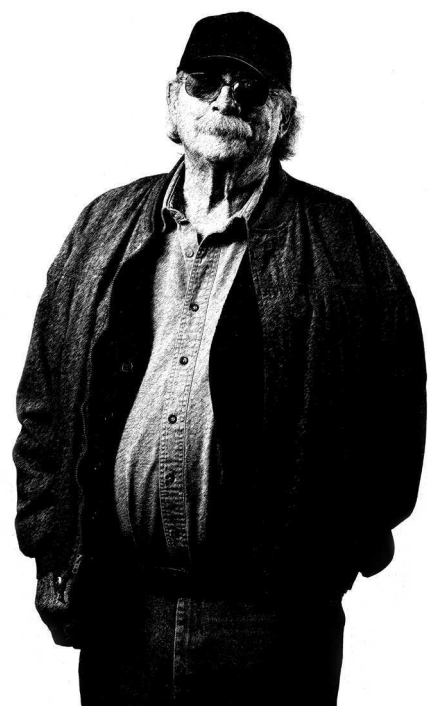


Waylon and Sylvia: A love story



J.D. SMITH

FROM THE HEADWATERS OF DRY CREEK

I believe in free public education at all levels. In the last year before school consolidation, I taught nine students in a wood frame schoolhouse, way out on the hard red winter wheatfields of northwest Montana.

There was no school bus. The students were delivered to the chapped building by wind-wrinkled mothers smelling of diesel, clabbered milk and manure, who drove stubnosed grain trucks and Pontiacs with singing shock absorbers. Through the slumping panes of the teacherage's kitchen window, I forecast the day's attendance by counting the dust plumes that boiled out of the Sweetgrass Hills and converged on the section-line roads.

I had long hair and had seen the world beyond Great Falls, so I was a bug in a mayonnaise jar to the kids, to be viewed through a shell of cautious politeness until it was determined whether I raised welts or spat stinky fluids. The younger ones softened first. By Columbus Day we were claiming a corner of Rasmussen's wheat field for our school by planting a flag in the dusty stubble. Shortly afterward I was J.D., one of the gang, to most of my students.

But not to Waylon, who, at age 12, had read most of Louis L'Amour and believed it possible to live as a gunfighter. Hormones were gathering behind his dinnerplate-sized belt buckle. He focused on fair Sylvia's scant breasts during history class. To Waylon I was

an outlander, an agent of change, someone bent on jamming mathematics between him and his bull-riding future.

In the puncture weeds at the perimeter of the pea-gravel parking lot were several ant mounds. Waylon's courtship of Sylvia consisted of carefully working his freckled hand and lower arm into an ant hill, until it was swarming with a black scurry, then chasing her around the schoolyard yelling "Ant Arm Man is going to get you! Ant Arm Man is going to get you!"

During one such episode of cowpoke foreplay, Sylvia went down hard on both knees against the lip of the concrete pad that anchored the flag pole. Restrained tears fogged her glasses.

"Damn you, Waylon. I'll get you." These were strong words from a fundamentalist farm girl who dressed as her grandmother had.

Waylon booted rocks down the road ahead of us. I was angry. I told him to cut the crap, to try a little tenderness, that Sylvia was in pain because he had worked an old joke one too many times, and that I didn't like pain, intentional or accidental. He'd better settle down before I called in the big dogs, his folks and Sylvia's. Waylon tipped back the bill of his tractor hat, checked the clouds, flashed a coyote grin and said, "Yes sir, Mister Smith, sir." That night a cold front sneaked over the Canadian border and covered the schoolyard with a foot of snow.

For Christmas I bought each student a harmonica. By Valentine's Day, with Sylvia

sitting first chair, we were a one-song band, playing "The Streets of Laredo" to an audience of aquarium guppies. Science afternoons were spent in model rocketry, firing chunks of balsawood and cardboard way, way up into the huge crystal skies. Physical education occurred when we trudged through the snow a mile downwind for the space ship retrieval.

A wind that smelled of crawdads whistled up from the Missouri River breaks in early April. Overnight the snow was gone.

