

A lifetime love affair with Josephine County

Margaret Bland Wallen has filled scrapbooks with her pioneer family's history

By Susan Goracke
of the Daily Courier

Margaret Bland Wallen's life spans almost a century, her first years spent on the banks of Quartz Creek near Hugo, and her last years on the banks of the Rogue River in Grants Pass.

Wallen was born in 1912 in a farmhouse on about 40 acres between Merlin and Hugo, where her parents and three older brothers lived "like pioneers" without electricity or indoor plumbing.

She grew up surrounded by plenty of family: Her grandparents lived nearby, one great-grandmother lived on a 360-acre farm near the Hellgate Bridge, and the other lived in Grants Pass.

Today, they're all gone. But at 97, Wallen's mind is still sharp. Her memories fill a book she helped write about her family's history, and her comfortable riverside home displays mementos from the past, among them her christening dress and a purse bought in Paris in 1944.

Her photos fill several scrapbooks. One features her year in 1938 as an animal-skin-clad Caveman Princess. Another chronicles her years serving in the Army, both stateside and in Europe, during World War II. She was photographed with "Frankie" Sinatra during a recruitment tour, and she dodged German bombs during the Blitz in London.

After the war, Wallen headed to Portland, where she graduated from college and taught elementary school until she retired in 1977. It would be 20 more years — in 1997 — before she returned to live in Josephine County.

Today, her fondest memories are of growing up on that 40-acre farm on Quartz Creek, with adoring parents — John Edward Bland, who called his daughter "Babe," and Anna Maude Jones Bland, who called her Dora. Her given name was Margaret Lanore Bland.

Wallen's parents met in 1902, after Anna's family moved west by train from Missouri in 1900.



SUSAN GORACKE/Daily Courier

Margaret Bland Wallen, 97, visits the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Cemetery in Grants Pass, where her ancestors are buried. The tall monument is in the Simpkins family plot, where Wallen's great-grandmother, Caroline Hauser Simpkins, is buried with her in-laws. Close by is the Bland family plot, where Wallen expects to be buried one day next to her father, John Edward Bland.

"Mother and Dad lived about a quarter mile apart on Quartz Creek," she says. "Dad saw her carrying water, and it led to their wedding." The couple married in Josephine County in January 1903.

Ed Bland never knew his father, John H. Bland, who died when his son was three months old. His mother, Ellen Hauser Bland, later married Louis Gibson, and they had several children.

Ellen Hauser had been a young girl when her father died. Afterwards, her mother, Caroline Hauser, married Horatio Simpkins of Josephine County, and the two had several children, including Ida, who drowned in Louse Creek as a young woman. Wallen remembers the sad story:

"She was engaged, and they had been to a party. There was a footbridge over Louse Creek, and she stepped out on it and must have slipped. When they found her, she had her fingers together, holding the (engagement) ring on."

Ida is buried next to Caroline and Horatio Simpkins in the International Order of Odd Fellows Cemetery off Foothill Boulevard in east Grants Pass. Their plot is close to the Bland plot, where Wallen's father



Wallen attended Merlin Elementary School in 1923 after 11-year-old Margaret's family left their Quartz Creek farm and moved to Merlin to build and run the town's first gas station.

was buried in 1934. His grave sits beside the granite headstone marking Wallen's eventual resting place.

After Wallen's father died, her mother remarried and moved to Portland, where she died in 1975. She is buried with her husband's family.

Wallen's other great-grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Beck with Bland Taylor, was born in 1839. She came west on a wagon train from New York with her parents at the age of 11. Her mother died on the trip and was buried near the Platte River, Wallen says.

train depot in Merlin before getting on the train.

Wallen also remembers climbing trees and fishing for small salmon in Quartz Creek with her brothers, attending the one-room Quartz Creek school.

Wallen's mother cooked meals and put up blackberry jam on "the most beautiful Home Comfort Wood Stove," and her father piped water from a stream into a wooden tank near the house. At night, the family read or played checkers by kerosene lamps. Sometimes they listened to music on a hand-wound Thomas Edison cylinder record player. Other times they listened to the cry of cougars.

Wallen's father and brothers also worked on Southern Pacific's Tunnel No. 9 near Hugo. But after suffering from a bout of pneumonia and influenza, Wallen's father couldn't do hard manual work.

In 1923, he and his sons built the Ed Bland Associated Gasoline Service Station in Merlin — the town's first gas station — and the family left the farm and moved to a house behind the station.

Wallen continued her schooling at Merlin Elementary School, eventually graduating from Merlin High School. She was on the tennis team, and during one summer she was in charge of the Sexton Mountain lookout while her brother Dick manned the lookout on Mount Peavine.

Wallen remembers packing supplies on her back from Old U.S. 99 to the lookout — there were no mules — and carrying water to the lookout from a spring about three-quarters of a mile away. She and her brother reported a fire that started in the hills behind her family's service station. They alerted their father, who set a back-fire that saved the town.

