

# Forging Community Connections at the Claire McGill Luce Western History Room

**by Karen Nitz**

Claire McGill Luce  
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KAREN NITZ has been employed with the Claire McGill Luce Western History Room at the Harney County Library since 2008. She is the author of “Images of America; Harney County.”

The special local and regional history archives collected together under the banner of the Claire McGill Luce Western History Room at the Harney County Library have played a role in recent community efforts to retain a connection with our county’s pioneer roots while pursuing creative efforts to revitalize a once-vibrant economy through preservation, restoration, and promotion of heritage-based businesses and activities. Community members and organizations seeking historic home designations, organizing living history events, celebrating the arts and cultures of Harney County, and preserving and restoring downtown buildings have all incorporated resources uniquely available for public access within the library archives to bring an element of historical context into our daily lives.

It all began in 1970 with a pledge and a vision: one thousand dollars per year for thirty years to document and preserve local history at the newly constructed Harney County Library. Little could Harney County-born Claire McGill Luce have guessed that her initial bequest would eventually blossom into a fund of over two million dollars and give rise to a historical research facility rivaling institutions many times its size.

Guided by Luce’s wish to “see a very fine collection of books, records, and documents pertaining to the history of Harney County,” the Harney County Library began its compilation of research materials with the purchase of a microfilm reader and accompanying reels of local newspapers. Through countless hours of dedication by library staff and volunteers, an oral history interview program was initiated to gather firsthand recollections from the earliest pioneer families. Journalist and historian Pauline Braymen was instrumental in organizing and recording interviews in the early years of the program. Historical photos were collected, indexes to vital records were constructed, and files of local interest were compiled. A boon to the status of the library collections came with donation of the prestigious private library of local rancher and avid northwest history book collector, Walter McEwen, and the working research library of author Edward Gray. In 2006, an addition to the Harney County Library



was completed, bringing together all the historical archives in a controlled environment to provide ready access for library patrons and preserve them for future generations.

To date, the archives of the Western History Room contain: over 4,000 publications, 540 transcribed oral history interviews, 545 audio and video interview analog tapes converted to digital files, 475 family history files, Burns and Crane high school yearbooks dating from 1911, 73 reels of microfilmed local newspapers dating from 1887-2014 in addition to Camp Harney military records, collections describing local Paiute and Basque culture, and files relating to local historic homes, towns, settlements, post offices, schools, ranch history, Edward Hines Lumber Co. logging history and more.

Over the past dozen years, the Claire McGill Luce Western History Room has partnered with the Harney County Arts in Education Foundation (HCAEF), Harney County Historical Society, other organizations and private individuals to bring history to the forefront in the community.

On October 30, 2010, the Portland Youth Philharmonic (PYP) was welcomed to Burns, Oregon for their first performance in the city where the idea for a youth orchestra was first born. The PYP performed at Burns High School in honor of the Sagebrush Symphony Centennial as a benefit for the HCAEF. Staff members of the Claire McGill Luce Western History Room were invited to serve on the Sagebrush Symphony Centennial Committee task force, providing local historical photographs and documentation of Mary Dodge and her Harney County youth orchestra, which were incorporated into all facets of the centennial tribute.

Founded in Burns in 1910 by music teacher Mary Dodge, her Sagebrush Youth Orchestra played to critical acclaim in 1915 and 1916 at venues around Oregon, including the Oregon State Fair in Salem and the Imperial Hotel in Portland. When Mary Dodge moved to Portland in 1918, Ruth Saunders and other young music students from Burns followed her to continue their training. In Portland, Mary Dodge founded the Irvington School Orchestra, drawing on her experience with the children of Harney County. This school orchestra evolved into the Portland Junior Symphony and later became known as the Portland Youth Philharmonic. Ruth Saunders' granddaughter, HCAEF member and Portland Junior Symphony alum Linda Neale, was instrumental in bringing the orchestra back to its roots in Burns.

Uniquely local entertainment was provided for the performing PYP musicians preceding the Centennial Concert to impart a sense of the cultural diversity of the hosting community. The group was treated to Paiute dancing, demonstrations by the Steens Mountain Men/Women, a rodeo, and a Basque-style lunch.