One sunny morning, after the yellow clay had dried enough to permit play, Sylvia and Janet asked if they could take the new canvas bases outside and design a softball diamond. Sure, but keep in mind the windows and the thistles.

Each team had a pitcher, a first baseman and a couple of roving fielders. I was both teams' catcher. Waylon captained one group and chose Sylvia, Janet, and the two first graders for his team. Sylvia was unusually aggressive in demanding that her team bat first.

Of course, Waylon was the leadoff hitter. He punched the first pitch through the hole where a shortstop would have been, a clean single, but the girls knew Waylon so, as he wheeled up the baseline toward first, Sylvia and Janet yelled "Take two, Waylon! Take two!"

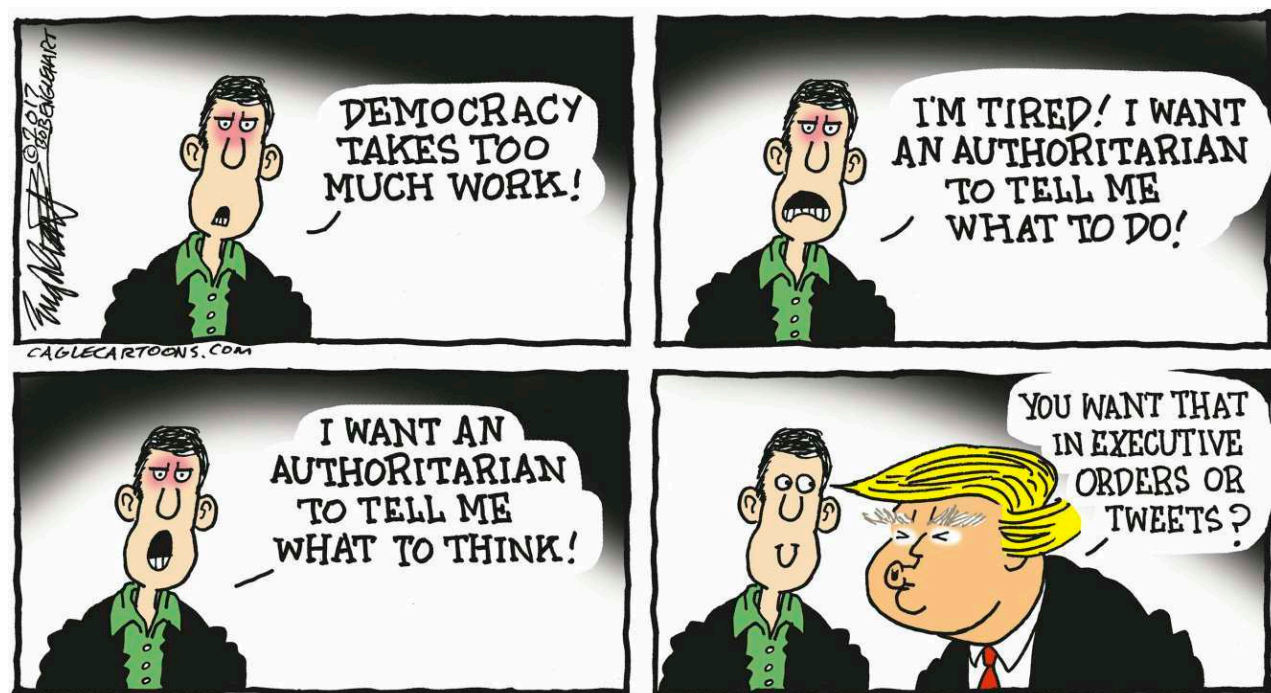
When he made the turn, going for the double, they changed their chant to "Slide, Waylon! Slide! Slide!" and he slid headfirst into a busy community of red ants that had recently been covered by second base.

He came up swatting, spitting and slapping. He was a tough little hombre, but I could see that he was in trouble with this situation, so I hustled him toward the four-seater outhouse. I left as he fought with his

Waylon, at age 12, had read most of Louis L'Amour and believed it possible to live as a gunfighter.

belt buckle. Sylvia sat smiling in the swing. A month later the job ended. On the last day of school, as I was boxing the artifacts of my teaching career and packing my truck to head toward Alaska, I looked out into the schoolyard and there by the flagpole sat Sylvia and Waylon, holding hands while they waited for their rides back into the Sweetgrass Hills.

