

CAPSULE

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gathering of people interested in Oregon Trail history.

“It was a good block party,” he said. The time capsule, according to a Meeker journal entry, included a speech read by the mayor of La Grande on April 10, 1906, at a dedication ceremony for the marker. Jim Kreider, of La Grande, said good-naturedly that he had hoped the time capsule contained something more. “It is unfortunate,” he said. “I was hoping the secret of life was in there.”

Why La Grande?

Larsen said the La Grande marker is the only one Meeker ever mentioned in his journals as having a time capsule. Pat Ziobar, Larsen’s wife, believes the people of Union County in 1906 may have requested a time capsule. Ziobar said Meeker liked to involve communities in the process of designing the markers. “I think that was a good idea,” she said. The Oregon Trail was close to Meeker’s heart because he had taken the route west from Iowa in 1852 when he was a young man. He later settled in what is now Puyallup, Washington, and was the town’s first mayor. In the 1880s, he made and lost a fortune growing and marketing hops. Meeker then went to Alaska to look for gold, returned and experimented with dehydrated foods. He took up writing, producing at least five books before he died. Meeker made his 1906 stop in La Grande while on an eastbound trip along the Oregon Trail in an ox-drawn wagon. He made a second trip across the trail by



Isabella Crowley/The Observer

Dale Counsell, left, Jennifer Boyd, center, and Ronnie Allen discuss the day’s events after an Oregon Trail stone marker failed to contain a 1906 time capsule on Thursday, June 23, 2022, in La Grande. Boyd is one of the owners of the property at the corner of B Avenue and Walnut Street where the marker now stands.

wagon, and still later retraced portions of it in an automobile. At 94, he made the trip by airplane. He flew over the trail in a week. His 1852 journey took seven months. Meeker died in December 1928, at the age of 97.

Creating a new time capsule

The empty time capsule in the stone marker on Walnut Street will soon be filled with current items collected by Ronnie Allen, of La Grande, a local historian who organized the June 23 event along with Counsell. Items Allen will put in the time capsule include an Oregon Trail brochure, a copy of the Overland Journal (a quarterly publication of the Oregon-California Association) plus items that are or recently have been integral parts of our daily lives today such as face masks, a COVID-19 home test kit, an iPhone, a \$2 bill, a quarter and a 1926

Oregon Trail 50-cent piece. These items will be placed in the time capsule in about three days and then sealed. Allen said he will notify the Ezra Meeker Society in Washington that the time capsule should not be reopened until 2122.

Allen said loose stones collected from the marker will be sent to Washington State University’s geology department for analysis. He hopes this will determine where the rock used for the creation of the marker came from. Allen said the markers Meeker set up along the Oregon Trail were made locally. Many schoolchildren had attended Meeker’s 1906 dedication ceremony on Walnut Street, and Jennifer Boyd was glad to see a number of children and teenagers were at the June 23 event. “If just some of these kids get excited about history, it will all be worth it,” she said.

SCHOOLS

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school years, but the district is restricted in what it can spend the relief funds on.

After two years, the school district will have little if any COVID-19 funding remaining to buffer its enrollment decline, he said, meaning the chance of layoffs starting in the 2024-25 school year will be much greater if enrollment does not rise significantly. The school district’s enrollment has been declining since the COVID-19 pandemic hit Oregon in March 2020 and now stands at about 240 fewer students.

Justice believes one reason for the decline is that parents and students want consistency and stability. School districts lost an element of this during the pandemic when they were switching from online to in-person instruction and a hybrid learning model, which is a combination of both. “We understand the instability challenges for families,” Justice said. He added that he hopes that as stability improves in the post-pandemic environment, more parents will enroll their children again in the La Grande School District. Justice said the new athletic and academic center the school district will be constructing over the next two years may also boost enrollment. “It will show how serious our community is about education,” Justice said.

The athletic and academic center will replace the school district’s aging Annex gym building and will be constructed with funds from a \$4.524 million bond school district voters approved in May and a \$4 million matching state grant. Justice said enrollment in school districts often rises after a bond has been approved. He noted that enrollment increased after La Grande School District passed a \$31.5 million bond in 2014 for capital construction and major building upgrades. “Hopefully, this will happen with the passage of the latest one,” Justice said.

