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THE
CLAYTON/DEER PARK
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Mortarboard

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Part six of

Tuffy's War: The Alvin "Tuffy" Luhr Story

— told by Tuffy Luhr —

— written by Wally Lee Parker —

Free — Take One

... measuring my day's work ...

"I was discharged from the army on the first day of November, 1945, and returned to my home on Loon Lake's Sunset Bay. The GI bill said I could go back to college, expenses paid, but when I got home, I was just a bundle of nerves. I wouldn't have been able to sit down at a desk and study for anything.

"In the early spring of '44, before I was drafted, the wife and I had bought quite a bit of frontage along the lake. We had three or four individual lots, plus another quarter mile of lakeside. I needed something to do, some kind of employment, so I decided to build speculation houses on our lake-front property.

"Lumber was scarce just after the war ended, so I bought a little sawmill that a bunch of farmers had put together on the Earl Jones place along Spotted Road — that was about a mile south of where Spotted crossed Highway 395. The farmers had sited the mill on a slope, but the way they had arranged everything the logs were moving uphill through the mill instead of downhill. So it wasn't all that efficient.

"The sawmill was supposed to be a portable. I leased a diesel engine to power the thing, and got my younger brother Allen Berg and another fellow to run it. We rearranged the workings so everything would flow through the mill better. We cut logs into boards, then hauled the lumber to a mill in Spokane to be kiln-dried and planed. First I used the lumber to build a couple of four-room cabins on

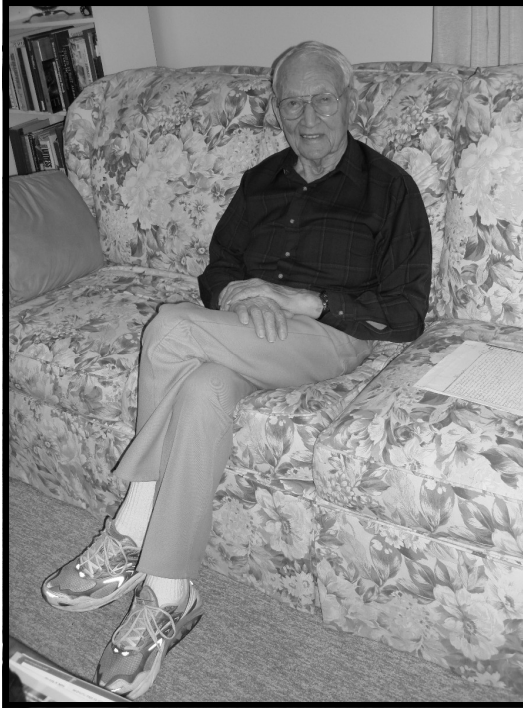
our lots. And before long I was selling my mill's extra output to a couple of Spokane brokers — Joseph M. Smith and Henry V. "Hank" Nielsen — who were buying and shipping out carloads of whatever lumber they could find as soon as they could find it.

"I was still restless. It was so bad that I'd be getting the wife up a four o'clock in the morning to help me haul lumber or sawdust or whatever, and I'd keep going like that until midnight. I don't know why Marjorie didn't just shoot me and be done with it.

"The wife's parents owned a sawmill in the Pataha Valley, near the little town of Pomeroy. I spent four or five months down there getting a planing mill installed and working, and generally upgrading their mill for them. That was when Joe and Hank asked me if I wanted to join them and their accountant in forming a lumber company. Because lumber was so scarce, they'd decided to expand into production to insure a reliable supply for their wholesale customers. That's how the Smith-Nielsen Lumber Company got started — and that's what I did for the next quarter century."

The available data suggests that Joe and Hank were quite the characters. Joe had gotten involved with the manufacturing and distribution of an industrial degreasing product developed by a Massachusetts corporation in the early 1930s. Henry was a well-experienced pilot who had flown fighters against the Japanese under the banner of the Chinese Air Force prior to America's entry into World War II, and after Pearl Harbor continued flying as a pilot for the Air Transport Command. Joe and Hank got

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Alvin "Tuffy" Luhr — 2008

together with the intent of distributing Joe's degreasing product to the aircraft industry nationwide and, since Hank knew airplanes inside and out, the two did extremely well. The trade-name of Joe's degreasing product was 'Gunk'.

When an offer to buy Joe's company came along, he took it. Looking around for a new business, the two decided to cash in on the postwar building boom by brokering lumber. And then, though neither had any practical experience in the lumber industry, they decided they could better exploit the chronic lumber shortage by moving into the manufacturing side too.

Tuffy said, "The first piece of equipment the Smith-Nielsen Lumber Company bought was an old wood-planer we found in the middle of a wheat field. Nielsen tinkered it into what he thought was running shape, turned it on, and — just in case — ran like hell. And we never stopped running after."

"Spaulding was a little place about ten miles east of Lewiston on Idaho's Clearwater River. We lived in Clarkston — where Richard and Susan started grade school — while I scratch-built and then

ran the partnership's Spaulding lumber-mill. The family would stay at our Loon Lake place during the summer — something that became a tradition for us — and I'd commute to the lake on weekends."

Smith and Neilson were associated with an accountant — Robert H. Anderson — who was likely quite a bit more than just an accountant. All seemed to have a penchant for forming supply chains of interlocking companies and partnerships. By 1950 the Smith-Nielsen Lumber Company, which appears to have actually been an equal partnership between Smith, Neilson, Anderson, and the new guy, Tuffy, owned a sawmill at Kettle Falls, as well as half interest in the sawmill at Spaulding. The other half interest in the Idaho mill was owned by the Pataha Valley Lumber Company, a corporation registered in Washington. And oddly enough, the Pataha Valley Lumber Company appears to have been owned by Joseph Smith and Henry Nielsen.

"After about five years of operation," Tuffy continued, "this guy came along with a deal to lease our Spaulding operation. We signed it over, and my family — including our new boy, David, — moved to Spokane."

"We bought a house on Brown's Mountain. And every day I would put on a suit and go to work in the partnership's downtown office. By that time the partnership had everything we needed to make lumber — including timberland. And don't ask me exactly how or why, but I don't think our group ever really had much of a chain of command. It was a partnership in every sense of the word, but instead of doing things together, we'd just talk about it and then go out and do our own thing — buying different companies and things like that. Of course Joe was the senior. He had lots of money and an unbelievable number of political and economic contacts. So we called him 'Boss'.

