

HIStory

Shared through pixels and bytes at the Washington Rural Heritage database

By Trista Crossley

They smile in old, torn photographs tucked away and forgotten in the attic. In the corners of abandoned fields, they quietly rust to nothing, kept company only by field mice and weeds. And in boarded-up, one-room school-houses, the wind sweeps away their last faint echoes.

The voices of the past, the memories and stories that made us who we are, are too easily lost in today's electronic busyness and bustle. But finding and preserving local history has become a major focus of Washington's small, rural libraries, and they are doing it with help from the Washington Rural Heritage (WRH) initiative.

Begun in 2007 with pilot projects at Ritzville and

Enumclaw public libraries, WRH is a public, statewide collection that digitally documents the culture, community and industry of Washington state. Federally funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the website and project is managed by the Washington State Library which provides grants, training and support to rural libraries so they can preserve their local history by scanning and storing photographs and historical artifacts.

WRH currently holds material from more than 80 institutions and more than 200 privately-held collections from across the state, with more than 11,000 catalogued resources in the database. The material includes photographs, historical texts, scrapbooks, maps, artwork and artifacts.

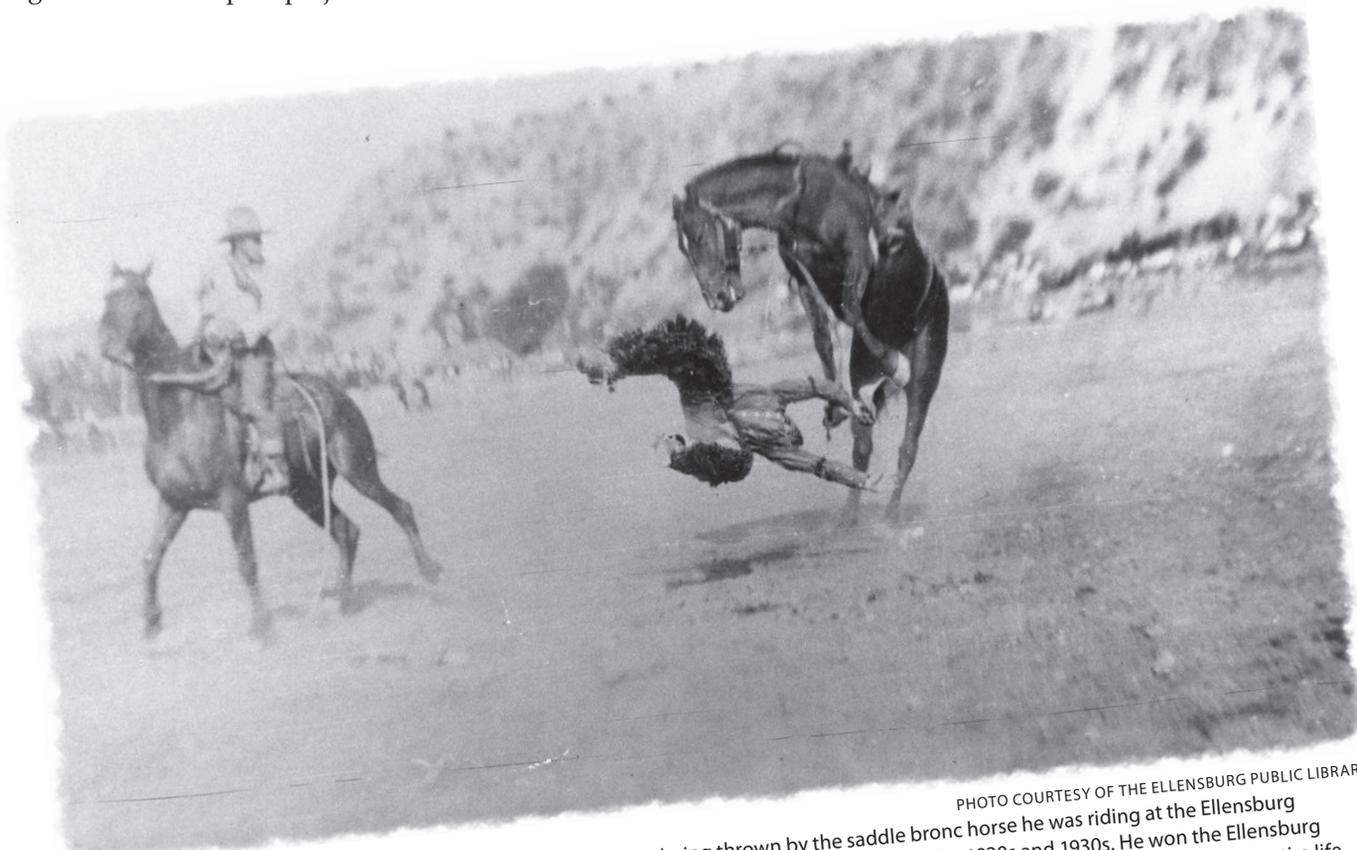


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ELLENSBURG PUBLIC LIBRARY

Schaller Bennett (1897-1983) has a dramatic trip to the ground after being thrown by the saddle bronc horse he was riding at the Ellensburg Rodeo. Bennett was an active rodeo performer at various northwest rodeos for many years during the 1920s and 1930s. He won the Ellensburg Rodeo saddle bronc title in 1927 and 1931, winning a handmade saddle each time. Schaller Bennett remained active in rodeo affairs his entire life. Photographer is unknown. Photo was taken between 1920-1929.



Teams of horses pull farm equipment during the wheat harvest at Raleigh Hampton's farm in Genesee, Idaho. Photo was taken between 1934-1935.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ASOTIN COUNTY LIBRARY
Gene Wilson was the sack sewer

The physical collections are housed locally by the owning institutions, but the digital collections are housed by the state library.

