

Quick takes

Work halts at Carty

Worse time of the year for all the families. Now let’s all hope the checks are good to cash.

— Debbie Pettey

I’m glad I didn’t take the job I got called for.

— Dana Storms Tassie

How can you go bankrupt when they shovel money in your pockets?

— Brent Bottorff

And the coal plant keeps chugging away!

— Carolyn Thompson

PERS back at forefront

Only the bureaucratic system and its cronies would come up with such a Ponzi scheme known as PERS. Apparently no one in Salem knows how to save money or make money work. Our elected politicians answer to the problem is and has been: Throw more money at it. While the rest of Oregonians are having to hide their money in the back yard.

— Sid

This newspaper and others feigning surprise at this situation is disingenuous. You were informed about the financial structure 25 years ago. I know. I was there. You chose to believe elected officials who themselves were on PERS.

— bifford

If people are looking for someone to blame look straight at the local school boards association, which heavily lobbied for the cut, and for the money. We elect these people. Stop electing greedy idiots.

— Marc Feldman

One of the great lessons of the Twitter age is that much can be summed up in just a few words. Here are some of this week’s takes. Tweet yours @Tim_Trainor or email editor@eastoregonian.com, and keep them to 140 characters.

Big Ag stands on shifting ground

By PETER CARRELS
Writers on the Range

Between 2006 and 2011, farmers on the western edge of the Midwest’s farm belt in Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota and the Dakotas converted more than 1.3 million acres of grasslands to corn and soybean fields. Some people were seriously alarmed. Wildlife habitat was destroyed, and water, soil and the air itself suffered.

But that conversion of grassland into industrial-scale farming of single crops inspired sales of chemicals, fertilizer and seed — farmers call these expenses “inputs” — that exceeded \$260 million per year. Given that almost 175 million acres were planted with corn and soybeans in the United States in 2015, it’s clear that the more land is industrially farmed, the more profit there is for what we call “Big Ag.”

Yet Big Ag’s hold on the food market isn’t as certain as it used to be. Fortune Magazine reports that America’s top 25 food and beverage companies — think processed-food makers — have lost some \$18 billion in market share since 2009. Where did that market go?

My answer is that shoppers have read the news about the health consequences of eating too much sugar, fat and meat, and they are increasingly turning to foods that contain far less of these ingredients. “Wholesome,” “organic” and “natural” are the ingredient descriptions that Americans care more about now.

They have also begun to understand the relationship between healthy farming and healthy food. Progressive food shoppers are put off by crops grown with synthetic

fertilizers, hormones, neonicotinoids, genetically modified organisms and glyphosates.

What once might have seemed like a fad now appears to be a genuine social movement. Fortune quoted one former ConAgra executive who described this movement as the most transformative, dynamic and disruptive consumer shift he

has witnessed in his 37 years in the food industry.

Big Ag fought back with expensive public relations campaigns that sought to boost public support by employing well-worn themes. American consumers just didn’t understand modern farming, they said. Ads sponsored by industrial agriculture groups implied that many people don’t realize that food is grown on the land and does not magically

appear wrapped in plastic in grocery stores. I suggest that Big Ag is missing the point entirely: It’s not that today’s consumers don’t understand where their food comes from, it’s that they do.

Another marketing theme proposed that industrial agriculture helps fulfill the responsibility of American farmers to “feed the world.” This “feeding the world” slogan has been used for several decades to explain the need for production-oriented, large-scale monoculture agriculture. But is it reasonable to think that American farmers can and should feed the world?

Fred Kirschenmann, a sustainable agriculture expert and distinguished fellow at Iowa State University’s Leopold Center, also manages his family’s 1,800-acre organic farm in North Dakota. Kirschenmann regards the expectation that American farmers can feed the world as a distraction from more important agricultural

issues, and a mischaracterization of farming’s capabilities and objectives.

“There are ecological considerations that must be part of the discussion, and a whole range of social and political problems and the concept of waste that are also part of this discussion,” he says. “Climate change is another consideration.”

Who is perpetuating this mischaracterization? According to Kirschenmann, it is primarily the institutions and corporations that want to maintain the current system of monoculture agriculture. “These are the companies that sell inputs like fertilizers and other chemicals, and food processors and commodity groups,” he says. “They use the expression because they think it gives them a moral high ground from which to pursue the type of agriculture they profit from.”

