

## 75 years later, bridge plaque honoring pioneer woman goes to family

**F**or many people, 1937 was an eventful year. The Volkswagen Group was formed in Germany while Adolf Hitler secretly relayed his plans for acquiring "living space" for the German people. He would invade Poland, kicking off what became World War II. The Spanish Civil War was in full swing, and Japan continued its invasion of China. In Russia, future cosmonaut and the first woman in space, Valentina Tereshkova, was born. This was also the year aviation pioneer and author Amelia Earhart and her navigator Fred Noonan disappeared over the central Pacific Ocean while attempting to circumnavigate the globe.

### Closer to home

Closer to home, the year 1937 saw the Golden Gate Bridge in California open to traffic while on the other side of the country, in New Jersey, the German airship Hindenburg crashed and burned, killing 35 passengers and crew. In South Dakota, at Mount Rushmore, the giant sculpture of Abraham Lincoln's head was dedicated and all over the country, communities continued their slow recovery from the Great Depression.

In Oregon, the State Highway Department (now known as the Oregon Department of Transportation) was 24 years into its initial effort to "Get Oregon out of the mud." One of the highway sections under construction in the southeast corner of the state was U.S. 20 near Burns. And, overlooking the project from her front porch was area pioneer Susan Dixon Whiting. From the comfort of her rocking chair, the 66-year old wife and mother observed contractor M. L. O'Neil and Sons as it constructed the highway and replaced an old timber deck bridge over Poison Creek with a new concrete deck structure, one of the first of its type in the area. Susan's interest in the project and visits to the work site prompted the contractor to honor her with the first passage over the structure when it was completed in July of 1937. She died only a few days after her proud crossing.

### Watching the world from her front door

Susan Dixon Whiting was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Dixon, a Harney County pioneer family who settled in the area in the early 1880s. She was born in 1870 and attended the Burns grade school, later marrying Frank Whiting, whose family settled in the area around 1873.

"She watched with interest the completion of the central Oregon highway passing in front of her door," wrote Archie McGowan in 1938. McGowan operated the Burns Garage with his father in those days. His grandfather founded the community, naming it after the poet Robert Burns.

Knowing the history of the area and its inhabitants, McGowan felt it fitting that the new U.S. 20 Poison Creek Bridge be named after Susan Dixon Whiting.

"Besides being a wife and mother, Susan Dixon Whiting was a woman who was unusually interested in home development, neighborhood progress and public activities," wrote McGowan in his request to have the structure named Susan's Bridge. She was "honored and respected as an A-1 citizen."



*OTC Commission Chair Pat Egan presents the bridge plaque to family member Ron Whiting.*

## **Structure named for Susan**

From late 1937 through 1938 McGowan corresponded with the Oregon State Highway Commission and the Oregon Historical Society to coordinate getting the structure named in memory of Susan, honoring her unique community spirit.

The State Highway Commission approved the bridge naming request at its October 20, 1938, meeting and a brass bridge plaque was placed on the structure. The plaque reads:

SUSAN'S BRIDGE  
SUSAN DIXON WHITING  
PIONEER OF 1883  
DIED 1937  
WIFE, MOTHER, CITIZEN

While the bridge was eventually replaced in the 1960s, the plaque remained mounted to the guardrail of the new structure for several years before being removed and stored by ODOT. When District 14 personnel were getting ready to send their excess bridge plaques to the Salem archives, region staff decided that because of the personal nature of the plaque's inscription, it should be transferred to family members.

## **Plaque back in the family**

Now, 75 years after the bridge was named for local pioneer Susan Dixon Whiting, Director Matt Garrett welcomed her great-great grand nephew Ron Whiting to the August 21, 2013 Oregon Transportation Commission Meeting in Burns. After Garrett's brief recap of how the bridge became named Susan's Bridge, OTC Chair Pat Egan presented the inscribed brass plaque to Mr. Whiting.

Ron, who with his wife Linda operates a ranch in the Burns area, was pleased to receive the historical marker. After thanking the Commission and ODOT, he told the crowd that it would be proudly displayed in an art gallery that is part of the ranch property.

### ODOT ###