

Battle of the books
Umpqua, page A2

39 Jobs
in today's Classifieds

CLASSIFIEDS
Sponsored by
Century 21
THE NEIL COMPANY REAL ESTATE

Your next home is just a page turn away

The News-Review

Roseburg, Oregon

Vol. 148 No. 257

SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 2015

www.nrtoday.com

\$1.50



OREGON STATE WRESTLING TOURNAMENT

CHAMPS

Roseburg takes first, Sports A1



MICHAEL SULLIVAN/NEWS-REVIEW PHOTOS

History found

Historian to relate story of black pioneer woman

Above left, Letitia Carson's gravestone states that she died Feb. 18, 1888. Carson's gravestone, and several others in the cemetery, were previously damaged by vandals. Above, historian Bob Zybach of Cottage Grove lines up segments of a gravestone marking the final resting place of Letitia Carson at a cemetery outside Myrtle Creek on Wednesday. Carson's gravestone, and several others in the cemetery, were previously damaged by vandals.

CARISA CEGAVSKE
The News-Review

MYRTLE CREEK — In the middle of the Civil War, just four years after Oregon became a state, black pioneer Letitia Carson filed one of the nation's first Homestead Act claims for 160 acres on South Myrtle Creek.

Carson is believed to have been born a slave in Kentucky around 1814, but she died a free woman in 1888, as the owner of a farm valued at \$3,000. In between, she traveled the Oregon Trail, filed a lawsuit demanding a fair share of her husband's estate,

survived the Rogue River Indian War, managed her own ranch and served as a midwife.

For the past 30 years, historian Bob Zybach of Cottage Grove has been piecing together Carson's fascinating history one document at a time. The digging has become a habit, something like smoking, he said.

"It's what I do for recreation," he said.

Zybach will present the information he has uncovered at the Douglas County Historical Society's Spring Dinner Meeting March 8, at China Palace in Roseburg.

David and Letitia Carson were early pioneers. They traveled the

IF YOU GO...

WHAT: Douglas County Historical Society spring meeting. Historian Bob Zybach will discuss his research about black pioneer and Myrtle Creek homesteader Letitia Carson.

WHEN: 1 to 4 p.m., March 8.

WHERE: China Palace, 968 N.E. Stephens St., Roseburg.

REGISTER: Contact DCHS President John Robertson at 541-673-0466. Cost is \$15 and admission is limited to 50 people.

Oregon Trail in 1845, and Letitia Carson gave birth to their first child, Martha, along the way. David Carson, an Irish-American, claimed a 640-acre piece of property in Soap Creek Valley in Benton County. His claim was later reduced to 320 acres, the amount a single man was allowed, on the grounds that he could not

be married to a black woman.

Carson's paper trail becomes particularly interesting after her husband's death in 1852.

Zybach discovered Carson filed two successful lawsuits in Benton County after a pro-slavery neighbor denied her right to inherit David

HISTORY

From page A1

Carson's estate. Greenberry Smith was the executor of her husband's estate, and he argued that a black woman could not legally marry a white man or own property.

In Smith's view, Zybach said, Letitia Carson was probably of little more value than a table. Smith would have seen her as David's property.

If slavery had been legal in Oregon, she and her two children would have been sold. She remained free, but Smith sold her possessions without her permission.

Letitia Carson fought back.

She argued that if she was not a wife, she was owed back wages and compensation for her property, especially her cows, which Smith had also sold. Two separate juries — both, Zybach notes, made up exclusively of white men — agreed with her and awarded her a total of \$2,000.

The judge who presided over her case was George Henry Williams, a prominent Oregon Supreme Court justice who would later serve as a U.S. Senator, the U.S. Attorney General and mayor of Portland. He was anti-slavery and pro women's suffrage.

Carson's trials were attended by many important political figures of the time but were barely mentioned in the newspapers. Zybach turned to state archives of Benton County court records to uncover the details.

While her court cases were underway, Carson moved to Douglas County. She lived with the Elliff family in what is now Azalea and served as their midwife. During the Rogue River Indian Wars, she was at one point holed up in a stockade with members of the Elliff family.

Zybach notes Carson had many skills that would have been greatly valued by her fellow pioneers.

"It's hard to say what she did, but she knew how to make bacon and run cattle and make cheese, so probably she had a fair amount of work," she said.

There was also, Zybach said, "a huge social status to the fact that she was an old Oregonian. She was a pioneer of 1845. She was here before the United States was here."

However, she also lived during a time when racial issues were at the forefront of American politics. In 1845, when she arrived in Oregon, slaves who escaped slave states were considered free. By 1857, Oregon's leaders were debating slavery as they hammered out its constitution. In 1859, Oregon became a state and adopted a constitution that forbade slavery, but it was still quite hostile to African-Americans. New black settlers were forbidden to enter the state.

Then, in 1861, the Civil War began.

The war was still raging when Carson filed a claim for her land in a verdant, shoestring valley along South Myrtle Creek. Hers was one of the first 71 claims made under the Homestead Act and likely the only such claim in Oregon ever to be made by a black woman, Zybach said. The claim, made in 1863, was certified in 1868.

