

PONDOSA

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So the couple sold their place and moved to Pondosa in 1983.

“All this nice sunshine and fresh air,” Bob said. “It was a good idea. I keep busy over here.”

Although the houses had been sold and moved to other towns nearby, Bob discovered a huge pile of sawdust left at the mill site.

He can point it out, too, on the aerial photo of Pondosa that hangs on the wall of the store. He set to grinding up that sawdust and started selling it as garden mulch.

“I’d deliver it in 5-yard loads all over,” he said.

That kept him busy for a while, until the pile finally disappeared.

“It took 20 years,” he said with a smile.

While he worked at that, Jean ran the store.

“People yet talk about her. She’d visit with everybody,” Bob said.

Jean passed away in 2015. During her illness, she and Bob lived in Nampa, Idaho, with Lori and her husband, Dennis.

After Jean died, Lori thought her father might stay in Idaho with her. But he returned to Pondosa in the winter of 2015.

The store is warmed by three wood stoves, so Lori and Dennis came as often as they could to help haul firewood and move the snowdrifts.

That lasted only a few months before they decided, in February 2016, to move to Pondosa.

Prior to her marriage, Lori had lived in Pondosa for a time, and she met her husband in Baker City.

“Twenty-five years later, we’re back,” she said.

The Pondosa store has 15 bedrooms. During the days of the mill operation, the 12 bedrooms upstairs were rented to single men — two to a room. They all shared one bathroom.

In addition to the store, the town boasted a gas station, meat market and post office.

“That old vault is where they stored the payroll,” Bob said, pointing to a structure just across the driveway from the store.

Although the store was closed for a bit when Jean was sick, and again in the depths of the coronavirus pandemic, it is again open



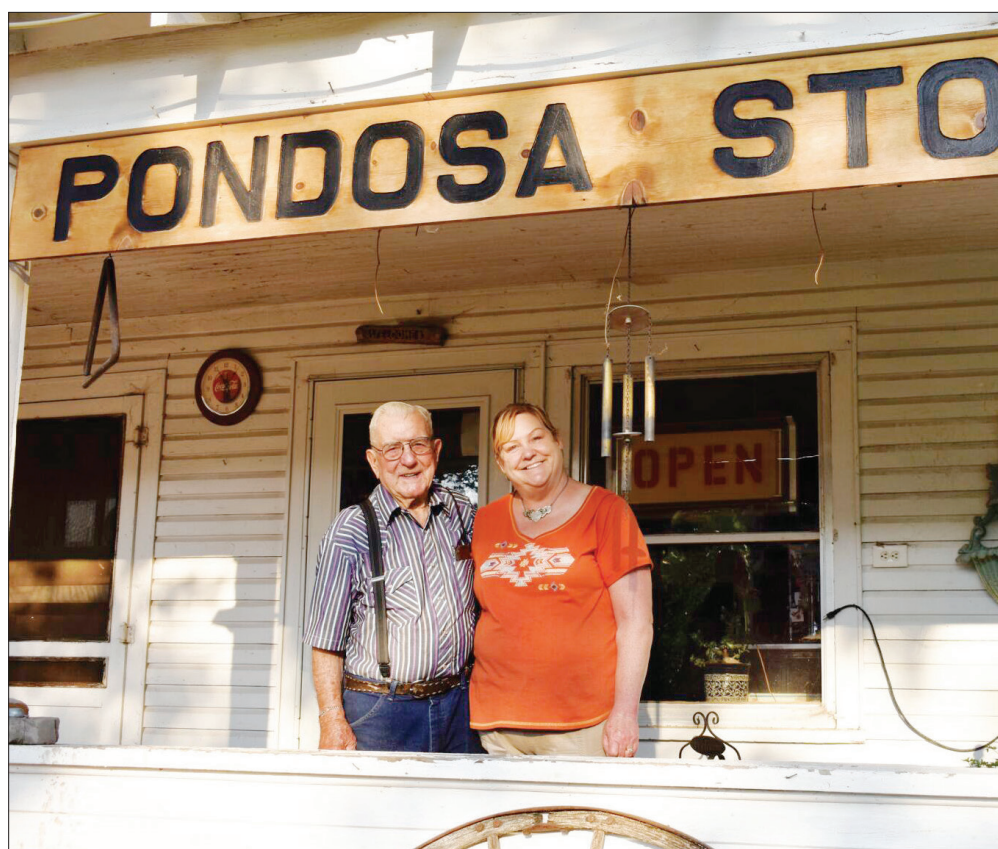
Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

The Pondosa Store was built in 1926 to serve Pondosa, a mill town about 25 miles north of Baker City on state Highway 203, a couple miles from Medical Springs.



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Pondosa proclaimed itself as the geographic center of the U.S. after Hawaii and Alaska were added as states in 1959.



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Bob Bennett, left, and his daughter, Lori Brock, on the front porch of the Pondosa Store on July 20, 2021.

seven days a week.

“Once we got Dad vaccinated, we opened back up,” Lori said.

Lori, who is a registered nurse, administered her dad’s second dose, on Feb. 11, at the Baker County Health Department in Baker City.

“We’re here and adding to our business,” Bob added.

Lori said the store stocks “mostly refreshments and snacks” — soda, ice cream, candy and chips. But Bob can serve up burritos, too, and he offers some essentials such as flour, sugar,

milk and eggs.

They’ve also applied for a liquor license.

The store is open daily from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Offerings have expanded outside as well. This spring they developed three campsites, and Lori posted the availability on the website hip-

camp.com.

“We get campers off the freeway,” Lori said. “North Carolina is the farthest away.”

