

Twelve sisters, 148 years, one new history center

Holy Names - Archive of the religious order's time in Oregon gets a sparkling new home

Thursday, August 02, 2007

JANET GOETZE

Special to The Oregonian

Article has been edited for brevity.

When 12 Sisters of the Holy Names left Quebec in 1859, their 36-day boat trip took them through Panama, before there was a canal, then north along the Pacific coast and inland to Portland, then a town of about 3,500 residents.

For the 148 years since, the sisters have kept records of their educational and social service work in Oregon, which had been a state for only eight months when the 10 French-Canadian and two Irish sisters arrived.

In June, a nonprofit foundation formed by the religious order opened the \$5 million Holy Names Heritage Center, where the sisters have placed their archives, including the earliest records written in French.

However, the 15,000-square-foot center off Oregon 43, near Marylhurst University, is more than a repository. It also will offer community education programs and gather Northwest family histories, said Tamra Brosseau, executive director of the new center.

"We are looking for oral histories, written histories, information about how and why families came to the Northwest," said Brosseau, an Oregon native who returned a year ago from her post at the Susan B. Anthony House in Rochester, N.Y.

"We can put information in the data bank so that people could do research, for instance, on women in World War II, when some came here to work in the shipyards," Brosseau said.

Besides Brosseau, the staff includes Sarah Cantor, director of archives, and Karen Kinzey, program manager. Both have experience with nonprofit historical organizations, Brosseau said.

The staff is planning training to help community volunteers and family members make copies of pertinent papers and take oral histories. Staff members also have scheduled history programs for fourth- and fifth-graders in the region, Brosseau said.

The center, designed by Portland architects Robertson Merryman Barnes, has a flexible layout. It can accommodate seminars, lunch and lecture programs, musical presentations, family retreats and wedding receptions. Two art shows already are scheduled at the center, Brosseau said.

Sister Jane Hibbard, chairwoman of the center's planning board, said that inviting the community into the center for research and other activities is part of the order's educational mission.

Chet Orloff, a former Oregon Historical Society director who is on the center's advisory committee, said the sisters have a good plan for gathering new information about Northwest history. Their real challenge, he said, will come in developing the programs that both build and serve an audience.

However, the well-designed center, with its contemplative garden, may attract people, he said.

"We often think of history places as old and dusty," Orloff said. "I like having a place that's new and fresh."

Janet Goetze: jgoetze@earthlink.net