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WEEKEND BREAK

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OUR WALLOWA ADVENTURE ENDS

By STEVE FORRESTER

In the United States, there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. That is what makes America what it is.

— Gertrude Stein

In retirement from The Daily Astorian, I gained a new job description. As president and CEO of our company, EO Media Group, one of my duties is to fill in — as an editorial writer and otherwise. Thus, three weeks ago my wife and I headed to Enterprise, at the foot of the Wallowa Mountains. I've served as interim editor of the Wallowa County Chieftain.

I've had a connection with Wallowa County since the 1950s. We started coming here because my father's cousin, Jean Sharff, lived in Enterprise with her physician husband, Dr. Bob Sharff. In those days, Bob was the only surgeon in the county. He told stories of riding horseback into the mountains to set a broken leg of one of Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas' companions. Douglas often summered at a camp in the Wallowas.

Writer's Notebook

When our publishing company purchased the Wallowa County Chieftain from the Don Swart family in 2000, our family's relationship with what is called the Switzerland of America deepened.

It has been a gift to reside here for more than a two-day stay. Out the kitchen and living room windows of our house rental, the Wallowas rise sharply, their peaks cloaked in snow. One could meditate on this mountain range, as the Japanese do with Mount Fuji. In my own musing on the mountains, I imagine that the Valkyries of Norse and German mythology live up there. It's where they fly to on horseback, with fallen heroes.

In both Astoria and Wallowa County, the weather dynamic can change in a matter of minutes. In Astoria, the Pacific Ocean generates the weather. In Wallowa it seems to be the vast mountain range.

Joseph, up the highway from here, had its rebirth many years ago. Enterprise is about to have its renewal. It is the same thing one observed years ago in Astoria. A local builder, Darrell Brann, has bought the OK Theatre. On our first night here, we heard a bluegrass guitarist and singer, Billy Strings, and his band. The OK Theatre rocked that night. Brann has equipped the theater for recording, and groups now come here to cut their CDs.

Brann owns a downtown building he will recondition. I met another man who, with his wife, renovated an aging building that now houses Wild Carrot Herbals and Dandelion Wines. Another developer is remaking an old apartment building.

During the night at the OK Theatre, it was apparent that Wallowa County is gaining a new, younger demographic.

Sound familiar?

Last Saturday night we saw the Blue Mountain Old Time Fiddlers at the Hurricane Creek Grange. The scene was out of a movie. My wife drove us home through a blinding snowstorm. On another weekend, we climbed the East Moraine of Wallowa Lake. At the top, the Wallowa valley was at our feet, and we could see well into Idaho. Through Bruce Buckmaster, we met Holly Akenon, a wildlife biologist who has mules and a salmon spawning stream on her property.

If you write for a daily newspaper, your nervous system becomes wired to reach a peak at certain hours in the day. For me, at The Daily Astorian, it was 10 a.m.

The weekly newspaper rhythm is different. I had done this once before, in

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On a springlike afternoon, reporters Kathleen Elynn and Steve Tool converse with Steve Forrester, center.

Cheryl Jenkins/Chieftain



While heavy snow fell outside, the Hurricane Creek Grange was warm with fiddling.

Brenda Penner/
 For The Daily Astorian



This was our view of frozen Wallowa Lake as we climbed the East Moraine.

Steve Forrester/EO Media Group

City dwellers succumb to the illusion that big things don't happen in small, rural places. But they do.