and white satin dress with beads hanging from the bottom of the sash. Everyone back East talked about that beautiful dress.” That Whitney never forgot the dress or how she felt wearing it confirmed one of Ann Shogren’s favorite sayings: “The dress that makes the woman feel twice as beautiful, is a dress that is never forgotten.”

The Oregon Historical Museum houses a profusion of ledgers, appointment lists and bills that acknowledge the breadth of their client list. Their clientele included the wives and daughters of Portland’s newly successful businessmen such as Emma Corbett, Emily Failing, Albertina Kerr and Caroline Ladd. (One local historian factiously called their customers “street ladies” because they already had streets named after them.)

Advertising was word-of-mouth. Events like the Lewis and Clark Exposition in 1905, with many out-of-town guests, introduced the Shogren label to a host of new clients from across the country's social scene. Mrs. Henry (Emma) Corbett, wife of a U.S. Senator, and Mrs. Charles Carey, wife of a federal judge, wore Shogren dresses to the opening of the Exposition. Left up to May, these were probably distinctive black broadcloth dresses, trimmed with jet black braid and matching single-breasted coat with large buttons or a lavender silk bengaline with darned net inserts and a lace bodice and sleeves (sort of knock-em-dead with subtly!).

The Shogren label began to show up on Portland's elite at parties from Alaska to New York and the Shogren client list grew beyond the Portland city limits to include Eugenia Bush, the wife of Salem banker and newspaper publisher Asahel Bush. Both Dorothy Stimson, wife of the Seattle lumber baron C.D. Stimson, and the eccentric Sarah Winchester of the Winchester Rifle fame came to Portland to get their own Shogren dresses.

"Through their combined talent and extraordinary self-confidence they defied the odds," recalled the *Oregon Journal* in 1968. "May had a fashion sense and Ann had a keen ability for book-keeping and they were both charming!" Shogren designs became so well known they brought attention to Portland's flourishing fashion industry and early in the twentieth century someone coined the phrase "Paris of the West" to describe the city.

To shop the newest in fabric and style and to see what women on the street were really wearing, Ann and May made regular trips to Paris and New

York City. Not that it would have deterred them, but by the turn-of-the-century it was perfectly acceptable for two women, 32 and 39 years of age, to travel unescorted and so they did.

Travel from Portland to New York City took at least three days by train via Chicago. These were long, slow trips but, considering how outgoing both women were, they probably had no problem chatting and making friends with fellow travelers. Their stays might last as long as a month and include meeting with clients and vendors such as B. Altman's, where the Shogrens were one of their biggest customers for fabrics and trim. They visited the high-end ready-to-wear stores such as Sterns and Haas Brothers, shopping where their clients shopped.

They did not socialize much while they were in New York but did enjoy having dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Haas, of Haas Brothers Department Store, at the Ritz Carlton. They attended concerts and the well-known 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church. If asked, either sister would have admitted that no matter how many trips they made, they were still small-town women. On one shopping expedition to the very large department store Wanamaker's, May said it was too confusing and noisy. "So many people tired us," she wrote in a letter home.

There are no ledgers or records of their trips to Paris but a steamer from New York City through Southampton to Paris took about a week. They made every trip a worthwhile journey, always returning with sketches of the newest styles and the finest French fabrics, English woolens and Irish laces. They did not just bring home the sketches to reproduce someone else's dresses, they adapted them to make their own.

* * * * *

Ann and May worked hard to achieve their success. Their aggressive, business-like behavior did not always fit the mold that was expected of young women in the early 1900s. Not knowing how to respond to their formidable attitude, friends, relatives and businessmen were not always kind to them. It is not hard to imagine why. Business associates were probably caught off guard by how professional they were and relatives were probably just jealous. Some even looked for more ulterior motives. One woman, whose mother hemmed and finished inside seams, remembered May as “a stern old lady in a rocking chair.” She said the sisters thought they were doing women a favor by hiring them while outsiders criticized them for taking advantage of the weak and desperate who needed jobs and would work for cheap.

This appears to have been an exaggeration. The Shogrens’ attitudes towards their employees and clients were never spelled out but sketching together notes in old journals, newspaper articles and stories told by family, friends, employees, the respect was reciprocal. The work environment was such that employee turnover was always at a minimum even when work required long, exhausting hours to turn out garments that merited the Shogren label.

The Shogren workforce ranged from fifty to as many as one hundred women. At its peak in 1905, M. & A. Shogren was the second largest private employer in Portland. During their busiest years when their payroll included 100 women, the entire state of Oregon only showed 1700 women employed outside of the home.