"Washington State Library maintains the database, and we provide tools for libraries around the state to upload their items," explained Evan Robb, project manager for WRH. "We provide training and support to help the libraries digitize material to nationally recognized standards. We teach them how to perform selection of materials, picking which ones to digitize. We also teach them about copyright issues, such as how to evaluate material to decide if they are going to run into any copyright infringement situations. We also teach them how use image editing software, like PhotoShop, and we teach them how to catalog material according to digital library standards and best practices."

Robb said the idea of digitizing the collections held by small, rural libraries was the brainchild of his boss, Gary Bortel, who works with the libraries on technological issues. Bortel saw that many libraries had special collections, but didn't have a way for the public to access them in any significant way.

"The intent was to allow the libraries to digitize the historical resources in their collections," said Robb, "but the project has morphed over time as libraries have started partnering up with local heritage museums in their area."

Robb said that besides putting their collections online, the project is also a



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WHITMAN COUNTY LIBRARY AND THE PRIVATE COLLECTION OF MARGIE ROBERTSON
Wesley Ulrich was plowing with an eight horse team when lightning struck and killed seven horses. Wesley was knocked unconscious and later was able to run off the hill with his ears bleeding to get help. He was on the farm of Ben F. Ulrich, who owned the team of horses, about five miles southeast of St. John, Wash. The neighbors came and helped bury the horses; the one remaining horse adopted a colt of one of the deceased mares. It was reported Wesley died a month later. Photo was taken by B.A. Lockhart around 1940.

way for these small, rural libraries to highlight their institutions. “Many of them don’t have a website or an up-to-date website,” he explained.

In addition, libraries have started digitizing private collections brought to them by community members. “We figured out ways for them to put privately held collections online. A big leader in this area is the Whitman County Library. They are one of our shining stars; they give us more work than we can handle,” Robb said, laughing. “They have hit almost every community in Whitman County and have done drives to get people to bring in their private collections.”

Whitman County Library

As one of the bigger contributors to the database, the Whitman County Library has been working on digitizing their material for the past five years, said Patti Cammack, WRH project manager for the Whitman County Library.

