

# SOUTHERN OREGON HERITAGE *Today*



A BRIDGE TO THE PAST AND TO THE FUTURE

**Wimer Covered Bridge**

FROM THE COLLECTIONS

**Mary Hanley's Square Piano**

PORTRAIT OF A NATIVE SON

**Eugene Bennett**

DECEMBER 1999

Vol. 1, No. 12





# The Gold Diggers' Guild

by Molly Walker Kerr

Jacksonville residents know Christmas season has arrived when they hear laughter inside the old Catholic Rectory. They realize the Gold Diggers' Guild, an auxiliary of the Southern Oregon Historical Society, is at it again; that soon the clapboard cottage, vacant all year, will be transformed into Victorian splendor—just in time for Jacksonville's annual Christmas celebration and home tour.

The 1867 rectory, furnished in period pieces, is fun to lavish in Christmas finery. Once the decorations arrive down the narrow attic stairs, the magic begins as wreaths appear in windows, brown paper packages with red bows crowd beneath an old-fashioned Christmas tree, and a teddy bear peeks up through the branches. Outside, the town's Christmas garlands decorate the rectory porch. When all is ready, Guild members in nineteenth century costumes guide visitors through the cozy rooms.

The small building, originally used as a one-room schoolhouse for Catholic boys, later became the rectory for the Catholic Church. In 1875, Father Francis



*Guild members have plenty to do during the Christmas season to decorate the old Catholic Rectory in Jacksonville with holiday trimmings.*

X. Blanchet acquired it on a sheriff's deed. An addition was built in 1891. Then, in 1908, when St. Joseph's Catholic Church became a mission of Medford, the rectory became a private residence. Later, it sat vacant for some time and was almost demolished in 1967. But a determined group led by Robertson Collins came to its rescue, and it became the property of Jackson County, to be maintained by the Society.

That same year—a year before she helped found the Gold Diggers' Guild—Ruth Preston was hired to plan a full renovation of the rectory. "We had to sweep out bees, spiders, and other garden critters before we could begin," she recalls.

The rectory gardens also are a Guild project. The Gold Diggers contribute substantial funds for their upkeep.

Who are these Gold Diggers who work so hard raising money? They are a fun-loving group of dedicated women who happen to revere history and its preservation. The Guild began in April of 1977, when Gertrude Drew, Gladys Fortmiller, Helene Salade-Ogle, and Ruth

Preston gathered around Pat Alley's table at the Plymale Cottage in Jacksonville to discuss a supportive guild. They contacted other history buffs—Amy Barnum, Justine Emmens, Carol White, Betty Root, Attorney Bob Hefferman, and Society Director Bill Burke—for a meeting to solidify their idea. After choosing the name "Gold Diggers' Guild," referring to Jacksonville's gold rush days, they began planning a vintage fashion show to raise money.



*A Christmas tree loaded with traditional ornaments and a holiday bow on the window lend a festive spirit.*

And raise money they did! For twenty-two years the Guild's elegant teas, parties, and fashion shows have helped support Society projects: the Hanley, Beekman, Britt, and Armstrong houses; the U.S. Hotel; the hands-on Children's Museum; and of course, the Catholic Rectory and its gardens.

Guild members are troopers. They bind themselves in corsets, roll their hair for a period look, swish in Victorian skirts, peer through hat veils, teeter in high-button shoes — whatever the event or exhibit demands. Obviously, they love what they do — and it's all in the name of history. 🐾

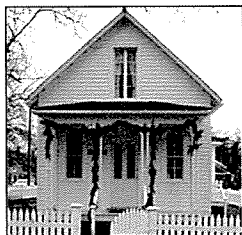
*Molly Walker Kerr, a member of the Gold Diggers' Guild, is a free-lance writer living in Medford.*



*The simple white clapboard rectory, built in 1867, comes to life with holiday garlands of evergreen boughs hung by the Gold Diggers. At right, more greenery enlivens an antique piano displayed inside.*

PHOTOS BY DANA HEDRICK-EARP

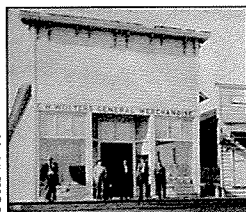
# SOUTHERN OREGON HERITAGE *Today*



Our Own Voices:  
Gold Diggers' Guild



From the Collections  
Mary Hanley's Square Piano



The Pioneers:  
The Wolters Family

## SOUTHERN OREGON HERITAGE TODAY

### Editorial Guidelines

Feature articles average 3,000 to 4,000 (pre-edited) words. Other materials range from 500 to 1,000 words.

Electronic submissions are accepted on 3-1/4-inch disks and should be accompanied by a hard-copy printout. Cite all sources and construct endnotes and cutlines using the *Chicago Manual of Style*. The author is responsible for verification of cited facts. A selection of professional, unscreened photographs and/or line art should accompany submission—black-and-white or color. The Southern Oregon Historical Society reserves the right to use Society images in place of submitted material. All material should be labeled with author's name, mailing address, and telephone number. Manuscripts will be returned if accompanied by a self-addressed envelope stamped with sufficient postage. Authors should provide a brief autobiographical note at the end of manuscripts.

The Southern Oregon Historical Society secures rights to full and final editing of all manuscripts, layout design, and one-time North American serial rights. Authors will be notified of acceptance of manuscripts within ninety days of receiving materials. In most cases, payment is upon publication. *Southern Oregon Heritage Today* takes great care with all submitted material, but is not responsible for damage or loss. Only photocopies of irreplaceable original historical documents should be submitted. Facts, views, and opinions expressed in signed submissions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints or opinions of *Southern Oregon Heritage Today* or the Southern Oregon Historical Society.

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## ON THE COVER

Rogue Valley native Eugene Bennett sharpened his artist's eye in Chicago, New York, and abroad, then brought his perspective home, reflected here in this oil painting of his Jacksonville studio in snow.

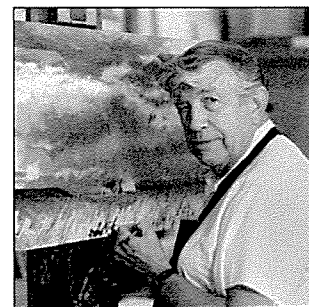
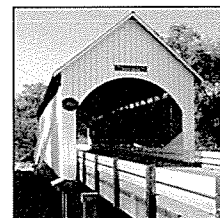


PHOTO BY TOM KERR, 1990.

Feature: Eugene Bennett



Sunday Driving:  
Wimer's Bridge

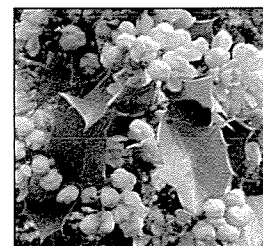


PHOTO BY DONN L. TODT

Rooted in History:  
Oregon Grape



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

THE STUDIO: FIRST SNOW, 1982, OIL ON CANVAS.

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SOUTHERN  
OREGON  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY



# Wimer Covered Bridge

## A BRIDGE TO THE PAST AND TO THE FUTURE

by Patricia Parish Kuhn

*The gracefully arched portal invites visitors to cross the Wimer covered bridge, first built in 1892.*

Many of Oregon's covered bridges have either succumbed to floods or fire. In 1933, Oregon had more than 309; now, fewer than sixty remain, including Wimer's.

As Southern Oregon continues to grow and develop, concern about the preservation of its history grows too. After all, one of the region's great charms is the often unexpected discovery of the remnants of another century that have survived in the nooks and crannies of the Rogue Valley. Wimer has preserved one of these links to the past in its bridge.

Designed primarily to protect a bridge's wooden structure from the damaging effects of weather and to extend the bridge's useful life, covered bridges have also served other purposes, providing shelter for rained-out picnickers and shade for weary travelers. It was reported that one covered bridge even accommodated a hanging.<sup>1</sup>

Today, covered bridges provide a focal point in our rural landscapes, and the focal point of Wimer continues to be the covered bridge. The community's annual Fourth of July celebration bursts forth with a homespun parade, fiddlers, a beer garden and a barbecue, all within a firecracker's throw of the pride of Wimer.

