

# In Blackface ...

Ignorance does not justify 'harmless fun'

I'm more amused than angry at what are not so much insults to my dignity as to my intelligence. I've been asked to believe that the three white boys who hung nooses in the tree at Jena, La., High School had no racial motive when they hung nooses on the courtyard "peace" tree at their school. They were simply copying what they saw in a movie. I'm wondering: What movie would have made them so blithely unaware of the role of the noose in historical Louisiana race relations? Maybe that history isn't being taught in contemporary Louisiana schools. I'm aware of how rarely it's taught in Oregon.



I attended the recent OSU-Stanford game, and I observed a white boy in blackface, black hands, wearing black clothes, sporting a black Afro wig, in support of a "school spirit" event called "Black Out Reser." In all fairness this was balanced out by the halftime sight of a black student, in his own face, wearing an orange Afro wig – so my overall reaction was a ironic smirk, eyeroll and head-shake. Having attended OSU, I know that the students are neither aware of the racist history of blackface nor how their 1920s counterparts enthusiastically embraced the Ku Klux Klan in "Korvallis," forming a student klavern and sponsoring dances and "naturalization" into the Invisible Empire.

Suppressed in the OSU collective memory is the spitting and urination in the direction of a black student named Harris (no relation), accompanied by racial epithets while entering a frat house party a decade ago. It's forgotten by all except the black staff and older grad students at OSU.

While the 1920s students of the UO generally rejected the Klan, many faculty members and upright Eugene citizens did not – and still do not. Some, like the football coach Shy Huntington in his role as Uncle Tom in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the Very Little Theatre, may even have donned blackface in entertaining satire. Donning blackface is not considered honoring those of African descent among those of African descent. Nor does ignorance of history or ignoring history make an act harmless fun.

As an Indian, I'm aware of how respect and honor are traditionally given and displayed. Naming a group after another group means that you emulate and seek to embody the qualities of that group. Among Natives or Africans, it is no honor to beat a weakened opponent. You want a strong and respected opponent, and you display that respect even when they are not honorable. In Roseburg last year when South Eugene was playing the Roseburg Indians to epithets of "nigger this" and "nigger that" directed at South's running backs and other players, South's players did not respond in kind. To my eye it was Klan-sympathetic local officiating that won the game for Roseburg that day, not athletic skill. The Roseburg Indians were not honoring Native competitive tradition but more that of the Knights of the Golden Circle or the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, whose traditions they were more clearly embodying.

So in Oregon towns where non-white people were forcibly removed, subject to arrest after dark or shot on sight, Oregon teams named after Indians should rename their teams the Golden Knights or the Fiery Knights since they seem to be honoring those traditions. It is not honoring to name a sports team after those who are not absent by choice.

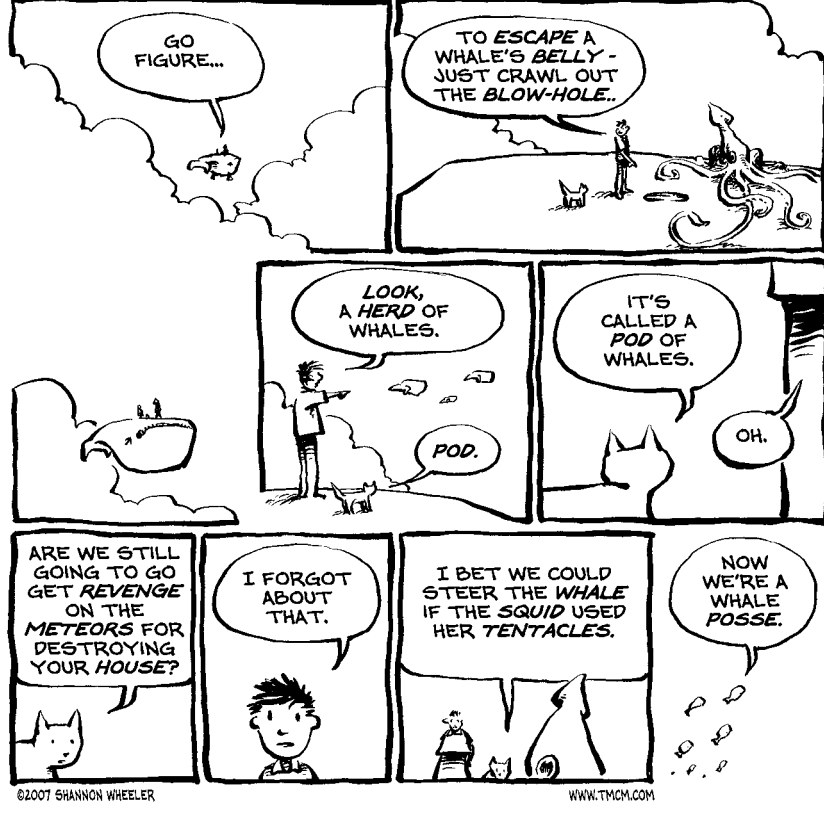
I know, I know, it was a long time ago. But those who forget the stupidity of the racist past, proud as you may be of those values many Oregonians hold dear, are doomed to repeat those stupidities in the present, to your economic downfall.