“Our focus in the county is trying to preserve the photos that relate to the history of all the little county towns,” she said. “So many of the pictures were in the homes of residents who were getting older. A lot of the pictures are in marginal circumstances, such as being stored in boxes in attics or garages or on paper that is not acid free. We try to focus on downtowns, churches, schools, pioneers and farming. Most of our photos are from the late 1800s to the early 1900s.”

Cammack said that when people bring in their photos, first they try to determine if they were taken in the county. Then, after scanning the selected photos, they try to gather as much information on the photo as they can, including identifying any person shown in the photograph. There is also a certain amount of technical data that must be gathered in order to make the photo more usable for people, such as subjects and searchable identifiers.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WHITMAN COUNTY LIBRARY AND THE WSU MANUSCRIPTS, ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
Wheat display in the interior of the Cashup Davis Hotel on Steptoe Butte near Steptoe, Wash. Photographer and date of photo unknown.

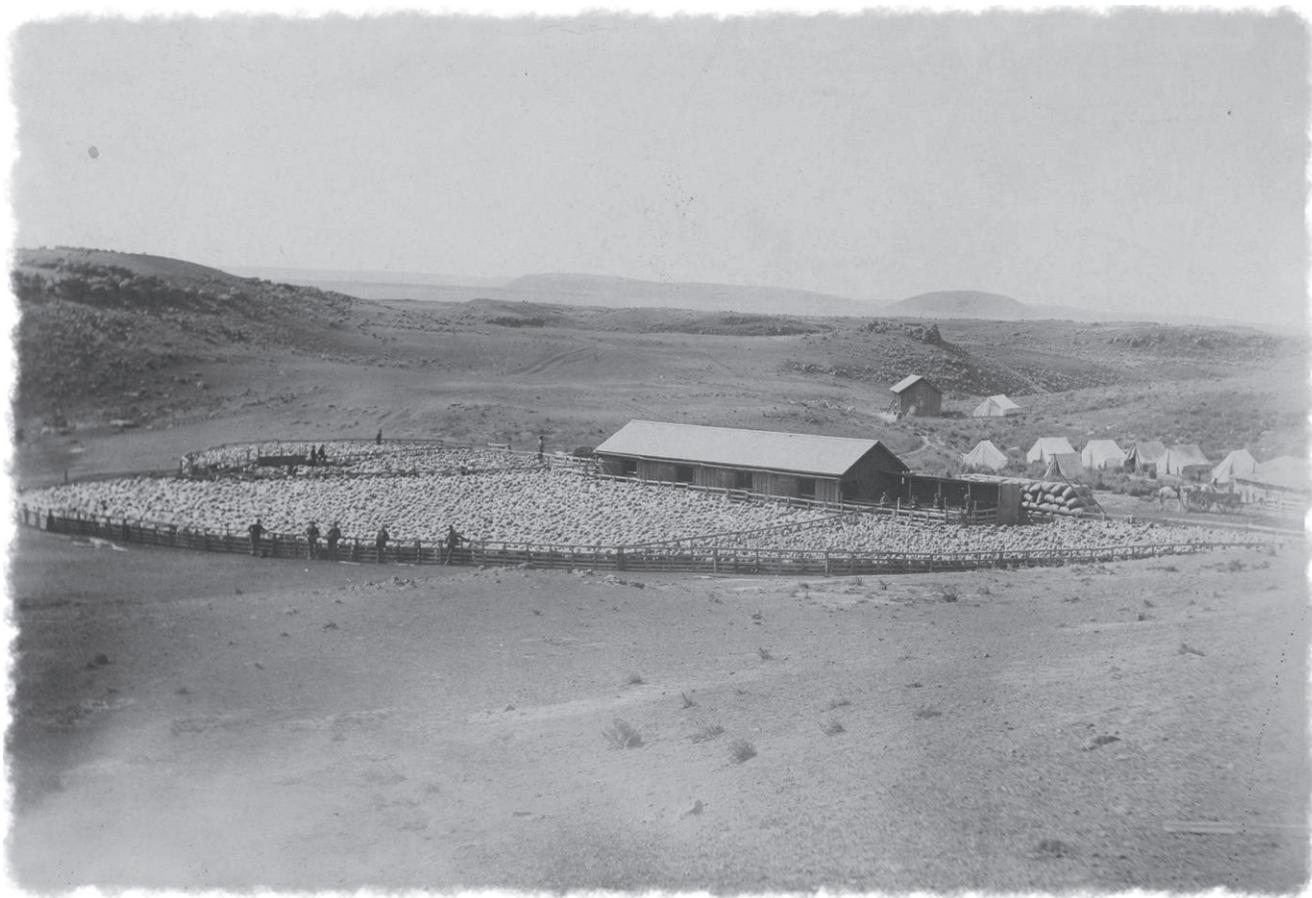


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WHITMAN COUNTY LIBRARY AND ALEX MCGREGOR

Six thousand sheep at Archie McGregor's sheep shearing camp near Hooper in Whitman county. Photographer is unknown. Photo was taken in 1903.

"I'm guessing there are about 200 individuals that have come forward with their photos. It has been a very rewarding experience. They enjoy so much talking about their own history," said Cammack. "People have been very generous about sharing their photos."

Preservation, said Cammack, is the crux of the whole project. "Everyone who lives here or has left the county can see their history. They can touch base with their own history. Those who farm just enjoy seeing the old farm pictures. People who have lived here their whole lives can look at the old photos and identify most everyone in them. It just means a lot to people."

Asotin County Library

Another Eastern Washington WRH contributor is the Asotin County Library. They started digitizing their material in 2009 and received a grant in 2010 in which they partnered up with the Asotin County Museum.

"When we tell people about the WRH, they get really excited," said Jennifer Ashby, director of the Asotin County Library. "People like talking about photos and the stories behind them. You get some really great stories, such as a picture of an old house and written on the back is 'Out

front is where so and so threw up.'"