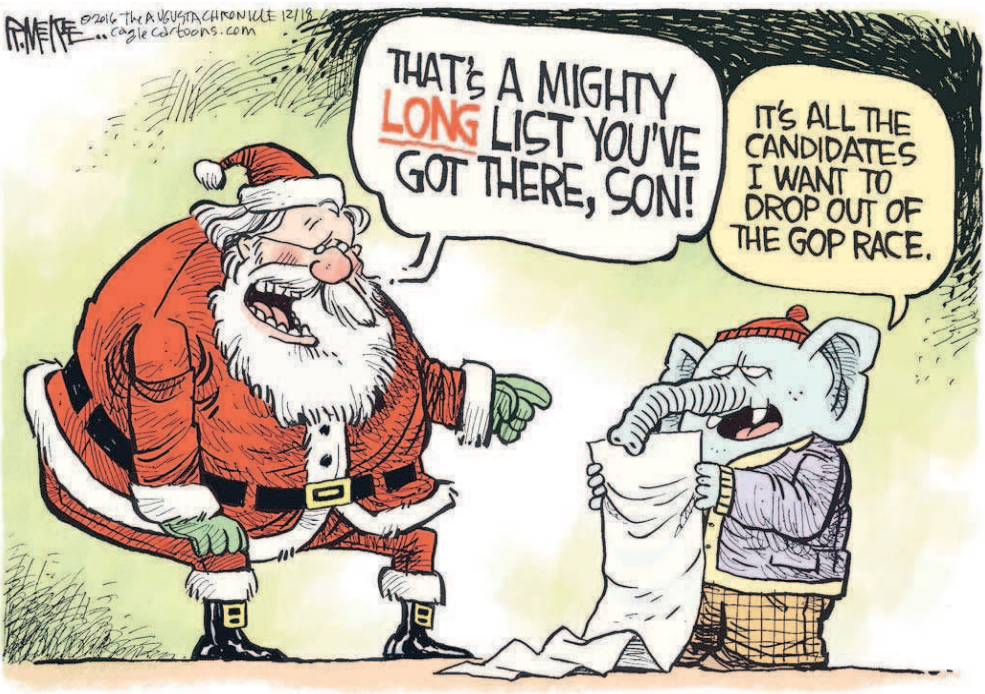
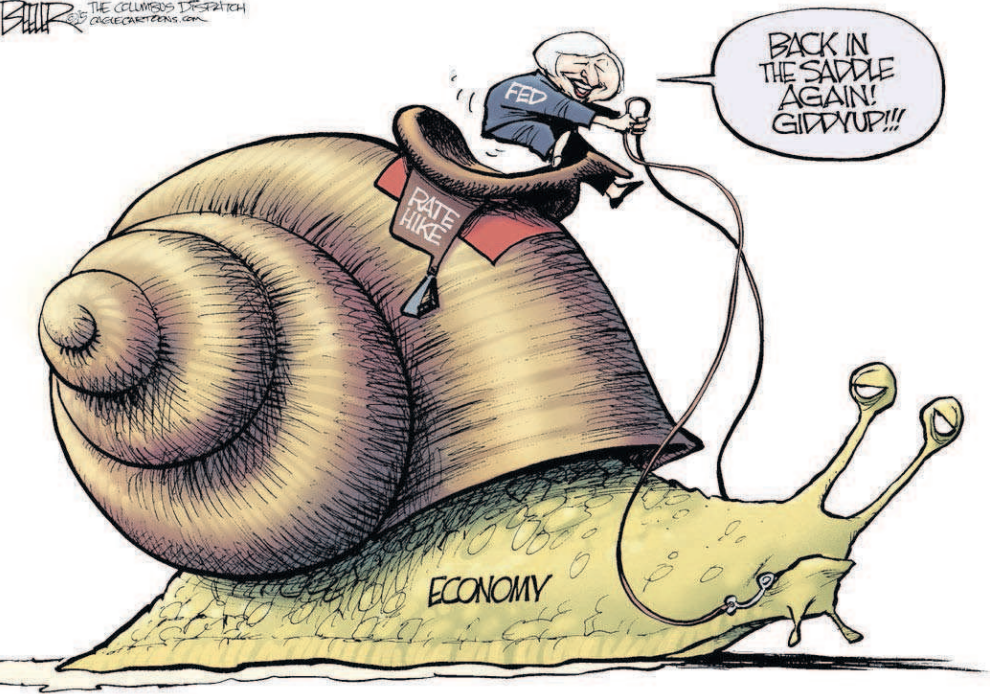
In any event, just how successful have American farmers been in their so-called quest to feed the world? The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that about 795 million people of the 7.3 billion people in the world, or one in nine, are undernourished, and that this number is growing.

