

To say that Larry Wortman felt apprehensive back in 1993—when he learned the U.S. Postal Service was transferring him to Dufur—would be a major understatement. He was terrified.

He was an openly gay man who, after moving from the outback of Montana, lived in cities like Seattle, Honolulu, Eugene and Anchorage, Alaska. He had worked his way up the Postal Service corporate ladder, becoming the district supervisor for the agency's employee assistance program based in Portland. But downsizing resulted in most of the positions being cut, and he was offered three different postmaster jobs—all of them in small towns.

Dufur, located 14 miles south of The Dalles, was the only one Wortman was even remotely familiar with, he notes with his trademark chuckle. He made the move.

"A friend had moved to The Dalles a couple of years earlier," he says. "I was familiar with it and knew where it was without having to look at a map. Plus I could get away to Portland...fast."

Wortman's greatest fear, believe it or not, was not how people would react to a gay man. (He had a plan for that.) More than anything, he admits he was afraid he wouldn't be able to do the job. So when he arrived, he turned to two personal attributes: honesty and humor.

"I just told everybody that I had no damn idea what I was doing and it was going to be a learning experience for all of us," he laughs. "I was upfront and honest about my lack of knowledge, and I found that using that approach worked best."

That method obviously was successful, as Wortman and the residents of Dufur began a nine-year relationship that culminated with a communitywide potluck for him June 9. After 33 years of service to the United States, both in the military and with the Postal Service, he is now a retired man.

Looking back on it now, he cannot believe how he grew to love the folks of Dufur. Residents who live there do not have their mail delivered to their homes but instead go to the post office each day to pick it up from their box.

That means Wortman had daily contact with many of the 600-plus people who call Dufur home. He got to know them. They got to know him.

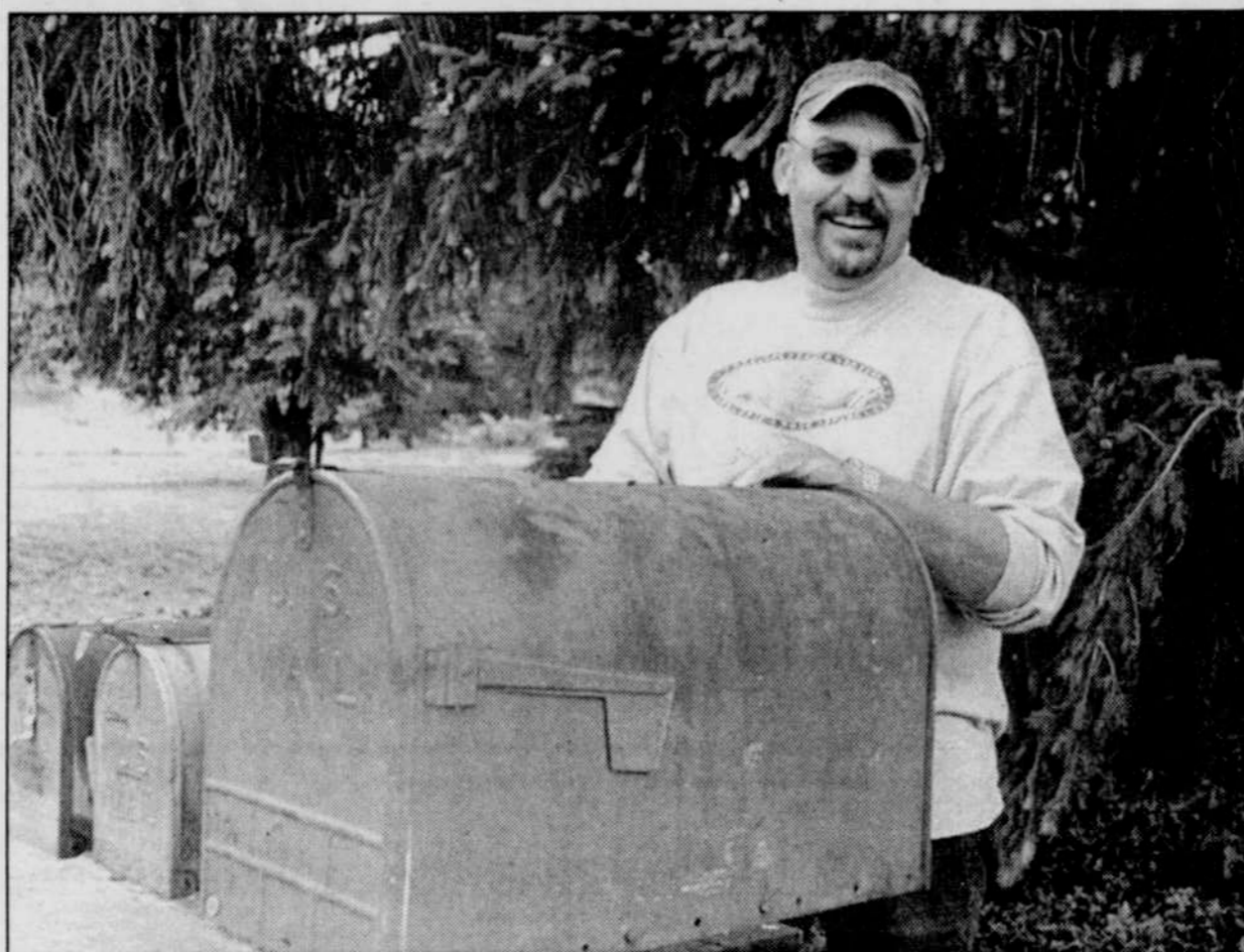
"We are going to miss Larry so much," says Nikki Beachamp, a longtime resident of Dufur. "We love him. He is one of the nicest guys you will ever meet, and he did everything for everybody. He will never be able to be replaced."