Ashby said they've used part of their grant money to purchase digital video frames and set them up in different places so people could see what's in the collection.

"It brings local history to life," Ashby said. "It is fun to see Main Street the way it was in 1909 and the various versions of the bridge. It shows us the way life was like."

Columbia County Rural Library District

Schoolhouses and cemeteries are the order of the day for the Columbia Rural Library District. According to Director Janet Lyon, they've received two grants which has helped them photograph and catalog all of the old schoolhouses in the county, as well as many of the county cemeteries' headstones.

"I think the community has realized that the library is working and trying to put digital information out there for everybody," Lyon said. "It (getting the grants) was a great chance to be able to do something like this."

Back at the state library, Robb said there are a many great collections in the database, but he pointed out a few that might be of particular interest to *Wheat Life* readers:

- The Davenport library is working a project with the Lincoln County Historical Society to digitize material relating to Fort Spokane and the small towns in the area.
- In Odessa, they've digitized the photography of Joshua Elmer. Elmer worked primarily out of SW Lincoln County and created panoramic photos primarily of wheat farmers out in the field with their horse-drawn combines.
- Ellensburg, another of the largest contributors to the database, has a large collection documenting the Ellensburg rodeo. Ellensburg also recently completed digitizing the 1940s, man-on-the-street photographs of Fred L. Breckon, an amateur photographer. Robb said the exciting thing about that collection is that Breckon included detailed biographical information about his subjects, often going back to update the photographs with the subject's date of death.

• The Metalines Public Library collection includes photos showing the Pend Oreille River before the Boundary Dam was erected. It also shows steamboat travel on the river and hidden waterfalls that no longer exist.

Grants and more grants

According to Robb, the grant cycle starts in February. Interested libraries put together an application (located on the Washington State Library website at www.sos.wa.gov/library/libraries/grants/grants.aspx) with a project title and detailed description of what they want to digitize. If they are working with a partner, they also need to include information about that partner. Grants are only available to public or tribal libraries serving 25,000 people or less, and the maximum grant amount is \$10,000. Grants are awarded in June.

