

A look back at notable women in Union County

By Dick Mason
The Observer

The temperature was falling toward freezing when one of the largest late-night crowds in La Grande's history gathered at its railroad depot eight decades ago.

The date was Sept. 27, 1937, and close to 1,500 people were at the depot with one unified hope — that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt would change his mind. Roosevelt was on a train bound for western Oregon and Washington that was scheduled to make a stop from 10:30 p.m. to 11 p.m. in La Grande to allow for maintenance work. The White House had announced the president would not be speaking in La Grande, but still a crowd had gathered hoping to get a glimpse of FDR.

The president never appeared, yet the crowd was treated to a significant historical moment.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt stepped out onto the train car platform. She explained "in her gracious way" the chief executive was unable to appear because he needed to rest following a long day of travel, according to a story in the Sept. 28, 1937, edition of The Observer.

The first lady went on to say she was sorry that she and her husband were forced to come through this part of Eastern Oregon after dark. She said they had hoped to see the "beauties" of this part of the country.

The crowd was gracious, and Eleanor Roosevelt was presented with a bouquet of flowers from the local Commercial Club before she went back into her train car.

Her appearance upstaged her husband, for the next day the Observer's page one headline about the presidential train visit read "First Lady Appears at Local Stop." No reference was made to FDR in the secondary headline below.

Today, Eleanor Roosevelt may remain the most famous woman ever to give a public address in La Grande. Roosevelt, who received countless honors for her work as a humanitarian with the United Nations after she was first lady, is regarded as one of the most popular Americans of all time. A poll of historians by Reuters and the Daily Mail news services published in 2014 ranks Roosevelt as the greatest first lady in United States history.

Eleanor Roosevelt is one of two first ladies to have visited La Grande. The second is Jackie Kennedy, who accompanied her husband, Massachusetts U.S. Senator and future president John F. Kennedy, on a visit to La Grande in November of 1959. The senator, who had not yet announced his can-

didacy when he visited La Grande, was elected president a year later.

John Kennedy made at least two public talks during his La Grande visit, but Jackie gave no presentations, according to The Observer.

A third woman familiar with the presidential limelight to visit La Grande is Joan Mondale, wife of former vice president Walter Mondale, who served from 1977 to 1981 under President Jimmy Carter. She spoke at Eastern Oregon University (then Eastern Oregon State College) on Oct. 9, 1992, as the keynote speaker for the Oregon Art Education Conference.

"Art teaches us about excellence and creativity. It teaches us how to get the best from ourselves," said Mondale, a former member of the Associated Council of the Arts, according to a story in the Oct. 10, 1992, Observer.

On the statewide political scene, the most prominent woman political leader to emerge from La Grande was the late Betty Roberts. A La Grande resident in the 1950s, Roberts made history in 1982 when she became the first woman to serve on the Oregon Supreme Court.

The trailblazer was appointed to the state's highest court three decades after living in La Grande in the early 1950s. Roberts settled here after moving from another part of the state with her husband, Bill Rice, and her young children, according to a story in the June 2011 edition of The Observer. Roberts, in 1955, took what was then an unconventional step while in La Grande. The housewife, entering her 30s, began pursuing an education degree by enrolling in night classes at EOU (then Eastern Oregon College).

About a year later, she and her family moved to Portland. Roberts then enrolled at Portland State University (then Portland State College) and completed her degree requirements, graduating in 1958. Her life then became a whirlwind. She began a teaching career and soon entered politics, winning election to the state House of Representatives in 1964.

Roberts, who later earned a law degree, was appointed to the Oregon Supreme Court in 1982 by Gov. Vic Atiyeh and served through 1986.

Roberts never forgot the

jump-start her career received in La Grande. This was apparent on Aug. 24, 1985, when she spoke at a ceremony celebrating La Grande's centennial.

"Throughout my career I have always clung to the notion that it was my experience in La Grande that started it all for me," Roberts was quoted as saying in a story in The Observer on Aug. 26, 1985.

Roberts credited Eastern with having a profound impact on her.

"The presence of Eastern Oregon College had a dramatic influence on my life. I made a decision while living here to return to college despite the fact I was married and had a family," she said. "This community gave me not only stability but offered

me a challenge. It offered me the encouragement I needed, and I shall be forever grateful for that."

Born in Arkansas City, Kansas, in 1923, Roberts was elected to the state Senate in 1968. Her work in the senate is credited with helping get the historic Oregon bottle bill passed in 1971. The bill addressed Oregon's growing litter problem.

Roberts died in June of 2011 at age 88.

Women trailblazers outside the political world with Union County ties include Amy Currin, who was one of the first, possibly the very first, female physician to practice in the county.

Currin, born in 1878 in the Payette, Idaho, area, practiced at Hot Lake Sanitarium

during two stints over an approximate four-year period in the early 1900s.

She first came to Hot Lake to practice medicine in early 1910. Currin moved to Hot Lake from Baker City where she had also practiced medicine. She stayed at Hot Lake for less than a year before leaving for Chicago to work there as a physician, according to the second edition of "The Hot Lake Story" by Richard R. Roth.

Currin left Chicago in early 1911 and returned to Hot Lake, where she worked until 1914.

Currin graduated in 1904 from Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania. The college, founded in 1850, was the first medical school in the world for women autho-

rized to award M.D. degrees, according to the Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia (philadelphiaencyclopedia.org).

Roth believes Currin may have drawn a number of patients to Hot Lake. He explained having someone like Currin on staff would have been a great comfort to women when dealing with issues specific to their gender.

At that time, Currin undoubtedly faced additional hurdles as a female physician.

"Any woman who accomplished the outstanding achievement of graduating from a formal medical school program would often take a back seat to her male counterparts during the course of her career regardless of her abilities," Roth wrote in his 2008 book. ■

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