This is happening even though in recent years American farmers are producing record soybean and corn yields. Kirschenmann also points out that America’s most agricultural state, Iowa, where much of the land is devoted to a single commodity crop, actually imports 90 percent of its food.

The trend is clear: American consumers increasingly want to buy food as free as possible from artificial ingredients, pesticides, sugar and fat and hormones. And bigger may no longer be considered better when it comes to producing food.

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Peter Carrels is a contributor to *Writers on the Range*, an opinion service of *High Country News* (hcn.org). He writes in *Sioux Falls, South Dakota*.



The 2015 Sidney Awards

It is time once again for the Sidney Awards, when I pick out some of the best long-form essays that you might download for your holiday reading pleasure. This year there were so many fine pieces it’s impossible to read them all without totally ignoring your family.

The first two winners are just great narratives. In “The Man Who Tried to Redeem the World With Logic” in *Nautilus*, Amanda Geffer described the partnership between Walter Pitts and Warren McCulloch. These two geniuses fit together perfectly. They performed amazing intellectual feats, the first of which was coming up with a working model for how the brain works and laying the groundwork for artificial intelligence.

They also developed an amazing friendship. At one point when they were apart, Pitts wrote McCulloch, “About once a week now I become violently homesick to talk all evening and all night to you.”

Only one person was unhappy with this arrangement: the wife of a third colleague who was jealous of her husband’s academic relationships. She told her husband, falsely, that their daughter had been seduced by his colleagues. That ruptured the whole network of ties.

Pitts was abandoned. He began drinking heavily. He withdrew from most social contact. As Geffer writes, “On May 14, 1969, Walter Pitts died alone in a boarding house in Cambridge, of bleeding esophageal varices, a condition associated with cirrhosis of the liver. Four months later, McCulloch passed away, as if the existence of one without the other were simply illogical, a reverberating loop wrenched open.”

“The Zero Armed Bandit,” published in *Damn Interesting* by Alan Bellows, opens with an amazing problem. In 1980, a security guard finds an ingenious bomb with 28 mysterious toggles in a Lake Tahoe casino. An accompanying note says that any attempt to tilt the bomb or take it apart will set it off. The bomb will apparently wreak destruction within a 1,200-foot radius, including the Harrah’s hotel across the street.

The essay tells two stories — of the father and sons who built the bomb and engineered an equally complex ransom drop-off scheme, and the local officials who had to figure out how to defuse the thing. The essay shows two groups of bold and creative people, on both sides of the law, competing to solve opposite but wickedly complex problems.

I guess our theme here is the intersection



DAVID BROOKS
Comment

between psychology and intellect. Let me quickly mention two pieces that brilliantly marry psychology, intellect and technology. The first is “What Is Code?” which Paul Ford wrote in *Bloomberg Business*. Ford gives us a one-stop primer for what code is, how it works, who writes it, the nature of the people who write it. If you want to understand this ubiquitous stuff, this is the place to go.

If you want a glimpse of technology’s next face, I’d hold up Connie Chan’s post, “When One App

Rules Them All: The Case of WeChat and Mobile in China,” on the *Andreassan Horowitz* site. In America we use different apps for different functions. But China has overleapt us. The Chinese app WeChat basically does everything from texting to dating to banking to accessing city services. It is an app that contains millions of apps within it. As Chan says, it shows what happens when an entire country skips the PC and goes straight to mobile. It suggests a completely unified technological life. As Tyler Cowen noted on his *Marginal Revolution* blog, this is one of China’s first major innovations in the tech era.

Let us close this first column on the annual awards, named for philosopher Sidney Hook, with two looks at campus culture. The first is the much-discussed “The Coddling of the American Mind” in *The Atlantic* by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt. This was the most important article this year on student hypersensitivity, the way some students seek safe spaces in case they are assaulted by microaggressions. The authors invent the apt term “vindictive protectiveness” to capture this mindset and describe how this mental state leads to depression and leaves students unprepared for the real world.

