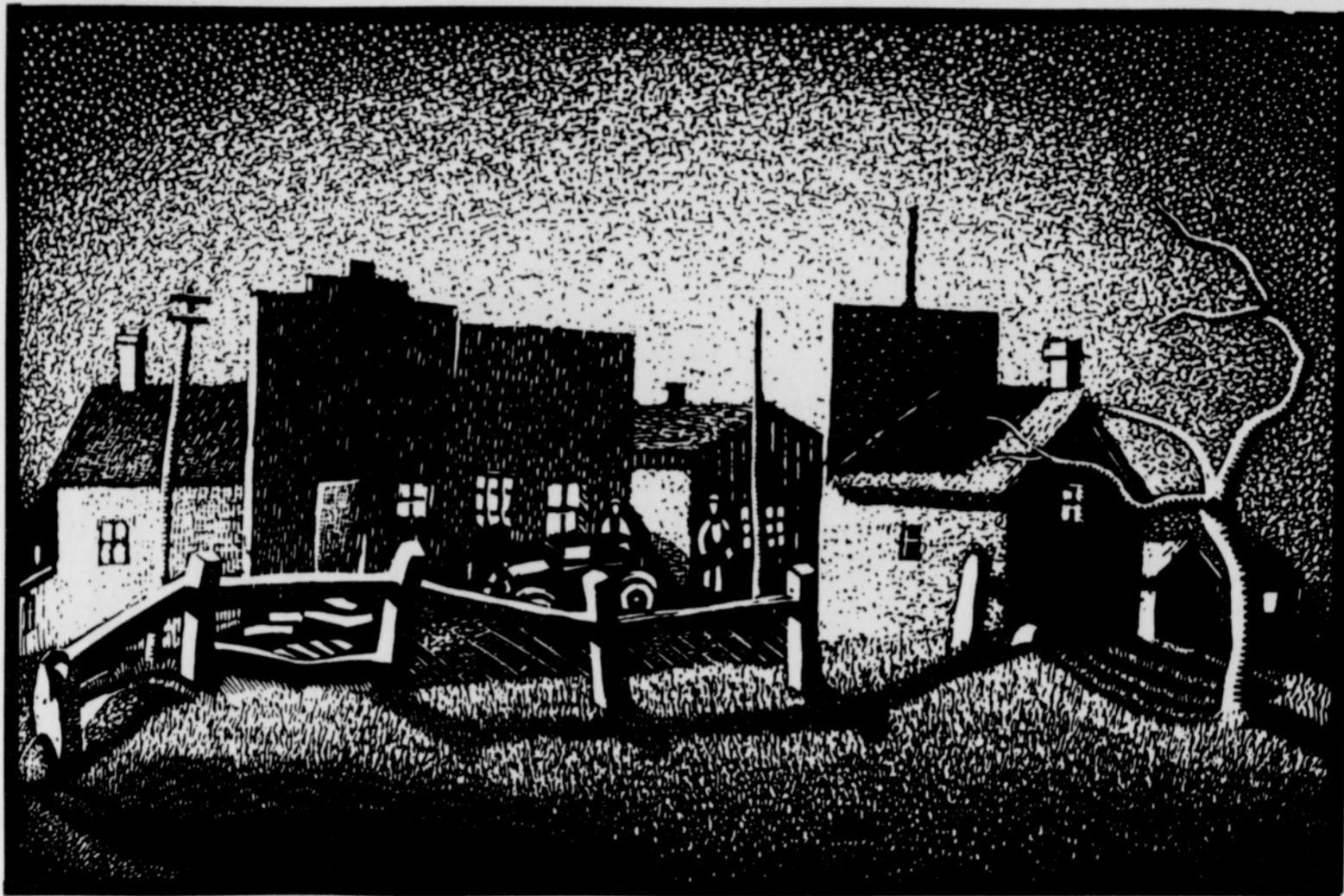


# VALENTINE TO OREGON



CHARLES HEANEY, 'AN OREGON TOWN'

*February 14 is generally regarded as Valentine's Day, but it is also Oregon's birthday, this year 145 years since statehood in 1859. Bob Frazier, reporter, columnist and editorialist emeritus for the Eugene Register Guard from 1948 to 1977 (the year he died), penned this ode to Oregon in celebration of its 117th anniversary.*

BY BOB FRAZIER

Sometime when you're in another part of the country, drive into a gas station with your Oregon license plates. Or sign in at a motel. Or just let it be known that you're from Oregon. Unless you're in New York City, where people are grumpy, chances are fair that somebody will say:

"Ara-gan! You're a long way from home."

"Sure am," you'll agree.

"Are you on the top or in the middle or is that Washington?"

"In the middle."

"You're the one with that oddball governor, the one who don't want people to move there?" \*

"We've got a new governor now, but he shares some of the old governor's ideas." \*\*

"Must be nice out there? What's it really like?"

What's it like? You think of the blind men and the elephant. One felt the elephant's side and concluded it was like a great wall. Another, feeling the leg, thought it was like a tree trunk. A third, after feeling the tail, said it was like a rope. A fourth grabbed an ear and knew that an elephant was like a blanket.

That's Oregon.

Oregon is a lush valley, green well into summer. Flowers and blossoms bloom in the spring. In the distance a snow-capped peak smiles down on crops that will feed the cities.

Oregon is that same valley in February under leaden skies. Puddles of water as big as lakes grow in the incessant rains. If the snow-capped peak is still yonder, it finds nothing to smile about.

