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The future of Sublimity's history is here

By Clarice Keating
OF THE SENTINEL

SUBLIMITY—Tony Beitel is 100 years young and, oh boy, does he have some stories to tell.

It would be a shame if no one wrote down all those tales. Or, at least, that's the general consensus of a group of historians at St. Boniface Church here.

These dedicated volunteers have taken it upon themselves to archive and document as much family, parish and city history as they can get their hands on before photos are lost, papers decay and the people who lived it pass away.

"[Getting the information] is still like pulling teeth," said archivist Evangeline Ripp. "We still have much information we would like to gather on the families in the parish."

On Tuesday mornings, Joe Spenner often leads Beitel to the public meeting of the St. Boniface history committee, where people are welcome to stop in with details and artifacts of times past.

Gradually they're coming around.

"It's taken a long time, but they come and look in our archive museum, and say, 'I've got such and such,' and we jump on them and ask them to bring it in so we can copy it," Ripp said.

There is a lot of material. St. Boniface, built in 1889, is the second oldest original church in the archdiocese.

From 1879, when a small building on the corner of Center and Maple streets was leased for \$1 a month and dedicated to St. Boniface, to more recent happenings, like the parish's 125th anniversary in 2004, they are keeping track.

Many small parishes are archiving the histories of their churches, but the people of Sublimity have taken — everything possible goes online.

Henry Strobel, the Web guru of the bunch, took the site live in 2003. He uses a branch of his existing site, originally created using simple HTML in 1990 to advertise his own business.

Building and maintaining the sites and their sub-pages comes naturally to Strobel, who is a retired electronic



engineer.

Document collection really got rolling in 2003, in the year leading up to the 125th anniversary celebration. Then-pastor Father Patrick Donoghue enlisted the help of Ripp and Vera Boedigheimer to create a chronological history of the church. Eventually Francis Hendricks, Rita Young, Spenner, Carol Zolkoske and Don Porter volunteered to help with the project.

"Most of our older people from the area were already gone, so that made it hard," Ripp said.

They found much of the information through parish and archdiocese archives, the Salem Public Library collections and at Mount Angel Abbey.

Through this process they discovered some notable details. For instance, the first teacher and president of the United Brethren College in Sublimity was Milton Wright, father of Orville and Wilbur Wright, inventors of the first powered airplane.

That school was purchased in 1880 by Father Peter Stampfl and converted into the church, and adjacent property became the first Catholic cemetery in the area, the Cemetery of Holy Angels

Once the weekly open-door meetings started, people began bringing in curios found in attics and garages. The committee found themselves needing more space for the expanding collection. And the group was starting to get noticed.

In 2005, Strobel was appointed to the 12-member Archdiocesan Historical Commission.

According to commission secretary Brenda Howard,

the commission encourages all parishes to have a place to keep photographs, letters, official papers and artifacts. Workshops on preservation of parish documents have been recorded on DVD and sent to parishes throughout the state by the commission.

"The Archdiocese of Portland was established in 1846, 13 years prior to Oregon becoming a state," Howard said. "As Oregon celebrates its 150th year of statehood, the Catholic Church's archives are a great resource of the rich history of our church and state."

In 2005, the Web site caught the BBC's attention, which sent a television crew to interview parish members.

By 2006, the collection had outgrown its original home, so the group moved into the southwest corner of the brick convent across the street from St. Boniface, one of the oldest original church buildings in the state

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Boedigheimer died in May, and the archives were dedicated to her.

With the museum, so too grew the Web site.

"It's the most efficient way to do it," Strobel said of the online documentation. "It also has the farthest reach."

At first, information posted was mainly St. Boniface history. Soon the historians began compiling interesting tidbits from families throughout the area, and adding it to the museum, and then the Web site.

Strobel fields inquires from all over, New Zealand, Holland and Canada to name some of the more far-flung locales, all people who have roots in Sublimity.

Historians Charlene Pietrok Pierce and Zolkoske alternate taking notes during the Tuesday morning meetings, when local folks come in regularly to share memories or trinkets they uncover.

Despite their interest in history, the committee is looking to the future, hoping a new generation will take interest in carrying on the project.

"These things have a way of growing," Strobel said. "You find that people start relying and expecting you to be there."

Currently the Web site, www.saintboniface.net, contains more than 500 photos and 165 scanned Documents. (*Editor: By 2013 this had increased to 800Mb total or 3,000 individual items.*)