## Offbeat Oregon: History No. 500

Abigail Scott Duniway thought she'd be remembered primarily for her novels, but....

> By Finn J.D. John Special to The Sentinel

bigail Scott Duniway is a name that's very familiar to most Oregon history buffs. She was a pioneer, a journalist, a newspaper editor and a tireless advocate for women's suffrage.

All of this she managed to accomplish while also fulfilling all the obligations of an invalid's wife and the mother of six children.

But Duniway, during her life, did not expect any of those things to be what she was most remembered for. She expected — or, rather, hoped — that after her death her novels would be collected and published, and that future readers would "marvel at the facts therein portrayed as much as the student of today is marveling at the progress of the world since the discoveries of Christopher Columbus or the explorations of Lewis and Clark."

That, of course, didn't hap-

Instead, most people don't even realize that she wrote any

In part that's because none of her novels are very easy for a modern reader to get through — although it's kind of surprising how well they do hold up, considering how different was the era in which they were written. As English professor Debra Shein of Idaho State University points out, most novels in the 1870s were neither character driven, nor plot driven — they were action-driven, like parables or allegories.

That meant most of them were "a song with a message," intended to manipulate the reader into better or more virtuous patterns of thought or behavior — something modern read-ers have little tolerance for. It also meant the characters in them had a tendency to be personifications of virtues or vices — the mustache-twirling Dastardly Villains, the placidly faithful Saintly Widows, the relentlessly cheerful Virtuous Youths, and so forth.

In other words, these novels are works of advocacy. Or, to put it in Duniway's own words from the introduction to her first novel, "Skeptics, you who laugh at the Bible, who mock at the mission of the lowly Nazarene ... ye who live merely that you may amass rich-es, eat, drink and die — this book is not for you. I leave older and wiser heads to parry your studied blows, while I turn, in re-spect and confidence, to the lenient, intelligent, pious and elevated, for encouragement and assistance."

Of all the novels Duniway wrote, only the first and the last were actually published in book form during her life. The first one, in fact, was the first novel commercially published in Oregon (unless one classifies Margaret Jewett Smith's 1854 memoir, The Grains; or, Pas-



Abigail Scott Duniway as she appeared in the late 1800s. (Horner/Gazette-Times)

sages in the Life of Ruth Rover, as a novel).

Duniway's first novel was Captain Gray's Company; or, Crossing the Plains and Living in Oregon (S.J. McCormick,

It was heavily based on the Scott family's journey to Oregon in 1852 over the Or-egon Trail. The last novel, From the West to the West: Across the Plains to Oregon (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1905), was basically a re-write of Captain Gray's Company. Neither of these novels represents her at her best — although it is probably safe to say that they do represent her at her least con-

Arguably, Duniway's best work — and unquestionably her most influential — was represented by the 21 novels she wrote and serialized in her newspaper, The New Northwest, and later her magazine, The Pacific Empire.

After she retired from journalism, Duniway spent years revising these novels and submitting them to book publishing houses back East. None were picked up. This most likely is because at the time Duniway was submitting stories to these conservative, male-run publishing concerns, she was just too hot to handle.

To be fair, the stories were pretty hot. Judge Dunson's Secret: An Oregon Story is a black comedy of sorts in which the judge's "secret" is that he once had a temper tantrum and tore out all his young son's teeth, leading directly to the

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heroine, who for some reason has feelings for him, disguises herself as the dead son's ghost and rattles a bag of teeth in eventually successful quest to get him to face what he's done, repent and marry

boy's death; the

Ethel In Des-Graeme's tiny: A Story of Real Life, the entrepreneurial heroine is tricked into marriage by a drunken sea captain who treats her like an ATM machine, leaving her penniless at

the end of a life in which she's made her fortune several times over only to have him show up and drink it all away.

her.

Edna and John: A Romance of Idaho Flat has a similar theme. Edna is swept off her feet by John, who turns out to be a callow idiot; while he's off digging hopefully in the gold fields, she makes a fortune as a restaurateur, but when he returns and starts spending it frivolously and abusing her, she learns that if she divorces him, he will get everything: restaurant, money, and even the children.

Meanwhile her mother, after being widowed, is kicked out of her lifelong home because the Dower Acts have enabled her husband's creditors to seize all her property, and her aunt is left penniless after her late husband turns out to have been a bigamyst. At the end, denied a divorce, Edna actually buys a gun; the story ends before we learn whether she uses it or

Margaret Rudson: A Pioneer Story is less overtly subversive, but in other ways it's more so. It's the story of a wealthy heiress, who is also an inventor, entrepreneur, and physician, and her devoted fiancé. The two of them travel out West to found a socialistic commune in which men and women enjoy equality before the law and domestic chores — cooking, child care, cleaning, etc. - are shared equally by men and women and handled communally.

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married, and adopt a hyphenated surname — Rudson-Horner - which was at the time considered a scandalously radical thing to do.

Most of Duniway's novels, particularly the ones serialized in The New Northwest, are a little rough, like second drafts. That's because they were told in serial form over many weeks, like a soap opera; something interesting had to happen in every episode. This worked great in its original form, but the relentless procession of intense moments of drama can be wearying if read all at once; there's a reason why no one binge-watches "Days of Our Lives" or "The Young and the Restless."

Rudson and her fiancé are

Also, Duniway didn't always finish writing a novel before starting to publish it (actually, she may never have done that); so, sometimes she found herself boxed in by events of previous weeks and had to break the narrative thread to solve the problem. Still, they were very popular, and made more of a contribution to the campaign for women's suffrage than most people realize.

And to the women of Portland, in the late 1800s, they rang true to life, and they sent a strong and welcome message: You are not alone.







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www.cgcalvary.org

**Center for Spiritual Living** 700 Gibbs Ave. (Community Center) Rev. Bobby Lee Meets Sunday 3:00 p.m.

cslcottagegrove@gmail.com Church of Christ 420 Monroe St • 541-942-8565 Sunday Service: 10:30am

Cottage Grove Bible Church 1200 East Quincy Avenue 541-942-4771 Pastor: Bob Singer Worship 11am Sunday School:9:45am

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1025 N. 19th St. 541-942-3420 Father: Joseph Hung Nguyen Holy Mass: Tue-Thu: 8:30am; Sat:5:30pm

Sun: 10:30am Confession: After daily mass, Sat. 4-5pm or by appointment St. Philip Benizi, Creswell 552 Holbrock Lane 541-895-8686, Sunday: 8:30am

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