To see the bridge, take the Rogue River exit off Interstate 5, proceed through the center of town, take a left and follow the road sign pointing to East Evans Creek and Wimer. The drive is abundant with rural scenes: horses and livestock in the fields, weathered barns, and other evidence of the Evans Creek Valley's rich agricultural heritage.

Almost eight miles out of Rogue River, a sign points to the right, saying Covered Bridge Road. On ahead, cross the one-lane bridge, park the car, walk down into the little square of park and take a look at the Wimer Family Totem. Carved by local residents, the cedar totem honors the beaver, coyote, turtle, bear, elk, owl, and eagle, but most of all it honors the community spirit of Wimer.

Rather than returning the way you came, if the weather and roads are good, continue on to the right "over the top," drop into Sams Valley via Ramsey Canyon and return via Table Rock Road, refreshed. ■

*Patricia Parish Kuhn is a Medford free-lance writer.*

### ENDNOTES:

1. *Medford Mail Tribune*, 9 November 1975.

**C**overed bridges gone the way of covered wagons? Not all of them. In the rural community of Wimer, in northern Jackson County, a remaining link to the pioneer past and the center of this growing town is Wimer's covered bridge. Most of the history of the area resides in or around this white clapboard structure.

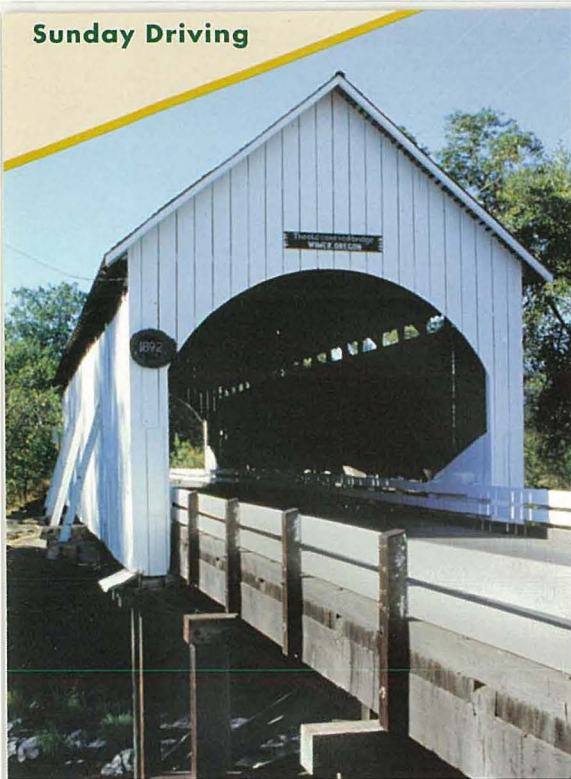
Just off Interstate 5 and eight miles north of the town of Rogue River, Wimer is celebrated for its historic landmark, the covered bridge across Evans Creek built in 1892 by J.W. Osbourne. According to newspaper accounts, the bridge was rebuilt in 1927 by the Hartmans of Jacksonville, condemned for vehicular traffic in 1961 and rebuilt again in 1962. The bridge spans eighty-five feet.



PHOTOS BY DANA HERBICK-EARP

*Above, the bridge's roof keeps the weather off the wooden trusses and beams, extending the life of the structure.*

*At left, the Wimer covered bridge's reflection in the waters of placid Evans Creek evokes an image of the region's less-hurried rural past.*





# Mary Hanley's Square Piano

by Jessica James

**"E**very American family with pretensions to culture, an interest in music, and enough money to buy one was determined to have a piano in the parlor," wrote historian Hellen Rice Hollis.<sup>1</sup>

To many nineteenth century Americans, the instrument was considered a "universal symbol of middle class refinement,"<sup>2</sup> and the Hanley family of Jacksonville was no exception. In the corner of the east parlor in the Hanley house sits a large, square, rosewood piano.

Pianos haven't always been upright or harp-shaped. In the mid-1800s, square pianos were all the rage. The Hanley piano displays the label of W.P. Emerson, a Boston piano maker whose name was associated with success and quality. Emerson began making inexpensive pianos in 1849, but he, along with other piano manufacturers, sought to improve the instrument. Expert piano maker C.C. Briggs, hired by Emerson in 1854, improved the Emerson piano greatly with his mechanical expertise.

About 1880, square pianos fell out of favor in America, and their manufacture ceased.<sup>3</sup>

This piano was given to Mary Harris Love Hanley when she was a girl in the 1870s.<sup>4</sup> A hymnal from the Hanley collections, *Songs for the Sanctuary*, published in 1874, is inscribed inside the front cover, "M.H. Love." Hand-written

*Notes scribbled in Mary Hanley's hymnal offer brief glimpses of long-ago family life.*



PHOTOS BY MAGGIE JAMES

*Mary Hanley's rosewood piano has sat in this parlor for more than a century; all that is missing is the sound of the music and the ticking of the metronome.*

notes such as, "Sung Monday May 17, 1880. one week from to day we pack," and "Alice and Mary April 29, 1880," appear in the margins throughout the worn hymnal.

Possibly the Hanleys would gather around the piano and as one played, others would sing. Maybe some of these occasions were special enough to be written down.

Mary Hanley's square piano may be seen on house tours at the Hanley Farm. Call 773-2675 for an appointment. 🏠

*Jessica James is a volunteer at Hanley Farm for the Southern Oregon Historical Society.*

#### ENDNOTES:

1. Helen Rice Hollis, *The Piano*, Hippocrene Books, New York, 1975, p. 90.
2. William Seale, *The Tasteful Interlude: American Interiors Through the Camera's Eye*, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1975, p. 38.
3. Alfred Dolge, *Pianos and Their Makers*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1970, p. 292-293.
4. A serial number found on the bottom of the piano case indicates the piano was made between 1870 and 1875.

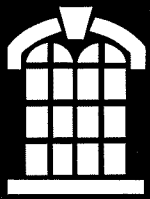
*Sung Monday May 17, 1880 -  
one week from to day we pack.*

ENCOURAGEMENTS.

97

CHRISTMAS. C. M.





# News & Notes

## of the Southern Oregon Historical Society

December 1999

### Program Schedule

#### DECEMBER CRAFT OF THE MONTH

##### Ornaments & Dreidels

Children's Museum

Families; free

Celebrate the holidays by creating an ornament or a dreidel.

#### MEET THE COLLECTOR OPEN HOUSE

Friday, December 3, free

Ashland Branch, 5:00-8:00 p.m.

As part of the Ashland Gallery Association's First Fridays program, join us for an evening with Terry Skibby, Ashland photographer.

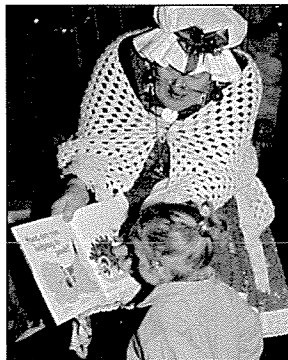
#### CONVERSATIONS WITH...

Saturday, December 4, free

Ashland Branch, 1:00 p.m.

Remember the "Dutch Gus Café?" Back in the 1940s, Norm Wyers' family built a small restaurant at the corner of the Pacific Highway and Valley View Road. Wyers graduated from

Ashland High School in 1950 and taught at the university level for twenty-three years. Share memories of Ashland in the fifties, talk of multiple generations quest for the American dream, and hear excerpts from Wyers' book, "Just Nosing Around with Gus."



#### A VISIT WITH MRS. CLAUS

Saturday & Sunday,

December 18 & 19

Children's Museum

1:00-4:00 p.m., free

#### CHILDREN'S MUSEUM HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES

Families, free

1:00-4:00 p.m.