SNOW

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Chelsea Judy, marketing manager at Anthony Lakes, said about 114 inches of snow has fallen at the ski area since the resort closed for the season the first weekend of April — a respectable amount for the same period in the middle of winter. “It’s been a crazy spring,” Story said, “with the late snow and these really cool temperatures.”

Road obstacles

The lingering snow is a tangible effect of the trend, and one that is preventing travelers from completing the 106-mile Elkhorn Drive, which circles its namesake range and passes through Baker City, Haines, Granite and Sumpter. Although warmer temperatures earlier this week melted snow from about a mile of the byway, Story said that when he drove up on June 22, the route was blocked by snow between the upper Crawfish Basin trailhead and near Grande Ronde Lake, just west of Anthony Lakes.

That section includes the highest parts of the byway, capped by Elkhorn Summit about 2 miles west of Anthony Lakes. At 7,392 feet, it’s the second-highest point on a paved road in Oregon, behind only the Rim Drive in Crater Lake National Park, which ascends to 7,900 feet.

And the obstacles are considerably more daunting than a few modestly sized drifts, Story said.

Snow still spans the entire roadway in places.

It’s possible the byway won’t fully open until early July. That would be a month later than in 2021, and about two weeks later than usual.

The Forest Service doesn’t plow snow from the byway.

But Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort, which has a certain amount of experience in moving snow around, starting last year offered to use its equipment to punch through remaining drifts when the byway was almost clear.

That’s not the case yet, though.

Peter Johnson, Anthony Lakes general manager, said it probably would take “another week or two” of melting to make it feasible to clear the remaining snow.

Although the byway opening will be unusually late this year, Story thinks it might have been later still but for a project he coordinated several years ago

that had nothing to do with snow but yielded an unexpected benefit.

He hired a contractor to cut small trees — with a diameter of less than 9 inches — within 6 feet of the shoulder of the byway between Crane Flats, a few miles north of Granite, and the Elkhorn Summit. The purpose was to get rid of tree branches that impeded drivers’ views on the curvy byway, Story said.

But since the work was done in 2016, Story said he’s noticed that snow doesn’t accumulate to quite such prodigious depths in some places, and it seems to melt earlier — he estimates the difference at 10 to 14 days.

He figures that removing the roadside trees, besides extending drivers’ sight-lines, exposed the byway to more sunlight, hence the accelerated snowmelt.

Story notes that this effect is muted, however, when snow is actually falling, as it did on many days this spring.

Other roads, other issues

Above Cove, the 6220 Road running north from Moss Springs toward Mount Harris and Point Prominence is also closed, Story said.

Some other popular routes are open, however, including Forest Road 39, the Wallowa Mountain Loop Road, which leads north from Highway 86 east of Halfway to near Joseph.

The Blue Mountain Scenic Byway from Granite to Ukiah is also open.

Besides the persistent snow, Story, who has worked on the Wallowa-Whitman for 31 years, said this spring has been noteworthy for the amount of debris he’s seen on forest roads.

The detritus includes rocks as well as fallen trees.

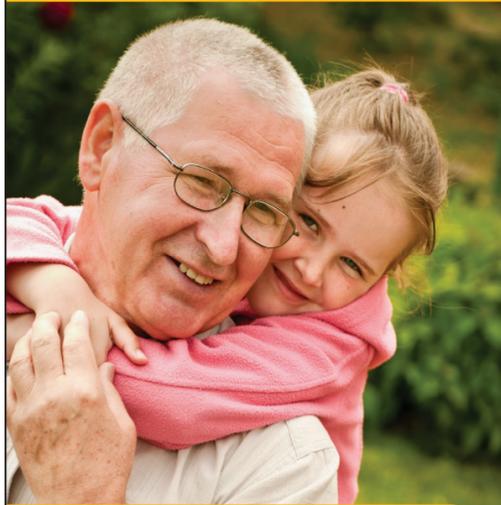
Story said an infestation of fir engraver insects has killed many white fir trees, and the combination of strong winds on dead firs, bearing loads of heavy, wet spring snow, led to what he called an “excessive” number of trees toppling across roads.

He also noted — as campers and other outdoor enthusiasts undoubtedly did — that some of the soggy storms happened on weekends.

Story said he’s found several places where people driving on saturated roads left deep ruts that channel water onto the road and prevent it from draining.

“There’s been a lot of damage to our road system,” he said.

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