Her farm included an orchard with more than 100 trees, cattle, pigs, a smokehouse and a barn.

Locally, she was known as "Aunt Tish," and a creek near the property still bears her name.

In 1888, Carson died and was buried a few miles west, in the Stephens family graveyard. Her son Adam "Jack" Carson sold the farm but lived the rest of his life in Douglas County. He never married and died in 1922. Martha

Carson married into the Lavadour family and moved to Umatilla County.

Zybach said growing up he heard his grandmother's tales about his own pioneer ancestry. In the 1970s, he began reading journals and correspondence from his ancestors and other early settlers. Over time, he became especially interested in some of the people he felt were underrepresented in historical accounts.

"When I started getting interested in history, I realized this was just a bunch of white guys writing about other white guys. I became curious about why isn't there black history, Indian history, women's history?" he said.

Zybach discovered the disputed David Carson estate while researching the travels of mountain man and explorer Jedediah Smith. While poring over documents on David Carson, Zybach discovered that he had been an Irish-American with a wife who had formerly been a slave. Well-known African-American Oregon journalist Kathryn Bogle interviewed him about the project in the early 1990s and encouraged him to write Carson's story.

Zybach hopes eventually to complete scholarly articles for the Oregon Historical Quarterly or another similar publication and a biographical book.

In the meantime, Carson's story is already being told through fiction. Research by Zybach and Janet Meranda, a colleague he met while attending Oregon State University in the 1980s, helped inform the 2014 novel about Carson's life, "A Light in the Wilderness," by author Jane Kirkpatrick.

You can reach reporter Carisa Cegavske at 541-957-4213 or ccegvsk@nrtoday.com.



The Roseburg High School wrestling team accepts the first place trophy in the 6A division at the Oregon State Wrestling Tournament in Portland on Saturday.

if you go...

WHAT: Douglas County Historical Society spring meeting. Historian Bob Zybach will discuss his research about black pioneer and Myrtle Creek homesteader Letitia Carson.

WHEN: 1 to 4 p.m., March 8.

WHERE: China Palace, 968 N.E. Stephens St., Roseburg.

REGISTER: Contact DCHS President John Robertson at 541-673-0466. Cost is \$15 and admission is limited to 50 people.

MYRTLE CREEK — In the middle of the Civil War, just four years after Oregon became a state, black pioneer Letitia Carson filed one of the nation's first Homestead Act claims for 160 acres on South Myrtle Creek.

Carson is believed to have been born a slave in Kentucky around 1814, but she died a free woman in 1888, as the owner of a farm valued at \$3,000. In between, she traveled the Oregon Trail, filed a lawsuit demanding a fair share of her husband's estate, survived the Rogue River Indian War, managed her own ranch and served as a midwife.

For the past 30 years, historian Bob Zybach of Cottage Grove has been piecing together Carson's fascinating history one document at a time. The digging has become a habit, something like smoking, he said.

"It's what I do for recreation," he said.

Zybach will present the information he has uncovered at the Douglas County Historical Society's Spring Dinner Meeting March 8, at China Palace in Roseburg.

David and Letitia Carson were early pioneers. They traveled the Oregon Trail in 1845, and Letitia Carson gave birth to their first child, Martha, along the way. David Carson, an Irish-American, claimed a 640-acre piece of property in Soap Creek Valley in Benton County. His claim was later reduced to 320 acres, the amount a single man was allowed, on the grounds that he could not be married to a black woman.

Carson's paper trail becomes particularly interesting after her husband's death in 1852.

Zybach discovered Carson filed two successful lawsuits in Benton County after a pro-slavery neighbor denied her right to inherit David Carson's estate. Greenberry Smith was the executor of her husband's estate, and he argued that a black woman could not legally marry a white man or own property.

In Smith's view, Zybach said, Letitia Carson was probably of little more value than a table. Smith would have seen her as David's property.

If slavery had been legal in Oregon, she and her two children would have been sold. She remained free, but Smith sold her possessions without her permission.

Letitia Carson fought back.

She argued that if she was not a wife, she was owed back wages and compensation for her property, especially her cows, which Smith had also sold. Two separate juries — both, Zybach notes, made up exclusively of white men — agreed with her and awarded her a total of \$2,000.

The judge who presided over her case was George Henry Williams, a prominent Oregon Supreme Court justice who would later serve as a U.S. Senator, the U.S. Attorney General and mayor of Portland. He was anti-slavery and pro women's suffrage.

Carson's trials were attended by many important political figures of the time but were barely mentioned in the newspapers. Zybach turned to state archives of Benton County court records to uncover the details.

While her court cases were underway, Carson moved to Douglas County. She lived with the Elliff family in what is now Azalea and served as their midwife. During the Rogue River Indian Wars, she was at one point holed up in a stockade with members of the Elliff family.

Zybach notes Carson had many skills that would have been greatly valued by her fellow pioneers.