"The group owned ten different companies by time we were done. My main job was overseeing the group's four sawmills. The way things worked was the group would reach a consensus, then Joe would call the shots. For example, the group owned a machine shop in Spokane that manufactured automatic blade sharpening machines for both circular and band saws. Joe came to me and said, 'The sawmills are running pretty smoothly, but our machine shop is having problems. I think you should find out what's going on there.' So I added the machine shop

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to my list of responsibilities.

“For the most part I would sit at my desk all day, poking at a typewriter, and at the end of the day I would carry my entire day’s work to the mailbox in maybe six envelopes. A whole day’s work and it looked like nothing. I was used to measuring my day’s work by the thousands of board-feet of logs and lumber moving in and out, in the number of railcars and logging trucks being loaded and unloaded, in solving the headaches created by broken machines, late deliveries, and all those other inevitable problems that had to be sorted through to keep a sawmill working day after day. Sitting all day in the head-office was something I didn’t really care for.

“It seems like it was somewhere in the mid 1950s that a fellow at Harrison, Idaho, had gone broke and was trying to sell his lumberyard. Joe sent me over to break all the stock into saleable units. It felt so good to be working around real lumber again — to see it, feel it, smell it. And I think that’s what finally started me looking for some excuse to get back into the hands-on side of the business.

“My brother Allen was living in Colville at the time — working for Darigold. He invited the family up for a Sunday picnic. His family had a nice house on a side street close to the hospital. I liked the town, and was fairly familiar with it since our sawmills bought a lot of timber from Canada, so I was driving through Colville all the time on my way to deal with the Canadians. It was at my brother’s picnic that I started thinking Colville would put me seventy miles closer to those Canadian associates — and more importantly, moving north would get me out of the head office.

“First we moved to Kettle Falls where I worked building up our sawmill. After about four or five months my wife decided she really wanted to take a job at the library in Colville — and, since it was only a few miles east of Kettle Falls, it didn’t take much to convince me that we should move there. At first we leased our house with an option to buy. It was an older place located on the side of a hill — and at that time the highest house in town.

“All the kids graduated high school in Colville — the youngest going there all twelve grades.

“I don’t think the kids missed out on much. It must have been in the early 1960s that I had an industry meeting at Bozeman, Montana, and

we decided that as long as I was going we’d make it a family vacation and take the kids to Yellowstone.

“We took the train — Northern Pacific. They had those Vista-Domes. And my youngest, David, spent his time running from one end of that train to the other. While I was at the conference, the wife rented a rubber boat and took the kids down one of the rivers — and all kinds of things like that. And then we rented a car and drove to Yellowstone.

“One thing I do remember, that mountain air put me so soundly to sleep that first night at Bozeman that I slept right through breakfast and barely woke up in time for the beginning of the conference — and, since I was part of the program, that could have been a problem.

“As I remember it was about 1970 — after having accumulating ten companies during the 25 years we were in business together — that the older fellows decided they wanted to retire — all three of them. That meant we’d have to divide the assets. The seniors decided — since I was still pretty young and wanted to keep on working — to offer me whichever company I liked as part of my compensation. I decided to take the sawmill at Kettle Falls, as well as a good chunk of the timberland in the area. The Kettle Falls mill was the newest of our mills, and the closest to home. The rest the partners sold off.

“And I just kept going — with Marjorie as the mill’s timekeeper.

“It was going good. The mill had a veneer plant. I was shipping the veneer out to be made into plywood elsewhere. We were just getting ready to put in our own plywood plant when Boise Cascade came along and said, “Put a price on your whole operation. We’d rather buy you out than put up with the competition.”

“As far as the market value of the mill, equipment, standing timber, and contracts, I knew what everything was worth. But as far as getting out of the business, I wasn’t ready. So I told them I wasn’t interested. Coming back, they dropped a number on me that was almost twice my estimated market value, and at that point it just didn’t make sense not to sell.

“As part of the deal, the only thing I kept was one of the company pickups. Everything else was liquidated.

“So I hadn’t yet turned fifty-five, and I was retired. I tried my hand at golf because that’s

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what you're supposed to do when you're retired. It didn't turn out to be that satisfying.

"Early morning and I'd be lying in bed. I could hear the logging trucks out on the highway. I knew they weren't my logging trucks. I knew they weren't my logs. And it bothered me. It felt like somebody had cut off my arm. It felt like I didn't amount to a damn.

"I was retired for about four or five months when a fellow I knew back east — an old customer — called. He owned a bunch of lumber yards from Chicago on east and things weren't going well. He wanted me to look things over and give him an idea of what might be wrong.

"It took a week or two. One of his problems was that he didn't want to pay anybody for anything. He didn't think it was necessary to compensate people for their skills and experience — as a result he couldn't keep good staff. And he didn't have anybody educated in sales working for him. So I wrote up a report — a set of suggestions — and went home.

"A representative from Burlington Northern Railroad was waiting for me when my plane landed. He asked me if I'd be interested in building his company a new sawmill just south of Colville at Arden. He was a big guy, about 6' 3" and maybe 300 pounds. I told him I'd never really worked for anybody else. In reply he said, "Damn it Tuffy, you could try, couldn't you?"

"They were willing to give me eight and a half million dollars to build the mill. I really wanted something to do, although I didn't really care if I worked or not. So I looked at it as fun and had a very relaxed approach — especially since someone else was paying for everything. More than once Burlington's representative said to me, "Next time we hire somebody, it's gonna be somebody who actually needs to work." But all in all, we had a pretty good working relationship

"There wasn't really anything wrong with the original sawmill, so I kept it running two shifts while we were building its replacement. Everything would be new — meaning it took two years to complete. The worst part was getting all the permits — and at that time the permits were everything.

"After building it, I ran the place for another two years, and then I began thinking it might be time to retire again, this time to Loon Lake. So I quit the mill and built a new home on the lake.

"And then some tribal members from Omak approached me about a new sawmill they'd just put together that had lost almost three million dollars in its first year. I'd done business with the tribes before when I had the sawmill at Kettle Falls, so I was well known around Omak. It turned out to be quite a job getting everything up there straightened out.

"And I've been working at consulting on this and that ever since.

"A few years back Marjorie's health had declined so much that we decided to move into Spokane so we'd be closer to the doctors and such. And then in '07 she passed on — we'd been married 67 years.

"Two of our kids are retired now. Our youngest works for the Department of Transportation. And we have a bunch of grand and great-grand kids.

"I don't think I've ever actually retired. Just in the last few years I've talked to people from China — where they're short on electricity, short on water, and long on pollution. And I've consulted with a couple of guys from Australia who are trying to build a plant to generate electricity from sawdust. My main advice to them was to slow down. They're trying to rush their project along, and that's likely to get them into trouble. And then the Omak people have approached me again regarding a sawmill I'd built for them about ten years ago. It was allowed to wear down until it had to be shut it down. They asked me to get it going for them again. I'm trying to get the paperwork finished up on that.

