

ROGUE VALLEY GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

3405 South Pacific Highway
 Medford, Oregon
 97501

The Rogue Digger is a publication of the Rogue Valley Genealogical Society (www.rvgsociety.org), which is a non-profit organization governed by a thirteen-member Board consisting of elected officers, past president, and appointed directors of the Standing Committees, all with voting rights. A subscription to *The Rogue Digger* is included with membership. Annual dues are \$30 for an individual; additional members in the same household are \$15 each. Membership includes library checkout privileges. Our library website is www.rvgslibrary.org. Background map of Jackson County, OR, and miner's image courtesy RVGS.

Editor's Note:

The Rogue Valley Genealogical Society is pleased to present in this issue Part 2 of a story from our February 2016 Quilts and Genealogy program. Part 1 appeared in our June issue. We also present an abridged retrospective of our society's history in light of our 50th year heritage celebration, which will be held September 19-27. Please join us for the celebration and our Genealogy Week offerings during that time! Details can be found at <http://www.rvgsociety.org>

THE HELMAN QUILTS

MORE MYSTERIES IN OUR BACKYARD

PART 2

by Lynn Ransford

Before going on to discuss the construction of the Helman quilts, I should pause here to express great appreciation to the many women involved in this research.

You already know about Barb MacMillen's tireless, detailed combing of census data, Ancestry.com, obituaries, Find A Grave, and SOHS files, as well as her resourcefulness, knowledge of the sites to investigate, and her hours of poring over computers at the library, at home, and even in Salt Lake City! She's the main reason it was possible to unravel and tell this story, which continues to unravel. Barb can't stop investigating and finding still more! She's the one who will be able to answer your questions.

Nell Mathern I regard as my quilting mentor. She is an expert quilter, and one of those also involved in the JCGL Quilt Registry Project. She was on hand numerous times to point out details in these quilts, to provide pictures and information, and to offer valuable suggestions. The staff here at the library, again Barb, and also Dorothy Cotton and Anne Billeter kept the research going each time we encountered (forgive the unintentional pun) stumbling "blocks."

Also, a remarkable and generous contributor to this story (sending photographs and information that we never would have found without her) was Julia Powell Woosnam, daughter of Dena Powell, the repair person and quilter of these Helman quilts! It was Julia, Dena's daughter, who graciously donated these Helman quilts to the Rogue Valley Genealogical Society. Without her, we would not have known a thing about these remarkable and historic treasures from the Abel Helman family.

Let's go back, now, to look at the quilt construction.

The Courthouse Square quilt top, made by Matilda Kimball Younker in 1870, was quilted by Dena Powell in 1970, a hundred years later. There are some modern repairs and appliqués on top. Dena used polyester batting and backed the quilt with a muslin-colored polyester/cotton blend fabric. All quilting and piecing was hand-done with even stitches in cotton thread, this according to the Quilt Registry Documentation papers. The documentation also says that there is no inscription. Here's another mystery in connection with the quilter, Dena Powell. A common practice for many a quilters is to put his or her name and date somewhere on a quilt when finished. Nell, my expert quilter, tells me that Dena always hid her name somewhere on the quilts she finished. We have looked and looked, but can't find Dena's name anywhere on the Courthouse Square quilt. Neither did we find Matilda's name on the Courthouse Square quilt. Perhaps inscriptions are sewn in the binding?



On the Brown Diamond quilt we did find Dena's name—Nell found it.

And as we saw before, Grace’s signature is on the Brown Diamond quilt. So there are no names on Courthouse Square quilt, but both names appear on the Brown Diamond quilt. It’s another mystery in our backyard! But, even with signatures, the construction of the Brown Diamond



quilt is not as clear. Both Grace Younker Helman and Dena Powell pieced the quilt top, according

to our 1983 information page.

Grace made the Brown Diamond quilt top in 1890, 20 years after her mother made the Courthouse quilt.

Below is a photo of Grace taken about six years before she pieced the Brown Diamond quilt.

Take this paper in hand if you wish to look at the backing.

BE GENTLE so the quilt will not be pulled.