Oregon is droplets of ice and snow dripping from Hayden Glacier on the Middle Sister. Oregon is the birth of a stream, a rivulet that will become the North Fork of Squaw Creek, then Squaw Creek itself, then the Deschutes which tumbles over Round Butte and Pelton Dams to make power. When those droplets reach the Columbia, they go over dams at The Dalles and Bonneville. More power. They help float ships and then mix with salt water over the Columbia bar below Astoria.

Oregon is a paneled board room in a 40-story building. Men in expensive suits are dealing in millions of dollars. Oregon is a great cattle ranch — 15,000, maybe 20,000 acres. The hands speak of "pasture," but all one sees is sage and juniper. It takes 15 acres of this stuff to feed a critter for a year. The sun beats down, but nobody worries about fire. There is not enough vegetation to sustain a fire.

Oregon is a dense jungle of salmonberry and salal, nurtured by the rains and fog of the Pacific and by mild temperatures the year around. And this does burn in the summer, horribly. The best vehicle for traveling is the machete.

Oregon is the ubiquitous yellow school bus, hauling young Oregonians to school from the most remote corners of the state.

Oregon is an ancient van filled with migrant workers, pushing on to the next crop and hoping nobody discovers the kids and puts them in school. Their help is needed at "home."

Oregon is another van of migrant workers hoping they can find a place to land long enough that the children can get the educations their parents never had.

Oregon is a laboratory at the state university where professors and students are trying to solve the mystery of the origin of life.

Oregon is a lovely state park in the summer, jammed with people who wanted to get away from the crowds of the city.

Oregon is a deserted shack on land too poor to sustain life. It is a symbol of lost hope.

Oregon is a network of bridges in great strands and loops, spanning a mighty stream. Ships from foreign lands whistle and go under those bridges with their draws pulled up. The great Fremont, the twisting Marquam, the stately St. Johns don't need draws.

Oregon is a covered bridge over a quiet rural stream.

Oregon is that stream, where a small boy, barefoot, fishes in a deep hole.

Oregon is that same stream early in the spring, that same stream flooded by the snow melt and a dozen tributaries. It tears at the river bank, destroys farmland, floods newly planted crops, perhaps destroys its covered bridges.

Oregon is a stately Douglas fir, enough board feet to build as big a house as anybody needs.

Oregon is a juniper, survivor of many a year of stunted growth. It casts a bit of shade. Under it, a rattlesnake dozes peacefully.

Oregon is a hemlock log in the rain forest, a log that has been on the ground since most of us were babies. A new tree grows from its rotting side. Life goes on.

Oregon is the Grand Canyon of the Snake, deepest in North America and still untamed by dams.

Oregon is an alpine meadow, newly freed from snow. Wildflowers grow right out of the ground with almost no stem. Their life is short — short and glorious.

Oregon is a mountain, a mountain that challenges men and women with ropes and pitons in the summer, a mountain that cloaks itself with beautiful powder snow at ski time.

Oregon is the same mountain, dangerous and unpredictable. It lies in wait for the foolhardy at any time of year.

Oregon is a wide, sunny beach where families build sand castles. The hardy swim in the ocean, at 52 degrees the year around. The curious poke around the tide pools by the sea stacks and rocky outcroppings, teasing the sea anemones.

Oregon is that same beach in the teeth of a winter storm. A person can't stand up in those winds. Waves chew at the shoreline, which is never the same from one year to the next.

Oregon is a field of wheat, hip-high, swaying in the breeze.

Oregon is a stream in the hard-rock country where a miner, perhaps a businessman on vacation, pans for gold.

Oregon is a rough road in the back country. Grass grows in the ruts.

Oregon is a freeway — two lanes, three lanes, each way — choked at the rush hour.

Oregon is a lonely sheep herder in the Basque country where Oregon meets Nevada and Idaho.

Oregon is a fisherman, a commercial fisherman, remembering when his calling was in demand.

Oregon is a tavern on a Saturday night. If there hasn't been a brawl yet, there will be.

Oregon is a symphony, a play or a ballet. The ladies and gentlemen are in formal clothes.

Oregon is a suburban home, its lawn neatly manicured, two cars in the drive. Perhaps a boat.

Oregon is a flophouse where homeless men find company in their muscatel. What fire code?

Oregon is a posh resort where a couple can drop \$75 a day, even if they don't drink. People dress for dinner.

Oregon is a sleazy hotel where accommodations are rented by the hour. No questions asked.

Oregon is a road full of cattle being herded from one pasture to another.

Oregon is a hospital where a baby is born, where an old man dies.

Oregon is a church where a happy couple is married, a courthouse where an embittered couple is divorced.

Oregon is a cemetery on a hill, an orchard of headstones calling yesterday's roll.

Oregon is like any place and not like any place.

That's what Oregon is like, exactly.

~FEBRUARY 14, 1976

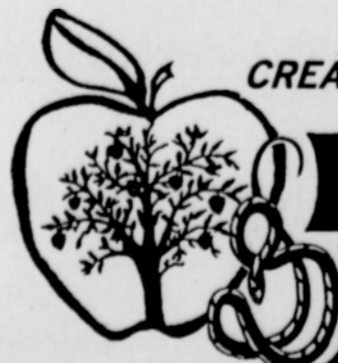
\*Tom McCall \*\*Bob Straub



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