

Medford, Oregon MAIL TRIBUNE

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Andrew Rauch of Seattle and Tiffany Dewees of Sacramento, Calif., walk past Ashland City Hall Saturday. Few who pass by the historic building overlooking the Plaza realize that the city must maintain it as City Hall or lose it.

Donor ensured link to Ashland

But heirs don't expect they'll ever own City Hall

By **DANI DODGE**
of the Mail Tribune

ASHLAND — A number of out-of-towners look at Ashland City Hall with a covetous eye whenever they visit, and rightfully so.

It could be theirs someday.

"We aren't just panting for it, although it would be a little more than interesting if something like that did happen," said Elizabeth Fitzsimmons of Portland. "I just tell my son, 'Keep track of it, you're the next generation and maybe it will be yours.'"

In an interesting quirk of history, you see, City Hall is only a loaner.

Back in 1884, when John R. Helman deeded the land for City Hall to Ashland, there was a stipulation: If the city stops using the property as City Hall, it reverts back to his family.

"Occasionally, this becomes an issue with someone," said City Attorney Paul Nolte, "but never a serious one."

Nolte said the city doesn't plan to abandon the civic functions at City Hall, so the reversion clause is moot.

"I think it meets the terms of the deeds and is still City Hall," Nolte said, "and will continue to be used for city functions."

"So it doesn't affect us."

But that doesn't mean city leaders haven't tried over the years to clear up the cloud in the title to City Hall.

According to city records, former City Administrator Brian Almquist first brought up the issue in 1977. He sent a memo to the attorney at the time, Ronald Salter, asking him to file a "suit to quiet title or whatever is

necessary to remove this restriction on the land at this time."

"I would rather do it now at our leisure, than 5 or 10 years down the road when a new City Hall is contemplated," Almquist wrote.

Almquist said last week that the city wasn't intending to build a

new City Hall back then — city leaders were contemplating a move of city services to another site because of overcrowding at City Hall.

At the time, a title company attorney was consulted who told city officials they could either transfer City Hall to a trust and then use the funds from the sale to build a new city hall, or find the Helman heirs to negotiate with them, or condemn the heirs' interests, which also would require finding them.

Salter found Almeda Coder at the Rogue Valley Manor, who he believed to be the only living heir.

"If you wish to contact her as to her willingness to sell her interest, please let me know," Salter wrote to Almquist.

In 1979, the council discussed the matter in executive session and members told the attorney to contact Coder. Coder revealed that she wasn't actually an heir of John R. Helman, but of John K. Helman. She said John R. Helman should have many heirs.

"To pursue the matter would require tracing all of the heirs of John R. Helman and negotiating with them," Salter wrote to the

council in February 1979. "This appears to be a very large undertaking, especially in the light of the fact that we do not have any plans to make a different use of City Hall. For that reason I will take no further action unless directed to do so by the Mayor or Council."

The issue resurfaced in 1984. Salter again consulted a title company about what could be done to clear up the title.

The company again advised the city to find the Helman heirs. Salter told Almquist they should send someone who is "friendly, not threatening, and able to carry on a warm conversation" to visit Coder at Rogue Valley

“I think he liked Ashland and wanted to see it grow and become something big. So he left something of himself there.”

— Elizabeth Fitzsimmons
great-granddaughter
of John R. Helman

Manor.

Other steps in clearing the title were discussed, but nothing was done until February 1985, when Almquist contracted with local historian Kay Atwood to research the Helman family and find the heirs who had an interest in City Hall.

Atwood learned that Helman left Ashland in 1858 or 1859 to fight in the Civil War. He apparently never returned, and eventually moved to Flathead, Mont., and changed his name to Hilman.

His brother Abel Helman had power of attorney over the property when it was deeded to the city. At the time, he said it was

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Helman

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to be used for a town hall and jail.

Atwood tracked the John R. Helman family through obituaries, wills and courthouse records, eventually discovering half a dozen heirs.

She contacted the relatives by letter and phone.

"I busted my neck to find these people," Atwood remembered this week. "I found all the heirs that I could, but I don't know what the upshot of it was."

Fitzsimmons, 80, said the news was a "real shocker."

"We had no idea our great-grandfather lived in the state of Oregon," she said.

As a former actress, she had visited the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and said Ashland had always been "dear" to her.

She said everything she knew of her great-grandfather then, and everything she has learned since, leads her to believe this was just the kind of thing he did.

"I think he liked Ashland and wanted to see it grow and become something big," Fitzsimmons said.

"So he left something of himself there."

Robert Hughey, 78, of Lafayette, Calif., was another heir listed in city records. He said he toured the city and City Hall with Atwood last year on a visit.

"I don't see the day I'll own a piece of property in Ashland — I don't think they'll ever give that up," Hughey said. "But it's fun to be part of the history."

Almquist said that the project of clearing up the title was abandoned after Atwood found so many relatives.

"You get into a family after four or five generations, and it would be virtually impossible to get everyone to sign off," Almquist said. "It would be a really valuable piece of property, probably one of the most valuable in the city."

He said it's pretty much "set in stone" through the city's comprehensive plan that it will remain a public building.

"There was never any intent to sell it anyway," he said. "It will always be in public ownership and never be sold as far as anyone can foresee."