As we approach the Olympic Trials at Hayward Field, (where at least one Eugene black Olympian, Margaret Bailes-Johnson, was not allowed to train for her successful gold medal performance 40 years before), let's try to be on our best welcoming behavior as a community. There were men of color training at Hayward, just not women. Especially a woman (Bailes-Johnson), who beat every male on Bowerman's track team except Harry Jerome. The men were even given a head start, and she still beat them but had to train elsewhere.

Times have changed. People of all colors and gender expressions can come to compete at Hayward now. We do allow people of color to live within the city limits these days, so unlike our past behavior as a community, let's at least try and act as if a few more people of color, for a few more days, are no big deal.

Mark Harris is an instructor in ethnic studies and substance abuse prevention at LCC.

## How to Be Happy (15 OF 8) by Shannon Wheeler



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### ONE MORE OFFENSE

I was alternately appalled and irritated at discovering an ad in the 12/13 *EW* for McDonald's!

You all call yourself an alternative newspaper, and now this?

First it was the T&A ads for the strip clubs working their way to the middle of the paper; then "Savage Love," then "¡Ask a Mexican!" and now this?

What happened to all the talk about buying locally, etc.?

McDonald's is one of the worst decimators of our planet and single-handedly contributing to obesity in this country.

So shame on you, *EW*! Yes, you may need the money, but putting an ad in for McDonald's is what it means to sell out to the "establishment" or big business in the U.S.

Kay Porter  
Eugene

### HOLIDAY PRIORITIES

I saw on TV where these folks were taking their pets to have their pictures taken with Santa. Then I remembered an agency, also on TV, that was pleading for a \$10 donation to provide a mosquito net to prevent a third-world child from dying of malaria.

And so it goes.

Christine Coy  
Eugene

### BRING US TOGETHER

The problem with Eugene is that while an oft-quoted slogan here is "Celebrate Diversity," the actual behavior of most here dictates that the slogan ought to be "Celebrate Diversity — Unless It Happens to be Anything Different From My Way of Perceiving the World."

The recent item pointing this state of mind is the incredibly negative response generated around the *EW*'s decision to adopt the column "¡Ask a Mexican!"

I have been reading Gustavo Arellano's column for over a year now in other publications, including a stint that I did last year with an almost entirely Mexican (there was also a Honduran) construction crew in Long Beach,

Calif. It is interesting to note that both Mexican and Chicano culture are incredibly more prevalent down there. Nobody on the bilingual crew found insult in the column, probably because humor is culturally predominant in Mexican culture. If you didn't know that or wonder why it is so, perhaps you could ask Arellano about it.

I have lived around, befriended, gone to the birthday parties of, gone to school with and worked with Mexicans and Chicanos for much of my life, and guess what, folks: Some things across the culture gap are incredibly different from what you know and are used to. Humor can make light of these differences and bring us together.

The column is not the ramblings of a racist; quite the contrary. Arellano is well-read, funny, kind and passionate about improving the life of Mexicans and others living in this country today, all things which somebody familiar with his writing would know. He does not, however, filter his content to soften the blow for the delicate sensibilities of upper middle class white liberals with a cultural guilt complex.

I welcome Arellano's column to your publication and look forward to more voices from different races, classes, creeds and colors in the future.

Matt Watkins  
Eugene

### ASK AN ASS-CLOWN

Who was the ass-clown who made the decision to portray Mexicans with that offensive graphic? What the hell is wrong with you people?

No offense to you personally by calling you an ass-clown. I was just trying to reappropriate that term to castrate it of its power, publish it again and again and again until people no longer see it as offensive [see quote from Gustavo Arellano in the 11/29 *EW* interview].

So, ass-clown, how you doing? Ass-clown. How's it feel to be an ass-clown? Ass-clown. Ass-clown.

Feel better, now that you longer see the term "ass-clown" as offensive, ass-clown? I knew you would. My plan to reappropriate