

STAIRCASE

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of Historic Places.

Many around the community share fond memories of the staircase, from growing up down the street to taking wedding photos on the scenic lookout.

Among them are Anne Olson and Marcia Loney.

The sisters grew up down the street from the stairs and were enchanted with its grandeur, as both attended kindergarten at the Ackerman Lab School on campus and Olson later enrolled at Eastern for college. Decades later as the structure began to crumble, vandalism on the crumbling stairs in 2013 was the final straw as the duo decided to fight for the staircase's future.

"I just remember being really struck by that," Olson said. "I think that's been a big issue all along. Here's this incredible architectural treasure, but it's in Eastern Oregon and at the end of a street that's not used as much any more. It's a hidden treasure."

The sisters voiced a shared concern among alumni and community members, aligning with officials at Eastern to seek funding to restore the staircase.

"Anne's and my memories are shared by generations and generations of kids and adults," Loney said.

The Grand Staircase represented a symbolic connection between the town and the local university, creating a bridge for students and community members to be a part of the campus.

The staircase also physically links the university to the community, allowing pedestrians easy access to and from the campus.

"It was a very symbolic, meaningful thing for many years," Seydel said. "That changed with deterioration of the staircase to the point where we couldn't use it."

Pushing for funding

Local advocates worked



The Observer, File

Eastern Oregon University's Grand Staircase, which was built in 1929 — the same year the university was founded — doesn't look very grand in this 2016 photo. After years of being on Restore Oregon's list of endangered places in Oregon, the university received funding to rebuild the historic feature, with work slated to begin in 2023.



Bob Bull photo collection

Workers stop for a photograph during the construction of the Grand Staircase at Eastern Oregon Normal School — now Eastern Oregon University — in the 1920s. The university learned in March 2022 it will receive \$4 million to restore the historic staircase.

with the city of La Grande, Main Street Downtown, Union County Chamber of Commerce, Eastern Oregon Visitor's Association, Oregon Historic Preservation Office, Union County Commissioners, La Grande Landmarks Commission and other interested parties in the city.

"Having all those players lined up made it possible to show that this wasn't just the university trying to

get money for something that needed to be fixed or a bunch of sentimentalists — it was a community effort," Olson said.

When Olson and Loney created a connection with Restore Oregon in 2014, pushing to find funding for a restoration project, the sisters were shocked to learn that few around the state knew of the staircase and its history.

"One of the things we've

found is that outside of La Grande and Union County, nobody knows about the staircase," Loney said.

Seydel and advocates for the Grand Staircase managed to drum up enough donations and funds to begin the planning and organizing stages of the restoration — Seydel noted that the funding efforts have extended close to 20 years.

The project inched

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— **Marcia Loney**, of La Grande

closer and closer to financial backing over the last decade, with the funding being close to consideration in state legislative sessions in the last several years.

"We were painfully close to getting it funded and trying to fix this incredible piece of architecture," Seydel said. "Finally, we were able to push it over the finish line so to speak."

In a groundbreaking decision, House Bill 5202 designated tens of millions of dollars for statewide projects, \$4 million of which is allotted to restoring EOU's Grand Staircase.

"I seriously think it took us a few days to actually believe it," Loney said. "We were overjoyed. This is a gift to future generations, to La Grande and to Oregon. We're beyond excited and we're so grateful to EOU for all the work they've put into it."

Lasting connection

With the new financial backing, the university is in the planning stages of starting the staircase's restoration in 2023.

The project will involve working around the staircase, preparing the site, reconstruction and landscaping. The staircase has suffered from the effects of time, including running hillside water, concrete over 90 years old, broken balusters, vandalism and the freeze and thaw winter cycle.

According to Seydel, the restored staircase will provide an opportunity to bring back events and traditions that were an important part of the early years of the university. The stairs were most notably used for graduation and Evensong, a ceremony in which gradu-

ating seniors traversed the steps and symbolically left the campus and embraced the community as their post-college lives began.

"That was very symbolic of the connection between the university and the wider world," Olson said.

Seydel noted that the Grand Staircase also will encourage tourism to the university and Union County, with visitors stopping in La Grande to admire the architectural feature. Seydel envisions the stairs again becoming a focal point for university and community gatherings and a place for wedding and graduation photos among other things.

In Olson and Loney's years of advocating for the restoration of the staircase, positive community feedback from alumni and community members helped the cause gain substantial momentum. With the staircase set to return to its original glory, the sisters hope the nostalgic structure will create new memories.

"We really do hope that it is a seed for some really good things to happen for the university and for the city of La Grande and in the region," Olson said.

The restoration project is set to bring back one of the city's most historical gems. Originally built to link Eastern Oregon University with the La Grande community, the Grand Staircase will strengthen that bond in years to come.

"It supports not only the university, but it is the embodiment of the physical connection to the community," Seydel said. "It drives tourism, it drives enrollment and it makes the entrance very symbolic from the university to the community."

TRAIL

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month. Other additions include an ox yoke, donated by Craig's Antiques, of La Grande, that was used by oxen to pull a wagon across the Oregon Trail, Allen said.

"It shows heavy wear consistent with pulling covered wagons over the Oregon Trail," he said.

Yokes, like the one displayed, were wooden beams normally used between a pair of oxen to enable them to pull together on a load when working in pairs.

