

## Oregon's beauty inspired photographer Gunnell

By Sam Pearson

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In the 1920s and 1930s, a pioneering photographer called Salem home.

Colorado Springs native Kathryn Gunnell (1895-1987) fell in love with the mountains, rivers and lakes of Oregon. She preserved historic Salem's cultural life in photographs of theater performers. She publicized Oregon in photographs, films and promotional brochures.

Gunnell attended high school and graduated from Willamette University. She founded Gunnell-Robb Studios with B. B. Robb. It was at 520 State St. in Salem and operated until 1932.

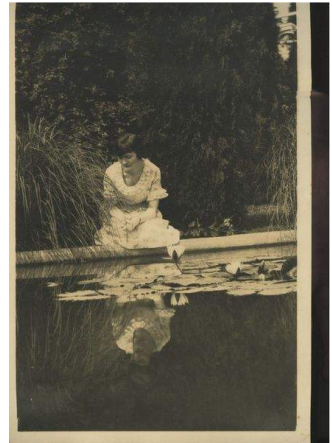
Gunnell photographed luminaries of the day from choral, theatrical and dance troupes to traveling comedians. Her notable subjects included actress Elizabeth Waters and vaudeville performers Fanchon and Marco. She photographed and maintained correspondence with former Oregon Poet Laureate Edwin Markham. Her knack for capturing elaborate poses and passionate expressions put her ahead of her time.

Yet Gunnell's greatest interest was in pictures of children. Along with other children, her nephew Merlyn Gunnell appears in countless Charlie Chaplin, cowboy and doctor outfits.

Oregon's beauty inspired Gunnell. Promoting Oregon provided a career. Gunnell drove a 1939 Chevrolet painted with Oregon scenes. During the Gunnell-Robb years, she took several dozen short films of Oregon scenes. Agriculture offered another venue for advertising the state. Pictures of the Willamette Valley flax harvest occupy a significant portion of her collection. She coordinated produce booths at State Fairs and mailed promotional materials at her own expense.

Gunnell's tourism promotion reached across the country. She designed a decorated touring car. Two emissaries drove the vehicle around the continental United States to display a promotional film in hotel lobbies.

In the late 1930s, Gunnell left Salem for Los Angeles with her mother. There, she worked for Western Union as a telegraph operator, sold dresses and experimented in film.



### Willamette Heritage Center Collection

This photograph is typical of Salem photographer Kathryn Gunnell. She founded Gunnell-Robb Studios with B. B. Robb. It was at 520 State St. in Salem and operated until 1932.

The Willamette Heritage Center is a unification of Mission Mill Museum and Marion County Historical Society. The center is dedicated to telling stories of the people who have lived and worked in the Willamette Valley. For information about hours and events, go to [www.missionmill.org](http://www.missionmill.org).

She returned to Salem in the late 1950s. Not content with just photography, Gunnell tried songwriting. Dubbed "God's Own Oregon," Gunnell's Oregon Centennial Song submission in 1959 celebrated "the beauty and grandeur — the plenty and peace / God fashioned as Oregon."

Gunnell opened her second business in the 1960s. Kathryn Gunnell Enterprises sold Oregon-grown "Gold Nugget" brand filberts and cherries. A roadside store later moved to her residence at 590 Doaks Ferry Road NW.

An accident in 1972 nearly crippled her. "She was a lady to the end," longtime friend Bea Drury said. Gunnell Enterprises ran into financial trouble and went out of business about 1977. In a March 24, 1987, interview, Drury said Gunnell was loath to part with her photographs and films despite losing her equipment to a bank.

Upon her death in 1987, Gunnell's photographs passed to Drury. She gave them to Alfred Jones, who donated them to the Marion County Historical Society in 1998. Rather than disappearing, the photographs are preserved at the Willamette Heritage Center. Recently catalogued, a selection of her images are now on display in the center's visitor orientation center.

Gunnell's legacy is that of a historian. She documented the vibrant cultural life of the turbulent interwar period. Her photography left us a glimpse of our city, state and nation that is at once unique yet inseparable from who we are now.

Sam Pearson, a student at Corban University, volunteers at Willamette Heritage Center. If you have questions or comments, call (541)-590-0850 or email [samuelperson@corban.edu](mailto:samuelperson@corban.edu).