

New guidelines give parole boards power

Just four months after being paroled last November, convicted double murderer Russell Obremski was arrested on charges of sexually abusing a 4-year-old girl, the niece of an acquaintance.

The incident sparked a blaze of public outcry that reached its peak when Crimestrike, a division of the National Rifle Association, ran full-page ads in several prominent Oregon newspapers. The ads, featuring a wild-eyed mug shot of Obremski and a graphic description of his crimes, urged readers to call and complain to the chairman of the parole board that authorized Obremski's release. Hundreds of Oregonians followed the ads' advice.

Such public anger was understandable, although it seemed to meet nothing but frustration. The parole board insisted that its hands had been tied when they let Obremski out; release dates for criminals sentenced between 1977 and 1989 (or those sentenced earlier who wish to be included) are determined according to a matrix. When Obremski's tentative parole date arrived and he passed the required psychological evaluation, the parole board was forced to let him go.

But recent changes in the parole system may help prevent the release of other potentially dangerous criminals. Perhaps the unfortunate circumstances of Obremski's release and re-arrest may have come to some good, after all.

Richard Wayne Godwin is a convicted child killer who kidnapped, raped and decapitated his 5-year-old victim — and then lit candles in her skull. He is tentatively scheduled for parole March 11, 1995.

The suggestion that such a criminal be let out so soon — less than 20 years after he committed the crime — has once again raised objections from many Oregonians. For many, it's hard to imagine how the state could justify releasing such a man — a man who, in addition to his grisly killing, has also been convicted of sexual abusing two other 5-year-olds.

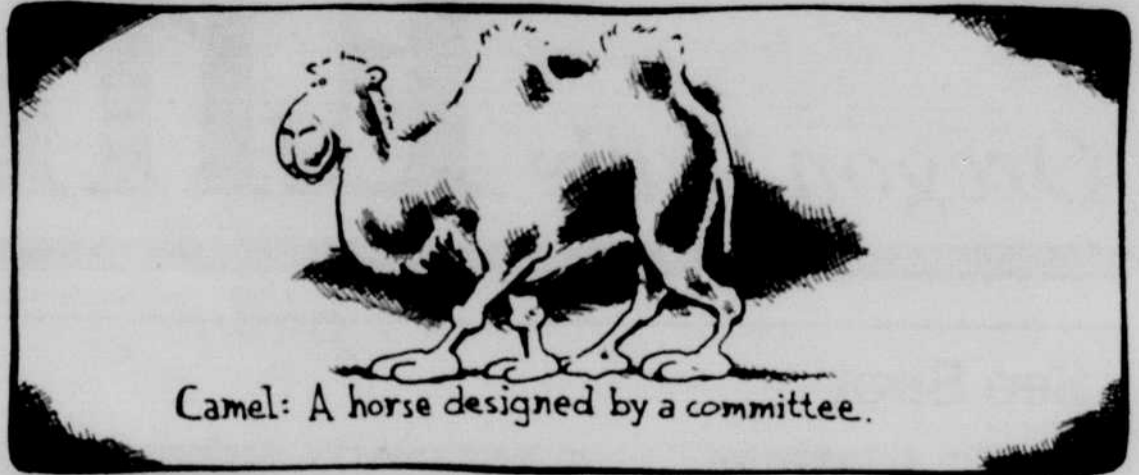
For many, the possibility of Godwin's release invokes the memory of the Obremski case. But the board that will review Godwin's application for parole will have greater power to prevent his release than the one that was powerless to stop Obremski's.

For one thing, the parole board now has the power to request additional psychological tests for potential parolees. This way, less importance will be placed on a single evaluation, such as the one that favored Obremski's release and effectively forced his parole board to let him go.

And the 1993 Legislature further lessened the significance of psychological exams by authorizing parole boards to consider other factors in deciding whether to release a criminal, including underlying information about the crime, public outcry, and the opinions of lawyers or judges involved in the case. The psychological evaluation previously overrode all such considerations.

There are some potential dangers involved with these changes; in particular, the danger that public anger alone could force a parole board to retain an inmate even if that inmate is otherwise fit to be released.

But the potential gains outweigh such possible disadvantages, at least at this early stage. No one wants to see a paroled criminal commit another crime. If these new guidelines can help stop that from happening, then perhaps it can renew the public's faith in the criminal justice system.



COMMENTARY

Amazon rehabilitation best choice

By Sharon Singer Millman

The following is a correction of factual error contained in Joe Harwood's opinion printed Tuesday, August 9.