PATTERN	BROWN DIAMOND
YEAR MADE	1890, 1973
PIECED BY	Grace Arilla Younker Helman,
QUILTED BY	Dena Powell
LOANED BY	Julia Powell

Pieced by Mrs. Grace Helman, daughter-in-law of Ashland’s founder. Given to Dena by Mrs. Almeda Coder, who was Grace Helman’s daughter, and Mrs. Abel Helman’s granddaughter.

Finished and quilted by Dena in 1973.

ASHLAND’S
10th ANNUAL QUILT SHOW
1983
DENA POWELL MEMORIAL
by
United Methodist Women



Grace Younker Hellman, May 1, 1884

Take this paper in hand if you wish to look at the backing.

BE GENTLE so the quilt will not be pulled.

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ASHLAND'S
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The photo is another treasure that Barb found in the SOHS files. The Brown Diamond quilt was repaired and quilted by Dena in 1973, 83 years after Grace first put together the top.

We now know who pieced the Helman quilts, except for the line on our Brown Diamond quilt information sheet, which I told you that we would address.

After the line, "pieced by Grace Yonkers Helman..." a reference to "Dena" is added. Dena, remember, is our well-known quilter from this area to whom Almeda Helman Coder gave the quilt tops that had been pieced by her (Almeda's) mother and grandmother.

Below right is a photo of Dena by one of her quilts in 1970 at the Swedenberg Quilt Show, and below left is a photo of her with her husband, Lawrence Powell, in their 1929

wedding photo. Lawrence, incidentally, "was a long-time member of RVGS and SOHS, who helped her (Dena) thread the needles she used to quilt the last quilts she made before she lost her sight entirely," their daughter tells us. Dena was born Altadena Spencer in 1911. She lived her entire life in Ashland. She is the granddaughter of original settlers who came here in 1853 and 1860.



Dena died in 1982.

Looking at the bottom of our Quilt Information pages, please note that these forms came from Ashland's 10th Annual Quilt Show in 1983, which was a memorial to Dena Powell.

The JCGL Quilt Registry Documentation papers list the quilters as Dena Powell and "Hands All Around," which, according to Nell, was one of the quilting groups to which Dena belonged. Members of "Hands All Around," according to our information sheet, may have helped Dena with the quilting of the Brown Diamond quilt.

The border, or binding width on the Brown Diamond "varies widely," says the documentation, which we also observed. It is not even, like that of the Courthouse Square quilt. The Brown Diamond sashing appears to be repaired and replaced by newer fabric in spots. Some of the sashing is not aligned, not as much as it is in the Courthouse Square quilt. But a more striking difference between the quilts appears in the quilting techniques. The Courthouse Square quilt is all hand-quilted, which is consistent with Dena Powell's work. The Brown Diamond quilt is both hand-quilted and machine-quilted. The border is machine quilted, top and bottom, in-the-ditch, and in a diamond pattern. These differences were what first led me to believe that the same person could not have constructed both quilts, which did prove to be true for the quilt tops. However, the quilting for both was supposed to have been done by Dena Powell. It didn't appear that Dena, known for her expert hand quilting, could have done both quilts. The Courthouse Square was consistent with Dena's famed work; the Brown Diamond did not appear to be the same.



It is certainly possible that the misalignment of some of the sashing might be due to Grace's original piecing. It's also possible that Dena's repairs and replacement of parts of the frayed or disintegrating sashing could explain some of the irregularity. I asked Nell, my expert quilter, "Do you think the Helman quilts could both have been finished by Dena?" For sure, I thought Dena did the Courthouse Square. Again, the neat, tiny hand stitching, the even binding—all were in line with the beautiful, professional quilting for which Dena was so well known. Calm, cool Nell replied, "Well, I do know Dena had problems with her eyes in her last years—she always wore dark glasses—it was a little hard for her to see." And Nell sent pictures.

On the preceding page is a newspaper clipping of Dena, who is on the left, working with Hands All Around quilters, preparing for Dena's 6th Annual Quilt Show, in 1979, sponsored by the United Methodist Women in Ashland.

