



PLAQUE HONORING the late R. M. “Jerry” Wright who served Skamania County for more than 60 years in a variety of capacities, most recently as Court Commissioner, is presented to his son and daughter-in-law, Deputy Sheriff Jack and Kay Wright, at Monday’s (Feb. 19, 1967) meeting of the Board of County Commissioners. The plaque will be permanently displayed in the County Court House. From left: Commissioner Jim Attwell, Kay Wright, Commissioner Tonnie Lundy, Jack Wright, and Commissioner Lyle Ternahan.

(Skamania County Pioneer)

Skamania County Lost Colorful Figure In Death Of Jerry Wright

Skamania County is rich in history and legend, and there's a little of both in the name of R. M. "Jerry" Wright, who died January 22 at the age of 88.

He had served Skamania County for more than 60 years, and the volume of anecdote built up around his familiar Court House figure had made him a legend even in his time.

The following obituary is history. The legend will grow as stories involving Jerry, some apocryphal, are passed along to future generations.

* * *

Mr. Wright was born near Huntingdon, Pa., May 30, 1878. As a young lad he was water boy for a section gang on the P. R.R. during the summers of 1889-90-91, the youngest employee on the railroad at that time.

He attended Juniata College for 2½ years and was graduated from Mercersburg College in Pennsylvania. He received his law degree from Dickinson School of law (also in Pennsylvania) where he was a member of Delta Theta Phi, honorary law fraternity, in 1903. That same year he was admitted to the Cumberland County bar.

He was married to Catherine Spotts in Carlisle, Pa., on June 17, 1902 and the couple came west shortly after he finished law school.

By Train, Boat

They traveled by train to San Francisco and from there by boat to Seattle. Mr. Wright was admitted to law practice in Washington State in 1903.

Mr. Wright met Moman Stevenson, legislator from Skamania County, in Olympia in 1904, and Stevenson induced the young attorney to go to his home county. At that time there was no attorney in Skamania, and county commissioners had to hire a Vancouver attorney to handle their cases.

Sam Samson, another well-known name in Skamania County, who figured prominently in the Alaska Gold Rush, had met Mr. Wright in Seattle and the two became good friends.

Mr. Samson offered the young lawyer a handsome sum to go Alaska and practice law, but Mr. Wright had already committed himself to Skamania County and did not accept his offer.

In 1904 he built a home just east of the present sheriff's office, and this still is occupied by Mrs. Wright.

Before Railroad

The small town then, in the before construction of the Spokane, Portland and Seattle railway, was concentrated along the river banks, and there was nothing but woods north of the Wright home, the pioneer recalled later.

He started practice at Stevenson on June 16, 1904, Was elected Skamania

County prosecutor for the first time in November 1904 and served in the job intermittently thereafter for a total of 25 years. As part of his duty, Wright also served as ex-officio coroner.

Wright was chairman of the Washington State Presidential electors for Coolidge, served a considerable number of times as Republican county chairman and state committeeman, was candidate for Superior Court judge and once for Congress.

Mr. Wright reportedly won by a large margin in Skamania in trying for jobs serving a wider area, but the county population was too small and he was beaten in the total results.

Clerk-Treasurer

The Stevenson resident was town clerk-treasurer for a total of 18 years, and court commissioner for 28 years. In the latter job he handled legal work in the absence of the judge.

He was county assessor for seven years, shortly after World War I.

For 10 days in 1941 Wright was legally the county sheriff, following the sheriff's death. Under law, the coroner acted as sheriff until a new official was named. During those same 10 days, Wright also was prosecutor, court commissioner and town clerk-treasurer.

Retired In 1947

Wright retired from practice of law at the end of his last term as prosecutor in January 1947, but retained the commissioner position which he termed "ideal for something to do in retirement."

During the Spanish American War Wright was a private in Company A of the Fifth Pennsylvania Infantry, serving in the states.

During World War I, Wright was a first lieutenant in the infantry, but was overage in grade and didn't serve overseas.

