



## The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

### Harney County blues

*“The perceptions of any people wash over the land like a flood, leaving ideas hung up in the brush, like pieces of damp paper to be collected and deciphered. No one call tell the whole story.”*

— Barry Lopez

Nobody is winning in Harney County. Not the Hammonds, certainly, who by some strange judicial legerdemain — and one can’t help but believe it is likely vindictive — are now back in prison.

Reasonable people might come to the conclusion that they have already done enough time for the

convicted offense which, given the scale of it, wasn’t much at all. A hundred acres, more or less, and a rickety fence burned. The citizens of America, let alone Harney County, don’t gain much by jumpsuited the Hammonds back into a Federal prison with cartel dope dealers and human traffickers.

And the unwanted Bundy outfit, many of whom appear to have stumbled out of Ted Kaczinski shacks, have exposed themselves as knee-jerk charlatans without a plan, without a sympathetic message, and more importantly, without a reasonable clue. Meanwhile, the kids are out of school, the townfolk are fed up, Fox News and CNN blather on relentlessly, and the only ones worthy of any praise are Harney County Sheriff David Ward and the FBI, who have learned enough about Direct Action failures elsewhere to refuse any at the Malheur Refuge. Good on them.

Buried beneath all of this are real issues. There are some who wail about the abuses of “subsidized” ranching, and would like nothing more than to see families like the Hammonds and their livestock thrown

off the range for various offenses, real or imagined. Others expect public lands ranchers to behave dispassionately when confronted by bureaucracies that have become increasingly hostile, and by environmental groups that sue them into oblivion no matter what improvements they make in their practices, and no matter how much good faith they show.

In a reasonable discussion, it seems that we might remember that these are people whose livelihoods are tied to their use of public land, and who take tremendous pride in their stewardship of the resource. Are there scofflaws? Bandits? Some outright bad people? You bet, and that’s true of any industry, and any business in America. It’s true of government, cops, the military, environmentalists, priests, big business, small business, and everywhere else.

If you want to open the door on the room of unrighteousness, don’t be surprised by the people you find sitting in there. But thankfully, they aren’t the majority among us, in any enterprise, and never have been.

It is just as wrong to

decry the efforts of environmentalists whose efforts are most often made in equally good faith. These are passionate people and organizations, who cannot be faulted for their convictions any more than the folks who have ranched a few sections of desert for a hundred years. Often, when seated at the same table, they find that their goals, extracted from the heated rhetoric of politics and media, line up squarely.

Sagebrush rebellions are as old as the West. In recent memory I can cite the Dann Sisters, the Nye County revolt in Nevada, and the recent serious resurgence of the State of Jefferson movement in northern California. There are many more. And I could tell you privately, preferably over a Hoodoo Voodoo at Three Creeks — and only after my horses are fed — of any number of alleged government abuses and the subsequent sagebrush partisan sabotage. This has been going on for years, and isn’t likely to go away, so long as the present atmosphere of extremism, partisanship, and the perceptions of disenfranchisement remain.

We can do a whole lot

better.

Once, when I was a working buckaroo in northern Nevada, I had an MC horse in my string. A son of that outfit, Bill Kittridge has written brilliantly about the decline and fall of the MC, and fans of Ian Tyson might know his brilliant ballad on the sale of the MC horses. The MC is all gone now, broken apart and sold off to various interests.

But no one can tell me we are better off because of it, that something precious was somehow preserved by killing something else that was equally precious. That smart and energetic palomino I rode with an MC iron on his hip, just the two of us working great circles in the great American outback, under bluebird skies and far out in the rocks and the biting flies, is long dead, but I learned this: it’s a great big desert out there, a desert that will still be there long after we are all gone. It’s a blues joint, in fact, singing a song we all appreciate, and there’s room enough for all of us to grab a chair and sit down to listen: the righteous, the unrighteous, the cows, the cowboys, the wolves, the wild horses, and whatever little frog you’ve got.

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