The decision to demolish Amazon was made long before the Endex report was commissioned. In fact, it was because of the slipshod and embarrassing report the University commissioned to justify their decision that a new study was undertaken. Endex Engineering was charged with evaluating the condition of Amazon, and estimating the costs under three scenarios. In the final report, the rehabilitation scenario actually came out slightly cheaper than new construction. This did not prevent University Vice President Dan Williams from testifying to the exact opposite in front of the City Council.

Furthermore, it was Endex, not "the cooperative" that determined the figure of \$3 million to repair Amazon and to keep it in good condition for at least the next 50 years. "Good condition" means the rehabilitated buildings would be in the same condition as the new construction would be, given the improved maintenance program Endex included in both scenarios. Gary Feuerstein, the chief engineer, even wrote a letter to the University, criticizing its interpretation of his report. He was not instructed to include financing in his analysis but if those numbers are included, rehabilitation to an equal level of quality is \$16 million cheaper than new construction.

While lead paint, asbestos, earthquakes and fire are issues that must be taken seriously, they do not, in particular, justify the destruction of Amazon. Almost none of the buildings on campus were designed to meet earthquake considerations and there is asbestos for sure and most likely lead paint in many campus buildings — including Westmoreland, where they chose abatement over demolition.

Space is not adequate here to explain the Historic Designation,

but perhaps Mr. Harwood could read the original application, the findings of the local Historic Review Board, the unanimous decision of the City Council to uphold the decision, the testimony given before the State Historic Review Board and the forthcoming recommendation from the Board that Amazon be placed on the National Register.

As for self interest, many of the most active student tenants could not possibly be defending Amazon for selfish reasons because they graduated before the first phase of the demolition was scheduled to begin. Perhaps Mr. Harwood is unaware that impossible rent is the most common cause of dropouts from the Lane Community College Women in Transition program. This program supports single mothers trying to get off the streets and off welfare by getting an education. We are proud to have a number of ex-homeless single moms living at Amazon who have made the big leap to LCC and then to the University. Perhaps Mr. Harwood is unaware that everyone at Amazon qualifies for public assistance. Perhaps Mr. Harwood has not tried to support a family (food, clothing, shelter and love for three dependents in addition to himself) while going to school full time. Perhaps he cannot imagine needing to find a three bedroom apartment near campus on a one-student budget or caring for two small kids when he is not in class and paying someone else to do it while he is.

That \$10 or \$20 a month makes a big difference in the grocery budget or the winter coats for the kids. It's true, in "the real world" a landlord would have evicted those who could not pay higher rent and because of that, Amazon was built in the first place which is why so many are fighting to save this haven, where rent is low because the mortgage is paid off and the savings have been passed on to the students.

The units at Amazon comprise half of the very low income units in Eugene. Amazon is in better shape than many apartments

around town and even has some materials that could never be replaced today — straight grain wood floors, cedar siding and big, long, solid timber floor joists that the contractors begged for if we happened to be getting rid of any. A decent painting program would prevent a lot of the dry rot. I would also like to point out to Mr. Harwood that Amazon Community Housing is not "a student co-op" it is a "non-profit corporation." This may seem like a minor point but perhaps it will assuage some of his fears. The Board is divided between tenants and community members. It is the strength and reputation of our community board members and the tireless work of current and previous tenants on the Board that caused the University to even read the Co-op proposal, which it seems Mr. Harwood has not done. If he had, he might have noticed the proposal includes a professional management staff and a detailed rehabilitation program, with all of the work (and more) suggested by Endex as well as contractors' estimates. He might have seen that Eugene Water and Electric Board volunteered to do most of the weatherization for free because of loans available to Amazon Community Housing as a non-profit low income housing complex. He might have concluded the University would be better off spending its \$16 million bonding authority by rehabilitating Amazon and building new student housing elsewhere. Rehabilitating Amazon is far and away the best thing for the students in both the short and long term. It is no accident that we have the strong support of city councilors, strangers on historic review boards, state legislators and a big group of tired and determined tenant activists. Three quarters of the struggle has been bringing light to the truth. I do hope the future editorial editor of the *Emerald* will check out his facts.

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Oregon Daily Emerald

P.O. BOX 3159 EUGENE OREGON 97403

The Oregon Daily Emerald is published daily Monday through Friday during the school year and Tuesday and Thursday during the summer by the Oregon Daily Emerald Publishing Co. Inc., at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

The Emerald operates independently of the University with offices at Suite 300 of the Erb Memorial Union and is a member of the Associated Press. The Emerald is private property. The unlawful removal or use of papers is prosecutable by law.

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