Oxen are regarded as the unheralded heroes of the Oregon Trail, Allen said. He noted that the vast majority of the pioneers coming West on the Oregon Trail used oxen instead of horses. Pioneers preferred them because they are calmer and easier to work with than horses.

"They are not as temperamental as horses," Allen said.

Pioneers took excellent care of their oxen, Allen said, because they knew that without the animals, they would be in dire circumstances.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Ronnie Allen poses for a photo on Monday, March 21, 2022, near a newly restored logging sled at an Oregon Trail site in Lower Ladd Canyon south of La Grande. Allen and Dale Counsell, both of La Grande, created the interpretive site five years ago and are continuing to add to it.

Oxen sometimes drank water from wooden buckets on the Oregon Trail when they could not be taken to streams or springs. The buckets pioneers used to bring water to their oxen were virtually identical to a bucket that was also recently added to the Oregon Trail interpretive site, Allen said.

It is easy for visitors to the site

to get a feel for the type of wagon oxen pulled across the West for it has two replicas of them. Both are farm wagons more than 100 years old that are like those used on the Oregon Trail. Allen said farm wagons started being used on the Oregon Trail due to a shortage of the more popular Conestoga wagons.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Artifacts, replicas and historical information help tell the story of the Oregon Trail on Monday, March 21, 2022, at an interpretive site on Hot Lake Lane between La Grande and Union.

No actual wagons in which pioneers traveled across the Oregon Trail still exist, Allen said. He explained by the time pioneers made it to Oregon, most wagons were in terrible condition. Those that were functional were used for farm work until they wore out. And after about five years of farm work, he said, "they were useless." Allen, who received a Distin-

guished Service Award in 2019 from the Northwest chapter of the Oregon-California Trails Association for his work in helping create the Oregon Trail interpretive site in Lower Ladd Canyon, said there will be more additions to the center in the future.

"It is an ongoing project," he said. "There really will be no end to it."

SUICIDES

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State health officials cautioned that Oregon suicides are still well above the national average, however. And preliminary data for all ages combined indicate an increase in the number of suicides in 2021.

"Racial and economic inequalities impact the overall health of many of our communities and we have much work to do to alleviate this injustice," Allen said in the OHP statement. "Our hearts grieve alongside the Oregon communities and families that have experienced suicide loss."

Oregon was one of seven states that showed a decrease in suicide rates between 2019 and 2020, according to the CDC data

released in February. The state had 18.3 deaths by suicide per 100,000 people in 2020 with a total of 833 deaths. In 2019, the suicide death rate was 20.4 per 100,000, which amounted to 906 total deaths.

As documented by the recently released Youth Suicide Invention and Prevention Plan annual report, the number and rate of suicides for youth age 24 and younger decreased in 2020 by nearly 14%, from 118 deaths in 2019 to 102 deaths in 2020.

Preliminary 2021 data for Oregon indicate a three-year decreasing trend in suicide numbers for youth age 24 and younger. While Oregon's youth suicide deaths have decreased, it must be noted that Oregon's youth suicide rate was much higher than the national average for the years pre-

ceding the decrease, state health officials said.

Health officials also said that call volumes to Lines for Life, a regional substance abuse and suicide prevention nonprofit that operates several crisis hotlines, has increased annually since 2016. Of the crisis calls staff answered, roughly the same percent of callers reported thinking about suicide in 2020 as in 2019.

The officials said it is also important to note that the number of youth suicide deaths in 2021 did not decrease in every county in Oregon. Last week, Lane County Public Health declared a public health emergency due to an increase in youth suicides since November 2021. In response to this increase, additional resources and supports are being made

available to Lane County schools, health care providers and community members.

Oregon Health Authority responds

OHA works together with other state agencies, counties, Tribal partners, communities and advocacy groups across the state to prevent suicide in Oregon. State health officials said that since March 2020, Oregon's suicide prevention team has met weekly to analyze data, plan prevention efforts and bolster the state's ability to respond to emerging needs.

OHA has invested heavily in several suicide prevention, intervention, treatment and "postvention" programs, collectively referred to as Big River programming. Each of the programs is available state-

wide, has a coordinator to support local efforts, and has seen robust growth since they became available in 2020.

State health officials have also:

- Launched the Remote Suicide Risk Assessment and Safety Planning phone line and created a tool to support school administrators, school counselors and other school-based mental health services.

- Created the Oregon Behavioral Health Support Line, which offers live support.

- Developed the Youth Suicide Assessment (YouthSAFE) training, created specifically for mental health professionals who serve youth. This training equips school- and community-based mental health professionals to use vir-

tual tools to reach youth who have thoughts of suicide. More than 700 youth-serving providers in Oregon have taken YouthSAFE training since its launch in December 2020.

- In collaboration with the Oregon Department of Education, set up a School Suicide Prevention and Wellness team to provide support to school districts for suicide prevention planning and implementation.

Before then, Oregon launched the Safe + Strong Helpline and website at the beginning of the pandemic to provide support for those struggling with the loss of loved ones and lifestyle changes. The Safe + Strong Helpline, 1-800-923-HELP (4357), is available 24/7. More help and resources are available in multiple languages on the Safe + Strong website.