Papermaking, Saturday, December 4

Card Stenciling, Saturday, December 11

Printing Press Cards, Saturday, December 18

#### VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS AT THE BEEKMAN HOUSE

December 4, 5, 11, 12, 18, & 19

Beekman House, Jacksonville

1:00-4:00 p.m., free

Cookies fresh from the woodstove; tree adorned with Victorian ornaments; dining room set for a grand feast. Come explore a traditional Beekman family Christmas.

#### GINGERBREAD HOUSES WORKSHOP

Wednesday, December 8

Children's Museum

Ages 3-6, 3:30-4:30 p.m.

\$3.00 members/\$4.00 non-members

Come create a traditional holiday craft that you can eat when you're finished. During this workshop we'll be using frosting and candy to decorate tasty gingerbread houses. Call 773-6536 to preregister by Wednesday, December 1.

#### GOUGE EYE, LEMITI AND NOTI: THE COLORFUL STORIES BEHIND OREGON PLACE NAMES

Wednesday, December 8, free

Ashland Branch, 7:30 p.m.

What's in a name—and Oregon place names? These are questions explored in the current exhibit, *Public Places & Private Lives*. Stories about place name origins often reveal the human values and prejudices of both indigenous people and the settlers. Tom Nash, professor of language and literature at Southern Oregon University, combines history with folklore, linguistics, and an occasional song, to talk about Oregon landmarks such as Sweet Home, Burnt Ranch, the Three Sisters, and others. Call 773-6536 to preregister by Dec. 6.



Clockwise from back left, Ed Jorgenson, Alice Mullaly, Ilma McKern, Ryan Primm, and Hali Fyre.

#### VOLUNTEER AWARDS

Volunteer of the Year: Alice Mullaly; Outstanding Youth Volunteer of the Year: Stuart & Allegra Fety, tied; Youth Rookie Volunteer of the Year: Hali Fyre & Ryan Primm, tied; Rookie Volunteer of the Year: Ed Jorgenson; Extended Service Award, Ilma McKern.

Celebrate the Season and Save

Member Appreciation Day

December 5

10%\* off your purchase

(in addition to your membership level discount)

at the History Store at the Rogue Valley Mall

\*Valid December 5, 1999, Rogue Valley Mall location only. Members must present their Member Card and this coupon. May not be used toward purchase of consignment items.

COUPON

For more information about the Southern Oregon Historical Society, contact us at:

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## Exhibition Schedule

### HISTORY CENTER:

December is the last month to view the *Going Places* exhibit at the History Center as dismantling begins January 3.

#### ALL Society sites

will be closed the first two weeks of January to assist with the dismantling and to allow work on other necessary projects.

The History Center will reopen January 18; Ashland branch and Jacksonville museums reopen January 19.

### THE CHRISTMAS DREAM

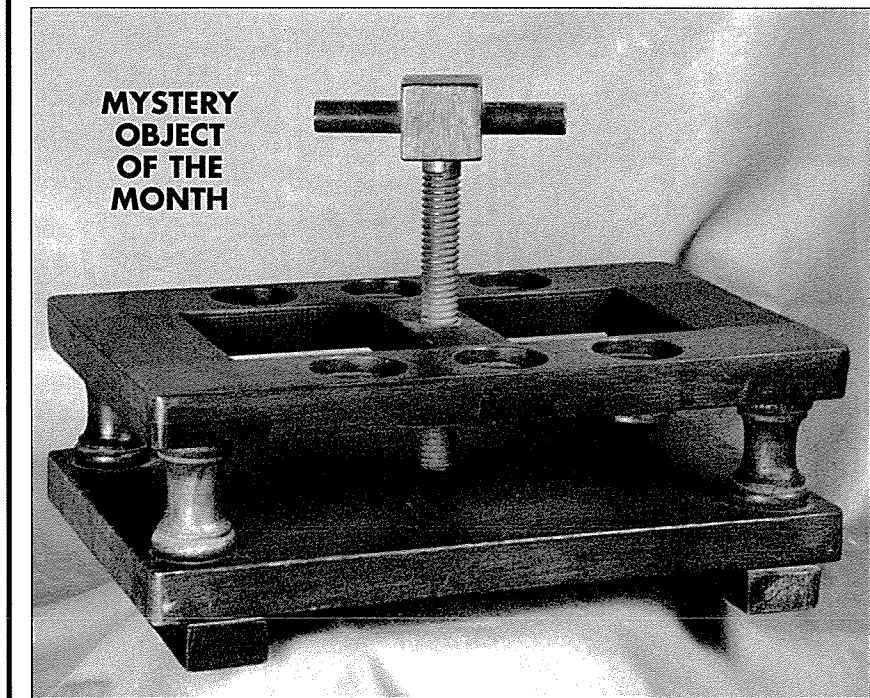
Located in the window to the left of the History Center front doors, this exhibit represents a toy store window display as might have been seen in the 1930s-40s. It depicts a boy's Christmas Eve dream of all the toys he hopes to find under the tree in the morning. The marvelous toys float tantalizingly about as he imagines the many hours of fun awaiting him (assuming, of course, that he made Santa's GOOD list). The toys are artifacts from the Society collection.



### THE PRIVATE LIFE OF A NON-PUBLIC PLACE

December 1, 1999 to June 17, 2000  
Ashland Branch

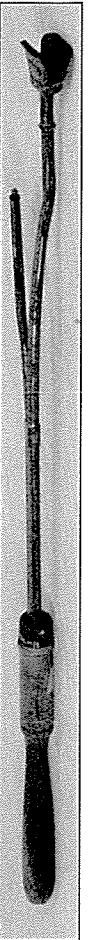
Since 1974, Dunn House has provided a safe haven to abused women and children in Jackson County. Rooted in an educational institution and the feminist movement, Dunn House is now part of the multi-faceted Community Works organization. In conjunction with the *Public Places & Private Lives* exhibit, we celebrate the history of Dunn House.



Help us solve a real mystery! This object is wood and stamped "Japan" on the bottom. There are six circles indented in the top. The turn screw has not left a mark on the lower platform. It measures 12" long x 7-1/2" wide. What was this item used for? We'll print the best guess in the New Year. Send your answer on a 3-1/2 x 5 card with your name, address and phone number to: News & Notes Mystery Object, SOHS, 106 N. Central Ave., Medford, OR 97501.

November's mystery object was a torch and key lighter used to operate gas lit chandeliers and street lamps. The metal flange grasped a gas light key to turn the gas on or off. The torch is a wax taper that slid up and down within a metal tube to light the gas. Congratulations to September's Mystery Object Winner, Sally Harkness of Medford, who identified the soap saver.

November's Mystery Object:  
Torch and key lighter



### STREETSCAPES AND CITY VIEWS

December 1, 1999 to June 2000  
Ashland Branch

Explore the visual history of Ashland through the eyes of yesterday's photographers with images from Terry Skibby's collection. Skibby is known for his lifelong commitment to preserving Ashland's photographic and architectural history.

### THIRD STREET ARTISAN STUDIO:

Weavers and potters will be demonstrating from 11:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. the first three weekends: December 4-5, 11-12, and 18-19. Although the Studio will be closed during January and February, watch for weaving workshops during that time. The Studio will reopen March 1. For more information, call the Society at 773-6536.

## Southern Oregon Historical Society sites

Phone: (541) 773-6536 unless listed otherwise

#### HISTORY CENTER

106 N. Central, Medford  
Mon - Fri, 9:00am to 5:00pm  
Sat, 1:00 to 5:00pm

#### RESEARCH LIBRARY

106 N. Central, Medford  
Tues - Sat, 1:00 to 5:00pm

#### JACKSONVILLE MUSEUM & CHILDREN'S MUSEUM

5th and C, Jacksonville  
Wed - Sat, 10:00am to 5:00pm  
Sunday, noon to 5:00pm

#### THIRD STREET ARTISAN STUDIO

3rd and California, Jacksonville  
Sat. & Sun., 11:00am to 4:00pm

#### U.S. HOTEL

3rd and California, Jacksonville  
Upstairs room available for rent.

