

MILTON-FREEWATER

Last witness to Depot explosion dies at 93

By **MARCIA AKES**
For the East Oregonian

Milton-Freewater resident Evelyn Thomas was believed to be the last living witness of the explosion at the Umatilla Ordnance Depot on March 21, 1944. She died Wednesday morning at the age of 93.

Igloo B-1014 contained 264 500-pound conventional bombs and was completely destroyed in the accidental explosion. The blast was felt as far away as Lewiston, Idaho. Six civilian workers, five men and a woman, were killed in the blast. It was the only fatal munitions handling accident in the history of the Depot.

Thomas, whose maiden name was Guerrant, was born on February 6, 1922, and said she grew up "out in the sagebrush around Pendleton." She went to work for the Depot in November 1943 and became one of the base's two photographers.

It was World War II and everyone in the area, who could, worked at the Depot handling conventional munitions. They worked in shifts around the clock packing, unpacking and storing bombs in over 1,000 huge underground concrete vaults.

The night of the explosion there was a movie on base and Thomas had been



Photo contributed by Marcia Akes
Evelyn Thomas, left, receives the VFW lifetime achievement award from Tina Buzard, Milton-Freewater VFW auxiliary president.

watching the children of a senior officer. She was waiting in a car to go home when 264 bombs lit up the night. After hitting the ceiling of the car, she gathered herself and reported for duty. "I was wide-eyed," she said in a 2010 interview and "scared out of my senses," and never forgot that horrible night.

Nobody knew exactly what had happened but Thomas and the head photographer, Jimmy Drake, were sent to the scene to document the aftermath of the explosion. Traversing the area was difficult for Thomas, who had on high heels and a dress. When daylight came it

showed a terrible sight. The crater and rubble were hard to face for everyone. Taking pictures of the tragedy was especially hard for young Thomas, as just nine months earlier her husband had died in an explosion while fighting in North Africa.

While everyone was saddened by the igloo accident, there wasn't much time to dwell on it as the country was at war. "You had a job to do," Thomas said.

She eventually became the post photographer so Drake could leave for the war. She recalled sitting in dark box cars loaded with bombs, taking pictures of damage to the packing and

bracing used to secure the bombs during shipping so munitions packing could be improved.

Since they could not use flash bulbs, as it might ignite the bombs, a light meter was used and it took about five minutes per picture. The pictures then had to be developed and 8x10 glossies printed. Thomas worked at the Depot until 1947.

Then she met Wilfred Joseph Thomas, who had served in the U.S. Army during the war. The couple married in 1948, and after her husband retired from the railroad in 1983, they moved back to his hometown of Milton-Freewater.

An extensive Army investigation was unable to determine what actually caused the explosion of Igloo B-1014. Some workers at the time speculated a bomb might have been defective, or may have been dropped "just right." The igloos were designed so if there was an explosion everything would be forced up, and it wouldn't affect the igloos on the sides. The engineers' design worked flawlessly.

There's still a crater at the location. It's grown over with grass now. A stark white cross marks the site of the blast and that's where the Army holds an annual ceremony to honor the six people who died.

BRIEFLY

Police create safe zone for online transactions

BOARDMAN — The Boardman Police Department has created a safe meeting place for strangers looking to complete online transactions.

Residents and business owners who wish to make exchanges from Facebook, Craigslist or other sites can now meet at the online safe zone at the Boardman police station, according to a department press release.

"Online purchases are very popular, but completing these transactions can make a person feel uncomfortable, and there have been reports all over the country of meetings going wrong," Chief Rick Stokoe said in the release. "We hope that residents take advantage of the new Online Safe Zone as a new program aimed at keeping people safe."

The location is covered by security cameras, and the station is staffed from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays. Officers can also be called to the station on the weekends if they are not responding to a call for service.

Echo collecting historical photos

ECHO — The city of Echo is looking for historical photos of local buildings.

City manager Diane Berry said she decided to put out a call for photos after a conversation with Lloyd Piercy, who said he was interested in knowing more about the original facade of the old Echo Hotel before starting a restoration project.

Berry said she had one grainy copy of an old *East Oregonian* photo showing the hotel in its early days but would like more pre-1950 photos of the building from inside and out.

"I didn't know it had an old balcony until I saw the photo," she said.

Berry encouraged people to bring in pictures of the hotel and other architecture around town, as well as information they have about the buildings, such as when the old theater in city hall closed and what happened to the historic street lights and pillars that used to be outside the building.

She said the city has a good collection of photos from 1907, when it appears the city paid a professional photographer to take promotional pictures of the town, but not much between then and the 1950s.

Any contributed photos and information will be used on the city website, at city hall and at the historical museum.

"It's a way to make sure some of these images are preserved," she said.

Residents can stop by city hall to have their photos scanned and returned to them or can email electronic scans to ecpl@centurytel.net

Educational forum to discuss service changes

PENDLETON — An educational forum will be held in Pendleton to discuss changes to state and federal requirements for people who receive home and community-based services through the Department of Human Services and Oregon Health Authority.

The forum is targeted to people 18 years or older and their service providers. Forums will be offered to children's providers and guardians later in 2015.

The Pendleton forum is scheduled for Thursday, Sept. 10 at the Vert Club Room, with an afternoon session from 1-3:30 p.m. and evening session from 5-7:30 p.m. The same information will be presented in each session. Agency staff will be available to answer questions and offer guidance following a presentation.

More information is available at www.oregon.gov/dhs.