"So all in all, it looks as if this is about as retired as I'm going to get."

This concludes "Tuffy's War". The Clayton/Deer Park Historical Society wishes to thank Alvin "Tuffy" Luhr for his willingness to undergo over the last year and a half the very intrusive process needed to create this story. "Tuffy's War" required the taping of six ninety-minute interviews, and then at least a dozen follow-up phone conversations. And through it all, Tuffy maintained his soft spoken sense of humor.

We also wish to thank all the individuals who assisted through research and technical advice our capturing of this remarkable story.

Regarding The Historical Society's Two Leno Prestini Nudes “Untitled ‘52” & “Girl with Banana”

by
Wally Lee Parker

The Clayton/Deer Park Historical Society currently owns two Leno Prestini paintings. The first, “untitled ‘52”, was painted in 1952 and given by Leno to his friend Silvio Costa. The painting then passed to Silvio’s brother Duane, and Duane gave the painting to his cousin, Bruno Costa. Eventually Bruno and Duane together decided to donate the painting to the C/DPHS. The second painting, which for lack of a better name I’m calling “Girl with Banana”, was completed in 1960 — three years before Leno’s suicide. The C/DPHS purchased the painting from a bookstore owner in Eugene, Oregon, in the summer of 2008. (See *Mortarboard #4*, or page 33 of *Volume One of the Collected Newsletters for the story*.)

If Leno discussed the story behind “Untitled ‘52” with Silvio, neither Duane nor Bruno is aware of what was said. The woman, the meaning — all of that remains unknown. All that can be said for certain is that several disturbing paintings of nudes with certain features similar to “Untitled ‘52” had been painted the year before. Those paintings are now in the Prestini collection at the Stevens County Historical Society’s Colville museum.

As for “Girl with Banana”, its very existence was unknown to the C/DPHS until last summer. The prior owner most certainly paid much less than the five hundred dollars he charged us when he originally bought the portrait at an undisclosed Oregon antique store. Most everything else about this expensive lady remains a mystery.

Details from “Girl with Banana” have appeared in the *Mortarboard* before. We only reproduced fragments from the painting because of concerns regarding the propriety of publishing an image with this much “exposure” in our official newsletter — just as the Society has worried about how we would display either of our nudes to the public. Not having an answer to this question, it appears we’ll have to experiment — it appears we’ll have to publish the full images of our nudes, then gauge the public’s acceptance or rejection by how much flack flies in our direction.

In the last year I’ve met several working

artists willing to discuss Prestini’s artwork. Using what they’ve said, what little is known about Leno’s history, and a lot of guesswork and speculation on my part, this is how I’d at least begin to interpret our two ladies.

Leno named his small Clayton studio “Vagabond House”. Frequent visitors to the studio recall having seen a number of Leno’s paintings in various states of construction over the years — it’s assumed “Untitled ‘52” was completed there. But so far no one recalls seeing ‘Girl with Banana’. In fact, no one in the entire community has yet come forward with any recollection of seeing this particular painting before. That doesn’t mean it wasn’t created in the Clayton studio, but it does leave open the possibility of it having been painted somewhere else.

Leno’s brother Battista left Clayton for California in the 1930s. Leno often visited his brother, but some evidence of other acquaintances and other visits has recently appeared. It’s always possible that our 1960 painting’s journey into Washington State in late June of last year may have been the first time “Girl with Banana” has been anywhere

Vagabond House — about 1955



A Clarence Glassbrenner Photo.

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near Clayton. She may have been one of his hinted at “California paintings”. We simply don’t know.

Recalling the 1950s and the time she and her then husband Walt Baynes spent at Clayton, Wanda (Parker) Vaughn (*the editor’s eldest sister*) said, “Leno was always nice to me. Several times when we stopped by Clayton’s Ramble Inn he bought my kids hamburgers.

“While sitting in the Ramble Inn, Leno painted a picture of Johnny Russell — it was his impression of Johnny Russell anyway. Leno asked if he could do my portrait, but I guess I was too bashful to say okay. That’s something I’ve long regretted.

“Walt and I spent a year in California in the later 1950’s, and somewhere along Route 99 not too far north of Sacramento we saw Leno’s pickup sitting in front of this — I can’t remember what kind of place it was. There’s no way there could have been another pickup like Leno’s — with the cow skull above the cab and his artwork on the doors. And I heard tell his paintings were hanging in places all around that area.”

If the specifics of Wanda Vaughn’s memory are correct, what was Leno’s connection to that particular location in California?

Jo Ann Cornelius, a resident of Castro Valley, California, and great-granddaughter of Clayton pioneer Erling K. Westby, recently sent the society a digital scan of a postcard mailed from Lincoln, California, by Leno Prestini. The small town of

Lincoln is approximately twenty miles northeast of Sacramento and about fifteen miles east of Route 99. The postcard was addressed to Clayton’s O. R. Wind. As for the date it was sent, Jo Ann wrote, “I’ve looked the postcard over with a magnifying glass. The postmark says October 24th — but no year. The year it was sent isn’t indicated anywhere on the card, front or back.”

Leno’s message reads, *“Dear Fitting Shed Bums, California is a great place for millionaires, but a poor place for bums. I am working in the fitting shed here pushing an air hammer. There are only 72 men in the fitting shed and 35 air hammers. I will be in Mexico before long. Well Goodbye Boys — L. Prestini.”*

The “fitting shed” Leno was working in was probably associated with the Gladding-McBean company since the company’s Lincoln pottery factory was pictured on the reverse side of the postcard. If similar to Clayton’s fitting shed, the air hammers at Lincoln’s terra cotta works were used to trim excess materials from fired terra cotta ware — something often necessary with large architectural ornaments designed to be fired in smaller pieces and then fitted together when installed at the point of use. Fitting and trimming at the factory insured everything would fall into place at the jobsite.

The Lincoln operation was founded in 1875 by Charles Gladding, Peter McBean, and George Chambers. In the 1930s the Lincoln factory — one of a number owned by the company — was a major producer of terra cotta, roofing tiles, sewer pipes, and pottery. In the 1950s the same Gladding-McBean company bought Washington Brick & Lime in its entirety, then shut down and demolished the company’s Clayton, Washington, factory. Although its Lincoln facility is now under a different corporate structure, the California factory is notable as the last major producer of hand-sculpted terra cotta in the country.