After high school, Wallen attended business college in Medford, then worked different jobs in Grants Pass for a few years.

She was married twice, first in 1939 to Orville Jones, and then after World War II to Coble Wallen in Portland. Both marriages lasted four years. Her teaching career spanned two decades, but her love affair with Josephine County has lasted a lifetime.

GP Women's Club was city's only women's civic group for many years

The Grants Pass Women's Club organized in June 1908 as an auxiliary of the Grants Pass Commercial Club — the forerunner to the Chamber of Commerce.

The Women's Club continued to meet until 1996, except for a short time during World War I, when members cooperated with the Red Cross in wartime work.

In 1935, the club had 100 members. But it held its last meeting in 1996, disbanding due to fading membership.

For many years, it was the city's only women's civic organization, and members either initiated, aided or helped finance projects such as the beautification of the railroad park on the east side of Sixth Street at G Street, the Grants Pass High School grounds and residential districts.

The club also was instrumental in eliminating unsightly billboards from the city and adjacent highways.

Over the years, the Women's Club also raised money for scholarships, for Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland, for child welfare work and for food sanitation.

The club helped make possible the establishment of a Carnegie Library in 1921, and helped finance the building of a community house, which opened originally as the library auditorium in 1928 just north of the Josephine County Courthouse on Sixth Street. Later, it was known as the Women's Club Auditorium.

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In 1997, the county renovated the building and renamed it the Anne Basker Auditorium, after the county's first woman commissioner and a community leader who died in 1994 at the age of 70.



In 1906, a passenger train collided with a stranded freight train on Southern Pacific Railroad tracks in southeast Grants Pass. A fireman who was unable to escape was killed. Courier Publisher Amos Voorhies took this photo the day after the crash.

One man died in 1906 train wreck, but it could have been much worse

By Susan Goracke
of the Daily Courier

Folks in Grants Pass were sitting down to supper at 6:28 p.m. on Jan. 29, 1906, when they heard a "terrific" crash coming from the railroad tracks on the east side of town.

Freight train No. 222 — its heavy load pulled by two engines — was pulling onto a side track when a drawbolt gave way, breaking the train into two sections. That left the back half of the freight cars on the main track with their air brakes set hard.

The conductor sent the brakeman back to signal and warn oncoming passenger train No. 16., which was coming fast and was close behind. Engineer M.V. Crocker had just enough time to whistle that he saw the warning, throw off steam and set the emergency brakes when his passenger train crashed into the freight train. Recent rain had made the tracks slippery, making his brakes less effective.

Crocker and Fireman John P. Barger were in the passenger train's lead engine, which was smashed upon impact and thrown to the side of the track, on its side and at a right angle to the track. The second engine remained on the roadbed, but was buried in earth over its axels, its front end badly smashed.

Engineer Crocker had jumped from his

engine just as the trains collided. He was picked up beside the track and taken to the Grants Pass Hospital, where local doctors attended to his injuries: two broken bones in his right leg just above the ankle. He was badly shaken up, but alive.

Fireman Barger's body was found lying on the wreckage between the engine's cab and the tender, which had been thrown across the roadbed. He had tried to jump from the engine, but was caught between the corner of the cab and end of the tender. His hips and abdomen were crushed. He gasped his last breaths as rescuers reached him.

None of the train's 300 passengers were seriously injured, but were aghast to discover how narrowly they and the town had escaped harm: While the freight train's caboose was literally ground into kindling wood, forward of the caboose was a car loaded with boxes of dynamite.

That car was hurled into a ditch and badly wrecked. Many dynamite boxes were broken, but they hadn't exploded. The dynamite was still frozen, having just made the trip over the snowy Siskiyou Mountains.

The wreck between the two Southern Pacific trains was the largest known in the Rogue Valley until that time, according to a front-page story in the Rogue River Courier on Feb. 2, 1906.

Second & Third Generations

The Second Generation

If we look back a mere 46 years, we see Virgil and Esther's son joining Hull & Hull Funeral Directors, after attending both the University of Oregon and the San Francisco College of Mortuary Science. Upon graduation from these institutions, Virgil F. "Fred" Hull served in the U.S. Army. It was 1962 when this second generation of the Hull family entered into the firm full-time.



Just two years later, in 1964, his wife, Diane, joined the firm. The partnership of Fred and Diane mirrored that of his parents; not only did they work side-by-side in the business; they raised two children together, Kirk and Kendra. The Hull & Hull family extended its reach into the community in 1982, when they started Southern Oregon Cremation Services. They had heard many families express the need for such services, and they rose to the occasion in the expansion.

The Third Generation

It was Kirk and Kendra, the next generation to join the firm, who helped to lead the Hull & Hull Funeral Home into the 21st century. Kirk came into service in 1988, his sister just 3 years later; and each truly enriches the business.

Continued expansion has been the hallmark of the past 12 years. In 1996, the firm purchased Hawthorne Memorial Gardens, and just 10 years later purchased Cave Junction's Illinois Valley Funeral Directors.



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