#### HANLEY FARM

1053 Hanley Road (between Central Point & Jacksonville) Open by appointment.  
(541) 773-2675.

#### HISTORY STORE

Rogue Valley Mall, Medford  
Daily, Mall hours  
(541) 774-9129

#### ASHLAND BRANCH

208 Oak, Ashland  
Wed - Sat, 12:00 to 4:00pm  
(541) 488-4938



# Eugene Bennett

## Artist brings color and light to the Rogue Valley

by Nancy Bringhurst

Say “artist” and the word might evoke an image of Picasso – eccentric, depressed, and full of anguish. Or perhaps a sardonic Cezanne, uncouth in appearance and difficult to know or like; an alcoholic Pollock, a mad Van Gogh or a turbulent, aloof Delacroix. Well, don’t try to dress Jacksonville’s Eugene Bennett in any of those wrappings. They won’t fit.

Visit his home, gallery and atelier housed in the renovated 1856 Eagle Brewery Saloon, and you’ll appreciate Bennett’s sensitivity and perceive his delight in nature’s artistry even before meeting the man. The grace and harmony of the gardens, with the surrounding paths and sheltering trees, are reflections of the charm and beneficence of the man himself. Stepping inside, you’ll be warmly met by a neatly dressed, rather shy, gentle, humble and very accessible artist with a delicious wit and sense of humor.

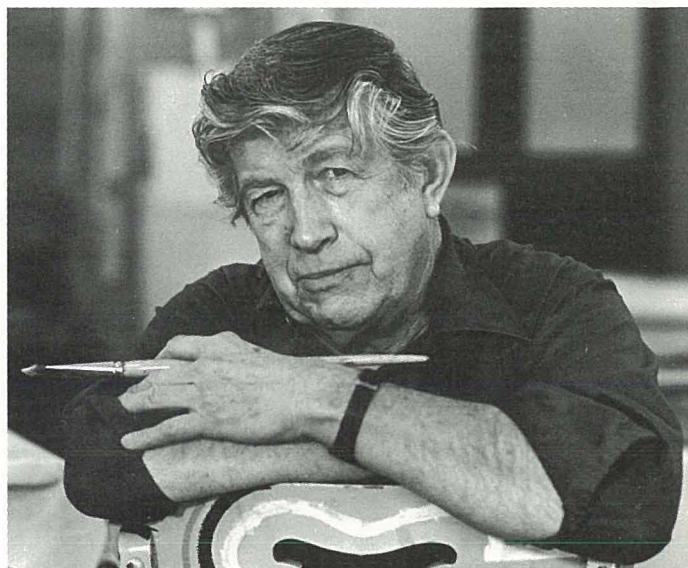
Stroll with Bennett through the streets of Jacksonville to the post office and see how many times you are stopped to chat

with his friends and fans. As Sue Cooley, friend, artist and Bennett patron says, “People like Eugene because he genuinely likes them.”

You will find Bennett’s gallery brimming with an astonishing range of texture, tone, and theme, representing almost sixty years of creative exploring and expression—quite an accomplishment for someone who set out to be a musician.

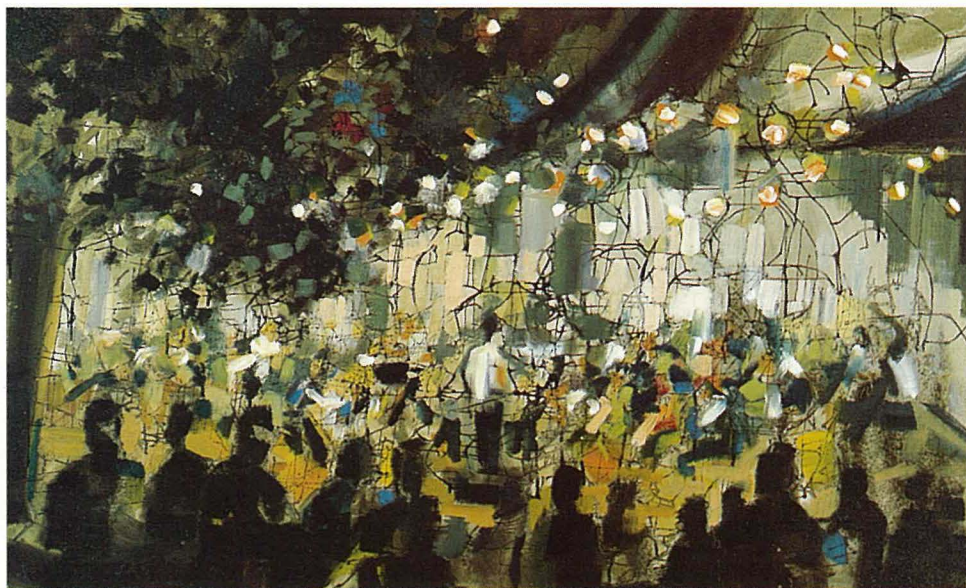
Bennett, the youngest of four children, was born in Central Point on December 20, 1921, into a music-loving family. “We all played instruments and sang together,” says Bennett. “I played the piano and the pump organ by ear, and took violin lessons for a while.”

Throughout grade school, Bennett expressed his penchant for art in various ways. He created marionettes, painted posters, made set designs, and even constructed a puppet theater, complete with footlights. It was a set of pastels given to him by Alice Cromar, Bennett’s



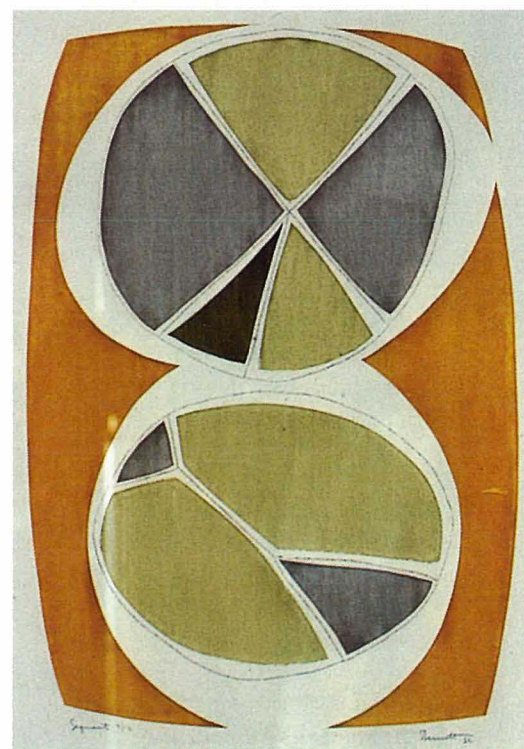
Eugene Bennett in April 1986

PHOTOS AND ARTWORK COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



BRITT FESTIVAL, 1963, OIL ON CANVAS.

*Painted the first year of the festival and used for the thirtieth anniversary poster in 1992.*



SEGMENTS, 1952, SERIGRAPH.

*Collection of Museum of Modern Art, New York City.*

sixth-grade teacher, that first kindled a serious interest in visual arts. But it was his Medford High School piano teacher, John Reisacher, whose influence struck a chord that would reverberate and touch a permanent note in Bennett’s life. Reisacher acquainted him with the dynamics of oil painting, but equally important: he introduced him to Cezanne.

“John gave me a book of Cezanne’s work with photographs of scenes Cezanne painted, including reproductions





NOTRE DAME, 1955, OIL ON CANVAS.

Bennett painted this, and many others, during his stay in France and Italy in 1954-1955.