They went out of their way to hire women who were widowed or single and needed to support themselves. As a seamstress's skills increased, so did her wages. They paid above the minimum standard of \$9.25 per week that would be established by the Welfare and Standards Commission in 1916. When domestics were earning from \$2.50 to \$7 per week, the sisters paid their employees from \$9 for apprentices to \$12 for seamstresses. Before there were laws limiting women to 10-hour workdays, their employees already worked no more than 9-hour days. There are no old contracts to be found but stories were told that they offered some sort of medical help and gave their employees vacation time.

To make the cost of doing business even higher, Ann and May never forgot that many of their employees were the sole wage earners for their families and they were working in an industry that was seasonal. Fashion time schedules were determined by the social season rather than the monthly calendar. In this world it was not unusual for shops like the Shogrens to cut back or lay off their employees during the slow seasons. Ann and May didn't do that. They encouraged clients to bring in clothing they had originally made for alterations. They remodeled furs and retailed out-of-style gowns to keep their workers busy.

Ann and May always found a place for relatives who needed a helping hand. This generosity was not always appreciated. According to the stories repeated by the Shogren's grandnieces, there were relatives who would move into the Shogren home, take their charity as long as they needed it and then complain that Ann and May looked down on them. The nieces who were offered

Shogren dresses accepted them with contempt, saying, “They made dresses for all the nieces but they had no shoes!”

To help take care of all these people, Ann and May had a full time cook and a “retaineer” who worked as their driver and all-around helper. Some who knew the family thought he was a relative, others did not know; he was just “Emil.” What is known is that he drove their Model T Ford, did deliveries, took care of the beach house and was a much relied-upon handyman. Emil lived in the carriage house on the Mount Tabor property.

One grandniece, Nancy Lessor, recalled visiting them every Sunday. While her mother played hymns on the piano, Nancy played hopscotch on their Persian rugs. Lessor admitted that the sisters had worked hard to live a very comfortable lifestyle. From family stories it appears that the sisters did not talk about how tough their early life had been. As their success grew, Ann and May lived comfortably but remained frugal in both their personal lives and their business.

Lessor learned some of these truths during a visit from the European opera diva Ernestine Schumann-Heink. Lessor said she listened to the three of them trying to outdo each other on how poor their childhoods had been. Schumann-Heink remembered wearing flour sack underwear while May Shogren said they were “so poor they had to slide down Mount Hood in dishpans because they couldn’t afford sleds.”

* * * * *

The Shogrens became financially and socially prosperous but their personal lives began to change in 1904 when their lives were overwhelmed by a series of personal tragedies. Ida, their oldest sister, died that year. A year later Daisy died in childbirth. Daisy's eldest daughter, Gladys Hug, was only fourteen when Daisy died. Ann and May took Gladys in and she lived with them until she graduated from high school. At her graduation from the University of Oregon, Gladys wore a "Shogren" dress they had made for her.

Sophia died in 1908, leaving May, Ann and Fred living with Henry in the Grand Avenue house. Then it was Fred's turn to move on. In 1904, brother Fred Shogren had bought "country" property on Mount Tabor for \$150. The house was slow in coming but he finally hired W.L. Morgan, a highly respected architect, to design the art-and-crafts house that would, eventually, welcome friends, relatives and anyone who needed a place to stay. It was a bungalow style, designed with exposed beam and rafter-tail shingle siding, turrets and a stone foundation. A detached garage was big enough for a Ford car and living quarters for its driver.

The house had a warm, welcoming atmosphere and was always filled with guests and music. Many of the Shogren clients were invited to have parties and weddings on the well-manicured grounds. To this day, the house is a much-sought-after venue for parties, weddings and other special occasions.

Fred was still not content. He had never wanted the city life and this lightly populated part of the Portland didn't fulfill his country soul. He dreamt of being an orchardist and within a few years he offered to sell the Mount Tabor

house to his sisters so he could buy acreage in Mosier, Oregon, and move to the country.

Ann and May had no hesitations about buying the house from Fred. From their first studio to the Dekum Building, to the big old house on 10th and Yamhill, the sisters were well versed in how Portland's real estate world operated. With a thriving tailoring business and a healthy savings account, Ann and May would continue to invest in real estate.

In 1908, they built the five-story Madison Park apartment building, which is now home to the Oregon Historical Society. Eventually their holdings included the house on Grand Avenue, the Mt. Tabor home, four other houses in the same neighborhood and a beach house in Ocean Park. (The Mt. Tabor house was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1996). In a story covering the 1996 listing, a local businessman remarked on the Shogrens' skills as real estate barons, "If they had been men they would have been in all the history books."

Ann and May rose to a degree of social prominence despite their poor immigrant background in a city that was very class-conscious. The "Nob Hill elite" did not make it a habit of socializing with the blue collar or working women, especially those who were in their service. Somehow, the Shogrens set an example of how women entrepreneurs could succeed and do it with panache.

