The 24-foot Oregon pioneer faces west from the top of the Oregon State Capitol.

Photo by DANA E. OLSEN The Oregonian

A CAPITOL IDEA

Oregon gets set to fete birthday of half-century for state building with parades, re-enactments

By JANET FILIPS
of The Oregonian staff

Nineteen-year-old Winona Robinette Sellard stood outside the new Capitol in Salem at 2 p.m. Oct. 1, 1938, wearing a proper skirt and jacket, and listened to dedication speeches that failed to stir her in the manner of the Gettysburg Address.

She did enjoy watching Mark O. Hatfield, the good-looking son of family acquaintances, who was playing horn in the Salem High School band. But the formal ceremony, pomp-filled as it was, didn't match the fire. "The fire was much more spectacular," 69-year-old Sellard says now from Eugene.

Sellard and her husband plan to be in Salem Saturday morning for more speeches as the state of Oregon celebrates the 50th birthday of its latest Capitol.

Eight months ago, Frances Bell, visitor services manager at the Capitol, asked her boss if he wanted to celebrate the building's birthday.

"I had no idea it was going to grow like topsy," said Bell with a laugh. More than 100 agencies and individuals helped in planning the extravaganza, co-sponsored by the Oregon Historical Society.

The ceremony will begin at 11 a.m. at the front (north) entrance of the Capitol on Court Street Northeast in downtown Salem. A parade will precede the event at 9:30 a.m., and the 234th Oregon Army National Guard Band will perform.

Highlight of the ceremony will be re-enactments of remarks from four men who spoke in 1938. Scott Larsen, sponsored by Timberline Lodge, will portray President Franklin D. Roosevelt; Harvey Scott will portray his father, Leslie M. Scott, who was president of the Portland Chamber of Commerce; Robert W. Chandler will portray Robert W. Sawyer, his predecessor as chairman and editor of The Bulletin of Bend; and Charles Martin II will portray his grandfather, Gov. Charles H. Martin.

A picnic at Willson Park (Court and Cottage streets west of the Capitol), with entertainment and food vendors, will follow at 12:30.

The spectacular fire was the reason there was a new Capitol to be dedicated at all, replacing the beloved copper-domed building that

Please turn to CAPITOL, Page C2

Stately building rises from ashes of history

Oregon Historical Society photo, #0334A022

1880 photo of old state Capitol, built of brick, sandstone and limestone. Ground was broken in 1873.

Porticos were added to the Capitol in 1888; the 187-foot-high copper dome, in 1893. It housed all branches of government until 1914. Fire destroyed it April 25, 1935.

The current marble-faced Capitol, built for $2.5 million after a national design contest, was dedicated Oct. 1, 1938.

Capitol: Some Oregonians unhappy with design, out of state architects of building

■Continued from Page C1

had served as Oregon's seat of government from 1876 until April 25, 1935. At 6:43 p.m. that day, a janitor called an alarm to the Salem Fire Department: Smoke — with flames still hidden — was filling the Capitol.

Otto J. Wilson of Salem was at glee club practice across the street from the east end of the Capitol when a fellow Willamette University student noticed smoke. That put an end to practice. Wilson raced with friends to the hazy rotunda, as people ran past carrying typewriters, boxes and furniture.

"As soon as the fire department arrived, they shooed everyone out," remembers Wilson, 71. "And all of a sudden, flames burst out from the tip of the dome."

As the evening wore on, the copper dome burned in the tremendous heat, feeding an inferno of oranges, pinks, blues and greens against the darkened sky.

The new Capitol has no such dome. Chosen by a special commission from 123 entries in a nationwide competition, the winner was a switch from the usual statehouses across the country. The design, conceived by two associates in the New York firm of Trowbridge and Livingston, "combined Greek refinement and Egyptian simplicity without the classical details of the former," explained the "State Capitol Souvenir Book," published Oct. 1, 1938, by The Statesman Publishing Co.