Trying to pin down the date the postcard was sent, society president Bill Sebright noted that, “The 2¢ stamp used on the card was first printed in the early 1920s. As near as I can tell it was last printed in 1934.” This does suggest a window for the mailing.

Understanding what Leno might have been doing at Lincoln, besides working, requires some background on the person the postcard was addressed to and then another look at the message it-

A Clarence Glassbrenner Photo.

Leno and Truck in Clayton — mid 1950s.



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self.

In 1893 Christina Wind, widowed with five children, married into Clayton's Cowan family. In 1890 or '91 George Cowan had claimed a home-

stead to the north of what was then known as Allen's Siding. As the Spokane Falls & Northern Rail Road laid track from Spokane to Colville in the summer of 1889, the company placed a number of sidings along its route. In 1893 the original Allen's Siding — named for a gentleman who owned a sawmill in the vicinity — became the site of Washington Brick & Lime's new brick plant. W. B. & L. platted a company town across the railroad tracks to the south of its new plant and named this new town Clayton.

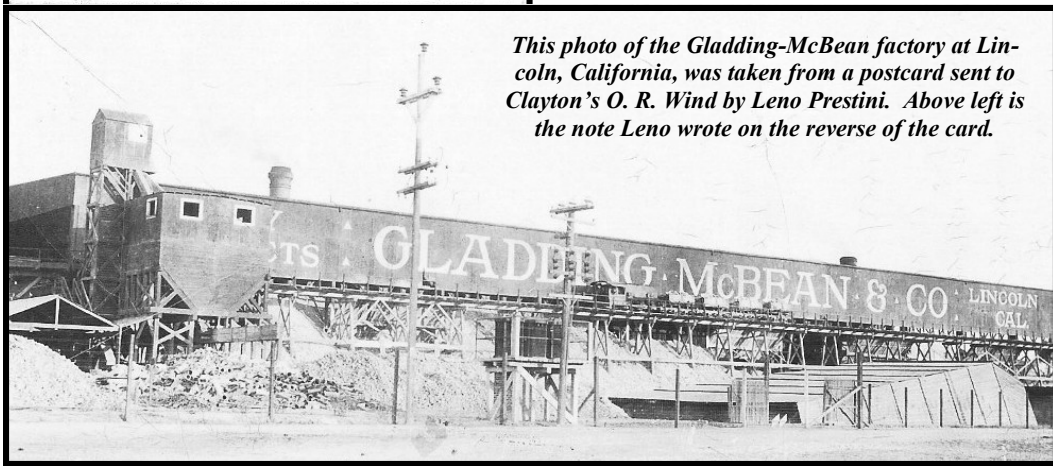
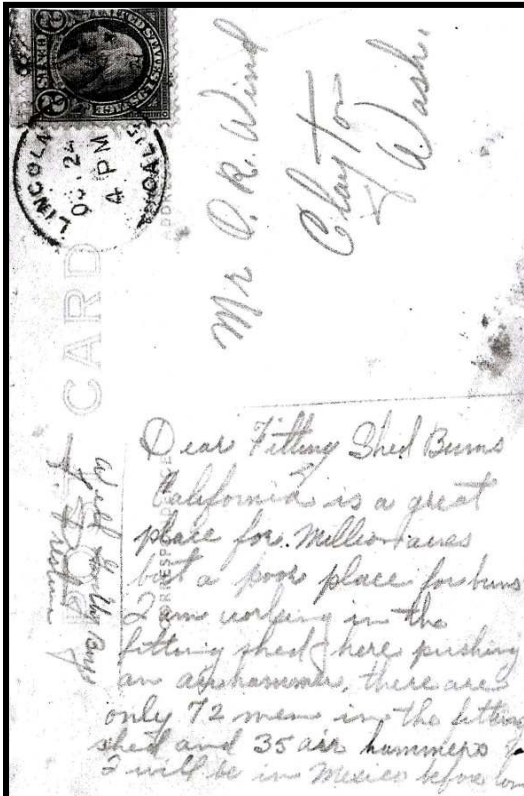
Around the same year Erling Westby took a homestead near the new town. His son, Albert Westby, after completing a correspondence course on the topic, earned a draftsman's position at Washington Brick & Lime's Clayton terra cotta factory.

In 1911 Ole R. Wind — Christina (Wind) Cowan's son — married Albert Westby's sister, Olga — making Ole R. Wind and Albert Westby brothers-in-laws.

Regarding Leno Prestini — it's believed the Prestini family arrived in Clayton around 1912. The C/DPHS has documentation that both the Prestini boys, Leno and his older brother Battista, were enrolled at the Clayton school by 1915 (the earliest records currently available). We know Leno didn't graduate from school, but dropped out and soon after went to work at the brick plant. Since our current understanding is that men had to be at least 16 years old before being eligible for hire at the Clayton factory, it's assumed that it would have been at least 1922 before Leno would have begun working there.

Clayton would have been less than ten

Postcard courtesy of Jo Ann Cornelius.



This photo of the Gladding-McBean factory at Lincoln, California, was taken from a postcard sent to Clayton's O. R. Wind by Leno Prestini. Above left is the note Leno wrote on the reverse of the card.

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years old when the Prestini's arrived. The 1915 school census records a number of Italian surnames, and it's likely that Italian would have displaced Norwegian as the town's second language by the time Luigi settled his family there. As for how well the Catholic Italian families integrated with those prior northern European Protestant settlers, we currently have little documentation. But it's probable that the younger people would have had the fewest problems.

We do know there was at least some discrimination in the larger community. On the school census forms, in the column for parents, Luigi had written his name as both Louis and Lewis. Ferdinando Prestini, Luigi's older brother, commonly went by Fred. And Ferdinando's son, Arnaldo Arturo Prestini, by the 1930s had completely changed his name to Arnold Arthur Preston. (Documents suggests that Ferdinando and his family were Spokane residents from 1900 on — except for a short period of time between 1910 and 1920 that the family spent on a farm north of Spokane in the Half Moon Prairie area.)

Mary DePaola-Hopkins — longtime friend of Leno Prestini and daughter of Deer Park's historic dry-goods-man, Mike DePaola — in a 2004 interview with the C/DPHS recalled that Leno loved to visit and loved to argue. She recounted one contention of Leno's that raised many an eyebrow, including hers — his certainty that at some point in America's not too distant future the races would be so inter-married that the national skin tone would be light brown. That was an absolutely scandalous and possibly even dangerous point of view in the 1940s and '50s. So it's likely that whatever cultural or racial prejudices may have been common in Clayton in the first part of the 20th Century, few if any belonged to Leno.