J.D. Smith is an accomplished writer and jack-of-all-trades. He lives in Athena.



Drone range a development opportunity

I hesitate to say that something is new in Pendleton's economy after dashed hopes over the years.

Why has Pendleton not landed payrolls that have gone to Hermiston? Several reasons.

If you need bare land near interstate highways, interstate rail and a major river, Hermiston can be your place. Pendleton has some of those features but this town is more choosy than Hermiston when it comes to development. I believe most Pendletonians favor economic growth as long as it does not change the basic character of the town they cherish.

Seems to me Pendleton has to some extent been the victim of its own success — as if Pendleton Woolen Mills and the Round-Up are proof that this town has it made forever. But the losses of Albertson's and J.C. Penney and declines in school enrollment remind us that if you are not moving forward, you are dropping behind.

Pendleton airport has found itself in the research and development aspect of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), or drones.

The Tiger Shark is the newest aircraft added to the aviation department of the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory. Tiger Shark collects data related to global climate change. It was developed by a Pennsylvania engineering firm for the Navy for reconnaissance. It was then adapted by the DOE as a climate measuring tool.

PNNL flight official Pete Carroll sounds enthusiastic about being able to use Pendleton's UAS test range. Chances of repeat business with the Pendleton test range look pretty good.

But even though the Pendleton Range is busy these days, city officials wonder if the future will bring the airport more than rental payments from aviation companies.

After all, the Northwest-based engineering for a Tiger Shark would



MIKE FORRESTER
Comment

need to come from a group such as PNNL. And ventures including shipping freight puts distant Pendleton at a disadvantage and Pendleton has a limited number of ready workers.

But the point here is not whether Pendleton can grow to a population of 30,000 or becomes the UAS capital of the West. The question is whether Pendleton and its airport can team up with drone R&D people and help them. If so, Pendleton can be a net beneficiary.

Incorporating drones into farming drove early interest in forming a test range here. Pendleton sits next to the Columbia Basin, one of the most productive crop areas in the United States. World War II brought Pendleton an airport designed to handle planes of the Army Air Corps and commercial airliners out of Portland. And the fact that Pendleton is in a rural area of just 17,000 is good because UAS aircraft need plenty of space.

The FAA says the data from the Pendleton test range helps the FAA in writing flight regulations and ensuring that airport users across the country can operate cooperatively and safely with one another.

The FAA is known for extra attention they give to drafting and revising regulations governing aviation. It can be frustrating to deal with a cautious agency, but Pendleton UAS officials have learned to cope.

Darryl Abling, the Pendleton Range manager, says that in addition to the Tiger Shark, other potential clients have shown an interest in using the Pendleton Test Range, but he gave no names.

Abling, a 29-year veteran of Northrop Grumman in Southern California, showed me two facilities to house drone test operations at the Pendleton airport.

One is a trailer that can move tech equipment from place to place on the test range. The other is a

12,000-square-foot building that used to house bank records.

So what is the potential for outside investment and jobs at the Pendleton test range? Distance from urban areas and shortage of housing and workforce may rule out manufacturing of drones. So what is more likely to develop?

Because of the Pendleton Range's favorable reputation so far, I would guess that the PNNL would consider Pendleton for work on aircraft beyond the Tiger Shark drones. Likewise for the FAA's writing of drone flight regulations and capturing data on climate change. Pendleton has apparently been a dependable partner, so why not keep using the facility?

Pendleton needs well paying jobs. Numbers of ag jobs here have declined as farm ownership has consolidated.

If there was a prize for filling a drone test range niche, Pendleton might get the blue ribbon: Diverse array of aircraft from science research to military to medical, distance from urban areas, nearness to diverse cropland and forest lands, variety of weather and climate, nearness to Tri-Cities.

A rule in economic development is to build on your strengths. Pendleton has been fortunate in that. A flourishing sheep industry helped start the Pendleton Woolen Mills just after 1900. And the Round-Up and Happy Canyon were a natural fit for Pendleton.