Maintaining a connection with the youth orchestra's past, a highlight of the Harney County Fair Parade a month before the benefit concert was a specially created replica of the Sagebrush Orchestra's iconic violin float. The enormous float was pulled along the parade route by a vintage automobile with Georgia Marshall, daughter of Ruth Saunders, waving from the passenger seat. Perched atop the giant violin, a dozen Harney County music students performed under the direction of Mary Dodge, as portrayed by Linda Neale.

Claudette Pruitt, a local author and historian with a passion for connecting community members with their roots organized several projects in conjunction with the Claire McGill Luce Western History Room and the Harney County Library that were designed to showcase significant citizens in county history and commemorate pioneer family homes from the early settled period of Burns.





Sagebrush Symphony Orchestra Centennial Celebration. Violin Parade Float in Harney County Fair Parade. September 11, 2010. Pictured: Linda Neale as Mary Dodge, standing center, surrounded by young Harney County musicians. The float is pulled by John Watts driving his vintage Ford truck with passenger Georgia Leupold Marshall.

On September 15, 2012, at the Burns Cemetery, Pruitt led local residents dressed in period costume to pay tribute to some of the men and women laid to rest there—who helped shape the character of Harney County. Representing “Spirits of the Old West,” the living history players drew on historic photographs and documentation from the Western History Room archives to establish their characters. Garbed in old jewelry, hats, and other period apparel, the Spirits used photo albums and props to relate, in 10-minute narratives, early county history and how they played a role. Of the 14 reenactors, five were descendants of prominent Harney County citizens portrayed. Cemetery visitors wove their way among the headstones, stopping to hear the “spirits” recount significant events in their lives.

The cast of characters featured Tim Clemens and Helen (Clemens) McCart as Peter and Jennie Clemens, Bill Renwick and his sister Lois Renwick as their great-grandparents John and Dorcas Neal, Denny Presley as George McGowan, Michelle Steineckert as Ida Olivier Petersen, Mark Christie as Grover Jameson, Peg Johnson as Phoebe Kelley Geary, Jen Hoke as Grace Brown Lampshire, Robin Cramer as Margaret Smyth Donegan, and Len Vohs as “The Sage of Harney County,” Bill Hanley. Known for his folksy wisdom, Hanley’s perspective on the afterlife leads one to imagine he would have approved of his temporary resurrection. In *Feelin’ Fine*, Hanley’s autobiographical memoir compiled by Anne Shannon Monroe, Bill reflects:

“Well, each life is only a little spot in time. And there is no death. Nothing can be lost—it only changes. Will I return? people ask. It’s what’s in you that returns.”



Fittingly, the entrance to the Burns cemetery commemorates Bill and his wife Clara with two marble columns.



Photo by Paul Kohler

Harney County Living History Players. Cast and support personnel for the first annual living history performance at the Burns Cemetery. September 12, 2012. *Pictured:* Seated, left to right: Karen Nitz, Lois Renwick, Robin Cramer, Wesley Welcome, Claudette Pruitt, Michelle Steineckert, Helen Clemens, Peggy Johnso. Standing, left to right: Sandy Weld, Tom Boren, Denny Presley, Mark Christy, Len Vohs, Bill Renwick, David Brinkley, Jen Hoke.

In addition to organizing living history, Claudette Pruitt compiled research from Harney County Library archives and other sources to document historic homes, including Clara Hanley's final residence. Pruitt's interest was initially fueled by the history she uncovered about her own house, a circa 1900 structure which she lovingly restored to near original state. As owners of neighboring vintage homes took notice, an informal movement—spearheaded by Pruitt—ensued. The group encouraged the display of placard signs to honor the earliest known owner(s).