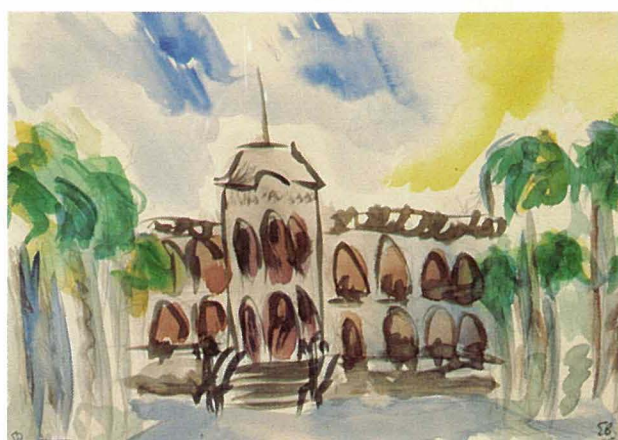


of the actual paintings," said Bennett. "There was truth in his work, so brilliantly subtle. He'd followed his inspiration freely and lyrically. Those examples somehow gave me the freedom to take liberties in my own work."

But that came later. Bennett graduated from high school in 1940. That summer, a song he wrote for a lady-in-waiting in *Much Ado About Nothing* was performed by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Bennett played Verges in that same production.

That fall, Bennett entered the University of Oregon to study music. The depth of his talent pointed to a remarkable future career. While there, he set several poems by Langston Hughes to music, and a number of his compositions were acclaimed in university productions. "I like to compose," Bennett says, "but since I mostly played by ear, I lacked the discipline to read music. I couldn't seem to translate what I heard in my head to the blank page. I still believe, though, there are things you can't say any other way except in music."

Top left, Bennett at age three. Bottom left, Bennett in 1940 Shakespeare production of "*Much Ado About Nothing*," in which he played the role of Verges.



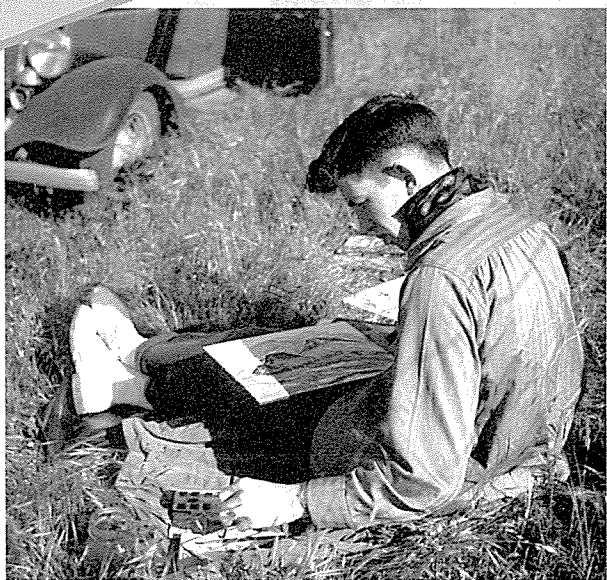
IOLANI PALACE, HONOLULU, HAWAII, 1945, WATERCOLOR.

Debussy and Ravel are like impressionistic painters, for example."

Just as music remains an integral part of Bennett's life today, art was a significant part of his university life. He frequently gathered his watercolors and brush and immersed himself in the beauty of the Willamette Valley countryside or the hills of Ashland.

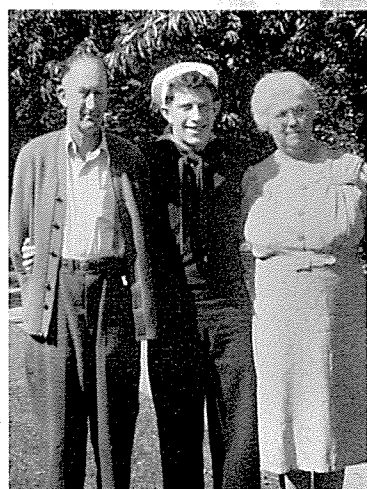
In 1942, Bennett enlisted in the Navy, but it was not until June 1943 that he was called to active duty. He entered Officer Training School at Park College in Parkville, Missouri. As his elective, he





chose an art class taught by John Tatschl. Tatschl was an important and timely beacon who instilled in Bennett the conviction that the love of art was not something separate, but an inherent part of life. It was also under Tatschl's influence that Bennett learned to recreate nature, not by direct imitation, but by stressing the unifying effects of pattern and color.

Bennett was sent to Officer Candidate School at Columbia University in New York City, where he found a host of unexpected benefits in the Navy. Here were The Cloisters, the Metropolitan Opera, and Carnegie Hall, all to enjoy in his free time. It was a cornucopia of advantages for a young musician from the Wild West. Unfortunately for Bennett, his talents did not include math and physics, or an interest in ballistics. After several months he washed out. "It was very hard to take," Bennett remembers grimly, and no wonder: it meant starting over in boot camp in Sampson, New York, as an apprentice seaman, followed by Yeoman School in Providence, Rhode Island. From there, Bennett was stationed in Newport, Rhode Island, where, with so much to inspire him, he began the habit of carrying watercolors wherever and whenever he could.



The summer of 1945, Bennett was transferred to the Naval Air Station at John Rogers Field adjacent to Hickam Field in Hawaii. He became a yeoman first class in record time, and spent his working hours as a legal secretary. He spent his liberties either in the Honolulu Museum, where he was first introduced to the work of Raoul Dufy, or sketching Navy life on the island. He still remembers the freshness and freedom he first saw in Dufy's work. After all, the art world was still immersed in the accepted theory "stay within the lines," and here was Dufy with washes of color and the audacity to draw over them.

Somehow, those years being shuffled around by the Navy shifted Bennett's direction from music to an art career. After being discharged in May 1946, he decided that an art school in a large city would offer the exposure and challenge he needed to test his choice. The Art Institute of Chicago accepted him for the fall of 1947.

He had made the right choice. Bennett inhaled the rich offerings of the concerts, galleries, museums, and the melange of colors and configurations of the cityscape; he breathed them into his work.

Each summer, from 1948 on, Bennett returned to Medford. His father sold him a lot adjacent to their family home on Grape Street, including a small building that he converted into a dwelling. During summer breaks, Bennett designed and built three more small houses on the property. This group of homes, artistically built and placed within a lovely courtyard, can be appreciated today on South Grape Street.

Bennett taught landscape and still life painting to children and adults each summer. He remembers fondly that ten-year-old Peter Cotton was his very first student, and Emily Carpenter Mostue was his youngest.

"I don't remember any particulars, but I know I enjoyed taking those classes with Gene," recalls Mostue. "I still remember the wonderful space we painted in, and he always had music playing. I know, without a doubt, Gene's classes helped to develop my appreciation of art and music."

Bennett especially liked teaching young children. "There's a carefreeness that's gone in older children," he says. "Until I built the first house, I held classes outside; the children used poster paint and water colors. My goal was to help them to see things in a different way than they'd always known."

In 1972, Judy Howard (owner of Hanson-Howard Gallery in Ashland) was art curriculum specialist for the Medford school district. She saw Bennett's teaching skills make a difference in many young lives. "I was seeking local artists for our 'Artists in Education' program," she said. "But I didn't ask Gene because he was such a famous artist and so dignified. When I heard rumors that he would like to have been invited I was elated, and we were all excited when he came. Through him the children learned to see things from their own unique and fresh perspective rather than copy and imitate. He encouraged them to be original. We all loved him and his sense of humor. It was a wonderful experience."

Meanwhile, Bennett's work was receiving accolades in Chicago. A serigraph entitled *Segments* was bought by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and was included in an exhibition of "Young American Printmakers" shown throughout the United States and Europe. In 1950, the Portland Art Museum celebrated his accomplishments with a solo show.