Both Nell and Anne Billeter suggested that I try to contact Julia Powell Woosnam, Dena's daughter. I did. Julia's information was invaluable. After introducing myself to Julia by email, and explaining some of the mysteries regarding the quilts, I asked her if she had "any idea why the craftsmanship would be so different. Was it true that her mother's eyesight might have been failing at that time? Would that account for her use of a sewing machine, rather than hand quilting, on the binding? And would that explain why the stitching is not as regular? Do you think someone else helped your mother finish the quilt in 1973?"

The very next day, Julia wrote: "Hello Lynn, So nice to hear from you about Almeda's quilts...here are some answers for your questions:

"The Courthouse Square was finished by Dena before her eyes became unusable. That was my favorite quilt and I helped to finish the binding. The Brown Diamond she did herself, in a hurry before blindness

was complete, mostly done by touch and I helped to remove some blood stains as a result (too much information!) but I don't know if she machine stitched the binding or, more likely, one of my nieces may have finished it for her."

I thanked her for her immediate reply, telling her how relieved I was to know of the possibility of her mother or a niece using a machine to stitch the binding because of Dena's impaired eyesight. However, the machine stitching still provoked some unanswered questions, and I went on to explain in my next email that "...the diagonal design was done without using a "reverse" feature on a machine or ...turning the quilt around. Each approximately 3" straight line of the zigzag is done with a starting stitch and an ending stitch, abruptly cut-off. There are no continuous lines, which meant (1) a machine that did not have reverse (and that didn't seem possible, since machines from the 1930s, or earlier, did have that feature) or, (2) it may have meant that, perhaps, it would have been easier for your mother to determine the end of the fabric and simply cut the line there, by feel, rather than trying to reverse or turn and create a continuous line with brown thread on brown fabric. That would have been much harder to see. Or, (3) and this seems most plausible, "more likely" as you say, that someone else, with less experience in sewing, in machine sewing, might have tried to hurriedly finish the job. Would one of your nieces have been young and/or inexperienced in 1973, when the Brown Diamond quilt was quilted?"

Several days later, Julia replied, "Thinking over the...questions you asked, I believe that Mom (Dena) did all the sewing on that brown quilt. There weren't any younger people (my nieces and I are the same age) nor any inexperienced people allowed to work on her quilts. It was sad to see that she didn't realize just how bad her sight was, and she was determined to finish the work she had started. By summer of 1973 when the quilt show started, she needed some help walking and always wore her darker lenses to protect her eyes. She had cataracts on top of macular degeneration and a heart condition, but she kept doing as much as she could." Julia then offered to send other information.

Thank you, Julia, for your patience with me, as I asked for more information the very next day.

I thanked Julia for the pictures she sent and went on to tell her, “Last week, again we looked carefully at the Helman quilts. Another question arose: do you think that your mother used a treadle sewing machine to do the zigzag on the border of the Brown Diamond quilt? One of our best quilters (that was Nell) said that a treadle machine would make small, tight stitches like that and probably wouldn’t have had a reverse option on it—that might explain why each line of the zigzag design was cut, rather than being a continuous line. This is the only time we know about your mother using a machine. That’s one of the features that is puzzling to us. The rest of her work on the Brown Diamond, as you know, is all hand quilted. But maybe her rush to finish that quilt in 1973 led her to the use of a machine? As always, any interpretation that you pass on to us is so appreciated! Thank you so much!” And dear Julia replied the day after that, “Dear Lynn, what good sleuthing you are all doing, but, not a treadle machine, she used her 1950s Pfaff industrial and boy do I miss that machine – wish I’d gotten it!”

At last, nearly all our questions were answered!

So, here at the end of the story, I have to confess my most erroneous assumption: that the quilter of the Brown Diamond could not have been the same quilter as the one who finished Courthouse Square—that the quilter of the Brown Diamond quilt did not exhibit the same level of skill and expertise. How absolutely wrong! And I apologize. The same person—Dena—did quilt both quilts. The Brown Diamond quilting does not display less skill, but **more!** It takes the greatest of skill, unbelievably remarkable ability, to be able to finish an entire quilt while nearly BLIND! The fact that Dena may have done most of the work herself, is a great testimonial of her devotion to her craft and to her tremendous abilities as an absolutely outstanding quilter! Can anyone imagine what it takes to be a blind quilter?

