

Ben Maxwell (1898-1967)

By Scott McArthur

Benjamin Isaac Maxwell was a journalist and historian who recorded much of the obscure history of the Salem area. For many years a columnist with the *Capitol Journal*, he wrote over 3,800 columns in which he recorded events—unusual and commonplace—that occurred in the mid-Willamette Valley. He also wrote articles for other Oregon newspapers and periodicals and amassed an extensive collection of photographs, some taken by him and others copied from the personal collections of pioneers and their descendants.

Ben Maxwell, born in 1898, was raised in Salem. His father Isaac N. Maxwell, a mining judge and lawyer in Idaho before coming to Oregon in 1869, was a teacher at the Eola school in Polk County. His maternal grandfather was Ben Hayden, a prominent Democrat and a Civil War-era county judge in Polk County who contemporaries sometimes referred to as “Dirty Ben” because of his reputation as a no-holds-barred trial lawyer.

Maxwell graduated from Salem High School in 1917 and served as a sergeant in the U.S. Army during the First World War. In 1918, he married Louise Hager; they were married for forty-nine years. He graduated from the University of Oregon in 1925, with a degree in journalism and history, and attended one year of law school before returning to Eola and his farm there.

In about 1930, Maxwell began working for the *Capital Journal* as a stringer and photographer, getting paid for one piece at a time. He had to pay for his own film and darkroom supplies, and he never took two photographs when one would do the job. Because of that, his contemporaries called him “One-Shot Maxwell.”

Maxwell started a twenty-six-year series of daily columns in 1939. Titled “Nuggets,” the columns were composed of short paragraphs about significant historical events, such as the visit of President Benjamin Harrison to Salem. He was primarily interested, however, in the people who lived in the Salem area and who frequented the city’s jails, saloons, and courthouse. Known for his sharp tongue, Maxwell once described an early-day politician as “nothing, whittled to a sharp point” and referred to a group of Greek railroad section hands jailed at Woodburn as “remote descendants of Pericles.”

Maxwell left the *Capital Journal* in 1965. When he died in 1967, his wife donated his notes, articles, and photographs to the Salem Public Library, a collection that is a valuable contribution to the history of the mid-Willamette Valley.

Sources

“Benjamin Maxwell Collection.” Salem Public Library.
<http://photos.salemhistory.net/cdm4/browse.php?CISOROOT=%2Fmax>.

The Oregon Encyclopedia

https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/maxwell_ben_1898_1967_/