

The backyard of Stephanie Jorgensen in Stayton in August 2008 during a field burn



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Killing Fields

Field burning's deadly legacy from the I-5 pile-up to today's toxic air

BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

Kate du Aime Rodewald and her husband, Bill Rodewald, were driving north on I-5 from Eugene in a borrowed Volkswagen van with their baby girls Dayiel, age 2, and 8-month old Mia, when smoke drifted across the highway. The family had recently moved to Oregon to be near Bill Rodewald's mother in Falls City, a small town west of Salem. They had just made an offer on a house and planned to move to Eugene and attend the UO that fall.

Their plans ended forever when the smoke of a field burn blew across the highway on the afternoon of Aug. 3, 1988. Blinded by the smoke and in the smoky darkness the Rodewald's van was hit from behind by an 18-wheeler and shoved beneath the vehicle in front of them. The family was burned alive in the fire that swept over the accident. In all, seven people were killed and 38 were injured in the 23-vehicle disaster that made headlines across the country. The only member of the du Aime-Rodewald family to survive that day was Kate's son Wills, who

'I could actually see the flames; there was light smoke across the highway.'

— Steve Rodewald

had stayed home with his grandmother.

The fight over field burning began in the 1960s, but that young family's tragic death in 1988 is probably the grimdest reminder of the dangers of field burning smoke. This summer marks the release in paperback of William Wharton's novel *Ever After: A Father's True Story* that chronicles the life and death of his daughter, Kate du Aime Rodewald, and her family in that field burning accident, and it also marks yet another attempt in the Oregon Legislature to put an end to the controversial practice. A bill to phase-down the practice introduced by Gov. Ted Kulongoski died in committee, but Senate Bill 528, written as a ban on burning, is struggling its way from committees to the Senate this week, and its advocates have long hoped it would mark a complete end to the fires in the grass seed fields of Oregon.

A Burning History

It was an accident that brought field burning to Oregon in the first place; an unplanned fire in a grass seed field in the 1940s eliminated a fungus that kept seeds from germinating, leading agronomists, like John Hardison, stationed at OSU and known as "the father of field burning," to recommend the practice as a way of controlling pests and weeds and to reduce straw.

By the 1960s thousands of acres of fields were being burnt, to the point where it created a "pall of smoke that frequently hangs over the valley for days on end," according to a 1964 article in *The Register-Guard*. A prescient August 1963 *R-G* story warns, "Fields next to highways should not be burned when wind can blow smoke across the highway and jeopardize traffic."

But such warnings were not enough to prevent the 1988 accident, or any of the other smoke-induced wrecks in Oregon. According to archived newspaper reports: In 1968 smoke from a burn caused an accident injuring three people, two of them critically. In 1972 a rear-end collision near Scio left a man with permanent neck and back injuries. In 1978 a 22-car accident happened 17 miles north of Eugene on I-5. That same year field burning smoke piled up 10 cars near Madras injuring 16 people. In 1980 "near-zero visibility" caused a four-car wreck near Albany, and in 1981 another accident near Albany also involved four cars.

But these days it's not traffic accidents that have field-burning opponents concerned — though the acres of fields that are burned have been reduced — it's the affects of the smoke on the lungs of Oregonians. As Rep. Paul Holvey, who introduced this year's bill to end field burning puts it, "We've learned so much more about the health impacts." According to the EPA the fine particulate matter caused by field burning smoke can penetrate to the deepest parts of the lungs and is linked to "numerous health problems including asthma, bronchitis, acute and chronic respiratory symptoms such as shortness of breath and painful breathing, and premature deaths."

Two such premature deaths have happened in Idaho, a state where field burning is also hotly debated. Mary Bird, 68, died in 1986 of pulmonary emphysema aggravated by field burning, her husband, a

doctor, said in an interview at the time with *The Spokesman-Review*, "She went through hell every smoky day." Thirty-seven year old Sharon Vogel died of an asthma attack brought on by grass seed field burning smoke at her house in Sandpoint, Idaho. Her last words were "I don't want to die; I am going to die."

Kate du Aime Rodewald was only two months short of her 36th birthday when field-burning smoke cut her life short. Her brother, Matthew du Aime, flew to Oregon for the funeral of his sister, her husband and their baby girls. "At the time of the accident," he says, "It wasn't clear what had happened." When it became evident the accident was caused by field burning smoke, "it seemed so strange to me," he says in a faint accent that hints of his upbringing both in the U.S. and in Europe.

As he was leaving Oregon for his return trip to France, he says he "borrowed a piece of paper at the luggage counter." He wrote a letter that was published in *The Oregonian* and the *R-G* that asked grass seed farmers to give him an explanation for why they burned their fields or to convince him if "there are no viable alternatives." He wrote, "I need a viable explanation for the death of these people I love so much."

Oregonians responded, deploring the practice, du Aime says in a phone interview this week from the family's houseboat in France. But the only response he got from the grass seed industry was to "try to take my quite naïve letter and try to twist it" in a journal put out by the industry.

"Suddenly," he says, "I began seeing the kind of sinister side to the grass seed industry."

Despite attempts by the industry to spin the field burning debate as an attack on small farmers, du Aime says, he "became aware a couple of really big farms" controlled the industry. Despite the reputation Oregonians have for rugged individualism, "I realized that there are economic forces in Oregon which are not obvious, but they control a lot of things."

The 2007 bill to ban grass seed field burning introduced by Rep. Holvey died in committee after a hearing with lobbying by major grass seed buyers Scotts Co. and J.R. Simplot.

Du Aime had lived in Oregon before working in a logging camp in The Dalles and had been excited that his sister had moved to Oregon. He says Oregon has always had "positive connotations for me." It wasn't until after the accident that killed his sister that he saw his first field burn. "What I saw looked like a mushroom cloud from a atomic bomb," he says.

Du Aime's way of dealing with his grief was "to initially get very aggressively involved and angry," he says. He wrote letters and arranged a meeting with then Gov. Neil Goldschmidt. His father Albert du Aime wrote not only letters to Goldschmidt but also a book about what had happened to try to deal with the death of his first-born child, and as a scathing indictment of field burning. "We cried and cried until our teeth hurt," says Albert du Aime's wife, Rosemary, "then we said, 'Is this doing any good? Let's stop this.'"

In one of his impassioned letters to Goldschmidt, du Aime wrote that he had