Wortman is not one to brag about himself,

## SPECIAL DELIVERY

### Dufur postmaster retires after 33 years of service

by Tom Stevenson



Although Larry Wortman vowed not to hide his sexual orientation, he says no one ever asked

but the folks around Dufur shared several fond memories:

- He used to take mail out to the cars of elderly and disabled people who had a hard time getting into the post office.

- When elderly people would not come in and get their mail for a couple of days and had not told him they would be gone, he made sure someone checked up on them.

- He would pay the postage due out of his own pocket for many of the customers, then just leave them a little note.

- He made sure he had a huge supply of sugar-free gum for each of the youngsters who came into the post office. One Dufur High School student, upon learning he was going to retire, sat down and wrote him a letter saying he always would have a place in her heart and expressing how much she appreciated his constant teasing.

- He started a tradition of opening the doors before 8 a.m. just so residents could take care of their postal business before leaving for work.

Those type of things are tricks of the trade Wortman learned from his father, who was the postmaster in Gallatin Gateway, Mont. "He took care of the people, and they took care of him," he says. "He never had an enemy in the world."

And although doing those nice things might have endeared him to the people of Dufur, there was still the issue of his sexuality. It all turned out to be for naught.

Wortman knows for certain that some residents of Dufur despise gay people, yet he made it a point to treat them with the same respect as everyone else he came into contact with in his workplace. He made a pact with himself that he never would hide his sexual orientation—he has rainbow license plate covers on

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—Nikki Beachamp

his car, including one that reads, "Friends of Dorothy"—and that, if anyone ever asked, he would be honest.

But no one ever did. "To this day I have never got into the conversation at work," Wortman says.

Still, he is quick to note that some residents have told him outside the post office that it was no secret. "I'm sure they know," he adds. "It's a small town, and people talk. If a few know something, everyone knows. But if something would have happened to me—if I would have come to work and found the word 'fag' spray-painted on the building or something—I truly do believe that most of the people of Dufur would have been just as disgusted as me. Fortunately it didn't...but it was nice to know that people would have supported me if it would have."

When Wortman took the job in Dufur, he chose to live in The Dalles, which has a population of more than 10,000. There still was not much of a gay social life, but he says he was fortunate to find a small group of gay friends and an even larger group of gay-friendly people to build a supportive social network.

He even played host to a foreign exchange student a few years back, which he called "an incredible experience." He also has been clean and sober for 27 years (he says he actually first applied for the post office in a "blackout") and has a long list of friends he has met through recovery.

Finally, he also is known for keeping in touch with nearly everyone he ever has met. His circle of friends is large. Many of the folks in Dufur just made it larger.

By not trying to be anything but the man he is, Wortman made many friends, as was evident not only at the retirement party, where he received endless gifts and well wishes, but also during the course of the past year as he struggled through some medical and other personal dilemmas. In a period of about 12 months he had an angioplasty, hernia surgery and a burst appendix; his mother passed away; and his constant companion, his house cat, died after 16 years with him.

The people of Dufur, he says, took care of him. "They sent cards, they sent food...they just went out of their way to let me know they cared."

Now Wortman is ready to travel and enjoy gardening and art projects at home. For many years he promised himself that as soon as he retired he would move back to the city.

That, however, is not going to happen. "I'm happy where I'm at," he says. ☐

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