



My Oregon Life : The Memories of a 20th Century Pioneer

David Proctor

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Elvine Gienger's story is 20th century American history, told in the first person, by a woman who lived an uncommon life and remembered it well.

There are so many aspects to her life, it is certain to have a broad and long-lasting appeal in a variety of markets, including conventional bookstores, schools and libraries, historical centers and senior citizen centers.

Born in 1902, one of 12 children, she grew up in poverty on the 20th century Oregon frontier, the daughter of an alcoholic father and a mother who was little more than a slave. As a child, while living on a ranch in the mountains near Medford, Oregon, she saw her father drag her pregnant mother down the stairs by her hair. The baby, who was her youngest brother, was born retarded. Shortly after his birth her mother divorced her father. That decision may have saved her mother's life, but it cost the family its ranch and forced her mother and Elvine's siblings into a series of rental houses in Medford where they scratched out a living.

She knew from early in her life that if she was going to achieve the high goals she set for herself, she would have to do it herself. She became the first in her family to finish high school, even though for a time she and her sister had to attend alternate days so they could babysit the younger children. She took teachers training in high school, and after graduation she struck out on her own into rural Oregon to teach school. She was only 18, and at her first school had students older than she was. Three of her students at that same school were Russian children, sent here with their parents to grow wheat for the starving mother country.

Elvine taught in one-room schools for nearly six years, then, at the ripe old age of 24 married an energetic and ambitious man, raised a family in a small town carved out of the Klamath Indian reservation. Together they dug a huge Indian artifact collection in Oregon and the Southwest, hunted big game and traveled throughout the West.

She was one of the first women in the region to hunt big game and continued to do so into her 80s. She remembers her first view of the ocean, the first time she listened to a radio, her digging trips to the Southwest, the close calls she and her husband had, two world wars, the time on a digging trip that she saw Sputnik blinking across the sky and a thousand other details that make this story so human and so compelling.

Her pioneering life covers a lot of ground, but it also allows the book to cross over into a variety of genres, including American Western history, women's studies, archaeology, Native American studies and popular culture. The book also includes her favorite recipes, family photos and a timeline of U.S. and world history that adds perspective to what was going on in her life.

This is a story of one of our tribal elders, one that contains wisdom and experience we can't afford to lose as we rush into the new century.

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