

# 2016: Four murders in first half of year

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sell most of the land to AgriNorthwest, a farming company based in the Tri-Cities, to grow wheat, corn and potatoes. The remaining trees will be harvested as they become mature and ready for processing.

One-third of the property also sold to California dairyman Greg te Velde, who is proposing a 30,000-cow dairy east of where Homestead Lane intersects with Poleline Road. However, the state must first approve a confined animal feeding operation, or CAFO, permit which regulates how the operation would handle wastewater and manure generated on site. More than 2,300 comments have been submitted so far, mostly in opposition of the project.

Don Rice, director of North American operations for Greenwood Resources, said it could take several years to finish milling all the trees. He said the decision to sell was met with mixed emotions, as the tree farm has become a captivating landmark for visitors and photographers along Interstate 84.

"A Very Poplar Run," a 5K and 10K race to benefit the Agape House in Hermiston, was held for the final time in October. The Collins Companies also permanently shut down its Upper Columbia Mill, with most of the facility's 67 employees laid off in September.

## 4. EOTEC opens in Hermiston

After years of planning and millions of dollars in public and private investment, construction was completed on the first building of the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center in May.

The event center started hosting events soon after, giving a glimpse of the project's potential after frustrations over construction delays and budget overruns.

The project's fundraising committee finished its goal of raising an additional \$2 million in private donations during 2016 while the EOTEC board chose contractors for the other major components and began discussing what the operating budget and staffing for the center will look like.

Construction on the rodeo arena — future home of the Farm-City Pro Rodeo — began in the fall, and contractor G2 Construction placed an order for the prefabricated metal buildings that will make up the barns used for the Umatilla County Fair starting (if all goes well) in 2017.

## 5. Pot sales pass in Pendleton

2016 was a comeback year for pot in Pendleton.

After the Pendleton City Council nearly banned marijuana sales in 2015, local voters resoundingly passed local ballot measures legalizing recreational and medical marijuana sales as well as a 3 percent tax on marijuana products in the November election.

In December, two prospective businesses filed with the city for a license to open shops in town.

Opening a pot shop won't come cheap. Citing the costs of background checks and tax collection, the council approved \$1,550 and \$600 business licensing fees for recreational and medical marijuana, respectively.

## 6. #YoungmanOnEllen

Pendleton High School students launched a Twitter campaign in January to get a beloved teacher on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show."

Spanish teacher Kathryn Youngman, who was fighting cancer for the third time, had long admired the comedienne for her positivity. Youngman frequently encourages her students to be kind.

The hashtag trended with tweets originating around the world. A producer finally invited the teacher and family members to fly to Los Angeles and observe an "Ellen" taping. During the show, DeGeneres approached Youngman in the audience for an on-the-air conversation about attitude and facing challenges.

The day the show aired, Youngman spent the morning in chemotherapy, but made it home in time to watch the show. The teacher has since finished treatments and is back to teaching full-time.

## 7. Naked intruder survives river leap

A naked home invader found himself hanging from a tree by his foot after fleeing police and falling off a cliff.

On March 5, Steven Burton, 30, entered the Pendleton home of Gail Wilson, who has muscular dystrophy and was sitting in a living room chair eating soup. The naked Hermiston man grinned at Wilson and tried to give her a hug. Wilson, fearing rape or murder, managed



**3** The Boardman Tree Farm was sold to make way for more conventional crops and, possibly, a second mega-dairy in Morrow County

Staff photo by E.J. Harris



**4** Visitors enter the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center during an open house May 13, 2016 in Hermiston.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris



**5** Pendleton residents voted in the November election to allow both medicinal and recreation marijuana dispensaries in the city.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris



**6** Teacher Kathryn Youngman waves to the crowd gathered at Pendleton High School Feb. 15, 2016 when she announced she will be attending a taping of "The Ellen DeGeneres Show."

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

to call 9-1-1 when Burton dragged the family's affectionate Labrador retriever into a back room.

When Burton heard police arrive, he dashed away. He scaled a cyclone fence and plunged off the side of a 40- or 50-foot bluff that borders the Umatilla River near the Riverside Bridge. Officers found the apparently drug-intoxicated man at the bottom, his left ankle wedged in a tree and his head about five feet from the bank.

Rescuers finally dislodged the combative man, secured him on a stretcher and took him to St. Anthony Hospital, Pendleton. Burton faced charges of burglary, harassment, disorderly conduct and resisting arrest.

The story, and photo that accompanied it, was republished in media around the world.

Umatilla County Circuit Court records show Burton took a deal in April and pleaded guilty to burglary, resisting arrest and harassment and agreed to go through drug court. He had nine hearings in the drug diversion program and made each one. His next is Feb. 10.

## 8. A violent start to the year

Four murders in the first half of 2016 marked the year as the most violent in recent Umatilla County history.

Thadd Nelson, 44, died from gunshot wounds the morning of Jan. 27 at his property in Meacham.

Joseph Aaron McIver of Umatilla and Edward Duarte Ayala and Armando Ruben Vargas, who were new to Hermiston, face federal weapons charges stemming from Nelson's homicide. Vargas also faces federal assault charges.