Amazing!

No wonder Julia chose to donate Almeda’s Helman quilts as a memorial to her mother. Julia, thank you; Dena, thank you; Almeda, thank you for these priceless donations and thank you to all the RVGS and JCGI staff who helped me bring this story to life!



ROGUE VALLEY GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY: SNAPSHOTS FROM A HALF-CENTURY OF SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY

by Andrea Patterson and Cara Davis-Jacobson

This September Rogue Valley Genealogical Library Genealogical Society celebrates it's *semicentennial*—50 wonderful years of preserving the past so that others may benefit from the accumulated knowledge of so many who paved the way to where we are today. Please come and join us at the Jackson County Genealogy Library September 19-27 as we celebrate with special events and our free Genealogy Week. See our website for schedule and information (<http://www.rvgsociety.org>)

From a box of books in a garage to a professional library replete with over a dozen computer research and mentoring stations, a growing and impressive book and map collection, and timely subscriptions to essential genealogical online research sources, your Society has expanded greatly over the past 50 years. As an all-volunteer organization, when we celebrate our Society, we are celebrating each of you and all of your contributions to making our society what it is today! Thank you for making it all possible.

And now, here are some snapshots of our growth over the years:

Progenitors Forum of Southern OR

- The early Researchers
- 1964 First President was Lucille Geigle

Reorganized in 1966

- Now RVGS
- Ruby Lacy 1st RVGS President



Ruby Lacy

1978: 101 Charter Members


Marie Hogle
President 1973

Honorary Members

- Colleen Eccleston
- Jean Maack
- Leona Blankenship
- Gene Henry
- Audrey Bradshaw
- Emillee Brazill