Bennett graduated from the Art Institute in 1951 and went on to receive his master's degree



*Top, during high school, Bennett paints while listening to a Sunday symphony concert on the car radio.*

*Middle, Yeoman First Class Bennett pays a visit home to see his parents, Carl and Mable (Peart) Bennett.*

*Bottom, Bennett, standing left, teaches an art class for Abbott Laboratories employees while an instructor at the Art Institute of Chicago, 1952.*





*Jacksonville's circa-1856 Eagle Brewery and Saloon as it appeared in the nineteenth century. The renovated brewery is now Bennett's home and studio.*

there in 1954. During that time, he taught at the Art Institute and at New Trier Township High School in Winnetka, Illinois, a school famous for progressive education. In the fall of 1954, he took a leave of absence from New Trier. He took himself to Italy, moved into a four-story walkup on the banks of the Arno River in Florence, and embraced the ancient city and all its grandeur. The art and architecture and milieu of Florence, as well as Paris, southern France, Rome, Venice and Sicily—places he zealously explored—were electrifying inspiration and grist for experimentation. "It was a very productive time," Bennett recalls. "When it was time to leave, I shipped a trunk filled with photographs, drawings and watercolors, and carried my luggage and a huge roll of canvases."

On his return in 1955, Chicago applauded his growth and honored him with many exhibitions. His painting of Notre Dame won the prestigious Pauline Palmer award in the Art Institute's "Chicago and Vicinity" show.

Three years later, Bennett surprised everyone by leaving Chicago and returning to the Rogue Valley. As Edith Weigle, a Chicago *Tribune* art critic wrote, "It is a loss to Chicago's art world to have Mr. Bennett leave, for he is one of our outstanding young modernists." She praised his recent one-man show as proof that Bennett was a "truly brilliant, original and creative artist."

So why did he leave a city that virtually assured him of success? As Nancy Jo Mullen, former director of the Rogue Gallery, said, "He was returning to a cultural wasteland. He was committing himself to a purpose instead of living a cushy life with an even wider appreciation."

If it's true that an artist paints to give freedom to his own visions and emotions, Bennett needed the landscape as a

conveyance. Moreover, he wanted to give to the valley he loved. "I knew the place; I grew up here. Nowhere is it more beautiful than the drive to Crater Lake, the Applegate, or the hills around Ashland. Above all, I knew there were many enthusiastic and talented artists in the Rogue Valley with so few possibilities to study or show their work. I wanted to help provide that opportunity for them."

And that's just what he did. He returned to Grape Street, resumed teaching, and quietly worked to organize the Rogue Valley Art Association, established in 1959. Bennett insists, "It would never have flown had not so many others pulled together to make it happen."

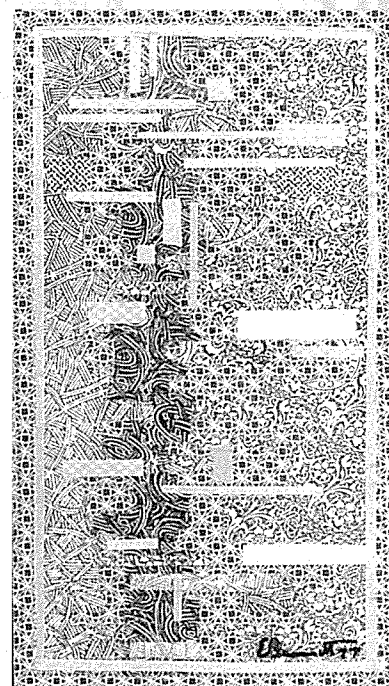
According to Robertson Collins, friend and former vice chairman of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Gene mobilized us. He has the ability to catch others up in his enthusiasm for art, whether it's for fun, a hobby, or a serious interest. That was a key to his classes as well."

The opening of the Rogue Gallery meant that local and regional artists now had a space in which to exhibit their work. It meant, too, that those who would never be exposed to work by artists outside the area could now see exhibitions by artists like Picasso. The gallery also provides a variety of art classes for children and adults. As much as anything, Bennett's dream was to stimulate a more spirited enthusiasm for visual arts in the valley. Though he continued to exhibit in Chicago, New York and San Francisco, he was pleased to have a place to exhibit locally.

Not long after his return to Medford, Bennett bought and renovated a house next to his Grape Street property. In 1962, he bought and took on an even larger renovation—the condemned Eagle Brewery Saloon in Jacksonville. Before moving, Bennett had some housecleaning to do. In his unwavering, precise and meticulous manner, he'd saved and documented the sum total of his life's work, and now he was overwhelmed by the immensity. What could he do but have a "Three Grand Days Gigantic Art Sale" at his studio?

And that is where John and Betty Gray found a bonanza of art they admired, a good friend, and an artistic arbiter for the Salishan Lodge that Gray

was building in Gleneden Beach, Oregon. They'd come to the Shakespeare Festival with a group of friends. "We were intrigued with Gene's work, having rented and bought several pieces from the Portland Art Museum," Betty says. "When we saw a poster advertising his sale, we had to go. We found so many pieces we wanted that our friends helped us transport them to Portland. We especially liked a large painting that Gene insisted needed more work before he'd part with it. When he offered to deliver it, we eagerly accepted. We'd already chosen a location for it and he was pleased with our choice."



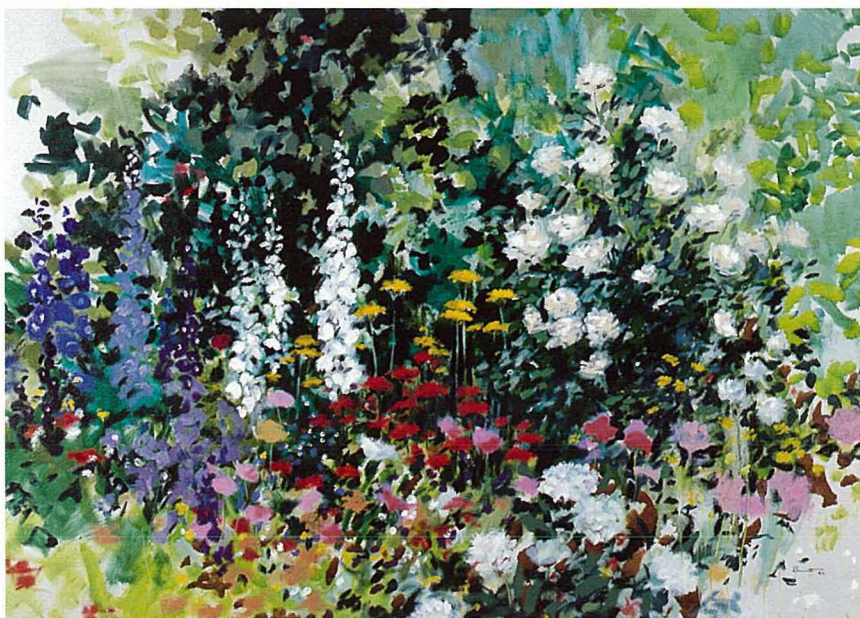
77-3, 1977, COLLAGE.



BEEKMAN HOUSE, 1946, WATERCOLOR AND FELT-POINT PEN.

*This piece is one of a series of watercolors Bennett painted of landmark buildings in Jacksonville.*





GARDEN SUITE: A GATHERING, 1982, OIL ON CANVAS.

One might think an artist would be satisfied to sell his work, never mind where it might hang. Well, not this artist. According to Bennett friend Marjorie Edens of the Southern Oregon Historical Society, “Gene analyzes everything, and his artist’s eye demands perfection in all aspects. Each part of the whole is equally important. He may be shy, but enter his artistic paradigm—look out.”

Dunbar and Jane Carpenter, friends and patrons of Bennett, would agree. “His sense of perfection is so strong; he haunts the printer until his work is reproduced to meet his standard,” Jane muses.

Bennett hovers over his work like a protective parent. He’s given birth to a beautiful creation, he’s given it the best part of himself, and now he sends it out into the world. Of course, he wants to be assured its final destination is exactly where it belongs.

The Grays also commissioned several wood sculptures, including a back bar for the lodge. “We were inspired by the fence he’d made out of mill ends on Grape Street,” Betty says.

