

Southern Oregon Historical Society

By Amy Drake

The Southern Oregon Historical Society (SOHS) collects, preserves, and shares the historical documents and artifacts of Southern Oregon. For much of its existence, SOHS was among the best-funded and important local historical societies in Oregon, amassing a large collection of artifacts, documents, photographs, and objects that drew visitors to the museum and researchers to its collections. In 2017, due to budget cutbacks beginning in the 1990s, SOHS is run primarily through volunteer contributions.

Among the many one-of-a-kind records SOHS maintains are collections on Native American peoples, including the Klamath, Modoc, and Takelma; pioneer records and artifacts from the Applegate family, the Beekmans, and many others; hundreds of items connected to regional Chinese and Japanese communities; architectural drawings by Robert Keeney and Frank Clark; and a large collection of glass-plate negatives and prints by Peter Britt. SOHS has been active in placing many of the historical markers in Jackson County, and also has produced books, pamphlets, and newsletters on southern Oregon history, most of which include photographs from its archives.

SOHS was founded in 1946 with the goal of saving the 1875 Jacksonville Courthouse from demolition. Two years later, Jackson County voters passed a permanent tax levy of 25 cents per \$1,000 to support historic preservation. With this funding source, SOHS was able to save the courthouse and to grow, officially opening to the public in 1950 and gradually hiring a professional staff. The Society acquired or managed over twelve properties in Jackson County, including the Beekman Bank, the Beekman House, the Catholic Rectory, and the U.S. Hotel. In 1966, SOHS staff helped establish Jacksonville as one of America's first officially designated National Historic Landmarks. In 1986, SOHS acquired Hanley Farm, an Oregon Century Farm and an Oregon Heritage Women's History Project Significant Site.

Jackson County Commissioners cut SOHS's permanent tax levy funding in the 1990s and 2000s. The passage of Measure 5 in 1990, along with a decline in the timber industry, significantly reduced local revenue options, and Measures 47 (1996) and 50 (1997) allowed for the consolidation of special levies into a single county tax base. In 1997, the commissioners cut SOHS's funding and redirected all proceeds from the levy to the county's general fund. In response, SOHS sued and received some county funding through the early 2000s; the last of the tax levy was absorbed into the county general fund in 2007.

The Southern Oregon Historical Society underwent a steady decline during the early 2000s, including staff layoffs and the elimination of programs. The Jacksonville Museum was closed in 2010. The Society negotiated with the county to transfer management of several historic properties to the City of Jacksonville, including the Jacksonville Courthouse, Beekman House, Beekman Bank, Catholic Rectory, and the U.S. Hotel. The Society made three attempts to gain voter support for a special levy and historic district. In 2008 and 2014, organizers failed to get the necessary petition signatures to place a measure on the ballot. In 2016, the county commissioners put the measure before voters without requiring a petition, but the measure failed.

As of 2017, most of the staff has been laid off, and the organization is run primarily with volunteers. The artifact and archival collections are overseen by trained professionals who volunteer their time. With an estimated one million objects and archival records, SOHS operates the Research Library in Medford, the Hanley Farm in Central Point, and an off-site collections storage facility. A small endowment helps support the organization.

Sources

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