

History and Roses

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When I was a kid we used to head south on I-5 once a year to historic Champoeg State Park for the Steamboat Picnic, an annual event celebrating Founders Day of Oregon's first government. Supposedly my family was descended from French Canadian Etienne Lucier, one of the men who voted to establish Oregon's provisional government and featured in a famous painting by Theodore Geggoux called 'The Birth of Oregon.' I'm not really sure about the specific relationship, but I suspect it was through his marriage to an Indian woman, as our great-grandmother was Native American.

I've always loved wandering through cemeteries, exploring country museums and visiting historic homes in out-of-the-way places. While many events in history may seem random, there are interesting ties between places and people that sometimes come together in a connect-the-dots kind of way. On the way to Champoeg, there's a wonderful, well-kept little graveyard sitting beneath some big trees, and we often stop there when we're 'in the neighborhood' to peruse the headstones and read those inscriptions still legible -- like that of John D. Fain, born in 1855 (almost exactly a hundred years before I was) and "murdered by his partner, JF Markley at Champoeg."

Champoeg Cemetery was established in 1853, the same year Oregon's former Territorial Governor Joseph Lane returned to that post for three days to help oust a political opponent in office at the time. Lane later became one of Oregon's first two United States Senators and the grandfather of Dr. Harry Lane, future Mayor of Portland -- our own Mayor Harry who is sometimes called the 'Father of the Rose Festival'!

We've been incredibly successful in tying history into our celebration -- with our motion picture, our cookbook, our story blog at OregonLive.com and our Living History Program and curriculum, where our versions of Mayor Harry and Georgiana Pittock visited a dozen local schools and presented their stories to nearly 750 kids. A little more than a year ago, most of this was still hovering somewhere between a dream and a plan, and yet another idea was just taking shape. On an especially cold and rainy day in April of 2006, Charlie and I hurried from an estate sale in West Linn to do something we'd been talking about doing for years -- visiting historic Zimmerman House on Sandy Blvd., a home only open to the public one Saturday every month.

I had to stop for gas that day, making us late, and I barely had enough cash left to cover the admission; but we decided to go in anyway. Most of the visitors were gone, and the ladies giving the tours that day were gracious enough to welcome us and spend a lot of time showing us around -- even getting out the special box of Rose Festival memorabilia they saved for their June Open House to show us the pennants and newspapers. We were overwhelmed with the size and scope of the contents of the house; for more than 120 years, Zimmerman House was in the hands of one family -- and the collection is intact! Clothing, magazines, furniture, mementos, musical instruments, postcards and more -- it's all original and unaltered. I mentioned the upcoming Rose Festival Centennial to the volunteers, and Charlie picked up a business card. Before we had turned back onto Sandy

Blvd., I started talking about the idea of somehow finding a way to feature historic sites like Zimmerman House in our Centennial plan.

I've never worked with anyone more ready to run with an idea than Rachel Trice, our Sales and Marketing Director. She felt we needed to reconnect with the floral part of our heritage and find some way to feature Portland's fantastic gardens -- and it was clear that our thinking was on the same track. Although the concept went on the back burner for a while, we both knew we wanted to make a home and garden tour part of the Centennial. We just didn't have the time or resources to do it ourselves.

When I first worked for the festival in the mid-70's, I reported to an amazing woman by the name of Sharon Tracy, at that time the Assistant to the Manager. My desk faced Sharon's, and I used to be fascinated by her ability to work at a steady, measured pace even when surrounded by event-related chaos. Her powers of concentration and her meticulous habits were far beyond my understanding, but I liked to watch her work out of the corner of my eye as she quietly snapped gum and typed reports and correspondence on her IBM Selectric -- with rarely a mistake. I was mystified by her passion for the festival's Rose Cup Races, but I remember how she painstakingly designed the plaques for the winners.

Years later Sharon went on to become one of the only female Indy-car race promoters in the world, and she worked in auto race event management until she retired from Global Events Group last year. Last year several people suggested that I connect with her to help in our Centennial planning.

Sharon became the architect of History & Roses -- the selection of historic homes, landmarks and gardens featured on our 2007 festival schedule. Still self-motivated and meticulous, she researched all the sites, made all the contacts and built all the partnerships. In her explorations, she even found Mayor Harry Lane's grave at Lone Fir Cemetery -- and just Wednesday at our final Centennial Steering Committee meeting, she volunteered to put roses on Harry's resting place during the festival -- because Sharon still appreciates the importance of the tiniest detail.

As I mentioned above, there are always interesting ties between places and people, and everything make more sense with the perspective of time. What wonderful perspective this Centennial celebration has offered all of us -- and what a precious opportunity to re-connect with my own personal history, as well.