

Out of the Archives

a newsletter from the Washington State Archives

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Office of the Secretary of State

Employee Spotlight

Meet Volunteer Helen Lewis

Contributed by Midori Okazaki, Archivist at the Puget Sound Regional Branch in Bellevue, Out of the Archives, February, 2016.

In January, the Puget Sound Regional Archives celebrated the 93rd birthday of volunteer Helen Lewis. Helen has been an official volunteer at the Bellevue branch for 10 years, but she has been a regular presence at the Archives for over 25 years.

Under the auspices of the South King County Genealogical Society, Helen published numerous genealogical indices. She now shares her expertise with the Archives and has helped to populate the Digital Archives webpage.

Helen was born in rural eastern Oregon, graduated from West Seattle High School and spent her early adult years in remote locations in Idaho, where her husband was employed by the Idaho Power Company. The family moved to Seattle in 1958 and Helen began working the following year for Boeing.

Her interest in genealogy began in the 1970s. Her son was stationed by the Navy in Europe and headed to Ireland for a cycling trip. He asked her what she knew about the family's Irish heritage, which was next to nothing. But she dove into researching the family's history, and after all these years, she has yet to climb out of the genealogy rabbit hole.

Helen became a charter member of the South King County Genealogical Society, and shortly after she retired from her 30-year career at Boeing, the group embarked on a project to extract and transcribe the Seattle and King County Death Records held at the Puget Sound Branch.



Helen Lewis, beloved volunteer at the State Archives' Puget Sound Regional Branch.

Helen, who lived within walking distance of the Branch's former Burien home, began her regular visits to the Archives. She immediately became known as a stickler for accuracy and completeness. After completing other transcription and indexing projects for the South King County Genealogical Society, Helen began lending her expertise to the Archives.

As a result of her many years of working with historic records, Helen can readily decipher the handwriting of even the least literate territorial-era clerks. Genealogy is sometime a matter of guess work and Helen has a deep knowledge base to tap into. She is familiar with names that have long fallen out of fashion, old-fashioned naming and recording conventions, and names from a variety of ethnic groups. She can intuit the correct transcription of what looks to the untrained eye to be a scribble. All her acquired knowledge goes into making her an expert transcriber—proof that age and experience matter.

No longer making her yearly trek to the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Helen instead dedicates her efforts to volunteering at the Puget Sound Branch. She comes twice a week and rarely misses a day – she never seems to suffer any sort of illness and bounced back from hip replacement surgery at the age of 91 with remarkable speed!

Helen has turned a personal hobby into work that helps fulfill the mission of the State Archives and benefits her fellow genealogists and other researchers not only throughout the state, but around the globe.