Training highlights special education

LA GRANDE — Understanding the IEP process, preparing for the transition to adulthood and special education rights are topics to be addressed during the FACT Special Education Regional Conference.

The conference is Saturday, Sept. 19 from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., which includes a free lunch, at Eastern Oregon University, La Grande. The event is free for family members and caregivers. It costs \$25 for professionals. Professional development units are available.

To register, contact 503-786-6020 extension 308, 888-988-3228, registration@factoregon.org or visit www.factoregon.org/calendar.

Heritage commission seeks grant applications

SALEM — The Oregon Heritage Commission is offering grants for qualified projects for the conservation, development and interpretation of Oregon's cultural heritage.

Awards typically range between \$5,000 and \$20,000. Projects can include anything related to Oregon heritage, and priority will be given to projects that preserve, develop or interpret threatened heritage resources or heritage resources of statewide significance.

Projects may include theatrical performances, collections preservation, exhibits, oral history projects, public education events, organizational archives projects, films and more.

The application deadline is Wednesday, Sept. 30. For more information, contact Kuri Gill at kuri.gill@oregon.gov, 503-986-0685 or visit www.oregonheritage.org.

ENTERPRISE

Festival jams with original musicians

By **TAMMY MALGESINI**
East Oregonian

Labor Day weekend offerings include a laid-back music festival in Wallowa County.

In its seventh year, Juniper Jam, which showcases original musicians, features all genres and musical styles.

"We want to honor original music and singer-songwriters," said Janice Carper, organizer of the event. "All the musicians are playing their own original music."

The Pre-Jam Jam is Friday at 5 p.m. with Will West & the Friendly Strangers and 7 p.m. with Run On Sentence at Terminal Gravity Brewing Co., 803 S.E. School St., Enterprise.

The fun continues Friday night at 9 p.m. with Dirty Revival at the OK Theatre, 208 W. Main St., Enterprise. Admission is \$12 or \$8 for those with a Juniper Jam ticket, which can be purchased at the Pre-Jam Jam.

The main event kicks off Saturday from 1-10 p.m. at the Wallowa County Fairgrounds, 101 S. River St., Enterprise. Tickets are \$15 in advance or \$18 at the gate. Kids ages 12 and under are admitted free.

"We increased the age



EO Media Group file photo
Kai Welch sings and plays guitar during the 2014 Juniper Jam. This year's event is Saturday at the Wallowa County Fairgrounds in Enterprise.

for kids getting in free to make it more affordable for families," Carper said.

Most of the bands, Carper said, are from the Pacific Northwest. However, the headline act, Jelly Bread, hails from Reno.

In keeping with the tradition of the Wallowa Valley Music Alliance's program Tunesmith Night, Juniper Jam opens with a writers-in-the-round set by three local songwriters. The musicians include Joey

Carper, Carolyn Lochert and Bart Budwig.

The show continues with two stages, featuring Mama Doll, Will West & the Friendly Strangers, The Blackberry Bushes, Dave McGraw & Mandy Fer, Marshall McLean Band, Run On Sentence, Simon Tucker and Sorry, Neighbors. After Jelly Bread's set, musicians from the festival will take the stage for a closing Jam.

The family-friendly event includes a kids area hosted by Safe Harbors. The activities include bouncy houses, a bubble machine, face painting and water balloons.

Food and beverages by local restaurants, bistros, micro-breweries, ranches and espresso shops will be available for purchase throughout the event. In addition, Juniper Jam features a small collection of Wallowa County art vendors.

"There aren't a bunch of vendors, just enough to feed the crowd and to support local artists," Carper said.

For more information, including a link to buy tickets in advance, visit www.juniperjam.com.

Contact Community Editor Tammy Malgesini at amalgesini@eastoregonian.com or 541-564-4539

PENDLETON

Grange to serve last fundraising breakfast Saturday

By **TAMMY MALGESINI**
East Oregonian

After more than 30 years serving up an all-you-can-eat breakfast, the White Eagle Grange is putting away its skillets and spatulas.

Gail Wilson said both volunteers and the number of people coming to eat have dwindled over the years.

"Without help, we have had to cancel too many times and our numbers attending doesn't make it worthwhile to continue," she said.

This weekend is the last regularly scheduled breakfast. It is Saturday from 6-10 a.m. at 43828 White Eagle Road, located 11 miles south

of Pendleton off Highway 395 between Pendleton and Pilot Rock.

The menu includes pancakes, French toast, bacon pancakes, bacon, sausage, ham, hash browns, eggs, ham scrambled, ham and cheese omelet, biscuits and gravy, and beverages. The suggested donation is \$7 for ages 8 and older, \$4 for ages 5-7 and free for 4 and under. Donate two non-perishable food items and receive a \$1 discount.

"I would love to see a big attendance this Saturday at our breakfast just to show that this isn't a fundraiser that we need to put to bed," Wilson said.

If the grange receives enough requests, Wilson said it may offer breakfasts on special occasions.

The grange raises money for community projects, including its Words for Thirds program. The project provides dictionaries for area third graders.

Even though the regular breakfasts are canceled, the grange continues to participate in fundraising activities. The board recently voted to start a bingo/game night.

The first one is Sunday, Sept. 27 from 6:30-8:30 p.m. A snack bar will be available to purchase desserts, beverages, popcorn and other snacks.

Wilson reports despite a little rain, the grange's recent car wash fundraiser was a success. Another one is planned for later this month or early October.

For more information, contact Gail Wilson at 541-276-3778 or g.wilson@q.com.



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