It also suggest that Leno had a very personable and intellectually intense personality — and was likely drawn to bright and creative people such as the artisans and craftsmen at Clayton's brick and terra cotta works.

Around 1924 Albert Westby gave up his draftsman position at Clayton's terra cotta and moved his family to Vancouver, Washington. Several years later they moved again, this time to Lincoln, California, where Albert took a draftsman's

position at Gladding-McBean's Lincoln terra cotta works. And at least one other member of the Westby family was working in the Lincoln factory at that time.

Erling Westby's granddaughter, Maxine Boysen, believes her father, Albert Westby, and Leno Prestini were longtime Clayton friends since she recalls Leno visiting the family years later at their new home in San Leandro, California — after Albert had transferred from Lincoln to a Gladding-McBean operation in San Francisco.

As pure speculation — based on the age of the stamp on the postcard apparently intended for the

“All the buildings were painted bright colors. It looked like the whole place was about to explode.”

men working in Clayton's terra cotta fitting shed, and the fact that the depression would have made work at Clayton's factory an on-

again off-again proposition — we believe the most likely dates for Leno's postcard was from the very late 1920s into the mid 1930s.

The postcard was addressed to O. R. Wind. Susan (Wind) Simpson of Castle Rock, Colorado, says, “O. R. Wind — Olaf Rye Wind — was my great-uncle. In his later years Ole was running Washington Brick & Lime's company store in Clayton, but it's probable that at the time of the postcard he was working somewhere in the Clayton factory.”

So we can place an acquaintance of Leno at Lincoln at the time we believe the postcard was written. From that we might suppose that Leno knew he'd have a job at Lincoln before he left Clayton. And the last line in the body of Leno's note — “*I will be in Mexico before long*” — suggests a motive other than obtaining work or visiting old friends for this particular trip to California.

Charles Stewart, son of Leno's close friend Burton Stewart, recalls one of Leno's visits during the late 1950s to the Stewart home on Loon Lake's Sunnyside Beach. “Leno was talking about his recent trip to Mexico over several long evenings — and his excitement with the trip gave me the distinct impression that it was his first trip. I still remember one of Leno's statements — “All the buildings were painted bright colors. It looked like the whole place was about to explode.”

Despite the excitement Charles noted, we would argue that the current evidence suggests Leno made at least several trips to Mexico, likely beginning in the early 1930s — as the O. R. Wind post-



Photo by Wally Lee Parker

“Girl with Banana” — Leno Prestini, 1960 — Oil on Canvas-Board

card indicates. And we believe whatever Leno saw there made a lasting impression on the nature of his art — in much the same way that Holland’s Vincent van Gogh was influenced by the light and colors of southern France.

Just as van Gogh painted scenes of the bullfighting arena at Arles when in the south of France, Leno appears to have become well acquainted with bullfighting while in Mexico — acquainted enough to paint several canvases based on the subject with — as noted by Chewelah artist David Govedare when observing Leno’s canvases — “an accurate eye for the subtleties.”

In another recollection of Leno’s visits to the Burton Stewart home, Charles Stewart remembers, “Leno was clearly both disgusted and fascinated by bullfighting. Not impressed with the matador’s haughtiness, and thinking the little spears the

picadors used to prep the bull for the matador unfair, Leno was definitely on the bull’s side. On the other hand, the way rodeo clowns like Clayton’s Homer Holcomb jostled with the bull on equal terms — well, Leno was very impressed with that.”

Jo Ann Cornelius speculated, “While in Mexico Leno might have seen some of the works done by muralist Diego Rivera. Leno’s work has that same display of symbolism. Prestini may have not had a political agenda as Rivera obviously did, but I do see a similarity in the way Prestini organized and used symbolism on his canvases.”

All said, it’s also not unreasonable to assume that Leno spent enough time in California to have done at least a few pieces while there — and possibly even some paintings or ‘studies’ when in Mexico. Those would be pieces we know nothing of. This holds open the possibility that there’s much

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yet to be discovered — just as “Girl with Banana” was recently discovered.

As for the society’s two paintings, we do know that both are unique, as is most everything Leno created.

When the creative urge struck, Leno tended to use whatever was at hand for a canvas. We have examples of sketches done on brown paper grocery bags and lined school paper. For backing his oils, Leno did use factory-made canvas-board, but he also used the traditional stretched, sized, and gesso treated canvas, and was even know to have used tempered hardboard — Masonite — at times.

As a normal part of preparing most art canvas, the woven flax cloth is treated to reduce porosity and stiffen the fabric by saturating it with a gelatinous glue called ‘size’. Next, to produce a nonporous foundation for the paints, the cloth is painted over with a mixture of glue and gypsum called gesso. The canvas beneath both our paintings is actually ready-made canvas-board — a thick pasteboard to which a treated canvas has been bonded. Although this canvas-board process has been used since the 1870s, there is still some debate regarding the archival quality of the underlying pasteboard, and now some questions regarding the durability of the acrylic gesso used on some boards manufactured after 1955. The issue here is a possible chemical incompatibility between the acrylic gesso and the oils in oil-based paints. As to whether acrylic gesso was used on the canvas-board beneath our 1960 painting, until we have a definite answer it would seem best to assume it likely.

No handwriting is evident on the back of the “Girl with Banana” canvas-board. The manufacturer’s printing states that the board is 22x30 inches. However, the actual measurement of the canvas is 22 inches high by 28 inches wide. It appears that two inches of the original width of the board has been cut away on the right hand side — Leno’s signature side of the canvas. The cut, which looks to have been made with a hand-drawn blade of some sort, appears old — the interior of the cardboard revealed by the cut having a uniform discoloration likely due to long exposure to air. The scored edge of the board does not reveal the types of brush-laps that the un-scored

edges do, which would suggest that the cut was made after the painting was completed. However, the placement of the signature — traditionally the last thing Leno placed on his canvases as a symbolic declaration that this particular work was finished — is consistent with many of his other paintings as far as the position of the signature in relation to the edge of the canvas. This, along with the general side to side compositional balance of the painting, tends to suggest that Leno trimmed the painting himself — before applying his signature.

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The painting’s current frame is a modern addition — light high-density plastic foam molded with classic embellishments and painted to resemble gilded wood. At some point the Society will probably replace it with some-

thing more appropriate.

“Untitled ‘52” is 18 inches wide by 24 tall — also on canvas-board. The frame is varnished wood, but regardless of whether it’s Leno’s own handiwork we will likely pattern the replacement frame for “Girl with Banana” after it.

