

Wordsmith to research

Spelling champ uses both sides of brain

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

Ever wonder what happened to that guy? That girl?

Take the case of Christopher Barnhart. Twenty years ago, the Pendleton boy won both district and state spelling competitions. Those who knew the precocious 12-year-old weren't awfully surprised.

From toddlerhood, Christopher loved words. One year, he asked for a dictionary for Christmas. He read the newspaper when most children were working their way through "Green Eggs and Ham" or "Goodnight Moon."

Christopher's mother, Melinda Slatt, said Christopher's brain was sponge-like and his pronunciation spot-on. She remembers asking her four-year-old son to run to the backyard one summer day to get a sprinkler for her. He returned a few moments later with a question.

"You mean the oscillating sprinkler?" he asked.

"I didn't even know he knew the word," Slatt said. "He had read it somewhere."

Christopher and his aunt often went head to head doing the daily newspaper crossword puzzle. After procuring two identical papers, they raced to see who could finish first. He often won.

So what happened to this talented wordsmith, this lover of etymology, grammar and spelling? Surely he carved out a career as a writer, maybe an up-and-coming author whose name will one day grace the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Sit back in your chair and get ready to glide Google Earth-style slowly toward the East Coast, the state of New York and finally the Big Apple. The zooming continues until Yeshiva University and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine come into view.

Inside a lab, Barnhart peers into his microscope at guinea worms grown in a petri dish. These nematodes have a starring role in the 31-year-old's research about how an overabundance of manganese can cause cell death in certain parts of the brain.

"We're trying to figure out the involvement of certain proteins that might be involved in preventing cell death," he explains.

Barnhart, it seems, has bolted from one side of the brain to the other. His love



Contributed photo
Christopher Barnhart, a Pendleton native and state spelling champ 20 years ago, works in his laboratory at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine where he is researching the brain.

"The experience taught me that focusing and working hard can open a lot of doors for you."

— Christopher Barnhart, 1995 state spelling competition champion

of science clicked in at Pendleton High School as he studied biology, chemistry and physics. He earned a degree in bioengineering at Oregon State University and graduated with a Ph.D. in bioengineering from University of California Davis last March. The post-doctoral fellow now spends his days in Einstein's state-of-the-art laboratory chipping away at biomedical mysteries of the brain.

Barnhart doesn't get much opportunity for pleasure reading these days amid the avalanche of scientific papers, but when he does, the list is eclectic — everything from the Chinese poet Li Po to "Slaughterhouse Five," "Watership Down" and Stephen King's "It."

Barnhart remembers the district and state spelling competition with fondness, though he still winces at a word he missed during state.

"I only missed one word — fissure," he said with a laugh. "That haunted me."

That day, his mom sat among parents and other

supporters awaiting the announcement of who won the competition, which was done via paper and pencil instead of out loud. She braced herself as the winner was revealed.

"When they said Christopher's name, I shot up," she said. "I was the only one in the audience who knew him."

Afterwards, the mother and son celebrated by visiting an airbrushing booth at the Oregon State Fair, the site of the spelling competition. A short time later, Barnhart sported a T-shirt that proclaimed "State Spelling Champ of the Year."

"I still have it," he said. Barnhart said he left the competition with a burst of confidence.

"The experience taught me that focusing and working hard can open a lot of doors for you," Barnhart said.

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PENDLETON

Hill Meat expansion hits hurdle

Water pipes not big enough

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

The expansion of Hill Meat Co., a bright spot for Pendleton's business community, has dealt with a hiccup in its planning stages.

According to Pendleton Public Works Director Bob Patterson, Hill Meat's southward expansion isn't currently serviced by the city's water utility. Additionally, the four- and six-inch lines that provide Hill Meat's current water supply are not large enough to supply fire suppression to the growing business.

While city staff is looking into state grants that could cover the cost of upgrading these utilities, Patterson said Hill Meat would need to cover the costs if the state doesn't come through.

The city could know the total cost of the project later this week.

In addition to adding 20,000 square feet to its current Northwest 50th Street facility, Hill Meat plans to add as many as 30 jobs to its workforce as its business continues to grow.

While Hill Meat may be one of the most prominent business at the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport

industrial park, its location places it just outside the boundaries of more robust water lines.

Patterson said east of Northwest 49th Street is serviced by modern, industrial grade eight- and 10-inch lines, while the land west of 49th Street has water infrastructure composed of four- and six-inch pipes.

Those lines were originally installed in the 1940s, when the airport was used primarily as an Army base without the same fire suppression standards required for a modern development.

Patterson said the needed improvements to the Hill Meat expansion could have been paid for by system

development charges, a fee assessed to developers based on how much of an impact the development would have on the surrounding infrastructure.

The Pendleton City Council has discussed implementing such charges for water, sewer and stormwater, although an actual date for implementation hasn't been formally considered.

Hill Meat CEO Jim Cheney said he felt as though the issue was resolved and thanked the city for working with the company.

He added that the city's focus on attracting new businesses to the airport industrial park would have made utility upgrades an eventuality.