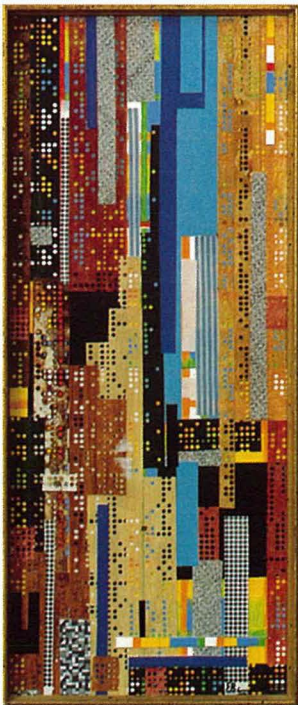
It turned out to be an architectural masterpiece. Bennett used Canadian cedar to construct the bas-relief forming the back bar. Different sizes and shapes of wood protrude at different lengths creating a perfect place for the bartender to stash bottles. “He wouldn’t do that would he?” David Pugh, friend and Portland architect, remembers Bennett asking in astonishment.

“Actually,” Bennett says, “the bottles were okay, but when he started to add

children’s stuffed animals, that was too much!”

After lightening his possessions considerably by the sale, Bennett moved to Jacksonville. His love affair with the city had begun in the 1940s when he painted a series of its landmark buildings. Ethical and aesthetic excellence in his personal life, his work and his immediate surroundings were paramount in his life, and Jacksonville was to benefit by his ideals.

According to Edens, “Gene is a born teacher and cares deeply about his community. He was an integral player in



78-1, 1978, COLLAGE.

the restoration and revitalization of Jacksonville. He knows art, history, and culture are key components of a healthy community. Gene is quick to support and praise efforts that benefit the community, but he’s also quick to express his concerns with city fathers, neighbors, or friends over any lessening of the standards that provide for that healthy community.

“One way Gene serves is by teaching art, but he contributes in many other ways. He’s designed checks, stationery, and posters; he even painted a door on



Bennett created these pole sculptures for the 1962 Seattle World’s Fair. They now grace the garden of his Jacksonville studio.

the U.S. National Bank safe as part of the restoration of the U.S. Hotel in Jacksonville. He’s also served on the Jacksonville Planning Commission. Gene has been supportive of Britt from the onset. He opened his studio for their rehearsals, and again after the concerts. He also opens his studio for tours to benefit his community. Gene is a very private man, but he’s been a catalyst to make things happen in the Rogue Valley.”

Bennett has sketched many scenes of the Britt musicians rehearsing. His 1963 painting of the Britt Festivals was reproduced as a poster to commemorate its thirtieth anniversary.

Robertson Collins would agree with Edens. “Gene has played a major community leadership role. His first interest is art, so he was ‘stepping out’ to work in the community.” Collins is adamant that, what he calls Bennett’s ensemble—the buildings, the files and records, the gallery and the studio, be retained and maintained. “It is all of a piece and it should be preserved intact, on site,” he stresses. “Gene’s successful



career was truly a boot-strap operation; a quiet achievement without flash or trendy marketing. He and his work are disciplined, cautious and exacting. Gene pursued his career alone, but he is not a loner. He refused to get an agent or join the commercial development and marketing world of art. His work is severely his; he doesn't care if we like it or not. That's his strength."

"He's been especially loyal and supportive of other artists," Nancy Jo Mullen adds. "I like to sit at his little table in the back and see what's hanging on the wall going upstairs. That's where he rotates other artists' work. It shows his connection to others."

"I keep discovering new artists," Bennett says. "It's exciting to find that one special painting that grabs you, then that one enables you to see more. It adds interest to life—like old friends, or coming back home where you have connections you didn't realize you had."

In a gallery within the original saloon space, Bennett hangs his own work on walls built from weathered barn wood. The idea originated in Chicago, where he hung his work on board fences—a perfect way to rotate his art without worrying about nail holes.

The gallery is a testament to the man's incredible range of genius. There are works in oil, watercolor, gouache, sculpture, pen and ink, collage and assemblage; some created by a systematic and methodical application of color and brush strokes; others appearing effortlessly spontaneous. Many avoid a single focus, but rather illustrate the vitality and complexity characteristic of the scene. There are totem-like wooden posts with geometrical rhythmic patterns inspired in part by large markers in the Jacksonville cemetery and the totem poles of Northwest Indians. There is humor: take a look at *Gene's Jeans*, an assemblage done in 1997, or the pair of 1950s chairs he decorated in wild and dazzling colors. Count the number of bits and pieces, like gimp tacks, glass and wood beads, sand, or mirrors, he uses in collage. Compare *Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, done in the style of a Persian miniature, with the brilliant and expressive use of color in *Garden Suite: A Gathering*, 1982.

Bennett is known for his rich surface patterns, grids and thick black lines, geometric shapes, and the intense colors that permeate his work. One

can recognize some of the same motifs in his photographs of scenes along the Medford railroad tracks, and of rock formations. "I grew up loving trains," he says, "and I'm fascinated with rocks. Basalt formations are very much like paintings. Some are as small as postage stamps. I'm sure that influenced my technique."

Photography is very important to Bennett, but his passion is being on site in the landscape with his oils—something he no longer can do, at least for the time being. Sadly, five years ago, Bennett developed benign essential blepharospasm—a disorder that creates an involuntary spasm making it increasingly difficult to keep his eyelids open. Since light intensifies the condition, Bennett is forced to work inside under an overhead light, and to wear wraparound dark glasses and a plastic visor when he goes

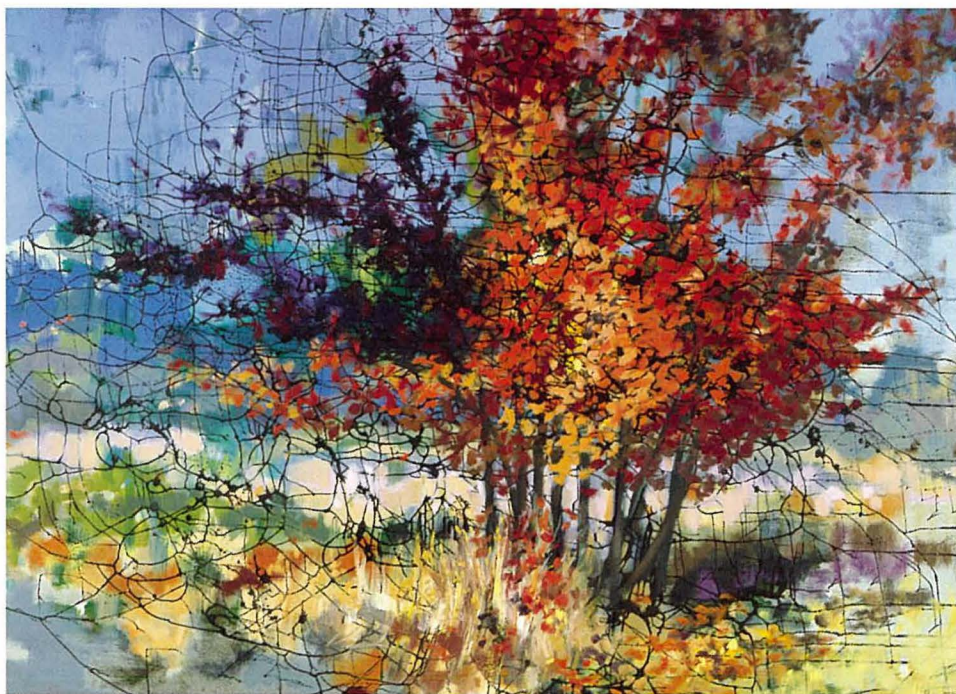
outside. Injections of Botox, administered periodically by a San Francisco neurologist, offer some relief. As yet, there is no known permanent cure, but Bennett is hopeful. "I haven't given up the idea of once again painting outdoors."

When asked what he did when faced with a dry period, Bennett replied, "Visual things usually stimulate me and get me going again, but I won't waste time. Discipline is the foremost thing. There is no compromising. I've always done whatever it took."

"I can't think of anyone else who did it his way," said Collins.