It’s believed Leno made his own frames as an economy measure — a necessity brought about by the chronic lack of money endemic to the Great Depression. At least some of his frames were made from decorative wood moldings such as those commonly used in houses. In some instances Leno’s moldings also acted as stretching-frames with the canvas pulled taut across the back, secured with tacks, then prepared in the usual manner for canvas. In these stretching-frames paint from brush marks can be noted extending onto the frames from the canvas, and at least one painting in the Stevens County Historical Society’s collection has an image from the painting extending off the edge of the canvas and onto the frame’s surface.

As the above suggests, most of Leno’s paintings exhibited a casual quality. Others seemed very much to be personal ciphers — outward expressions of inner conflicts usually of a romantic and/or sexual nature. Sometimes he expresses political opinions — most often with sensitivity to the working class. And still other times he reveals a love of the western pioneer saga, though idealized beyond the literal interpretations seen in the works of what most consider typical western artists. These western

“Untitled ‘52” — Leno Prestini, 1952 — Oil on Canvas-Board



Photo by Wally Lee Parker

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themed paintings are his most popular.

As for the roots of Leno's artistic approach, my best guess would be that he was heavily influenced in both style and content by the 'American Regionalism' movement that became popular during the 1930s. Most of Leno's canvases display bright colors, sensual lines, and a strong geometry — sometimes evocative of an evolution of Art Deco. There were also an anti-industrialist and anti-fascist political element in Regionalism's underpinning philosophy, and traces of such can clearly be seen in Leno's pre World War II canvases. As said, this is just my guess — but as to whether it was American Regionalism specifically that influenced Leno's choices, or just that this school was such an influence on

the painters and paintings that Leno came into contact with, all that is something we'll have to learn from the 'experts'.

Leno certainly had sufficient enough an eye and talent to take elements from other people's work and make them his own. There's nothing inappropriate in doing this since art by its very nature is derivative. In fact, art tends to be so derivative that even the most radical stylistic departures seldom prove to be totally new to art's history.

Such derivative tendencies are evident when modern day artists strive for effects similar in style to the works of pre-historic cave painters or young children. These seldom successful attempts to free art from its burden of technical knowhow assumes as rationale that primitive or uneducated art is somehow closer to interpretive truth — though in actuality the uneducated painters are likely trying to do exactly what most artists throughout history have tried to do — make their art recognizable as whatever they intended it to represent. Most artists would prefer not to be asked for an explanation as to what it is they are trying to depict.

What we now see in the ancient caves appears as it does because the artists lacked the accumulation of knowledge, materials, technique, and tradition that would have allowed them to create better representations — though what they did accomplish is remarkable. It may well be that modern

artists usually fail in their attempts to reproduce the power of cave paintings — or childhood art for that matter — because that kind of power isn't usually derived from an artistic choice. Attempting to revisit primitive art through studied crudeness usual fails because moderns have no underlying faith in the shamanistic ritual such ancient art is rooted in.

Modern day artists copy the cave painter's style without concern for the magic beneath, and that seems to limit the authenticity — or more likely it corrupts the viewer's faith in the 'truthfulness' of these modern imitations.

Attempts to copy the elegant crudeness of childhood art tends to fare even worse, since most of us were — with crayon and finger paints — once able to do as well or better than

the educated professionals attempting to recreate — but only managing to imitate — childhood art. People tend to be unimpressed by artists attempting to emulate what they once did themselves as a natural part of growing up.

Whatever Leno painted, it's fair to assume it represented the best he could do at revealing something he believed in. He doubtless was limited to some extent by his lack of formal training. He probably picked up tips and pointers through conversations with other artists — such as the craftsmen he worked with at Clayton's terra cotta factory. He doubtless studied techniques explained in books. And he assuredly studied the works of other artists — reverse engineering the effects they obtained. In all this even the masters remain students — always observing, always experimenting. But as far as we can tell Leno didn't purposely imitate anyone. Whatever he absorbed through study he appears to have made his own. His manner of re-expression was always unique. And the quality most apparent in his art was his belief in it. That quality he shared with the ancient shamanistic artists — as do most artists worth viewing.

It's probable that over the millennia most of the art practiced in tribal communities had magical significance to the community. The artist was very often part of the religious center of the community. With the rise of organized religion, the artist

If children are less self-conscious in their artistic expressions than most adults, perhaps it's because children are closer to the magical thinking in which the artistic compulsion is rooted. Perhaps art and magic are made of the same thing. Perhaps both work by reaching down into the primitive mind and tweaking our perception of the real world.

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lost his/her distinction of unique shamanistic power and became just another craftsman servicing the needs of the community's religious, social and poetical leadership.

Beneath it all belief is still a necessity for artistic expression. It separates the true artist from those that imitate — but only if that belief is sustained by an equivalent need to explore ever deeper the technical skills inherent to the craft. Without a habitual compulsion to pursue the craft, all is just artistic affectation, pretension, and delusion.

Though specifically referencing poets, perhaps William Shakespeare defined the artistic temperament best when he wrote, "*Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, such shaping fantasies that apprehend more than cool reason ever comprehends. The lunatic, the lover, the poet, are of imagination all compact.*"

Shakespeare is suggesting that the lunatic, the lover, and the poet are all the same — in so far as the way they allow their fantasies to shape their lives. What Leno Prestini solidified on canvas were his fantasies. As with all artists, there is a quality of sympathetic magic to this art. It's as if the magical thinking common to early childhood has re-expressed itself — as if the artist believes the imaginings he solidifies on canvas can somehow migrate into the real world. As if the successful hunting scene an ancient artist painted on the wall of a cave had the magical power to produce that same success in the real world.

If children are less self-conscious in their artistic expressions than most adults, perhaps it's because children are closer to the magical thinking in which the artistic compulsion is rooted. Perhaps art and magic are made of the same thing. Perhaps both work by reaching out into the primeval mind and tweaking our perception of the real world.

'Girl with Banana' is a full nude. The figure is positioned in the most explicit pose found in any of Leno's currently known works. There may be other undiscovered examples even more revealing — so explicitness may not be a permanent distinction for this particular work. The nude is reclining on a bed with her posterior toward the viewer. Her face is obscured by an open magazine, or possibly a script — though her intense red hair is revealed flowing to the mattress.

The painting is largely contained within encompassing drapes — suggesting a theatrical set-

ting in which the bed becomes the stage. The area behind the bed is dark, showing no walls or furniture. Floating above the head of the bed within this dark space is a mask — likely styled after the "Comedy Tragedy Mask" duo considered the symbol of modern theater. Though the theater symbol consists of two masks, this singular might represent the comedy side of theater — although the expression could also be interpreted as a leer, suggesting that the mask is more representative of a satyr and therefore sexual lust.

