

# The West Side

Newsletter and Journal of the Yamhill County Historical Society

May 1996

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Shirley Venhaus

Dear Members,

My apologies for not making the Historical House Tour meeting. I had the wrong date on my calendar. O.K. synchronize your calendars.

Thursday May 16th: 9:00AM - work day at the museum. Several specific things need to be taken care of, plus spring cleaning. There will be a lunch break at 12:00; so brown bag it or try a local cafe. Inmate help has been requested. I hope as many of you who can will plan to spend as much time as possible at the museum on May 16th.

Historic House Tour committee will also be meeting on the 16th to begin planning their specific activities. Committee members are as follows: Volunteers:-Delores Robertson, Maxine Williams, Lila Jackson, Jack and Betty White, Charlotte Filer, Pat Williams, Elaine Rohse, Margaret Macauley. Craft Activities - Ruth and Don Crawford, Elma Shuck. Transportation - Bob Kuykendall. Refreshments - Lois Brooks, Betty Mitchell, Elma Shuck, Ilene Lewis, Betty Baltzill, Twila Byrnes, Pat Williams, Farrel Fuerst. Advertisement - Dave Getman. Ticket

Sales - Shannon Venhaus, Don and Lesli Lutz. Telephone - Mary Ogden. As you can see, **more volunteers are needed in many areas** so be sure to get your name on the list and attend the May 16th meeting.

The April pot luck and general meeting at the Ewing Young School was well attended. Janet Mauntner's research and discussion about Ewing Young was very interesting

We wish to thank the following Linfield students who wrote items for the News-Register about members George and Maxine Williams, Olive Johnson, Roma Sitton, Lois Brooks and Shirley Venhaus. The students were: Ian Rollins, Katie Anick, Heather, Huskey, Jill Foreman and Lisa Mortimer.

Extended summer hours at the museum begin in June increasing the need for volunteers. **If you wish to spend a wonderful afternoon once or twice a month at the museum, please contact Maxine Williams at 472-4547.**

See you in Willamina May 14th.

Shirley

## PUBLICATIONS AVAILABLE AT THE MUSEUM

Compiled by Olive Johnson

SCHOOLS OF OLD YAMHILL by Ruth Stoller ..... 5.00  
History & pictures of old county school districts  
OLD YAMHILL by Ruth Stoller ..... \$15.00  
Comprehensive early history of towns in the county  
YAMHILL TO TILLAMOOK by STAGECOACH ... \$5.00  
by Ruth Stoller. History of the Trask Toll Road  
LAFAYETTE-Athens of Oregon by John White ..... \$ 5.00  
History of Lafayette  
REFLECTIONS OF CARLTON- Pioneer to Present. \$12.00  
Carlton School Project. History of Carlton  
OVERLAND TO OREGON ..... \$ 8.00  
History of Yamhill County and State of Oregon  
DAYTON Port City on the Yamhill by John White ..... \$ 8.50  
History of Dayton and vicinity  
SETTLING THE LAND OF PROMISE ..... \$15.00  
Pioneer stories by Jim and Reita Lockett  
YAMHILL COUNTY CEMETERY RECORDS ..... \$ 7.00  
Volume I Yamhill, Carlton Lafayette and vicinities

YAMHILL COUNTY CEMETERY RECORDS ..... \$ 8.00  
Volume II Sheridan, Willamina and vicinity  
YAMHILL COUNTY CEMETERY RECORDS ..... \$10.00  
Volume III Amity, Dayton Hopewell and vicinities  
1860 FEDERAL CENSUS OF YAMHILL COUNTY .. \$ 7.00  
1870 FEDERAL CENSUS OF YAMHILL COUNTY .. \$10.00  
1880 FEDERAL CENSUS OF YAMHILL COUNTY .. \$15.00  
1900 FEDERAL CENSUS OF YAMHILL COUNTY \*  
(\* Copy available for research only)  
1879 MAP OF YAMHILL COUNTY ..... \$ 2.00  
Shows donation land claims and much more  
SHERIDAN METHODIST CHURCH 1875-1975 ..... \$ 2.00  
WOODEN SCRAP BOOK INDEX ..... \$ 3.00  
IF TREES COULD TALK ..... \$ 2.00  
ORIGINS OF YAMHILL COUNTY ROAD NAMES \*  
by Linsheid and Swan (\* Available soon)  
**There is a \$2.00 postage and handling charge  
for each book mailed**