They attended all varieties of musical events, including both the opera and theater. They loved to entertain and it was never suggested that someone might not attend because Ann and May were "in their employ" as seamstresses.

The sisters were charter members of the Mazamas mountain climbing organization. They earned that honor in July of 1894 when they participated in the Mazamas inaugural climb up the south side of Mount Hood. When the group climb was delayed because of bad weather some of the party returned to Portland. Not the Shogren sisters. Undaunted, they stayed at the base and an expedition leader guided them up the next morning.

They must have been terribly conspicuous trudging up that mountain. In these early days of mountaineering it was common for female climbers to wear big wide-legged pants (pantaloon). This made scaling rocks and fording creek beds much easier and more comfortable. But these two sisters of fashion refused to succumb to pants and continued to climb in very traditional, feminine attire: heavy woolen tweeds. They remained active members of the Mazamas and their names were frequently mentioned in newspaper articles listing those who had completed successful climbs and hikes throughout Oregon and southern Washington.

Ann and May could spend most Sunday afternoons horseback riding throughout the undeveloped areas of Portland with the city's gentry. Both sisters were accomplished horsewomen but horses were Ann's passion. She was an active member of the Multnomah Hunt Club when it moved into town from Oswego Lake in 1907. She might be seen riding with friends throughout the inner city one day and competing against them along the west bank of the Willamette River (John's Landing area) the next. Riding was the singular activity that gave Ann a real physical and mental challenge. Ann's name was frequently

mentioned in weekly riding wrap-ups in the local newspapers especially on weekends when she participated in a “paper chase.” (A paper chase can be described as a “mock hunt” where a paper trail is laid. The rider tries to find the fox or hare and the route is more of an obstacle course than a clean ride.)

It appears that neither woman ever dated. If there were boyfriends no one remembered their names. When relatives were asked why, the only story that survived was that they weren’t interested, having been “terribly repulsed by the men in their family.”

* * * * *

In March of 1917, World War I was raging in Europe and Ann and May were on one of their last business trips to New York City. By the time of this trip, M. & A. Shogren was struggling. With more and more quality ready-to-wear available, demand for custom dresses was diminishing and Portlanders were intent on scaling down their own lives in order to support the war effort and the soldiers who had gone off to fight. Like most of the Western World, the local women were knitting socks as fast as they could and shipping them off to the troops in hopes of warding off the trench foot that was incapacitating many soldiers, not shopping for one-of-a-kind dresses. Ann and May might have been caught up in the call to buy Liberty Fund bonds or plant their own Victory Garden on the Mt. Tabor grounds.

That year, when they got to New York, they were taken aback by how different things were. The first sign of frustration comes in a letter May wrote from her room at the Waldorf Astoria. “There are so few exclusive things shown

and the dresses that are shown don't reflect how hard they would be to actually get." Her frustration turns increasingly into disappointment the longer they are in the city.

Both sisters were deeply upset with how many New Yorkers seemed to be ignoring the war. "Where was this war effort in New York City?" May wrote in a second letter. It seems the sisters wanted New Yorkers to show their support for the war just like Oregonians, wearing their patriotism on their sleeves. "When Ann and I were dining this morning we saw a woman so bedecked with huge diamonds that it quite astounded us!"

The fashion world as Ann and May Shogren knew it had moved past a point of no return. Styles were changing. The heavy corseted dresses that showed a female silhouette were giving way to simplified uncorseted ones. Hems were moving up. Women wanted the new chemise styles adorned with beads and rhinestones. Neither Ann nor May wanted to design dresses for the speak easy society.

The market for custom-made clothes was steadily dwindling. Portland's dry goods stores such as Meier and Franks and Olds and King were offering women off-the-rack garments that were fashionable and well made. When their close friend and longstanding forewoman Lizzie Dickens left their employ to work in Meier and Frank's "better dresses" department, it was time to move on and the Shogrens called it quits.

By the end of 1918 the Shogren shop had closed and the sisters disappeared into society. The rare American success story of women in

business had come to its end. In 1974, *Oregon Journal* captured the legacy of their fairytale dresses, writing, “the ‘bustle’ may be gone but never forgotten.”

The bustle is gone but the dresses still exist. Some are surviving because they are draped over mannequins or in preservative muslin garment bags in places like the Smithsonian, the Museum of History and Industry in Seattle, private collections in Washington and Syracuse, New York and the Oregon Historical Society. Sadly, the Shogren descendants prefer not to share the rest of these treasures and their stories with any historical society. They remain an unseen treasure-trove hanging in the cottage in Ocean Park, Washington.

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