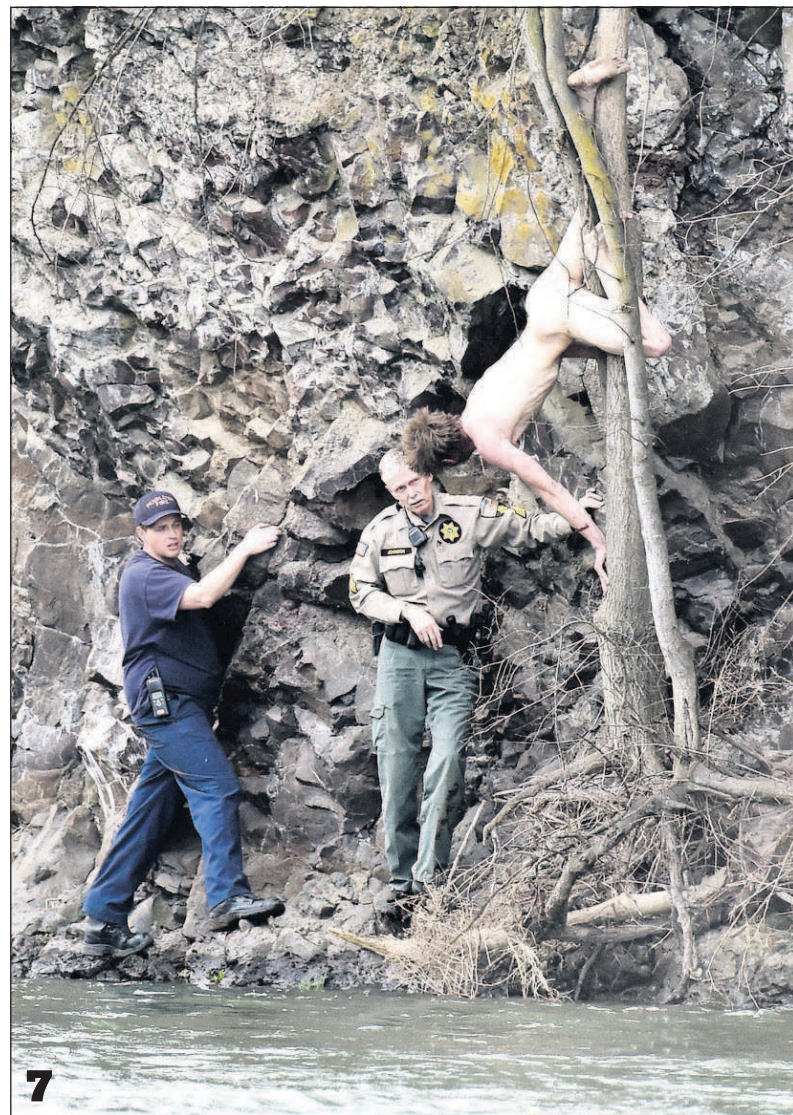
Umatilla County District Attorney Dan Primus charged McIver on Jan. 28 with Nelson's murder, then dropped the case days later when federal prosecutors indicted McIver and his co-defendants.

The federal trial for McIver, Ayala and Vargas begins May 16 in Portland pending delays. Primus said he could bring back the murder charge after the federal case concludes.

Federal prosecutors charged Julian Darryl Simpson, 23, with murder and gun crimes for shooting and killing Tony Jimenez, 27, the morning of March 19 at the home of Beau Welch on the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Co-defendant Victor Joseph Contreras faces assault and gun charges for shooting and injuring Welch.

Federal Judge Anna J. Brown set their trial to begin Feb. 7 in Portland.

Oscar Pastor Garcia Villegas, 26, of Milton-Freewater, faces murder and related charges for the May 26 stabbing death of his wife, Maria



**7** Steven S. Burton hangs from a tree above the Umatilla River in Pendleton on March 5, 2016 as Pendleton firefighter Jared Uselman and Umatilla County Sheriff's Deputy Dwight Johnson try to help him down.

Photo contributed by Monty Severe



**9** Seaport ceased all flights in September while it began liquidating its assets. Boutique re-started air service from Pendleton to Portland Dec. 19.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Villegas, 24. The state also accused Oscar Villegas of trying to stab and murder their two young children.

Circuit Judge Lynn Hampton on Dec. 21 sent Villegas to the Oregon State Hospital, Salem, to undergo a mental health evaluation. His next court date is Jan. 24 in Pendleton.

And the state charged Evan Freel, 17, of Milton-Freewater with murder by abuse and first-degree criminal mistreatment in the June 8 death of his infant son. Freel also is to undergo an evaluation at the state hospital. Circuit Judge Christopher Brauer set a hearing for Feb. 15 in Pendleton to discuss the next steps in the case.

## 9. SeaPort bankrupt, Boutique flies in

A year's worth of bad news for Pendleton's commercial air provider meant Round-Up City residents went without air service for three months.

Following SeaPort Airlines' February decision to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, the U.S. Department of Transportation announced that it would strip Pendleton of its Essential Air Service subsidy unless it could convincingly assure the agency that the airport could improve its flagging boarding numbers.

Despite public statements of support for SeaPort, the city council selected Boutique Air of San Fran-

## MOST VIEWED STORIES ONLINE

The top viewed stories on the East Oregonian website in 2016.

- 1. Pendleton home invader takes a naked leap**  
(March 7, 47,791 views)
- 2. Coach, teen dead in Hermiston; woman shot**  
(Aug. 18, 42,508 views)
- 3. Dark Days**  
(Jan. 27, 40,347 views)
- 4. Evacuations ordered for fire on Interstate 84**  
(July 30, 22,948 views)
- 5. 'Idago' still improbable, would sway U.S. politics**  
(Oct. 4, 21,061 views)
- 6. Police arrest man in Meacham murder**  
(Jan. 28, 20,524 views)
- 7. Counselors provide comfort to community in mourning**  
(Aug. 19, 18,647 views)
- 8. One dead, two injured in I-84 semi crash**  
(March 15, 17,872 views)
- 9. Ellen Show invites Pendleton teacher Youngman**  
(Feb. 15, 17,277 views)
- 10. Wreck shuts down traffic on Highway 730**  
(March 30, 16,291 views)