

Opening doors to Oregon history

New Holy Names Heritage Center to emphasize family stories, education

BY CLIFF NEWELL ✉

The Lake Oswego Review, Jul 12, 2007

From the day they arrived in Oregon in 1859 the Sisters of the Holy Names have always had their eyes on education.

Today, the new Holy Names Heritage Center doesn't totally complete that great mission. But it does give it a beautiful memorial and marks a milestone in the study of the history of the Northwest.

When you look around the 15,000-square-foot center at Mary's Woods next to Marylhurst University, it is easy to draw this conclusion: the Sisters have outdone themselves. And with two years to spare, the center is ready to mark the 150th anniversary of the Sisters in the Northwest.



"The Oregon Sisters, plus Spokane, were the driving force for this," said Tamra Brosseau, the center's executive director. "Their main mission is education, and this center is seen as a way to help.

"What we have here is unique. No one else is doing it."

The foundation of the Holy Names Heritage Center is the records of the Sisters themselves, including many books (most written in their native French), teaching tools, records of the many schools founded by the Sisters, and handwritten chronicles of the Sisters' own lives, along with a general history of the area. For many years the archives gathered dust in storage, unavailable for public research.

But seven years ago, the Sisters began a fundraising drive for the center. Working largely with large foundations and private donors, they raised an estimated \$5 million to build the center. The big opening came the weekend of June 23-24 when 500 people showed up for the open house.

Now the work can begin. Brosseau says the center plans several major projects, and the biggest is the Family History Project. This is truly a case of, when you build it, they will come.

Two hundred families have already agreed to participate by donating copies of their photos, oral histories and other items to the center's archives. All of these things will be placed in a special storage facility.

"It has research and documents of families, but it goes far beyond genealogy," Brosseau said. "There is actually recording of the stories of families and what traditions they brought here and what traditions they had to leave behind.

"Eventually, we'll have a family history bank that will look at culture from the lens of families. Some of the families go back to the 1830s. Some are even from today.

"What is so attractive about the Northwest? Why is it so unique? It's because of the families."

Other center programs include an in-school program about Northwest history and social justice. A program has already been launched for the fourth grade, and next year a program for seventh and eighth graders will be offered.

Workshops are the third big item on the agenda, and on this the center will be partnering with the Oregon Historical Society. They will coordinate on lectures, with topics including genealogy, family history, preserving photos, and oral histories.

For the latter, there will be an oral history soundbooth coming in the fall.

"We'll be one of the few places to have one," Brosseau said. There will also be lunch and lectures and art shows.

It is obvious that the Holy Names Heritage Center will have a major impact on the study of Northwest history.

"We definitely want to develop history, document it and preserve it," Brosseau said. "The overriding feedback from history professors is that we are filling a niche that hadn't been filled, in the way we focus on culture and stories of the culture, not just genealogy. We will have a large resource of raw data."

The offer to manage the center was enough to draw Brosseau back to her native Oregon after 10 years in New York.

"I'm thrilled to be here," said Brosseau, who holds a master's degree in historic preservation from Cornell University. "Preserving history is a serious passion for me, and to be on the ground level of a wonderful opportunity like this does not happen very often."

The center needs just one thing to help reach its potential: You. Memberships start at \$35. Other levels include \$55 for households, \$100 for family history supporters, \$250 for grantors, \$500 for patrons, and \$1,000 for sustaining membership.

The center's research room will be open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Wednesdays through Fridays. Rooms are available to be rented for community meetings and wedding receptions.

The Holy Names Heritage Center is located at 17425 Holy Names Drive in Lake Oswego. For more information, call 503-607-0595 or go to the Web site:

www.holynamesheritagecenter.org