

Pacific Northwest Regional History

Introduction

A question I get asked from time to time is “What are you doing here?” The reason for this is that having grown-up in the Pacific Northwest I keep orienting my historical inquiry toward that region. This is not an easy thing to do living and going to school in Virginia. To put things in perspective, I’m sure it’s easier for history grad students at the University of Washington to study Civil War than for me to study the American colony in the Oregon Country of 1842. They at least have access to more secondary sources in their library. Projects like [*The Valley of the Shadow*](#) are making some primary sources available to out of area scholars as well. One way to alleviate the difficulty I’m facing is to locate research sources on the Internet. This essay is a review of some of those sources.

I will attempt to show that a fair amount of research can be accomplished over the Internet. The major historical societies in the three states of the Pacific Northwest operate useful web sites. While none of them are perfect or support all a researcher's requirements they ease the task of transcontinental research. There are also several smaller local societies and museums with a web presence. They too contribute something to this research, though not as much as the major sites.

This by no means an exhaustive list of research site available. The constraints of the assignment limited it in scope. What I hope to do is show that a research project can get off the ground and be well on its way before the researcher needs to physically travel to archives. When that travel does take place the research can be focused to those sources that really matter and thus save on the time and expense of

the journey.

My evaluation of the sites will include the standard evaluation of the use of technology and design. These are necessary evaluation elements because they make the site intelligible to visitor. If you can't understand what you are looking at, how to navigate through the site, or find what you're looking for (or realize quickly that the site doesn't have what you want so you don't waste time searching for what's not there) then the site is a fails in its purpose of delivering useful information to the visitor. In addition I'll be looking for materials that would assist a long-range researcher track down materials related to specific historical questions.

The Big Three

The three principal sites under review are: the Idaho Historical Society, the Oregon Historical Society and the Washington State Historical Society. Each of these are large, well funded, and long established organizations dedicated to the preservation and presentation the history of their region. The Idaho Historical Society is the official historical agent of the state government and maintains the state archives along with a museum and research library. The Oregon Historical Society is a private organization; the state has its own museum and library. The Washington State Historical Society is a little of both, a private organization that is recognized in statute as a trustee agency of the state. All three have web sites that support their presentation objectives.

Idaho Historical Society

The IHS is clean and easy to understand. One text link in the center of the page leads to a what's new section. On the right are four navigation links to the primary section of the site Exhibitions, Programs & Events, History, and Research & Collections. Each of these leads to a page with links that drill down further into the site. The design is constant throughout after the front page. It uses icons on the right hand side for links while the rest of the site uses text. Other than that there is nothing jarring about the design or confusing about the layout.

The content covers a broad range of material to satisfy several constituents. This society, as do all three, devote space to elementary and secondary school education programs. Being a state institution

the IHS also has space devoted to county and local governmental history and preservation programs. There are also on-line exhibits of local interest to residents.

For the researcher the History and the Research & Collections area are of the most interest. The history site is mostly links to pages that have information about the hours of operation and location of various places of interest to historians. However, the strangely labeled link to "[Reference Series](#)" take the visitor to a listing of over 1100 articles available on-line about a host of topics on the history of Idaho. These reference documents range from one to forty-two pages in length. They are unindexed so the researcher needs to look at all 1100 plus titles to find everything of use or realize there is nothing of interest there.

The Research and Collections page links to other pages that describe the collections in the research library and the archives but do not provide any specific information about the. For example, under manuscripts the visitor is told that:

“The collection currently consists of approximately 1400 small and 700 larger collections. Included are the records of such individuals as Henry Dworshak and James Hawley and organizations as diverse as the Boise Equal Suffrage Association and the Republican State Central Committee.”

but nothing more about what is in the collections. It is only when you go elsewhere in the site on the History links page its library and archives link that the visitor learns that the “majority of Library and Archives collections are cataloged through [OCLC](#),” with additional information available through the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections.

My final evaluation is that this is a well-designed site that is of more than moderate use to the long-distance researcher.

[Oregon Historical Society](#)

The OHS is the oldest of the three societies and the only one that operates independently of the state government. The Society has within the last month reopened its museum and library after extensive renovation. Along with the brick and mortar renovation the society's web site has been overhauled. The opening page gets right down to business. On the left and in the title bar are navigation buttons. Most of the page area is presentation content focusing on current exhibits and programs at the museum. Over the past week the content of this area has changed to remain current. The look of the opening page is carried throughout the site. That is until you Oregon History Project section, then every thing changes. And it's to this section that the researcher will want to go.

