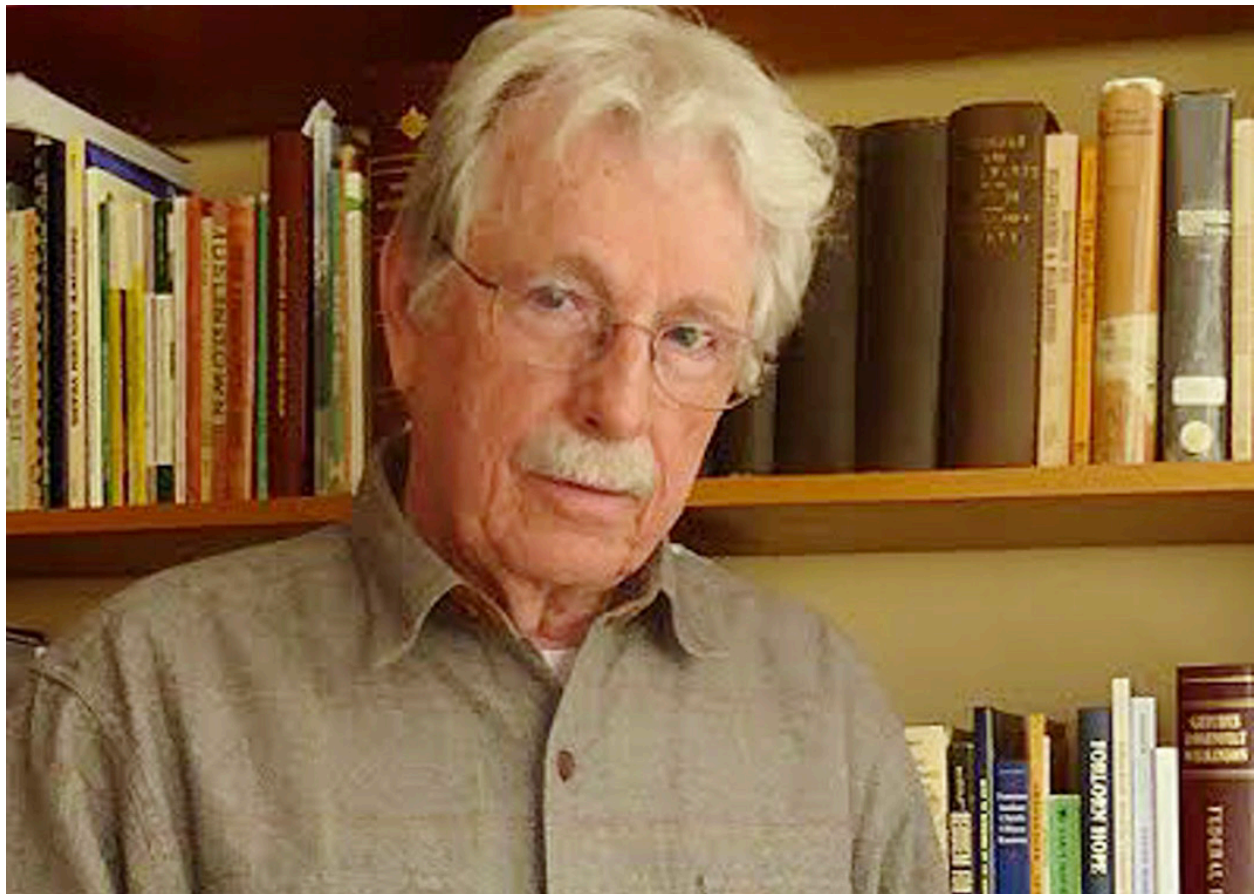


Local historian writes book about ghost town in Malheur County

In his book "Eldorado," Gary Fugate researched the former gold mining town of the same name. Fugate will sign copies of the book Friday, July 26 at the Four Rivers Cultural Center.

By Joe Siess - The Enterprise July 24, 2019 at 6:04pm



Author Gary Fugate

ONTARIO – Eldorado was once a booming gold mining town that drew people from far and wide in search of fortune. Today, while there is not much of a town to speak of, its rich history remains.

Gary Fugate, president of the Malheur Historical Project, has dedicated eight years of his life researching the history and way of life of the pioneers, work that has culminated in his new 320-page book that details the history of the gold mining town from 1867 to 1880. The town was northeast of Ironside and near what remains of Malheur City.

Fugate will introduce the book, entitled “Eldorado,” at the Four Rivers Cultural Center on Friday, July 26. The book signing will take place in the museum lobby from 6 to 8 p.m..

Fugate grew up in Brogan, graduated from Vale High School, and has been fascinated by pioneer history from an early age. After working for some time as a nuclear engineer in Idaho Falls, he is now a historian studying Malheur County.

“I grew up with all the old timers, and a lot of them were gold miners,” Fugate said. “We’d invariably go into the hills and we would go panning for gold and just do all sorts of things.”

Fugate recounts a time that his father’s friends, who actively mined for gold in Malheur City and Eldorado, came to visit.

“They would come down and they would have these baby food jars plum full with gold nuggets. And I can remember that, to this day.”

His childhood growing up around gold miners as well as his passion for history that developed while in grade school is what motivated Fugate to eventually dedicate his life’s work to Malheur County’s past.

In addition to chronicling life and events taking place in Eldorado, the book tells the story of a wild shootout in the streets of Eldorado that led to one man’s death.

Fugate spent over 10 years researching the shootout that took place on October 18, 1870, and as he tells it, it was the violent end to a bitter dispute between two gold miners and John McCourt, an Eldorado resident. In the end, McCourt was killed in the streets by one of the gun-slinging miners who climbed a fence and snuck up in an ambush.

Fugate said that these kinds of things were quite common during this period and that “they settled a lot of their disputes with guns and fist fights, but they did settle quite a bit in the court system.”

He added that, “they filed lawsuits readily and they got settled pretty reasonably too. But there was an awful lot of shootings and lot of fist fights.” However, in the end, the two vengeful gold miners responsible for killing McCourt were acquitted Fugate said.

Fugate wrote that a German traveler, Theodor Kirchhoff, witnessed the trial following a previous incident McCourt was involved in. Kirchhoff understood that the shootout was motivated by passions related to water rights and gold claims.

The way it played out, Fugate wrote, was that after the court was called into session and the law explained after being hastily researched only moments before, heavy drinking, heated debate and bombast ensued, before the jury returned their verdict of “not guilty!”

For his research, Fugate said he likes to use sources such as Ancestry.com and the Library of Congress website in addition to newspaper archives, museum databases and the book laden shelves that ensconce his home office.

One of the most surprising discoveries that Fugate made in his historical research happened after he stumbled across a picture of a man by the name of Charles Dickson Davis, who worked as a lawyer in Eldorado in the 1870s.

As it turned out, Davis is the great-great-grandfather of Fugate’s two children, Brian and Rebecca Fugate.

To this day, Fugate and his two brothers, Jim and Duke, go out as a hobby with metal detectors in search of the elusive golden nuggets. The same golden

nuggets that led so many throughout Oregon's history in search of fortune, while it led others, to a far grimmer fate.