**Tuesday, May 14th 5:00 PM**

**Board of Directors - Rebekah Hall - Willamina ("D" Street 1 block south of Main Street at railroad tracks)**

**Tuesday, May 14th 6:30 PM**

**Potluck Dinner - Rebekah Hall - Willamina (Address Above)**

**Bring Own Table Service**

**Guests Always Welcome**

**Carla Burdon of Willamina will present more of the Sawtelle Civil War letters**

**Thursday, May 16th 9:00 AM**

**Clean-Up Day - YCHS Museums, Barn and Grounds - Lafayette**

**Thursday, May 16th 1:00 PM**

**Historic House Tour Committee - Miller Log Museum - Lafayette**

*Remember: A Red Dot On Your Address Label Indicates Your Dues Are Due*



### OFFICERS - 1996

#### President

Shirley Venhaus  
472-7328

#### VP/Program

Barbara Knutson  
843-2069

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Betty White  
665-5376

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Don Crawford  
434-9843

#### Financial Secretary

Lila Jackson  
472-8510

#### Corres. Secretary

Dolores Robertson  
538-0767

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472-7239

Robert Kuykendall  
662-3354

Harvey Stoller  
864-2589

Ed Roghair  
472-6909

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Jim Lockett  
472-5005

#### Librarian

Olive Johnson  
472-6070

#### Newsletter

John White  
665-5376

#### Publicity

Elaine Rohse  
472-6827

### MUSEUM HOURS

June 1 to Aug 31:  
Wed-Sun 1 to 4 PM

Sept 1 to May 31:  
Sat-Sun 1 to 4 PM

or

By Appointment

# THE GREAT McMinnville Jail Break of 1911

by John White

Shortly before dawn on Monday April 3, 1911 constable Norman Terry was routinely patrolling the streets of McMinnville when he saw flames erupting from the vicinity of City Hall (then located on what is now the Northwest corner of Second and Cowls Streets). Rushing to the scene he found the jail ablaze. The bell to call out the volunteers was located on the adjacent fire hall tower and Terry moved quickly to pull the rope. However flames had already been drawn up the tower and the burned rope parted on his first tug. Shouting at a passerby to run a block south to the Baptist Church and ring their bell, Terry immediately returned to the jail to rescue the single prisoner incarcerated within. **To his surprise he found the cell door knocked off its hinges and no one in sight**

Merrill Ruffner had been arrested earlier Sunday evening for disorderly public conduct. Normally he would likely have been released the following day, but on this occasion it appears he was unwilling to wait that long. A quick inspection of the scene revealed someone with a sledgehammer or similar tool had sheared off the cell door hinge pins allowing it to be forced open. Evidence found at the scene also left little doubt the fire was no accident. Assuming it to have been set as a diversion to permit Ruffner to slip out of town unnoticed during the confusion, Police Chief Peterson ordered deputies to cover all the roads and check the two departing early morning trains. When these measures failed to locate the escapee, "wanted" wires were sent to law enforcement agencies throughout the state. In addition to the standard references of height, weight, hair color, etc., the description given for the fugitive also

mentioned a large gold tooth and noted he was last seen wearing an expensive looking blue suit of clothes.

The entire jail building and fire bell tower were totally destroyed and the bell itself was rendered useless because of severe heat cracks. Next door, the fire station and city hall offices above it suffered lesser damage but would still require extensive repairs, as was also the case with the adjoining Water & Light building. Ruffner now faced serious arson charges and an angry City of McMinnville administration was prepared to press for a maximum sentence of 15 years in the penitentiary

On Tuesday April 4th word reached Chief Peterson that a person closely answering Ruffner's description right down to the gold tooth had been apprehended at the Ashland train depot. However, since the suspect was clad in overalls rather than an expensive suit, authorities there felt the grounds were insufficient to hold him pending dispatch of a McMinnville constable to make positive identification. As it later turned out this person had indeed been Ruffner, causing Peterson to be furious with his Southern Oregon counterparts.

The next unusual twist in the case came April 8th when the McMinnville *Telephone-Register* received a letter from Ruffner himself! Posted at Redding California on April 6th, the letter pokes fun at the aforementioned Ashland police as well as those in Albany, Eugene and Grants Pass who apparently also questioned him. While freely admitting forcefully breaking out of jail, Ruffner insisted he acted entirely alone without assistance and further claimed he had

absolutely nothing to do with the ensuing fire.

Ruffner indicated the jail beds were "crummy" (a term used at the time to indicate presence of lice) and he did not wish to become infested by remaining incarcerated. Further stating he had found an axe in his cell, he told how he alone had beaten the pins from the door hinges so that he could remove himself from the vicinity of the insects. He said his original intent was remain on the premises, but realizing he might still be charged with escape, decided to sneak out of town instead. The letter ended with mention of a Redding bank having been burgled the night before and a closing remark of "I don't know where I'm going but I'm on my way". This was the last anyone in McMinnville was ever to hear from Merrill Ruffner.

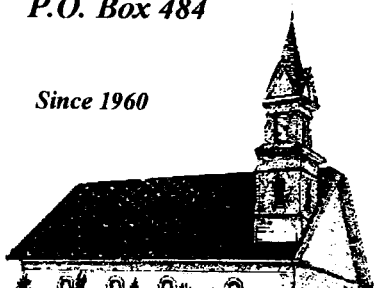
Over the next few weeks it was learned Ruffner was also wanted elsewhere, which probably was the real reason for his not wishing to remain in the McMinnville jail for any length of time. Additionally he must have had at least one accomplice as it would have been impossible for him to shear the hinge pins with an axe from inside his cell. Apparently the claim of acting alone was intended to direct suspicion away from someone still in town, although a thorough investigation of known associates never uncovered any real suspects. The fire was found to have originated in the bedding causing speculation at the time to be equally divided as to whether it had been set as an escape diversion or a protest against alleged "crummy" jail conditions. Only Ruffner could answer this for sure, but by now time has closed the case.

YAMHILL COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P.O. Box 484

Lafayette OR 97127

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