

An Old Photo 'Obsession'

Henry Balsiger collects and preserves pictures of the past

By Jeanie Senior

Henry Balsiger has a message for anybody who has boxes of old photos: sit down, go through them, and identify who or what is in the snapshots.

"This is a very family-oriented way of spending time together," says Henry. "Going through grandma's photos, putting the identification first AND last name on each photo, because when your folks are gone, so's the identity."

Otherwise, "the photos get put in a box somewhere in a closet, and that's where they stay, until the descendants come along and throw the box in the trash because they don't know who it is."

History is only as good as the last person who tells the story correctly, he adds.

Henry, who lives in the Snowdon area, acknowledges the truth of his wife Linnie Talman's claim that he is "obsessed" with photos.

"My goal is to collect as many photos as possible. It doesn't matter what they are," he says. "To me, they're all treasures."

Treasures to be preserved, that is. Henry started his quest with the photograph collection of the Gorge Heritage Museum in Bingen, about 11,000 photos he scanned onto CDs.

"I started about a year and a half ago," he says. "They were kind of

apprehensive. They didn't want me to take the stuff out of the museum. But when I brought back the first CD (and the photos) they couldn't give me another box fast enough."

Having the historic photographs on CDs makes them computer accessible—searchable and available for researchers to duplicate. That is a service few museums can offer, although Henry says many others hope to digitize their archived photos.

When he talks about collecting, Henry is not referring to accumulating stacks of old studio prints and



Henry Balsiger scans an old photo to transfer the image to a CD. The collections are donated to area museum archives.

snapshots. It is the images he is after, to transfer to CDs.

He is expanding the museum's existing archives on CD and copying the old photos collected by area residents, who he calls clients or customers.

No money changes hands, and the people who own the photos maintain ownership. Henry gives them a CD of the images.

Another CD goes to the Gorge Heritage Museum, or to a museum where the pictures will be most relevant to their collection.

If someone does not want the photos to leave their house, Henry

says "I can scan almost everything they have, on site in their home," using a portable scanner and a laptop computer.

Identification takes the most time.

"I like to have as much accuracy as possible," says Henry. "Especially older folks, who still have children around. I've insisted the children be involved in what I'm doing."

Some people hand him albums or boxes of photos to copy. He recently scanned books of snapshots from a pioneer White Salmon family, as well as a collection of post-

cards mailed to the same family in 1909, themselves a treasure because of their subjects—ranging from Gibson Girl prints to early photographs of the region.

What Henry calls "the biggest treasure I've run across so far" is a collection of photos and memorabilia from early riverboat captain Charles Spencer, including photos of the Spencer family, riverboats on the Columbia and Mississippi rivers, and

newspaper articles about the fare wars waged by the Columbia River steamboat companies. Spencer lived in the White Salmon Valley.

Henry made use of the barter system when he copied the photos.

"He wanted some train photos in the Gorge area," he says. "I've got quite a few. He brought these items, and I gave him what stern-wheeler photos and railroad photos I had."

Henry has also copied photos for people in Hood River and Parkdale.

"I don't care where the photos come from," he says. "If I've got ID of places, the museum will share

them, also.”

He sends some photos to other museums: airplane pictures—for example—go on a CD for the Evergreen Aviation Museum in McMinnville, Oregon.

Still, Henry says, “90 percent of the people I get photos from have never been to one of the museums. I’m not doing it for them. I’m doing it for their children and grandchildren.”

Part of Henry’s love of historic photos comes from his link to the area where he grew up. He is a descendant of the pioneer Balsiger family, which settled in the White Salmon area. He left after school to join the Navy, then went to work for Hughes Air West airline.

Both Henry and Linnie, who worked in customer service for the airline, are retired. They enjoy the house they built, with its Mount Adams view.

“We’re happy to be retired. We’re too busy to have jobs,” he jokes.

Henry and Linnie devote much of their time to community work.

“God’s been really good to us,” says Henry. “It’s time for us to give things back, if he allows us to keep doing these things.”

Henry got involved with the museum when he saw an item in the paper asking for volunteers. He was a planner for the White Salmon centennial celebration.

Linnie, a quilter for three decades, is involved in a Gorge quilting group. She contributed to the White Salmon centennial quilt. Another of her pieces, depicting the lumber flume down the Gorge, is in the Gorge Heritage Museum.

Linnie teaches water aerobics three days a week. The couple are avid square dancers. Henry is president of the Gorge Plus Square Dance Club.

Henry and Linnie have come up with another idea for displaying history: He salvages old four-pane windows, and they mat and frame historic photos in them. Auctions of the picture windows are popular fund-raisers. ■



Henry and Linnie show the matted and framed historic photos they display in an old four-pane window. The picture windows are popular auction fundraisers.