PURCHASING UPHOLSTERY FABRIC?
Accurate FREE yardage and labor estimates over the phone
Michael Talbert Interiors
Of Raleigh Hills
Phone 292-2053

The new Capitol was the center of controversy before a pencil had been put to paper. Gov. Charles H. Martin — "known as Old Iron Pants because he was a tough, happy warrior," said legislative historian Cecil Edwards — wanted the new Capitol built away from the congested center of the city, on a vacant hill south of Salem called Candeleria Heights.

But downtown businesses, crippled by the Depression, fought to keep the Capitol — and its foot traffic — downtown. To make room for the project, some of Salem's grand Victorian houses were torn down.

When a New York architectural firm landed the prize contract, Oregon architects — also hungry from the Depression — raised a ruckus and pulled all the strings they could. "Governor Martin stuck with his commission, and the legislators stuck with the commission, and they managed to hold on to the architect," said Chandler, who heard the story from the late Robert W. Sawyer, a member of the State Capitol Reconstruction Commission.

(Sawyer, a history lover, chose the historic Oregon figures whose names decorate the walls of the Senate and the House. He let Chandler in on his secret: In one of the sections of names in the Senate, the last letter of the final three lines spell Sawyer's initials: RWS.)

Economy wasn't a factor in the choice of candidates. The rebuilding was a Public Works Administration project, and the federal government contributed 45 percent of the Capitol's $2.5 million cost. (The wings were added later at $11 million.)

"It was a public works deal, and everything that went in there was first class, believe me," said former Sen. Harry Boivin, 84, of Medford. "I never thought it was a very well-planned Capitol for legislative efficiency. But it was beautiful. I liked it from the start."

Many Oregonians admired its clean, modern lines and cool Vermont marble. And others felt it looked, in a word, funny.

"The old statehouse had a cupola like Washington, D.C., and we thought statehouses should have a cupola. And this thing with a dome like a paint can was kind of different," said Harvey Scott, 64, of Portland.

C.C. Chapman, cynical editor and publisher of the influential Oregon Voter newspaper in the 1930s, derided the Capitol as lacking in majesty and efficiency. Moreover, Chapman reportedly sniffed that the Capitol "had a squirrel cage on top, with a beardless pioneer with a Boy Scout ax. He said that because the ax was single bitted," explained historian Edwards, 81, who also is former secretary of the Senate and chief clerk of the House.

"The Pioneer" actually does sport a beard, but it is trim and not really visible from the street. And according to the sculptor, Ulric Ellerhusen of New York, "The Pioneer" was fixing to build a shelter with the tarp (it's not a cloak) he was carrying. "And you can't pound stakes with a double-bitted ax," said Edwards.

The 24-foot-tall pioneer is cast bronze with gold leaf, and he, also, took some getting used to. "I think the fondness for the gold statue grew very slowly. Well, it wasn't traditional. I just remember some people shook their head," said Wilson. He chuckled. "I tell all my grandkids that it's my grandfather. Lots of people do that."

Other Capitol celebration week activities include:

Saturday — 6:30 p.m. Side Street Strutters, Disneyland Jazz Band, Willson Park Gazebo.

Through Oct. 1 — "What was Great in '38?" Birthday Card Display by Oregon schoolchildren, Room 50, State Capitol.

Friday through Sunday — "Up In Oregon," A Ratification Celebration, "new" vaudeville show of Oregon's history in music, 8:15 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday in Elsinore Theatre, Salem. Tickets at G.I. Joes statewide.

Saturday through Sunday — "100 Years of Oregon Railroad History," 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., Railroad Museum Car at railroad station, 12th Street and Pringle Parkway.

Volksmarch, throughout downtown Salem, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Register in front of Labor & Industries Building, on West Summer Street, N.E., a block north of the Capitol.

Saturday — Oregon Constitutional Debates, House Chambers, State Capitol, 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., sponsored by Oregon Committee for the Humanities and Oregon State Scholarship Commission.

Friday through Oct. 28: "Temples of Government: The Oregon Capitol Buildings in Salem," Oregon Historical Society Exhibit, State Capitol Galleria.