

VOICES

Carpool offers chance to learn from others

By VICTORIA CROSS
Special to The Observer

When most immigrants picture the United States, they think of Manhattan, Las Vegas and Hollywood. Few consider Scappoose, where I eventually landed when I arrived from Russia. When my father visited me, he asked: “Where is America?”

I told him: “This is it.”

Like most immigrants who come to the United States, I did not drive and relied on public transportation. When I got a job in downtown Portland, I had to find a way to make the 20-mile trip each day. Eventually, someone suggested I join a carpool. It was a new concept. When my American friends asked me if we had carpools in Russia, I said we did, but called them trains.

The carpool I joined had been founded 10 years ear-

lier. After a phone call, I was invited to join, and on the first day, I stood with my husband on St. Helens Road to wait for a red Ford to arrive and pick me up.

I was nervous when I thought about the 40-minute drive to the city. What would I talk about with these strangers? What if they didn't like me?

And then the red car stopped, and the door opened.

“Hi,” the driver said. “I am Anne.”

My husband suspiciously looked inside the car, kissed me goodbye and let me go. On the first day, it was just the driver and me. Anne was very talkative. Relieved, I just sat and listened. But the next day the whole team went to work, and I met the rest of my carpool.

I knew I was on probation.

The rules were simple:

No smoking and you could sleep.

In this little bubble, I learned how to communicate, discovered what was appropriate to discuss and how to dress so people at work wouldn't take a look at my outfit and ask me if I planned to go to the opera that night.

Each day I worked on my language skills. I'd studied English in school, but it was a British version of English language.

At first, it was difficult to communicate. I'd heard just some of the words, and because it was not my native language, I had to assume what was conversation about. But as I grew more comfortable, I started to relax. All of the carpool members were Oregonians, and some of them didn't travel much outside the state. They were curious about what I ate and where I shopped for groceries.

ANYONE CAN WRITE

Nearly 40 years in the business have taught me that readers are bombarded and overwhelmed with facts. What we long for, though, is meaning and a connection at a deeper and more universal level. And that's why The Observer will be running, from time to time, stories from students who are in my writing class, which I've been teaching for the past 10 years in Portland.

I take great satisfaction in helping so-called nonwriters find and write stories from their lives and experiences. They walk into my room believing they don't have what it takes to be a writer. I remind them if they follow their hearts, they will discover they are storytellers.

As we all are at our core.

Some of these stories have nothing to do with La Grande or Union County. They do, however, have everything to do with life.

If you are interested in contacting me to tell me your story, I'd like to hear from you.

Tom Hallman Jr.
tbhbook@aol.com

Tom Hallman Jr. is a Pulitzer Prize-winning feature writer for The Oregonian. He's also a writing coach and has an affinity for Union County.

Through these conversations were learned about each other.

In time, I learned the American version of small talk.

My buddies traveled with coffee mugs. Travel mugs were absolutely new

for me. It was cool to see people working on the streets with cups of coffee. I bought those travel mugs for my Russian friends and family as souvenirs.

This carpool was a vehicle that brought me to American culture. You

can read American literature, watch movies and TV shows, but only when you can acquaint yourself with ordinary people on regular basis it become real.

By communicating about everyday life, you learn about the culture. I found more similarities than differences. People have the same family values and work ethics even though communication styles are different.

This carpool was a gift. I learned just by observing my fellow carpool members. Through listening, observing and trying to adapt the new culture I learned about myself. I learned my strengths and weaknesses.

And then the carpool ended.

My husband and I moved, and I no longer needed a ride to the city. I moved on and started a new chapter in my life and journey.

Fundraising for bike playgrounds nears finish line

Foundations promise matching funds for Wallowa project

By BILL BRADSHAW
Wallowa County Chieftain

WALLOWA — The finish line is in sight in efforts to raise money to build a bicycle playground in Wallowa, with those behind the project having raised about 93% of the estimated \$329,500 needed, Ron Pickens said Friday, May 6.

“The biggest thing right now is we have two foundations that have recommended we use their funds as a matching opportunity within the community,” Pickens said.