Active In Lodges

The retired attorney was a charter member of the Skamania Lodge, 207 F&AM., the Afifi Shrine of Tacoma, a life member of the Elks Lodge of Carlisle, Penn., the American Legion, Spanish American War Veterans, Sons of the American Revolution; Eastern Star and his law fraternity.

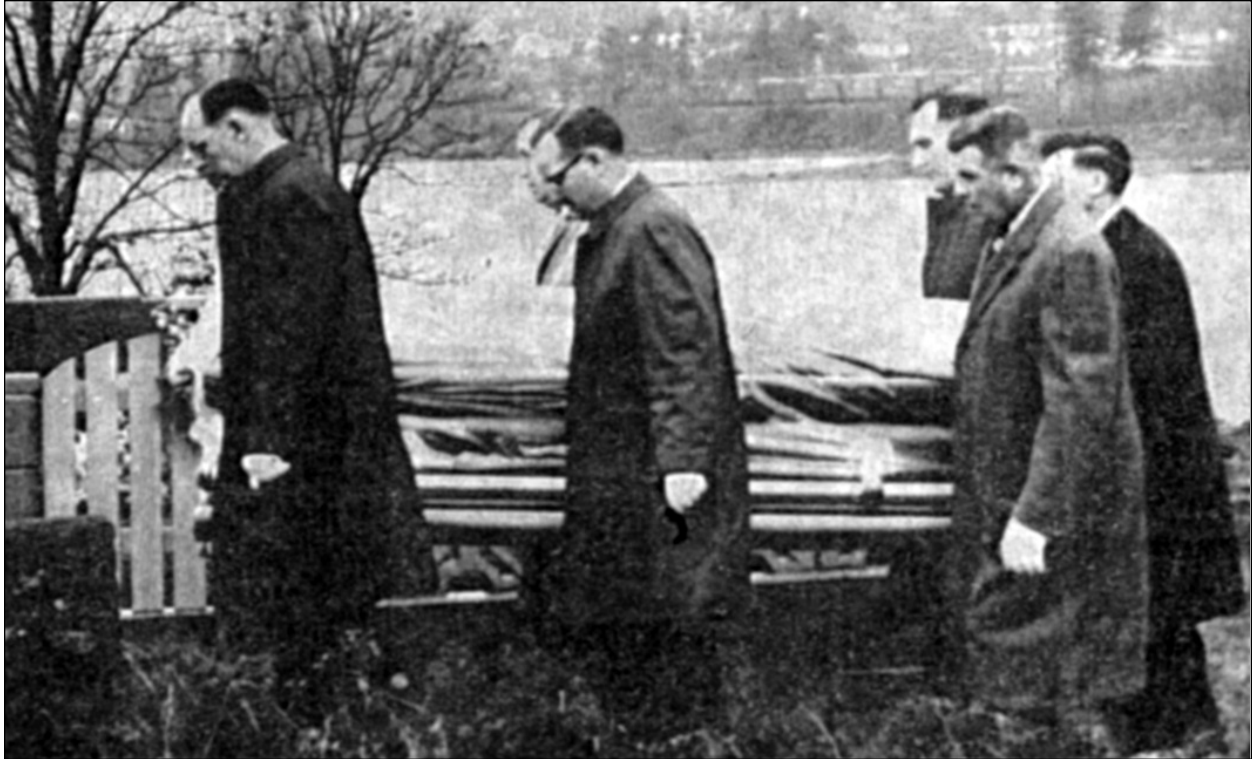
A favorite hobby was reading, and the Civil War was his main interest.

His last official ceremony was the swearing in of the county officials on Jan. 10.

64th Anniversary

He and Mrs. Wright had celebrated their sixty-fourth wedding anniversary in June.

Survivors in addition to the wife, are a brother, Claire, Huntingdon, Pa.; a son Jack, who is a Skamania County deputy sheriff, and four grandchildren, Cathy, Rosanne, John and Mary Louise Wright.