"It's hard to say what she did, but she knew how to make bacon and run cattle and make cheese, so probably she had a fair amount of work,"

she said.

There was also, Zybach said, “a huge social status to the fact that she was an old Oregonian. She was a pioneer of 1845. She was here before the United States was here.”

However, she also lived during a time when racial issues were at the forefront of American politics. In 1845, when she arrived in Oregon, slaves who escaped slave states were considered free. By 1857, Oregon’s leaders were debating slavery as they hammered out its constitution. In 1959, Oregon became a state and adopted a constitution that forbade slavery, but it was still quite hostile to African-Americans. New black settlers were forbidden to enter the state.

Then, in 1961, the Civil War began.

The war was still raging when Carson filed a claim for her land in a verdant, shoestring valley along South Myrtle Creek. Hers was one of the first 71 claims made under the Homestead Act and likely the only such claim in Oregon ever to be made by a black woman, Zybach said. The claim, made in 1863, was certified in 1868.

Her farm included an orchard with more than 100 trees, cattle, pigs, a smokehouse and a barn.

Locally, she was known as “Aunt Tish,” and a creek near the property still bears her name.

In 1888, Carson died and was buried a few miles west, in the Stephens family graveyard. Her son Adam “Jack” Carson sold the farm but lived the rest of his life in Douglas County. He never married and died in 1922. Martha Carson married into the Lavadour family and moved to Umatilla County.

Zybach said growing up he heard his grandmother’s tales about his own pioneer ancestry. In the 1970s, he began reading journals and correspondence from his ancestors and other early settlers. Over time, he became especially interested in some of the people he felt were underrepresented in historical accounts.

“When I started getting interested in history, I realized this was just a bunch of white guys writing about other white guys. I became curious about why isn’t there black history, Indian history, women’s history?” he said.

Zybach discovered the disputed David Carson estate while researching the travels of mountain man and explorer Jedediah Smith. While poring over documents on David Carson, Zybach discovered that he had been an Irish-American with a wife who had formerly been a slave. Well-known African-American Oregon journalist Kathryn Bogle interviewed him about the project in the early 1990s and encouraged him to write Carson’s story.

Zybach hopes eventually to complete scholarly articles for the Oregon Historical Quarterly or another similar publication and a biographical book.

In the meantime, Carson’s story is already being told through fiction. Research by Zybach and Janet Meranda, a colleague he met while attending Oregon State University in the 1980s, helped inform the 2014 novel about Carson’s life, “A Light in the Wilderness,” by author Jane Kirkpatrick.

You can reach reporter Carisa Cegavske at 541-957-4213 or ccegavske@nrtoday.com.



MICHAEL SULLIVAN/NEWS-REVIEW PHOTOS

Above left, Letitia Carson's gravestone states that she died Feb. 18, 1888. Carson's gravestone, and several others in the cemetery, were previously damaged by vandals. Above, historian Bob Zybach of Cottage Grove lines up segments of a gravestone marking the final resting place of Letitia Carson at a cemetery outside Myrtle Creek on Wednesday. Carson's gravestone, and several others in the cemetery, were previously damaged by vandals.



Carisa Cegavske
ccegavske@nrtdaily.com

February 27, 2015

Early black pioneer Letitia Carson made her home in Myrtle Creek



Historian Bob Zybach of Cottage Grove lines up segments of a gravestone marking the final resting place of Letitia Carson at a cemetery outside Myrtle Creek on Wednesday. Carson's gravestone, and several others in the cemetery, were previously damaged by vandals.



Historian Bob Zybach of Cottage Grove lines up segments of a gravestone marking the final resting place of Letitia Carson at a cemetery outside Myrtle Creek on Wednesday. Carson's gravestone, and several others in the cemetery, were previously damaged by vandals.



Historian Bob Zybach of Cottage Grove reads the inscription on the gravestone marking the final resting place of Letitia Carson at a cemetery outside Myrtle Creek on Wednesday.



Letitia Carson's gravestone states that she died Feb. 18, 1888. Carson's gravestone, and several others in the cemetery, were previously damaged by vandals.



Historian Bob Zybach of Cottage Grove reads the inscription on the gravestone marking the final resting place of Letitia Carson at a cemetery outside Myrtle Creek on Wednesday.



Letitia Carson's gravestone states that she died Feb. 18, 1888. Carson's gravestone, and several others in the cemetery, were previously damaged by vandals.



Coffel



Boy Scouts salute early Saturday morning, May 21, 2011 during New Jersey's Boy Scouts Camporee in Sea Girt, N.J. The Boy Scouts of America's National Council has voted to ease a long-standing ban and allow openly gay boys to be accepted as Scouts, Thursday, May 23, 2013. Of the local Scout leaders voting at their annual meeting in Texas, more than 60 percent supported the proposal. (AP Photo/Mel Evans, file)







DIED
Feb. 18, 1888.

AGED
85 yrs. 11 mos. 18 ds.

No pain, no grief, no anxious fears
Can reach the peaceful sleeper here.