He said the Reser Family Foundation has pledged a match of \$12,000 and the Roundhouse Foundation has pledged \$10,000, in addition to the \$15,000 Roundhouse already has given. Added to the approximately \$306,000 already acquired, the two pledges will take the project's funding over the top of what is needed, he said.

The final payment to the American Ramp Co., which is building the park, is due in early July, Pickens said.

A teacher at the Wallowa County Alternative

HOW TO DONATE

Donations to the bicycle playground to be built in Wallowa can be made to Building Healthy Families, 207 NE Park, Enterprise, OR 97828. For more information, call Ron Pickens at 541-426-9411.

“Within the past three weeks, the price (of materials) has already jumped. We want to make sure we have a little extra in our coffers.”



— Ron Pickens, Building Healthy Families

School, Pickens works at Building Healthy Families in Enterprise. He was instrumental in last year's refurbishment of the skate park in Enterprise. But he's long had a desire to have a similar facility in Wallowa since transportation to Enterprise is difficult for youths.

The promised matching funds also would help build a fund that could go toward maintenance costs and the rising cost of materials.

“Within the past three weeks, the price (of mate-



American Ramp Co./Contributed Graphic

A recent version of the planned bicycle playground shows what is slated to be built at Wallowa School in 2022. The mound at the top of the graphic is to be regraded to provide more concrete area for other elements.

rials) has already jumped,” Pickens said. “We want to make sure we have a little extra in our coffers.”

For example, he said, a bicycle-repair station, such as was installed at the Enterprise skate park, had been priced at about \$2,000. It's now up to \$2,300-2,400.

Such a station would allow an individual to put their bike on a rack and use tools available for minor repairs. It also

includes an air pump to inflate tires.

Pickens said a recent fundraising venture was successful, when the organizers of the playground project held a raffle for a flight in and breakfast for two at the Minam River Lodge. Courtney Lyman of Enterprise won the raffle.

Coming up Pickens said he plans to make a presentation at the May 18 meeting of the Wallowa

County Board of Commissioners. On May 4, the commissioners expressed interest in supporting the playground — possibly even financially — but said they would like more information on the project.

Some of the commissioners and spectators were unclear on the difference between the Wallowa bike playground, a proposed trail-with-rails project between Elgin and

Joseph, the Enterprise skate park and a pump track proposed for Enterprise. Of the latter two, the first exists and the latter is still in the planning stages.

Pickens said he has scheduled a grand opening of the Wallowa playground for Saturday, Aug. 20. Although the itinerary is still to be finalized, he hopes to have BMX stunt riders and motivational speakers there.

Wallowa County Board of Commissioners eyes creating road service district

By BILL BRADSHAW
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — A new road service district for Wallowa County will soon be in the works after the board of commissioners agreed to put the wheels in motion to take advantage of a piece of legislation that “fixes a bad piece of federal rulemaking,” as Susan Roberts, board chair, said.

At the end of the commissioners' regular meeting Wednesday, May 4, Roberts said that at the next meeting, May 18, the commissioners will start work on a road service district. She's been working with a law group that's been doing research for the commissioners to put together paperwork to free up payment in lieu of taxes (PILT) money and create a

road district.

Funds received through the Secure Rural Schools program provides additional funding to rural counties across mostly the western United States, according to U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley's website. The counties that generally receive SRS funding are those that have large tracks of public, tax-exempt forestland. In the latter part of the 1990s, timber receipts from the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management began to fall, impacting many rural counties that received a portion of those dollars from timber harvests to fund services. The SRS program is designed to bridge

that funding gap by providing funding for schools, road maintenance and other county services.

Roberts said the SRS money will go into the new road service district and not into what are considered

county funds. The governing board will be just like the one for the Wallowa Lake County Service District — it'll have separate commissioners and a separate budget meeting.

“What it does is it puts

that money from the payment in lieu of taxes back into the general fund,” Roberts said, “which then allows us to fully staff our sheriff's office or other work that we may have been putting aside because we didn't have the funds to do it.”

Commissioner John Hillock said counties outside of Oregon have already taken

such measure.

“There are counties in Montana that have done it already,” he said.

Roberts declined to comment further pending the outcome of research, but said when the commissioners — including Todd Nash — get started on May 18, it will be the beginning of a long process.



Hillock



Nash



Roberts

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