FINAL TRIBUTE is paid R. M. “Jerry” Wright, Skamania County Court Commissioner, as his casket is borne by fellow members of the Masonic order to spot overlooking the Columbia River at the IOOF Cemetery. In background, the town of Stevenson which Mr. Wright “adopted” in 1904 and in which he spent more than 60 friendly and fruitful years. Casket bearers are, from left, Don Leer and George Christensen Jr., Bob Salvesen and Frank Goepel, and Irv Sterns, Jr., and Lowell Ash. Assisting is Tony Mosbrucker of Gardner’s Funeral Home which handled arrangement.

Court Commissioner Jerry Wright Passes; Had Served County Since ‘04

Funeral services were held Wednesday for R. M. “Jerry” Wright, Skamania County Court Commissioner, pioneer attorney, longtime Prosecuting Attorney and active in community affairs since 1904, who died Sunday, January 22, at the age of 88.

Services were held at Gardner’s Funeral Chapel with interment at the I.O.O.F Cemetery in Stevenson. Masonic rites were read by members of the Skamania Lodge 207, F.&A.M. of which Mr. Wright was a charter member.

A complete obituary will be carried in next week’s Pioneer.



Museum Musings

by Merna DeBolt

October 2011

Kay Wright: A Girl From Chicago Part I

“It’s an ill wind that blows nobody good.” The “ill wind” in this story involves a recent auditor. Gloria Howell received a national award for her work in this unpleasant case. As a result of the publicity surrounding Gloria’s part in bringing it to everyone’s attention, an email arrived at The Skamania County Pioneer’s office.

It was from Thomas Coad. He was editor of this newspaper in 1952 and 1953. He had observed some corruption in Skamania County’s past and wanted to share his observations with Gloria and the editor of the paper, Joanna Grammon.

All this was published in the June 1, 2011 issue of The Skamania County Pioneer in Joanna’s column, “The Eye of the Storm.”

When Kay Wright read this, she was surprised to see Tom Goad’s name. In the early 1950’s, she had gone to the Pioneer office with her friend, Helen Hayes. Helen had a refrigerator to sell and wanted to place an ad in the paper. Kay had just arrived from Chicago and was hoping to settle in the area. Tom was complaining because his office girl was sick and he needed to replace her. After a brief conversation with Kay, he hired her.

At that time the Pioneer office was located on Russell Street just west of the courthouse. The telephone office was on the main floor; the newspaper office was in the basement. It was not a very pleasant place to work. It was a bit damp and often vines attempted to grow along the inside walls. The restroom was not fit for a lady so Tom insisted Kay use the facilities across the street at the courthouse. The building no longer exists but was close to the present day title company.

Tom did all the news gathering and solicited all the advertising. He learned how to operate the Linotype and newspaper presses. In addition to that, he addressed 1,200 papers that were to be mailed.

As soon as Kay read Joanna’s column, she phoned the Pioneer and talked to Joanna and to Gloria. They were surprised to learn that Kay had worked for Tom Coad. Gloria emailed him and told him that Kay Adams still lived in Stevenson.

At that time Tom and his wife were making arrangements to attend the Shakespearian Festival in Ashland, Oregon. They were planning to drive on up to Stevenson to meet Gloria and Joanna. When he learned Kay Adams Wright was here he said, “I must meet her when I come.”

So, on September 19, 2011 two old friends, now both in their 90’s, met at Skamania Lodge.

Webster’s defines coincidence as a striking occurrence of an event apparently by chance. You decide.

Museum Musings

by Merna DeBolt

October 2011

Kay Wright: A Girl From Chicago Part II

How do you say thank you to someone who has made their life a life of service; to one who has contributed their talents generously for several decades? Too often we wait until they have passed away before we praise them with tender eulogies. It is difficult to express the feelings of admiration that many local people have for a wonderful woman who lives among us.

So, this is Museum Musings' tribute to a dedicated supporter of the Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center Museum and a faithful member of our community, Kay Wright.

