

## COUNTRY

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gion's thousands of square miles — are a silent testament to their failed dreams.

And while the residents of today have considerable advantages to those pioneers — electricity for wells, better and faster transportation — life in Oregon's Big Country is still closer to that pioneer experience than what most Western Oregon residents are accustomed to.

And like those who preceded them, the people living in Southeastern Oregon in 1992 came here because they wanted a better life.

The slower-paced lifestyle is the most commonly given benefit of the region, as well as the small numbers of people and the resulting lack of crowds, traffic, pollution and crime.

Many Southeastern Oregon residents lived previously in larger towns or cities, but few have any regrets about leaving the hustle and bustle that goes along with an urban lifestyle.

"I don't miss any part of it," said Malena Konek, who owns the store in Frenchglen, 65 miles south of Burns.

Konek grew up in Albany and lived in Washington and on the East Coast before moving to this tiny community, population 10, 16 years ago. She remembers many facets of city living she would just as soon forget.

"I don't miss all the people, the traffic, or the rain," Konek said.

Konek said without all those distractions, life is pared down to its elemental roots.

"I like living a more basic life," she said. "My life here revolves around the seasons, around nature. I like the climate and the country."

Darrell Northrop, who runs the store and motel in Fields, 100 miles south of Burns, gave similar reasons for enjoying life in Oregon's isolated corner.

"I like the remoteness," he said. "And the lifestyle."

When asked if he ever considered living in a more populated area, Northrop — a Harney County native who has lived in Fields, population "about 20," for 25 years — laughed and said simply, "too many people."

It's not surprising that residents of Oregon's Big Country would be more happy without a lot of crowds. Both Konek and Northrop said except for the tourist season — roughly between April and October — they don't do business outside



The one-room elementary school at Andrews (population three), about 100 miles south from Burns, had two students in 1987 and has none now.

of the local residents. Konek said she sees "no tourists" in Frenchglen during the winter.

What is surprising is that age doesn't seem to be a significant limiting factor in people's decisions to live in such an isolated region with its often inhospitable weather.

"This is ideal for us as far as I'm concerned," said 65-year-old William Warner, who owns the town of Wagontire and makes up its entire population together with his wife, Olgie.

The Warners, who moved to this tiny cluster of buildings on a windy plateau along U.S. Highway 395 from Reno, Nev., five-and-a-half years ago, have no regrets about leaving city life for this outpost 60 miles southwest of Burns and 75 miles north of Lakeview.

"You can't pick up a paper over there in Eugene or Portland without something bad having happened," William Warner said. "Dope, crime and all that. We've never had any problems like that here."

Both William Warner and Northrop downplayed the weather in Southeastern Oregon, which is much more extreme than on the west side of the Cascade Mountains. In fact, both seemed to think the climate was just about right.

"We've been to the coast and all it does is rain, rain, rain," Warner said. "Two or three days in a row, all the time."

"This winter it only got down to zero two or three days. In the summer it gets up to about 100, but there's always a breeze. And it's dry over here,

too."

Zero degrees in winter and 100 in summer may seem pretty extreme to those of us used to the more moderate temperatures that prevail in the Willamette Valley, but Northrop didn't think much of the sizzling heat and frigid cold that also prevail around Fields.

"The climate is pretty mild here," Northrop said with a straight face.

Despite their choices to brave this wildest corner of Oregon, nonetheless its residents recognize there are also good reasons for living near towns and cities.

"When you get to a certain age you have to think about moving closer to medical facilities and things like that," Konek said.

And William Warner has put Wagontire up for sale, saying it's about time to think about retirement.

Still, neither the Warners nor Konek plan to move without a good reason.

William Warner said he plans to travel for a year if he sells the town, but he and his wife want to come back and live in Wagontire and help with the restaurant and motel, especially during the summer when traffic on the highway is heaviest.

Konek, too, expressed a desire to remain a resident of Oregon's Big Country, and perhaps she summed up best the feelings of many of those like her.

"As long as I am able I'd like to continue living out here," she said. "I don't want to be anywhere else."

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