



THE OBSERVER  
SERVING UNION AND WALLOWA COUNTIES SINCE 1896

SPORTS

Tigers sweep state awards

Inside  
Measures rejected, 2A  
Big fire season, 1B

# Weekend

FRIDAY-SUNDAY • December 27-29, 2019 • \$1.50

Good day to our valued subscriber Fred Riggle of La Grande

## Imbler cold case from 1927

# EXCITES

## La Grande writer

By Dick Mason, The Observer

**E**ight months ago, La Grande author Terrie Biggs took an unanticipated detour down a road filled with potholes, speed bumps and intrigue. Biggs emerged from this journey with a riveting story — one which may turn the thermostat up on one of Union County's oldest cold cases.



Staff photo by Dick Mason

La Grande author Terrie Biggs explores an unsolved murder in Imbler from 1927 in her latest book, "The Unsolved Murder of John Mayfield and other stories and poems by Jerrold Winter Wright"

Biggs' latest book details the 1927 murder of John Mayfield, a 45-year-old Elgin man. Mayfield was killed between 3 a.m. and 4 a.m. Dec. 27 by a gunshot to the head while sleeping inside an Imbler home not far from its front door. Biggs said Mayfield was sleeping in the home of Andy Coe, a man Mayfield knew and had been drinking with that night in Elgin.

Nobody was ever charged for the murder, although Coe, who

was in the home with his wife and children at the time of the shooting, was held in a local jail as a suspect. He was released after a month behind bars, according to a Jan. 25, 1928, Observer story Biggs' referenced in her book.

She learned of the 1927 murder while working on a project about Jerrold Winter Wright, who was Mayfield's great-nephew and died in 2010. Biggs, as a favor for Wright's second wife, Carolyn (Howard) Wright, was transcrib-

ing her late husband's poems and written stories.

"I volunteered because I wanted to help his family share his memories," Biggs said.

Biggs learned of the Mayfield homicide while transcribing Wright's works, then began tenaciously researching the murder not long after. Her book includes passages by Wright about the murder and plenty more.

According to Wright, Mayfield was a bootlegger who made and

sold alcohol during Prohibition.

"Although he was never arrested for this, the law breathed down his neck a number of times," Wright wrote.

He also wrote about a fight Mayfield got into with two boys when he was about 11. He was so seriously injured a doctor thought he might die. Biggs said the beating is believed to have had an emotional impact on Mayfield the rest of his life.

See **Cold Case** / Page 5A

Union County

## United Way calls it quits

■ Number of factors pushes board vote to end operations in 2019

By Sabrina Thompson  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — United Way of Eastern Oregon will close its doors the last day of 2019.

Alex McHaddad, interim president of the La Grande-based charity, explained a number of factors played roles in pushing the organization's board to vote to end operations, including the structure of United Way of Eastern Oregon.

Rather than have a specific focus or cause, he said, United Way of Eastern Oregon served as the collection point that passed contributions to other charities and service organizations in Union and Baker county, including Baker City Backpack program, the Mount Emily Safe Center and Shelter From the Storm.

"Today people aren't as familiar when funding is

See **Closure** / Page 5A

## Labor unions getting younger

■ Graham Trainor sees young workers turning to labor movement

By Claire Withycombe  
Oregon Capital Bureau

PORTLAND — Graham Trainor has taken the helm at one of the state's largest labor groups at a time when workers in Oregon — already a strong union state — appear emboldened, engaging in ambitious bargaining, strikes and demonstrations.

Trainor was elected in September to become president of the Oregon AFL-CIO, a labor federation representing the interests of about 300,000 private and public sector workers.

A longtime Oregon AFL-CIO staffer, Trainor is described by some as the heir apparent to Tom Chamberlain, a widely respected labor leader who had led the federation since 2005.

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## Union home has best holiday display

■ Union County Chamber of Commerce honors those who brighten winter nights

By Dick Mason  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Christmas lights of the past are helping a Union home sparkle in the present.

The lights on display at Joel and Jill McCraw's home at 780 Serenity Lane in Union won the Union County Chamber of Commerce's honor as best decorated home in the county for 2019.

The McCraw family's display includes a type of flashing lights on

the roof of their home that are hard to find today.

"They don't make these type of lights anymore," Jill McCraw said.

The display features thousands of colorful lights on their front roof, including heart-shaped configurations, a mass of striking lights covering the front exterior of their home, four 6-foot trees with strings of lights and an inflatable Santa in a sleigh in the front yard.

Jill McCraw credits her parents, Sam and Kari Rosti of Star, Idaho, with having a big influence on her family's display. Her father purchased the inflatable Santa, and her mom taught her a lot about the art of putting up Christmas decorations while she was growing up in Star.

McCraw also credits her husband and their young sons — Joey, Jace and Jordy — with providing her with

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### WEATHER

 Full forecast on the back of B section

Friday 26 LOW  
Low clouds  
 Saturday 37/29  
Partly sunny  
 Sunday 36/28  
A shower or two

### CONTACT US

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MONDAY A LOOK BACK AT THE YEAR THAT WAS Online at lagrandeobserver.com