She was born in Chicago, Illinois. She and her sisters grew up helping their mother, Rose, who, as a child had been afflicted with polio. Rose Adams taught her family the importance of being responsible workers.

Kay attended a Catholic school until it became time for her to go to high school. This building was quite new. It had been recently constructed by WPA workers. Upon her graduation in 1940, she found employment in the catalog department of a Montgomery Ward store. She worked an eight hour day and earned twenty-five cents an hour.

Kay was employed for several years at Montgomery Ward, but was often transferred to distant locations. That made getting to work in the winter a bit of a challenge. She managed, using public transportation which was often not too reliable.

Kay saved her money and after WWII, she bought a brand new 1949 Ford car. She had a dear friend, Helen Hayes, who had moved out west with her husband, Victor. She wrote Kay and urged her to come out and see the beauty of the Columbia River Gorge. Kay invited her two sisters to accompany her and soon all three were marveling about the scenery in Skamania County.

After Kay returned to Chicago, she kept thinking about a change. Maybe it was time to seek a new way of life in the West. She wrote to Helen and Victor and they encouraged her to come. She could live with them until she found work.

It seemed it was meant to be because Kay had only been here for just one day when Tom Coad, editor of the Skamania County Pioneer, hired her to be his office girl. This job lasted two years, and then the editor decided to sell the paper and seek greener pastures.

Kay immediately found work at the Stevenson Plywood Company; next at Joseph's Department Store and then as a time keeper at the Hegewald Timber Company.

The Sterns, the Christensens and the Hayes took Kay under their wings and decided to do some “match making.” They felt Jack Wright had been a bachelor long enough and encouraged him to take notice of this young lady, Kay Adams. Kay and Jack had seen each other on a daily basis at work, so they weren’t exactly strangers.

Saturday night became the night to “go out on the town.” (The town was Hood River.) The three couples encouraged Jack to join them and invite Kay to come along. It worked! After a short courtship, Jack took Kay to Portland to select a wedding ring and an engagement ring.

Now, it was time to meet Jack’s parents, Jerry and Kitty Wright, who were originally from Pennsylvania. Jerry was the first resident prosecuting attorney for Skamania County. Kitty was from a very wealthy family and so Kay was a bit nervous. She dressed in her very best. On the walk up to the front door, Kay was unaware that she had stepped in some dog droppings. A large portion was still clinging to her elegant high heels. As she was being introduced, she wondered what that awful smell was. Looking down, she saw the source of the odor and was so embarrassed. Jack took her shoe outside and cleaned it. However, to her relief she was welcomed warmly.

Jack and Kay were married November 22, 1952. Victor Hayes walked Kay down the aisle because the priest insisted she should not go alone. It was a small wedding. The “Match Makers” were there pleased that they had succeeded. In due time, four children blest their home: Kathy, Rosanne, John and Mary.

Sheriff Jim Reid asked Jack to come and be the night deputy at the sheriff’s office. Kay was content to be home with her family. But Dr. Rehal wanted her to come and work for him. He felt it was possible. Jack worked nights, so he could be home with the children in the daytime. She finally agreed and spent several years working in the doctor’s office.

Kay was rarely without a job. Mildred O’Donnell, County Treasurer, asked Kay to come and work just a few hours a day to help get out the tax statements. Before long Kay was appointed deputy treasurer. When Mildred retired, Kay ran for the office and was elected in 1974. She was re-elected in 1978.

Now, it was time to think about retirement. In spite of all her duties, she had been a faithful worker in the church. She has supervised countless receptions. She served several years as treasurer of the Skamania County Historical Society and hosted a reception for Burlington Northern, with the result being the donation of the 1947 little red caboos. Her attention to details is much admired by all who “roll-up-their-sleeves” to assist her.

Her dedication to the museum has encouraged the staff and its volunteers. She has been an inspiration to all who know her. Thank you, Kay. Glad you left Chicago.