The OHS does do a better job of helping the research search its collections that IHS did. Here the library catalog is on line and searchable, just the GMU library catalog. While OCLC is better than unless you structure your search properly you'll get hits from all over. This way you know that you are searching the specific library of interest.

As I said above the [Oregon History Project](#) is one location a researcher will want to visit. It has advantages over the Reference Series documents at the IHS site two ways. First, the author is acknowledged which Idaho didn't do. Second, the indexing is better. The articles are arranged by general categories. Under these pull-down menus list the specific articles. Still no search engine to aid but with organization the manual search is accomplished faster. The historical records area of this section contains about 650 documents,

illustrations with explanations.

One area where the OHS is lacking is that there is no links page. Within the Oregon History Project section there are some links to academic journals that publish essays on Oregon history but there are no links to other historical societies and museums within the state as there are on the other two society sites. This I think shows an elitist attitude. The OHS is only interested in academic level history and the local interest history pursued for the most part by amateurs is beneath them.

This is also a well designed site. It has more utility to the researcher but still doesn't have the type of source content that would save one a trip across country.

Washington State Historical Society

This is a poorly conceived web site. First off there is a version of a crawly on the page but this time its large and travels vertically up the right hand side. There are three buttons in the middle each of which take you a section that has a completely different design than opening page. The link buttons across the top all have drop-down menus but you really can't get an appreciation for what is in the site until you call up the site map. Specifically, there are links in the site map that don't exist anywhere else. You get confused, you get lost, and you're not sure what you're looking for is here at all.

The WSHS is oriented toward museum and educational projects. This makes it different from the Idaho and Oregon societies. The society operates two museums, the Washington State Historical

Museum and the Washington State Capital Museum. It conducts educational programs in the museums. Based on the interactive section of this web site that has the participants evaluating photographs for historical clues. There is also the "[History Lab](#)" which, is a web version of one of their museum exhibits which deals with the inspection and evaluation of artifacts. There is nothing pertaining to a research library or document collection other than a brief mention that documents of some kind are among the collection at the Research Center.

In the end this is a poorly designed site that has little to offer the long-distance researcher.

Local History in the Pacific Northwest

I chose three additional web sites, pretty much at random, to see what smaller local historical societies or museums could offer the researcher. The sites I chose were: the Historical Museum at Saint Gertrude's in Idaho, the Curry Historical Society in Oregon, and the Center for Columbia River History. This last was not as random as the other two. Having become a little frustrated with the WSHS site I looked for one of their sponsored programs to see if it was any better.

[Saint Gertrude's Convent](#) was founded by the Benedictine Sisters shortly after the start of the 20th century. It was founded to provide schooling for the children of Nez Perce reservation and ended up serving the needs of the entire north central Idaho region. This web site talks about the museum located at the convent. There is nothing

available on the site itself other than information about what the collections hold. Besides the artifacts held by the museum there is a research library with some manuscript collection relating to this area of Idaho. The collection represents all residents of the area, the Native Americans, the Europeans and Asians who settled there in the late 19th century.

The [Curry Historical Society](#) is located in Curry County Oregon and the Southern Oregon Coast. The society's web site violates just about every rule of design we've discussed in class. The pages have a background photo that makes the text difficult to read. The tables all have borders. There is uncontrolled use of color in highlighting. No two pages really look alike. All this aside this is a delightful site. Like the Brainerd, KS site it sets out to capture to local color. There is a page about local residents over the past century who have gained

notoriety of one sort or another. A second page talks about the origin of local place names. The third main page talks about local legends. It's local history done by the residents for the residents.

The [Columbia River Historical Center](#) is a joint venture sponsored by the WSHS, Washington State University Vancouver, and Portland State University. It is an effort to collect the history of the Columbia River region,, which interesting enough includes the three states under consideration as well. It appears to be a work in progress building sections on various communities along the river. Currently there are only four communities listed but the map provided seems to indicate more are planned. Much of what the center's work seems to be collecting oral histories. There is an extensive section of these on the site. The site also includes projects by students working at the Center as well as the professional staff. This seems to be a good place to

come for secondary resources. Which makes it the most useful of the local sites but then it is more of an academic site, which I was trying to avoid just to see what was out there. However, every local site listed on the WSHS links page was Curry County all over again. This was the only one that was different and so I chose it.