Between the store and campsites is a deck surrounded by trees and flowers in an area dedicated to Jean’s memory.

“We fixed up Mom’s little park,” Lori said.

She said it’s proven popular as a resting spot for touring car clubs as well as travelers on motorcycles and bicycles.

“It’s like a little oasis in the middle of the desert,” Lori said.

SURGE

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Eastern Oregon during the recent COVID-19 surge. Others from the hospital who spoke, including Dr. Zach Spoehr-Labutta, a pediatric doctor, emphasized the concern.

“This is the first point in the pandemic that I am legitimately afraid for my patients,” he said.

In addition to hospitals exhausting resources, nursing homes are feeling the impacts of hospitals reaching capacity.

According to a spokesperson at the Grande Ronde Retirement Residence, in La Grande, finding room for patients has been more difficult in the last two months than it ever has been.

Davis emphasized the strain in staffing is being felt across the state, which has resulted in the National Guard assisting and providing support functions at several hospitals, including St. Charles Bend. Grande Ronde Hospital has 160 cots from the National Guard that it can use in the event of a mass influx of patients, but the National Guard itself is not currently being used in La Grande.

Local authorities

Scarfo added his thoughts during the meeting, suggesting that the county is working



Scarfo

with the Oregon Health Authority to conduct mass offsite testing in the coming weeks in order to relieve pressure on hospital staff.

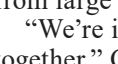
Mendoza emphasized the La Grande School District’s risk mitigation measures heading into the school year.



Mendoza

Mendoza added that a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases in the district has made operations difficult, but he is hopeful that protocols will create a productive in-person school year.

Clements added his recommendation for mask usage, and cautioned residents about the repercussions that can come from large gatherings.



Clements

“We’re in this together,” Clements said. “If there was a forest fire that was blowing in our direction, this community would pull together in a heartbeat. I wish that was the case now.”

VACCINE

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weeks, going from less than 150 in early July to a record 2,971 cases reported on Aug. 19. The state is now averaging 2,025 cases per day.

The Oregon Health Authority has reported that hospitals are nearly full, with 93% of staffed adult hospital beds in Oregon occupied and 94% of staffed adult ICU beds across the state in use.

The Oregon Health and Science University COVID-19 forecast for Aug. 18 said the pace of increases will continue until Labor Day weekend and is likely to leave the state 500 hospital beds short of demand.

“The fifth wave of the pandemic in Oregon remains much more severe than previous surges,” said Peter Graven, a top OHSU data scientist.

On Aug. 18, the percentage of COVID-19 tests that were positive was 13.8%, a rate that indicates exponential growth of infections. A rate of 5% is considered the top end to manage impacts on public health. The original version of COVID-19 reached a maximum rate last year of one person infecting three others. The delta variant is spreading at a rate of one person infecting eight others.

The OHSU forecast, which is updated about once a week, now projects

MORE INFORMATION

Oregon Health Authority also reported:

- 12,741 new daily cases of COVID-19 during the week of Monday, Aug. 9, through Sunday, Aug. 15. That’s up 53% over the previous week.
- 546 new COVID-19 hospitalizations, up from 224 the previous week. It marked the fifth consecutive week of increases.
- 46 reported COVID-19 related deaths, up from 40 reported the previous week. Though widespread vaccination of older residents and others most susceptible to severe illness has curbed the percentage of those killed by the virus, the current spike is spreading so rapidly that all indicators, including deaths, are on the rise.

COVID-19 hospitalizations to rise from the current 838 patients to about 1,075 by Sept. 3.

The spike won’t completely recede to levels seen at the beginning of August until late October at the earliest, according to the OHSU forecast.

‘On the verge of collapse’

Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen painted a dire picture of the hospital system straining under the flood of unvaccinated people who have become infected with the delta variant.

“Our health care system is on the verge of collapse in parts of the state,” he said.

The quarter of the state’s population who remain unvaccinated offer themselves “as a target to a virus that has killed 600,000 Americans,” Allen said.

Brown said she knew the vaccination requirements would generate blowback from workers who didn’t want to be vaccinated, just as her ear-

lier switch from voluntary to mandated mask wearing by school children had generated a wave of opposition.

But many of those decisions were made in July, when COVID-19 cases were about 12 times lower than today.

Without the mask and vaccination mandates, Brown said it would be difficult in particular to keep students in the classroom.

“That’s why I’m willing to take the heat for this decision,” she said.

The deadline for both the health and education groups to be vaccinated is Oct. 18, or six weeks after final approval of the Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines.

Brown is also requiring all employees of the state’s executive branch under her control to be vaccinated.

There are health and religious exemptions the state workers can apply for, but the third option, Brown said, “is termination.”

Flat vaccination rates

The mandates come

as voluntary vaccination in Oregon is “flat” according to OHSU and rising slightly according to OHA. That mirrors a national trend of slowing inoculation, with the CDC reporting that about 771,000 doses per day currently are being used, a more than 75% drop from the 3.38 million on April 13.

Brown’s orders bring Oregon in line with California and Washington policies. The Portland Public Schools had earlier mandated vaccinations for teachers and staff.

Brown said the state is taking several steps to shore up the response to the medical crisis. Actions include sending National Guard troops to 20 hospitals in the state to support staff experiencing a torrent of new cases.

Requests for help from other states and federal agencies have been made, including asking the Federal Emergency Management Agency for a fully staffed field hospital.

The state is also hiring nursing teams and private emergency medical technicians to supplement the exhausted personnel in the state.

The National Guard units will include nurses, staff for temporary decompression units to free up bed space, and speeding the discharge of patients who no longer require hospital-level care so that new patients can be assigned to open beds.