PILOT ROCK

Council moves toward \$4 million sewer project

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

Pilot Rock City Council gave the go-ahead Tuesday night for the creation of a draft plan for new wastewater lagoons. The latest report from the engineering firm of Anderson Perry & Associates shows the total cost of the project is about \$4 million, an increase of about \$200,000 since estimates in July.

The council voted 5-0 on an option that includes building new two lagoons — one 23 acres and one seven acres in size — on the north and south sides of the existing lagoon, which is a little north of the city and on the west side of Birch Creek. Pilot Rock's sewer treatment lagoon is 57 years old. In late 2013 the city exceeded its groundwater bacteria limit. The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality in 2014 warned Pilot Rock it needs to upgrade the lagoon to cease harming groundwater and avoid penalties and other actions.

The council discussed the project during a work session before the meeting. Anderson Perry president and senior engineer Brad Baird said at the session the draft plan would be ready

sometime in September, then the city would be able to seek funding from state or federal agencies that provide grants and long-term, low-interests loans for these kinds of big infrastructure projects.

To qualify, though, the city needs to raise its sewer rate to \$40.36 a month. The residential rate is \$28 a month after a \$10 bump went into effect in July. The city plans to increase the rate during the next few years until it meets the mark.

Construction could begin in spring 2017, according to Anderson Perry's project schedule, and wrap up in 2018. The new system would last at least 20 years.

The lagoon project also requires the city to acquire about 30 acres of land from private owners. Public works director Steve Draper in the work session said the asking price is \$125,000, but negotiations continue. Baird suggested the city buy the land now. The \$125,000 price, he said, is not much in the scope of the whole project.

The council in other business took no action on a request from city recorder Teri Porter to address people on Facebook or other social media. She told the council

she deleted comments she made on Facebook in response to misinformation about police schedules. Councilman Deacon Perkins said he was OK with letting go of this, which was fraught with public records and meetings issues.

"I don't think the city should get entangled in social media, so I appreciate you backing up on that," he said.

The council also heard a pitch from Sheri and Jason Lybrand of Pendleton to open a marijuana dispensary in Pilot Rock to take advantage of Measure 91, the new law Oregon voters passed to allow recreational marijuana. Jason Lybrand is the owner of Wicked Kitty Tattoo & Piercing in downtown Pendleton, which in addition to body art also sells lingerie and other items. A dispensary would be profitable, they said, and would bring more tax revenue to the city.

Council members did not seem too stoked on the idea, and at the end of the meeting Perkins said he felt misled — the agenda only noted Sheri Lybrand would discuss the benefits of the law. He and Councilman Jim Hinkle also noted Pilot Rock voters opposed Measure 91.

HERMISTON

Aquatic center in need of repairs

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

The Hermiston Family Aquatic Center is beginning to show its age.

Parks and Recreation director Larry Fetter gave city councilors a tour of the facility Monday night, pointing out areas in need of significant repair.

The pool's most noticeable defect was the boiler that heats water for showers. After the boiler began leaking, the city was not able to get it re-certified for municipal pool use, causing swimmers to put up with cold showers or skip them altogether for most of the summer.

Fetter said the pool, which first opened in 2004, is no longer brand new and it is time that the city started thinking about creating a reserve fund for large repairs that will inevitably start cropping up.

"If we had had a reserve we would have had showers this summer," Fetter said.

Fortunately, the pool can survive without hot showers, he said. But if a maintenance problem ends up shutting down the pool for a long period of its three-month season, that's going to be a major blow to

its budget.

Instead of replacing the boiler Fetter proposed putting solar panels on the picnic shelter roof to heat water for the showers. The panels would cost \$50,000 instead of the \$8,500 to replace the boiler, but they would save \$18,000 a year in natural gas, allowing the city to recoup its investment in three years.

The downside would be that the hot showers would be dependent on the weather, but Fetter pointed out that the pool only operates during the sunniest months of the year.

"We get a ton of UV," he said. "Especially this summer, we wouldn't have had a problem at all."

Fetter pointed out a second repair he hopes the city will pay for before the 2016 swim season. The tiles around the gutter system for the multi-use pool are covered in rust because the water has made its way through the tile to the rebar holding up the pool walls, causing internal damage that Fetter compared to a cavity in a tooth. He proposed spending \$40,000 to grind out the damage inside the pool lip and replace it with something that will hold up better and

be easier to clean than the tile.

"There really is no part of this gutter system that isn't affected to some degree," he said.

The work would take about two weeks to do and could be performed in the spring, in time for the pool to open for the next summer.

Fetter also pointed out a smaller repair that will cost less than \$5,000 and will be completed this fall. A significant water leak under the pool deck near the water slides has been draining water from the pool and needs to be dug up and patched.

"We've lost a lot of water, and it's expensive water because it's heated and chlorinated," he said.

Fetter urged the city council to consider creating a reserve fund to cover pool maintenance above and beyond routine things like new paint. He said if the city pulled \$20,000 a year aside from the Transient Room Tax fund it could still meet its bond obligation, which the city will not pay off until 2033.

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