Students may be offended by the slightest infringement in identity, but as Michael J. Lewis points out in “How Art Became Irrelevant” in *Commentary*, many are utterly unmoved by art. Lewis writes, “Placing things in context is what contemporary students do best. What they do not do is judge. Instead there was the same frozen polite reserve one observes in the faces of those attending an unfamiliar religious service — the expression that says, I have no say in this.”

Hyper-judgmentalism about self sits side by side with widespread non-judgmentalism about art, philosophy and even literature. This is a weird set of affairs.

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David Brooks became a *New York Times* Op-Ed columnist in September 2003.

Not everyone loves locavores

By ARI LEVAUX
Writers on the Range

In the last 20 years, the amount of locally grown foods consumed in the American diet has tripled, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and it now comprises 2 percent of the food consumed in the country. As with anything that’s popular, some have seen fit to attack this trend. Why do they do this? Do they find locavore talk of “terroir” pretentious and therefore annoying, or do they seriously believe, as some critics argue, that local food enthusiasts pose a threat to the planet?

One frequent complaint is relatively minor and concerns the fraudulent claims made by some restaurants. Thanks to the farm-to-table movement, menus have become dense with information, as chefs detail the life histories of every ingredient in every dish. San Diego Magazine did some investigating and documented cases of straight-up menu fraud: “Chefs will come look (at what we’re selling that day), write down notes, leave without buying anything, and then say they’re serving our food at their restaurants,” said Tom Chino of California’s Chino Farms.

The main argument against the locavore movement, however, revolves around the purported energy savings of growing food locally. In *The Locavore’s Dilemma*: In Praise of the 10,000-mile Diet, economists Pierre Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu argue that if everyone focused on local foods, agriculture would damage the environment even more than it already does. Their case rests on a widely circulated statistic: that local production adds up to a lot more food-related carbon emissions than the 5 percent accounted for by the transportation of food. Greenhouse tomatoes grown in the United Kingdom, for example, have been shown to produce three times the greenhouse gas emissions as tomatoes from Spain.

This criticism is not new. Stephen Budiansky wrote about it in a 2010 *New York Times* editorial, “Math Lessons for Locavores,” and several books have made the same argument, including *Just Food*, *An Economist Gets Lunch* and *Food Police*. Their arguments, based on economic concepts such as efficiency, comparative advantage and the economics of scale, assume that all

advantages and disadvantages of a given food chain can be accounted for.

Taken to their logical extremes, the economics-based arguments would label almost all gardens as inefficient. Most gardeners would agree that it would be more efficient, and even cheaper, to spend a few extra hours at work and buy all their food than spend that time crawling through the dirt. But they choose to garden just the same. Quality of life is hard to quantify.

An article published last summer by two economics professors, Anita Dancs and Helen Scharber, rebuts the efficiency arguments in the economists’ own language. While California can grow a lot of produce, they point out, the economic calculations don’t account for the state’s dwindling aquifer. Florida may also grow cheap tomatoes, but that economic efficiency doesn’t account for the near-slavery conditions in which some of the workers toil.

“I can’t believe that people are trying to argue that communities feeding themselves is a bad thing,” says Josh Slotnick, a farmer in Missoula, Montana. “Growing food in just a few places and shipping it around the world from there doesn’t sound like efficiency.”

Eating locally, he argues, makes you a better citizen. “Food is a medium for creating culture. It’s a medium for people falling in love with their places. And when people love where they live, all kinds of great behavior follows, very little of which is economically rational. It’s a red herring to say that, because the industrial food system is so efficient and its carbon footprint is so small, that it’s a good thing. Agribusiness isn’t about making food and places better. It will make us better consumers, but not better people or better citizens.”

Anyone who’s raised chickens will surely concede that it is more efficient to buy eggs at the store. But try telling that to my 2-year-old, whose first words in the morning are “get some eggs,” as he stumbles toward the coop in his sagging diaper. Should I tell him how inefficient that notion is? I’ll let you explain it to him, if it means that much to you. But I don’t think it’s an argument you’re going to win.

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Ari LeVaux is a contributor to *High Country News*. He writes about food and food politics in Montana.