Taking her historic homes research a step further, Pruitt commissioned a local watercolor artist named Mary Lou Wilhelm to create illustrations of a dozen of the homes. These paintings were featured in a 12-month calendar and handmade notecards. A short history of the homes and the homeowners is detailed on the back of each card. The cards were offered for sale at the Harney County Historical Museum and local gift shops to serve as reminders for visitors and local residents alike of the craftsmanship and rich history which are still evident in our community. Pruitt enthusiastically shared the high points of her research on pioneer families and homes with audiences at the Harney County Library and Harney County Historical Society. Although Pruitt is no longer a resident of the community, her research is deposited and accessible to the public in the archives at the Harney County Library, ready to serve as the historical groundwork for others to build upon.





Photo by Karen Nitz

Claudette Pruitt prepares for a Pioneer Homes of Burns history program at the Harney County Library (2014).

The Claire McGill Luce Western History Room and the Harney County Library continue to focus on highlighting local history by actively participating in—and serving as a research source for—exciting new events within the community.

Over the course of two nights in late February 2020, Harney County youth presented the second annual “Nights at the Museum,” held at the Harney County Historical Museum. After sourcing information from the historical archives, actors from the Burns High School Drama Club transformed into noteworthy Harney County citizens from the past. The inaugural two-night event last year played to hundreds of community members who were invited to tour the museum while historic notables—Peter French, Bill and Clara Hanley, Mary Dodge, Dr. L.E. Hibbard, Ilda May Hayes, Helen Cowan, and Captain Wright—interacted with the visitors and related stories from their lives. In addition, youth from the Burns Paiute Tribal Youth Leadership Council participated with a focus on detailing events associated with the 1878 Bannock uprising from their own perspective.

The Harney County Cultural Crawl festival joined forces with the popular annual Archaeology Roadshow organized by Portland State University in June 2019 in what is likely to continue as a combined local event to present the community with a wealth of historical and cultural-themed exhibits, demonstrations, information, and entertainment in one venue. Experts and representatives from a variety of government agencies, research institutions, and community cultural groups, including the Claire McGill Luce Western History Room, gathered together at the Hines City Park to showcase the abundance of opportunities for residents and visitors to engage with local and regional heritage-based activities. Some of those activities take place front and center on the main thoroughfare of Burns.





Photo by Karee Withee

Night at the Museum. February 21, 2019. Harney County Historical Museum. Burns Paiute Tribal Youth Council members relate history of the Burns Paiutes. Burns Paiute Tribal Youth Council Members participating included: Reyanne Hawley, Lane Hawley, Michael Teeman, Alexis First Raised, Methius Barney, Ksh'lee Thomas.

Downtown business owners are recognizing the value of incorporating historic details during the renovation of deteriorated buildings, in turn creating vibrant and welcoming new spaces to encourage investment in the local economy. Forrest and Jen Keady are examples of local business owners melding the old and the new to foster interest in preservation over demolition of aging local infrastructure in the heart of Burns. The Keadys jump-started the “revitalization revolution” in downtown Burns by successfully completing restoration of the former Masonic building. An overwhelmingly positive community response to the project inspired the couple to undertake a second fixer-upper; the result is the award-winning Historic Central Hotel, a mixed-use plan lodging guests in 1930s era boutique-chic on the upper floors and providing retail space at street level. Up and down Broadway Avenue, other businesses are following the Keadys’ lead to re-energize the core of the community while retaining its small-town charm.

In response to a growing interest in local history by festival participants, next year the Harney County Bird Festival Committee is introducing free guided downtown history walking tours in conjunction with the annual migratory waterfowl event. Led by staff from the Claire McGill Luce Western History Room at the Harney County Library, tours will begin and end at the shared library/museum parking lot. This one- to two-hour leisurely walk along Broadway and surrounding blocks will relate the development of Burns from a dusty cow town to a community looking toward the future through ongoing revitalization efforts.



Shortly before her death, in a letter penned to a hometown friend, Claire McGill Luce wrote of her conviction that citizens should be aware of their heritage. “This simple magnificent concept must be an eternal light, passed hand to hand, generation to generation.” Her legacy to Harney County continues to grow with each new addition to the archival collection that proudly bears her name. The community she held so dear will always hold the seeds of its past as it grows toward the future. Says Pauline Braymen, “The history will be available for children of tomorrow to hear and read as Claire Luce hoped it would be, so great was her love for the wide, free Harney County country—the other part of—Oregon.” 