This year, Robb said two Eastern Washington libraries received grants. The Ritzville Public Library is partnering up with the Adams County Historical Society to document early schoolhouses in Adams County.

The other grant was awarded to the Denny Ashby Public Library in Pomeroy to digitize a collection of papers

documenting the activity of the Civilian Conservation Corps in Garfield County, as well as a set of letters written by John Bertram Brady to a friend in Paris, France, prior to sailing on the Titanic.

In 2011, Robb said they had more than 200,000 views of the database, and that number is steadily growing.

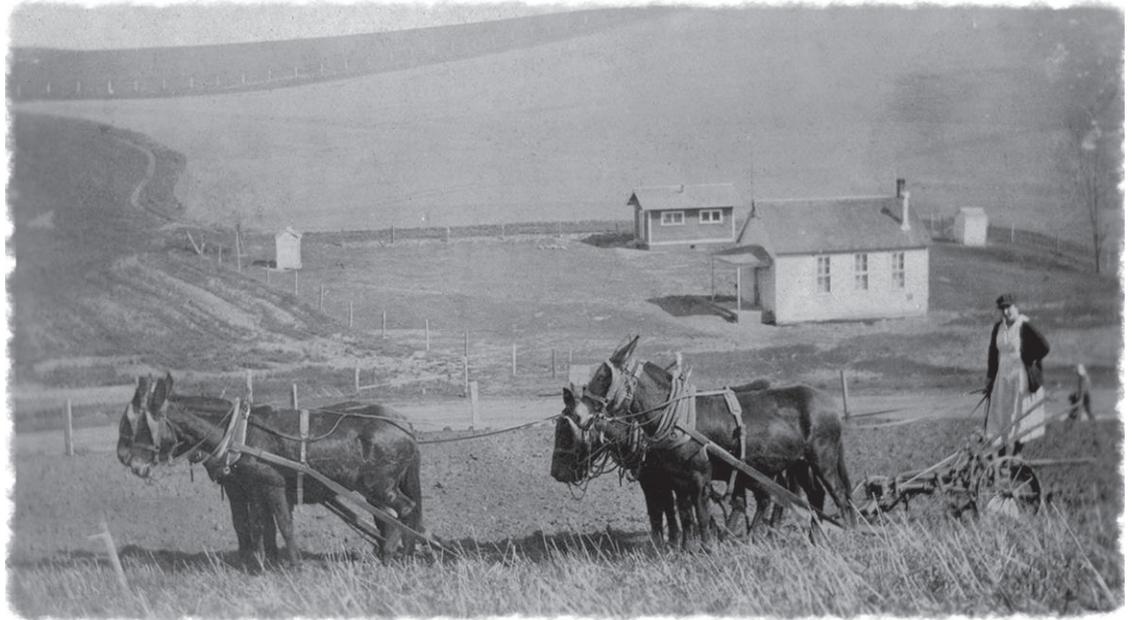


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE COLUMBIA COUNTY RURAL LIBRARY DISTRICT AND THE BLUE MOUNTAIN HERITAGE SOCIETY
 Laura Wright in front of the Wright school. Photographer and date of picture are unknown.

They've recently added the ability to accept comments from the public, and he is hoping that more people leave comments, especially if they have additional information to add to a particular photo or have a correction.

Robb hopes that the material in the database will see greater use in lesson plans and curriculums in schools around the state. He said that they get a lot of specialized users, such as government employees who are excited to find local history or a local map.

Using the database

To access the database, go to www.washingtonruralheritage.org/cdm/. You can search by specific collections or contributing institutions using the appropriate dropdown menus. There are also links to other institutions with historical material relating to Washington state, as well as a blog that updates readers on collections that have recently been added to the database.

Users can download or print a high-resolution JPEG image for private use, but there are copyright issues for distributing or publishing the material. To find out more information about the copyright issues and to get permission to use the photograph, users need to contact the holding institution. ■