Move over, Frank Sinatra. ■

*Nancy Bringhurst writes children's books, music and articles from her Ashland mountain top.*



*FIREBRAND, 1967, OIL ON CANVAS.*



*SHAKESPEARE IN ASHLAND, 1982, BRUSH DRAWING (OIL).*

*Bennett's work has been shown, among other places, at:*

The Museum of Art, University of Oregon  
Southern Oregon Historical Society  
Schneider Museum of Art, Southern Oregon University  
Brooklyn Museum  
Museum of Modern Art, New York City  
Chicago Art Institute  
San Francisco Museum of Art  
Alba, Italy  
State Capital Museum, Seattle  
Galleria State Capital, Salem  
Expo, Seattle  
Haseltine Collection of N.W. Art, Coos Art Museum, Coos Bay  
Rogue Gallery, Medford



# Oregon Grape

## AN EMBLEMATIC EVERGREEN

by Nan Hannon and Donn L. Todt

In 1865, Ashland pioneers decked the halls with boughs of Oregon grape for their community Christmas celebration.<sup>1</sup> The shrub reminded the settlers of traditional holiday greens. Oregon grape's prickly leaves resemble those of holly, and like holly, its evergreen leaves brighten the winter months.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the designation of tall Oregon grape as Oregon's state flower. George Himes, a nineteenth century curator at the Oregon Historical Society, believed that the tough, beautiful and useful plant embodied Oregon's best virtues. He enlisted the aid of the Oregon Horticultural Society in lobbying legislatures on behalf of the shrub, and in 1899, the Legislature voted to make tall Oregon grape the state flower.<sup>2</sup> It was a good choice. Except for salal, tall Oregon grape and low Oregon grape are the most common evergreen shrubs west of the Cascades, and creeping Oregon grape grows east of the Cascades, so the plant is one that most Oregonians know well.<sup>3</sup>

brilliant Irish-American botanist Bernard McMahon, a close friend of Thomas Jefferson. Proud of their floral connection to McMahon, Oregonians liked to perpetuate the story – possibly true – that McMahon hosted the planning meetings for the Lewis and Clark expedition to Oregon at his home.

Mahonia Hall became the name of the official governor's mansion when the state of Oregon acquired the Thomas and Edna Livesly home in Salem in 1988 to serve as the residence for the state's highest official. The 1924 Tudor Revival style mansion, with its formal landscaping, ballroom and wine cellar, seemed ideal for the governor's official entertaining. Neil Goldschmidt was the first governor to live in Mahonia Hall, and today Governor John Kitzhaber and his family call it home.

Unfortunately, controversy and confusion exist over the actual botanical name for Oregon's state flower. Years prior to the naming of tall Oregon grape *Mahonia aquifolium* for McMahon, an English botanist had christened a specimen of the same shrub *Berberis aquifolium*. The International Botanical Congress, which makes the final decisions on Latin names for plants, recognized the precedence of the *Berberis* name, and also thought it wise to group all the barberry shrubs in the genus *Berberis*, and *Mahonia* no longer officially existed.

However, the name *Mahonia* has proved remarkably persistent with Western gardeners and commercial nurseries, and even in that bible of Oregon gardeners—*The Sunset Western Garden Book*. Prickly as their state flower, most Oregonians aren't about to be pushed around by the International Botanical Congress, nor change the name of their governor's residence to *Berberis* Hall.



PHOTOS BY DONN L. TODT

*Tart Oregon grape berries make a delicious jelly. Pioneers in southern Oregon also used them in pies.*

Whatever you call the genus, make a place for at least one specimen of the species in your garden, for they are truly plants for all seasons, and there is a variety for almost all Western Oregon garden situations, including sun, shade or dry soil. On all of the species, clusters of yellow flowers brighten late winter and spring days, bronzy new foliage emerges throughout spring and summer, dark blue berries crowd the stems in fall, and many varieties get a purple or bronze color to the leaves in winter. On mature tall Oregon grapes, red leaves appear throughout the year. All tolerate drought and cold. Tall Oregon grape (*Berberis aquifolium*) grows to six feet and makes a strong, crisp, evergreen foundation plant, while creeping Oregon grape (*Berberis nervosa*) becomes an attractive ground cover. You'll be proud to show off Oregon's state flower. 🍷

*Anthropologist Nan Hannon and ethnobotanist Donn Todt grow several species of Oregon grape in their Ashland garden, not only for their beauty, but because deer don't eat them.*

#### ENDNOTES

1. Ashland Tidings, 3 December 1915.
2. Portland Oregonian, 8 August 1999.
3. Rhoda Whittlesey, *Familiar Friends: Northwest Plants*, Rose Press, Portland, Oregon, 1985, p. 126.



*Yellow Oregon grape flowers bloom in late winter and spring. Oregon grape contains the alkaloid berberine, which is used pharmaceutically. Berberine also repels deer.*

At the time it became the state flower, the botanical name widely used for the genus to which the different Oregon grape species belonged was *Mahonia*. The genus was named in 1818 to honor the





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# The Wolters Family

## MERCHANT PIONEERS

by Louise Watson

**M**erchants were vital to Southern Oregon communities. Who else carried those all-important nails, flour, sugar, dry goods, dishes and other necessities?

C.W. Wolters, of Medford and Talent, was one of those merchants, according to his great-grandson, Jerry McGrew of Jacksonville. "He was strictly a businessman," said McGrew.<sup>1</sup> So were other family members. Wolters's father, John, was a baker in Jacksonville; his son, C.C. (Chester) worked in the Groceteria in Ashland; his brother, Herman, ran a meat market in Ashland.<sup>2</sup>

John Wolters and his wife, Christina, came to Southern Oregon via San



*Wolters had moved to Talent in 1901, operating a general store and adding a bank in 1910, above. The store's walls and shelves were well-stocked with general merchandise, right.*



John Wolters ran a bakery; he died there in 1894 and was buried in Jacksonville Cemetery.<sup>3</sup>

McGrew's records show that C.W. Wolters became a foreman on Gang No. 49 on the Oregon & California Railroad in 1884. By the time he had married Amanda Ollie Alford in 1886, he was a businessman in Medford, selling groceries, cigars, and dishes. McGrew believes the store was in the Hamlin Building, on Main Street, opposite what is now the U.S. Bank.

By 1901, Wolters and his family had moved to Talent, where he opened a general store on I Street. By 1910, he'd added a bank vault to the store and opened the State Bank of Talent. Flames destroyed the wooden store on Jan. 31, 1911, along

*When fire destroyed his first Talent store, Wolters rebuilt, raising this more substantial structure in 1911.*

with most of downtown Talent.<sup>6</sup>

Later that year, Wolters rebuilt his store and bank on the corner of Wagner and I streets, this time using concrete block. He didn't run it for long, however, as he died May 25, 1912. His son, Chester, ran the store for a while after that, McGrew said. The bank portion became a part of Valley Lockers, later razed to make way for a remodeled Rick's Market in Talent.<sup>7</sup>

Merchant to merchant, the Wolters family served Southern Oregon quietly but well. ■

*Louise Watson is a Medford free-lance writer.*

### ENDNOTES

1. Interview with author, 20 August, 1999.
2. Ibid.
3. McGrew interview; abstract, *Ashland Tidings*, Vol. 23, p. 23, 1912; abstract, *The Medford Mail*, Vol. 1, p. 77.
4. John Wolters lineage chart, property of Jerry McGrew.
5. *The Medford Mail*, Vol. 1, p. 77.
6. Carol Malcolm, *Early Businesses and Industries of Talent*, (Talent Historical Society, 1975) p. 5.
7. Malcolm, p. 6.

*That's C.W. Wolters, at right in the doorway, with his daughter Cora in front of his grocery in the Hamlin Building on Main Street in Medford in 1893.*

Francisco and Crescent City, California, in 1861. McGrew believes C.W.'s birth on February 1, 1861, occurred as the ship bearing his parents arrived in Crescent City harbor.<sup>3</sup> The family already included Herman H. (Ham), born in 1856; John, born in 1853; and Sophia, born in 1860.<sup>4</sup> When the family moved to Jacksonville,



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