There is no resemblance between the mask and the artist himself. Leno was quite capable of putting his own likeness into his paintings — and when he chose to do so he did so with a clarity leaving little doubt of his intent.

Upright in her left hand the nude holds a half-peeled banana. The painting's context seems to unambiguously state that the banana is phallic in meaning — despite the anti-Freudian caution that sometimes a banana is just a banana. The truth is a surprisingly large percentage of Leno's works are adult in conception, dealing in an allegoric manner with certain manifestations of the dark side of Leno's romantic nature — as this painting evidently does.

In her right hand, "Girl with Banana" holds a burning cigarette — freshly lit. A number of crushed cigarettes are noted in an inverted crown being used as an ashtray. Doubtless some not too subtle allegoric symbolism can be inferred.

"Untitled '52" is also a full nude. The girl is looking into a whirlpool. As in "Girl with Banana", the figure's face is not visible. Since Leno could render faces expertly when desired, deliberately obscuring the identity of the subjects suggests that they were something more than fantasy creatures. However, it should be noted that obscuring was not the rule — and with at least two of his nudes a tentative identification has surfaced. The possibility that at least some of the women in Leno's paintings were drawn from his real life experiences make his nudes — and the way they were portrayed — psychologically among his most interesting works.

Few if any of Leno's known paintings of female subjects suggest in composition what we would call nude studies — meaning drawings similar to the numerous charcoals produced by Andrew Wyeth, another artist heavily influenced by the Regionalist style. Most if not all of Leno's nudes seem

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to be fully developed paintings. If he created preliminary drawings or studies to work out the details of his next composition, as many other artists do, we are not aware that any have survived.

Charles Stewart suggests as much. “Many of Leno’s visits to my folk’s home involved a concept sketch and lots of discussion about what it meant and how he wanted to show it. Often he’d return a few weeks later with the finished painting. On those nights his sketches involved naked women — or required a glass of whiskey — things waited until ‘the kids’ had gone to bed.”

In both our historical society’s paintings the women appear well proportioned. The hands on “Girl with Banana” are well sculpted, though between the two hands there does appear to be some disproportion in relation to length of certain parts of the fingers. This asymmetry does not appear to distract from the effectiveness of the entire form — and does not draw the eye in a displeasing manner.

On all his paintings Leno tends to use his paints sparingly — although the background gesso is usually well covered. My expectation is that the tonal blush and shadow that give the female forms the illusion of curvature have most often been blended more on the canvas than on the palette. This would seem consistent with techniques of application in which minimal amounts of paint are used. The flesh tones of his various nudes are not particularly realistic — and sometimes purposefully tinted to suggest a malevolent or diseased spirit. However, they do seem to work in so far as suggesting the appropriate curvature of the body.

Overall colors appear close to what comes from the tube — strong basics and earth tones cut with white and black. The curtains in “Girl with Banana” carry reds, browns, and black, streaked through with white. The background is black — over-painted with smoky white occasionally blushed with red. The center is primarily the flesh tones of the girl’s body, or the bedding brushed in a green that has been muted with white, brown, and a rouging of red and black. The light source is undefined. In “Untitled ‘52” the girl’s body is more alabaster —

with yellow and green tints. The shadowing seems a reddish-brown rouging. Her hair is an uncertain blonde with reddish highlights. The whirlpool is blue and green with pure white foam. The same basic colors used in the figure and whirlpool define the background. The shadowing indicates a definite source of lighting penetrating into the underground grotto from the upper left.

Valley Washington artist Sharon ‘Shane’ Wayson pointed out that artists often structure their paintings to induce an illusion of movement that keeps the viewer’s attention contained inside the borders of the canvas. This deliberate construction is designed to draw the viewer’s eyes around the canvas in a circular manner — returning

to the starting point only to begin the process again. In “Girl with Banana” the drapes forming the stage curtains impart this kind of circular flow — clearly clockwise. Thought more subtle, containment is also evident in “Untitled ‘52”. It’s an illusion Leno intentionally incorporated quite often — his surrealist style lending itself well to this type of viewer manipulation.

Shane also suggested that the technical aspect — the craftsmanship — of a painting remains even if the painting is viewed in black and white. The geometric quality of the curtains in Leno’s “Girl with Banana” is notable when the color is removed. And what is particularly notable is the depth and solidity of those curtains — as if they were carved from stone — as if they were drawn to capture and convey the elegance of a sculptured object.

This leads to the speculation that since the earliest “professional” artists Leno is believed to have come into contact with were the designers and draftsmen at Clayton’s terra cotta works, these designers were likely the first of Leno’s mentors — mentors well versed in creating two dimensional drawings that would show potential customers the depth and beauty of the company’s three dimensional terra cotta pieces. If so, that could explain the sculptural solidity that can be seen underpinning the objects in many of Leno’s paintings.

Much of Leno’s art, at least the more personal missives, are likely to remain puzzling ciphers

We need to make those remaining Prestini artifacts too valuable to lose or discard. Unfortunately, if this kind of promotion is successful, the days of being able to buy a Prestini for five hundred dollars will be long gone. On the other hand, the monetary value of those remain artifacts will greatly increase their chance of surviving.

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— without clear resolution. In some cases we have Leno's words to fill in the back-story. But in most cases we are at a loss.

Art becomes art when it evokes an emotional response. A number of artists like to shock — probably because that's the easiest response to evoke. In the late 1980s a photograph of a crucifix in a jar of urine won Andres Serrano a cash award from a fund that was partially sustained by the National Endowment for the Arts. That caused a political furor. Serrano obtained that emotional outrage cheaply. Creating the furor required little effort and no talent — a perception one critic sarcastically noted by observing, "If I can do it, it's not art."

Though much of Leno's artwork might be considered startling, or even bizarre, the pieces don't seem designed with the intent of invoking shock or anger — except possibly for our girl's half-peeled banana. I would suggest that Leno's hoped for response was probably humor. As far as I can see, Leno seldom if ever took the cheap route to a quick and easy reaction. And when such might be argued, I suspect what we're actually seeing is the refreshing lack of assumed sophistication common to most working-class people.

Seeing Leno's work, most agree that he was a competent artist and that his paintings told stories — but why did he sell so few of his canvases? A good portion of his western themed paintings were visually comfortable enough to hang in the average living room. And these same paintings had enough of an avant-garde quality to appeal to collectors of more progressive works. Vincent van Gogh only sold one painting during his lifetime — *'Red Vineyard at Arles'*. Vincent was supported primarily by his younger brother Theo. Leno supported his art by working as a laborer. In neither case did the art pay its own way.