Honorary Board Members

Ann & Larry Horton



Library Growth Require Moves

LDS Church on
Juanipero Way in
Medford 1971-1974



Garage on Kings
Highway, Medford
1974 - 1982



1982 Move

The Franklin Building
125 S. Central; Medford

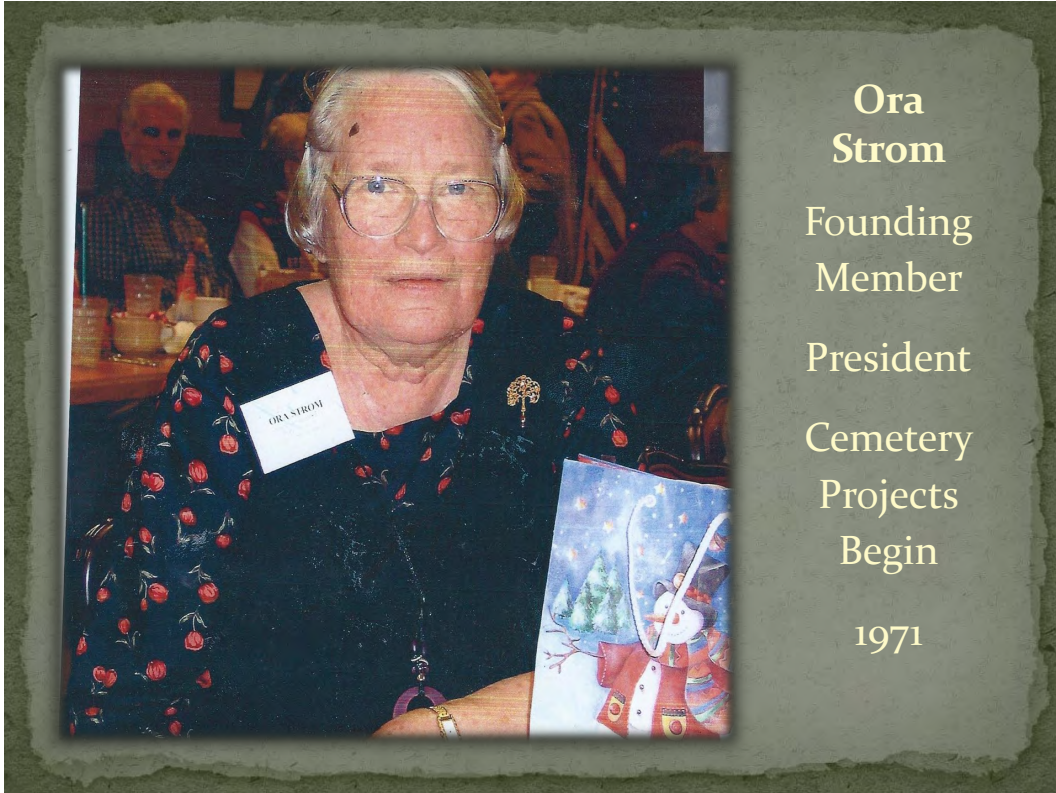


Audrey Bradshaw and member

Picnics began



Marian Miller is crowned Queen for the Day with a shower curtain!



Ora
Strom
Founding
Member
President
Cemetery
Projects
Begin
1971

1991–1993 Technology Comes to RVGS

Presidents

- Cliff Winkler, President
Donated RVGS's first
computer in 1991

Joe Burgess, President '92,
'93 began teaching
computer workshops & the
first User Groups

Jean Maack, President '96



"No Work Sale" Begins



2005 Board of Directors

2001 - 2013

Charleen Brown is elected in 2001 and serves 13 years on the Board as President.

A new library is established at 95 Houston. Charleen and Emilee Brazill, Library Manager, do the dedication with a Grand Opening

March 17, 2001

Charleen is bestowed with many credits and honors during her reign.

2001—The Move to 95 Houston Road, Phoenix, Oregon



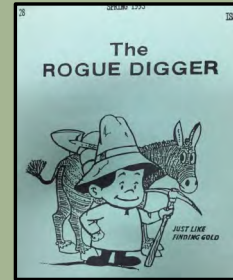


2001—The Move to 95
Houston Road, Phoenix,
Oregon

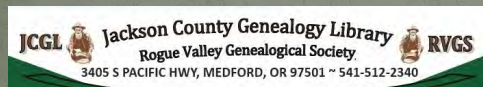


THE LAST 10 YEARS.....2006 to 2016

- ✓ Book Collection Expanded
- ✓ Computer Subscription Sites Added
- ✓ Websites, Library Databases Developed
- ✓ Technology Updates Ongoing
- ✓ Electronic Newsletter and Quarterly Added
- ✓ Seminars, Workshops, Classes Ongoing
- ✓ Computer & Software User Groups Formed
- ✓ Major Mapping, other projects initiated
- ✓ Grants Pursued
- ✓ Quilt Talks with Library Displays Given
- ✓ Railroad Show Exposure Added
- ✓ Public Programs Expanded
- ✓ Osher Lifelong Learning Institute Classes Added
- ✓ Film Rentals from SLC Provided
- ✓ Cemetery Project Expanded
- ✓ Pioneer Files Expanded
- ✓ Special Interest Groups Formed
 - Irish
 - German
 - Scandinavian
 - DNA (Basic and Advanced)



Our Current Jackson County Genealogy Library at 3405 S. Pacific Hwy., Medford, OR 97501



2016 Board of Directors



Andrea
Patterson,
President
2013-2016

2016 Membership
760

Thanks for your
support all these
years

Back Left: Marie Fulbright, Membership; Rich Miles, Finance; Barbara Northrop, Public Relations; Chuck Eccleston, Volunteer Coordinator; Anne Billeter, Vice President; Chloe Sternola, Library Manager; Marilyn Ayres, Education; Alan Marion, Maintenance.

Front Left: Betty Miller, Trustee; Charleen Brown, Past President; Sheila Kimball, Secretary; Barbara Shrewsberry, Treasurer; Andrea Patterson, President 2013-2016.

The Future is Bright

The Mission Statement of Rogue Valley Genealogical Society, Inc., is to inspire interest in genealogy, inform and educate the public, and maintain a growing sustainable library with a strong online presence.