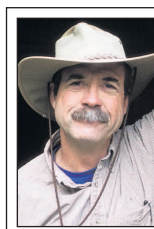
Operating a test range for drones has been a niche only for a couple of years. "Make the most of what you have" is still good advice.

Pendleton city officials are reportedly planning next fall to start marketing Pendleton and the test range for groups in the industry. I'll be rooting for that because I and others continue to meet people who are glad they have found this community which offers so many positive features to its residents.

Mike Forrester lives in Pendleton.

A river trip ends in tragedy

As spring returns to the West, I think about a day last summer when we packed for a rafting trip, never thinking to pack for death. We took clothes, cameras, river gear, sleeping bags and tents. We never dreamed there might be a tragedy, a whitewater death by drowning. And yet that accident happened, and our lives were forever changed the instant the raft flipped.



ANDREW GULLIFORD
Comment

It took hours for a helicopter to come by, low and slow, searching for the kind of shadow that reveals where a body might be hidden underwater, pinned by boulders.

Four other rafts were well ahead of us when our raft slammed into a submerged tree and the commercial river guide yelled, "High side! High side!" That meant we had to move fast to the upside of our raft to prevent water from getting into the low side and flipping us. But in a tight canyon with the river roaring at 9,000 cubic feet per second, everything happened simultaneously. The raft tossed all six of us into 45 degree water. I blew out the back end and swam to a log near an island. I looked around for my companions. I saw no one.

It was the first day and the first rapid on a four-day rafting trip. In those seconds after the accident, as I tried to understand what had happened, I heard only the rushing water. Then I saw the upside-down raft bobbing furiously in the river, caught in the kind of submerged tree that river-runners call a strainer.

I stayed on the log, debating whether to try to get to the island, when our guide appeared out of the thick willows. He saw me and patted his head. I patted mine in turn to signal that I was OK. We couldn't hear each other over the sound of the river. He turned around and melted back into the brush, and I stayed a few more minutes on the log, my impromptu sanctuary.

In 20 years of river running, I've experienced plenty of flips, but this one felt different. I reached the island, removed my lifejacket and helmet and tried to dry off as the sun climbed the cliff. Then one of the couples who had been in the front of our raft appeared, both of them barefoot because the river had ripped their sandals off. We hugged.

We explored the island. On both channels the river

roared by too swiftly for us to make a safe exit. Then we saw two guides signaling to each other across the river about how many of us had been rescued. And that is when we knew: One of us was lost.

River running, both in private boats and commercially, has become firmly established in the West. Families want a taste of adventure, cold water splashed on hot skin, yells and shouts of excitement, a reason to hang on to the "chicken line" as the rafts tumble through rapids. We crave excitement.

Our group had planned this trip months in advance without knowing that a record snowpack would force the dam above us to release huge amounts of cold water, not only to save the dam but also for downstream irrigation. These pulse floods are healthy for the environment, re-establishing habitat for endangered fish and bird species. But with high flows, there is little margin for human error. Now, as the bright sunshine ebbed towards late afternoon shade, we survivors were grateful simply to be alive.

The next hours blend together. I recall deep wails and sobs of grief from the man whose partner was missing. He kept saying, "Why her, God? Why not me? Take me, I'm older." The inevitable questions arose about the random nature of death, who dies and why.

Weeks later, I thought about the hidden complexities of the situation. Here we were, trapped in a canyon, and yet also caught between some of the West's other competing activities, things like farming and irrigation, activities far removed from river running. The Bureau of Reclamation, I had learned, would not slow a scheduled release from one of their big dams — not even to retrieve a body.

There were 28 passengers on the trip, and among them were grandparents who'd brought their grandchildren. I hoped those children did not blame the river. We had chosen to be in the wilderness, and that choice had irrevocable consequences.

Snow is melting now in the high country. Rivers are high from snowmelt, and rafters launch with a sense of nervous expectation. To every river runner and every excited passenger: I wish you safe passage.

Andrew Gulliford is a contributor to Writers on the Range, High Country News.

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