As an example of what we would consider a professional artist — meaning an artist who lives by selling his creations — Salvador Dali became an artistic icon during his lifetime through the well crafted manipulation of his own image, and as a result did quite well for himself selling both his artwork and his larger than life personality. It would appear that such aggressive self-advocacy is required if one intends to live off one's artwork.

Would van Gogh have become a legendary art figure without the postmortem intercession of his sister-in-law? We can't be sure. What should be

evident is that the effort to preserve everything related to Vincent, including the intimate details of his personal life, began even before his death. It was Vincent's sister-in-law who eventually published Vincent's letters — over a thousand pages. And that's likely why we know so much about him — both through the fact that Vincent wrote letters about his art and the fact that his family saved those letters. The same can't be said for Leno — who apparently was not terribly fond of corresponding.

The promotion of Vincent van Gogh as an artist was so successful that we can't separate Vincent's art from Vincent's personality — evidenced by the fact that the mention of someone cutting off their own ear immediately draws Vincent's art to mind. Leno's brother, Battista, attempted to promote Leno's memory with the museum he built in Clayton, but the community was simply too small and the location too removed from the art world to succeed. After the museum closed, the collected artifacts were divided among relatives, sold, or donated.

By his own hand or in his own voice, few of Leno's own words are known to still exist — and what does exist probably doesn't equal a hundredth of what Vincent left behind. Most of what we know about Leno comes from the recollections of his brother and various acquaintances. Fortunately, a good portion of Leno's more controversial artwork ended up at the Stevens County Historical Society's Colville museum. Those artifacts are safe. The best way to preserve what's left within the wider community as well as elsewhere in the nation, and the best way to find what still remains hidden, is to begin a vigorous promotional campaign. We need to make those remaining Prestini artifacts too valuable to lose or discard. Unfortunately, if this kind of promotion is successful, the days of being able to buy a Prestini for five hundred dollars will be long gone. On the other hand, the monetary value of those remain artifacts will greatly increase their chance of surviving. And that's the important thing.

One possible approach to such an open and aggressive promotional campaign would be to intertwine what we do know about Leno life with what we still have of his art. Regardless, it would be pointless for us to wait another forty plus years in the silent hope that the arts community will somehow suddenly discover Leno Prestini's art.

Society Minutes — May, 2009

Bill Sebright, Mark Wagner, Alan Berg, Duane Costa, Bob Clouse, Mary Clouse, Sharon Clark, Marilyn Reilly, Kay Parkin, Warren Nord, Cliff Meyer, Grace Hubal, and Lorraine and Don Ball were in attendance at the May 9th meeting.

Society president Bill Sebright called the meeting to order at 09:03 AM.

In the absence of the Society's secretary Patricia Parker, Grace Hubal volunteered to take the meeting's minutes.

Treasurer Mark Wagner's report was read into the official minutes and accepted as correct and proper.

As for the missing Society regulars — Wally Parker, Editor of the Society's Print Publications, and his wife Pat are in Lethbridge, Alberta, for the week to attend the high school graduation of one of Pat's grandchildren. Pete Coffin is at the Wild Rose Cemetery cleanup. His grandparents are buried there. Bob Gibson is at his grandson Greg's graduation at WSU. And Betty Burdette is at the Green House fund raiser at the Deer Park Eagles.

Duane Costa brought Alan Berg to the meeting. Alan is Orland and Alvin (Tuffy) Luhr's younger brother.

Duane showed the group a picture of Clayton's Washington Brick & Lime baseball team. Bert Melander and two Westbys were in the picture. He mentioned that their baseball field was about ¼ of a mile north of Clayton's main street on land that is now owned by the Lindh family.

Webmaster Bob Clouse reported that there were 830 hits on our website, 100 less than last month's record, and that the class pictures are by far the most popular pages on the website. Bob stated that Jo Ann Cornelius, a Westby family relative, found our Society through the Website and has been sending many items to help Wally in his upcoming article on the Society's two Prestini paintings. Bob added that Dennis Nicholas, the grandson of Dorothy and Thornton Steele, has contacted us. His Mother was Lila Steele. His Aunt Nelda is the only one of his mother's siblings left now. He has promised to send pictures from his time living in Clayton. And Bill Myrhang has contacted us in regards to Trysil. He was directed to Paul Erickson and Ken Westby. Both have now contacted him in return.

Bill reported that Pete Coffin has scanned

3 of Art Stelting's picture albums. There was an early picture of the Trysil Lutheran Church and many Clayton class pictures in them. Some class pictures show Mary Vickers (Mrs. Woodward) as a teacher in the 1930s — she also taught Spanish and English at Deer Park High School in the 1960s and 70s. Pete has also scanned a picture from Harry Ness, a former Big Foot Valley resident, that shows the location of the Big Foot Valley School. Bill's brother, Chet, has donated 7 years of the Nostalgia Magazines, a dozen Good Old Days Magazines, and a Palouse Magazine to the C/DPHS. If you want to borrow any of these, contact Bill.

To recap some old business that was discussed for those not present at prior meetings, Howard Richard's had contacted Rob Higgins about moving a building onto the Clayton Grange's vacant lot for use as a C/DPHS museum. Howard felt the County would not be too strict with its codes. Rob explained that the Society still wants to own the property under any museum structure it invests in. Warren Nord had asked about the availability of the old Clayton fire station. The asking price was reported to be \$40,000, and the building may need some work. Peer's barn adjacent to the Clayton Drive In was also discussed.

Sharon Clark showed the binders she has of the area schools' censuses. She hasn't done the Deer Park Schools yet, as it will take several 3-ring binders alone. She also has the censuses on DVDs. One of her censuses helped Wally pin down when the Prestini family moved into the area. She also found an article from a 1960 Tribune mentioning a Leno painting no one recalls seeing in some time — it's a street scene of Deer Park, circa 1910.

Warren Nord mentioned having two old letters written in Norwegian. Bob Clouse said that if Lorraine Nord could scan them and send them to him, he could forward them for translation to his contacts with the online Trysil, Norway, community.

The attendees were reminded that the next general Society meeting is scheduled for Saturday, the 13th of June at the Clayton Drive In. The time, 09:00 AM. All interested in the area's history, members or not, are welcome to attend.

The meeting was adjourned at 09:45.

We wish to thank this month's volunteer proofreaders — Bob Lemley, Sue Newell, Jay Hubal, Paul Erickson, and Patricia Parker.