



Klickitat County history buff Jean Allyn Smeltzer, right, helps Judy Walsh do research. Jean has published several books on Klickitat County, two this year.

County Chronicle

Researcher's own family heritage is woven through the years of Klickitat County history

By Jeanie Senior

Jean Allyn Smeltzer's enduring interest in genealogy and her family's history has yielded a lot more than a family tree.

She has published four books that provide a plethora of information about Klickitat County, beginning with a 1970s volume on the 1860, 1870 and 1880 census records in Klickitat County, which was then part of Washington Territory.

Another book is a comprehensive

listing of birth and death records in the county. Both are great tools for genealogists.

Her two most recent books, published in 2011, also will help family researchers. But most anyone will find fascinating reading in "Glimpses into the Past of Klickitat County" and "Klickitat County Tragedies." The books, which cover the years 1900 to 1940, were compiled from news articles published in local newspapers: The Klickitat County

Agriculturist, the Bickleton newspaper, The Independent and The Goldendale Sentinel.

In the introduction to "Glimpses," Jean writes that the book "covers roads being built for the railroad and automobiles, and the accidents associated with them; towns that became part of our history; the building of schools and other buildings that helped define our way of life; the fires that hampered our progress; violent storms that caused

hardships for the citizens; old deserted mines and Indian artifacts that enticed the adventurous; and most important are the people who made the news. Also included are many articles about the Indians who played an interesting part of early Klickitat County history.”

At nearly 200 pages, “Glimpses” follows the writing style favored by newspapers of the era. A 1925 story reported a fire had destroyed the abandoned Hotel Columbia at Cliffs, a former town site west of present-day John Day Dam, concluding with, “Every part was burned, including the bedbugs.”

“It’s addictive,” Jean says of archival research. “I think the more you do, the more you can see what needs to be done and you want to do it.”

She usually works two days a week as a volunteer research archivist for the Klickitat County Historical Society, whose documents are housed at the Presby Mansion Museum in Goldendale.

Jean is still learning about the information shelved there.

“I’ve only had that job for two years,” she says. “There’s lots of stuff I haven’t been through yet.”

Jean assists people who contact the society or come into the museum seeking information about their ancestors.

She grew up in the Goldendale area, and her roots are deep in Klickitat County history. Three sets of her great-grandparents—the Allyn, the Lindens and the Millers—moved to the county around 1880. The fourth, the Korthases, arrived in 1906.

Most of them were farmers, but James Henry Allyn, who arrived in 1879, was a Methodist minister and circuit rider who presided at the first service at the Methodist church in Bickleton.

Researching her ancestors got Jean started in county history. She published the book about the early census when she lived in Portland. As soon as her children started school, she joined the Portland Genealogical group and continued work. Even before the census report, she did the index for “Early Klickitat Valley Days,” a book published in 1938 that



Jean has traced ancestors to the Revolutionary War.

remains in print.

“It has a lot of names in it,” she says. “To find them was really hard.”

The book’s author, Robert Balou, “worked for the paper for a while,” Jean says. “He met a lot of these people and would gather the stories that he tells in the book. It really is a neat book to read.”

Jean’s husband, Roy—who worked in the engineering department for the Spokane, Portland & Seattle Railway—was transferred to St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1975.

At that time, she mostly set aside her genealogy research because St. Paul did not have resources, such as the Multnomah County Library and Oregon Historical Society in Portland, close by.

In Oregon, Jean found many family papers. Willamette University had the quarterly reports her great-grandfather, the Rev. James Henry Allyn, had filed with the Methodist church. Finding those documents in her grandfather’s handwriting, brought tears to her eyes, Jean says.

When she did research at the Oregon Historical Society, “there were his records for fighting the Indian War,” Jean says. “He died early and left his wife with children still to raise. She was trying to

get a pension (from his military service), and there were all the letters that she wrote.”

The couple was married in Vancouver. The record of their marriage later was destroyed in a fire. To get the small pension, Jean’s great-grandmother had to prove they were married and had to get affidavits from people.

“All those letters were there,” Jean says.

When Roy retired from the railroad, they moved back to Klickitat County. They moved from a small farm into Goldendale 3½ years ago.

After her father died in 2003, Jean wrote a family history book for relatives. A copy is at the historical society in Goldendale.

“Glimpses” and “Tragedies” represent about five years of work. All are indexed, an intensely time-consuming task, but one that makes the books far more useful to researchers.

Going through bound copies of the newspapers and microfilm records, Jean copied “any story I thought was interesting.”

The “Tragedies” book has been a good seller.

“I think just because it’s different,” Jean says.

One story particularly caught her attention: a farm fire where the family lost everything, including 600 quarts of canning.

“All that cooking over a hot wood stove,” Jean laments. “Their neighbors gave (after the fire), but not that much.”

As for her own family history, Jean says, “for Klickitat County, I’ve pretty much got everything I’m ever going to find.”

To expand her search, she has traced a couple of ancestors back to the Colonies in the 1600s. Four of her forebears fought in the Revolutionary War. Another ancestor came from The Netherlands and settled in New Amsterdam, the name for what is now known as Manhattan Island.

“They lived right down there where Wall Street is today,” Jean says. “It was just a cow pasture. That’s the sort of thing you can find when you can go back in history.” ■