

Poetry is in everyone, every culture

We weren't the first backpackers to head into the Idaho mountains. My father had even shown us the wooden frame he once used to pack in to his work as a crosscut sawyer, but he was clearly baffled that my friends and I would choose to do this for fun.

The ranger wasn't encouraging, either. "How's the trail to Sheep Lake?" we asked him, just making conversation. He eyed us skeptically. Last year a woman had left her gear behind and expected him to retrieve it. "You gotta be pretty husky," he said, finally.

But 1968 was a troubled time, and we were seeking solace. We did make it to the lake — despite thinking it would be smart to take a shortcut — and had a great time, complete with cutthroat trout and stars. Those days in the beauty of the mountains didn't resolve the pain of that year, but they helped.

And now? It has been a rough few weeks here in Oregon, a hard time for many in our country. Once again, or still, people are searching for healing. Where do we turn?

Robert Kennedy, whose assassination we were mourning that summer of 1968, had turned to poetry — to Aeschylus — as

he shared his own grief when he had to announce the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

I've been turning to poetry, too. Maybe that was why, when I heard it again, the all-too-familiar claim that "there was no poetry in America before 1855." I thought back to that shortcut in the Seven Devils Wilderness. We were alone in that canyon. No trail, no tracks. Were we the first people ever to walk here, we wondered? It was an exhilarating thought.

Not likely, we realized as we sat around our campfire. After all, Native people had been living in that country for thousands of years.

Of course Natives have been making poems for thousands of years, too. Some of their writing survived the conquistadors' fires. Ceremonial ritual poems were memorized and are still passed down. It boggles the mind, really — the idea that millions of people in hundreds of cultures, especially the kind of oral cultures that so honor the generative power of words, would

not create songs, lyrics, poems.

But blindness is the easiest kind of racism, especially when it reinforces the dominant narrative of a country. The truth is right in front of us, but we don't see it.

Recently Oregonians have been stunned by the murder of two men who tried to stop a hateful verbal attack on Portland's MAX train. Stunned is appropriate; but surprised, shocked. Not if we know our state's history. Many of us don't, and it's fair to ask, why don't we? And now that the door to this history has been cracked open just a bit, is it our responsibility to "discover" our state all over again?

On May 31, people were invited to the Tamastlikt Cultural Institute to hear stories of Celilo Falls, the heart of Northwest Native cultures for thousands of years before its death in 1957 when the gates of The Dalles Dam closed.

As we listened, we could almost hear the sound of Wyam, sometimes through voices misted with tears. But sonar images, speakers reminded us, show us that the falls are still there, beneath the water. Not dynamited after all. Not silted in. Thomas Morning Owl left us with these words: "Maybe one day, in my lifetime, in your lifetime, in the lifetime of these young people ... I pray that those gates are opened enough that the falls might live. For one day. Two days. Wouldn't that be something? To see what the elders remembered, as that memory dims?"

The pain was not gone. But as I joined the

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BETTE HUSTED FROM HERE TO ANYWHERE

circle dance that ended the evening, I felt a little better. What I had just heard was poetry. And yes, I thought, as I drove home. Wouldn't it be something, to see?

Bette Husted is a writer and a student of T'ai Chi and the natural world. She lives in Pendleton.



Basin's groundwater at risk from industrial ag, proposed mega-dairy

By MITCH WOLGAMOTT
For the East Oregonian

The permit for the Lost Valley mega-dairy, issued by the Oregon Department of Environment Quality, my former employer, and the Oregon Department of Agriculture will make a 30-year-old pollution problem even worse.

Not long before I left DEQ in 2010, I was asked to attend the annual Farm Fair in Hermiston. I was specially asked to address "the regulatory environment" related to the Lower Umatilla Basin groundwater management area.

The management area had been established in 1990 because of serious nitrate pollution. Twenty years had passed with no improvement. The early years were spent studying the problem and working with stakeholders to develop an action plan — a plan that was agreed to by everyone, including large-scale, irrigated agriculture.

As was customary, agricultural sources were asked to voluntarily implement practices that would improve water quality. But there was a stipulation that if things did not improve, regulatory solutions could be sought. Progress was to be evaluated every four years.

At the Farm Fair I told the audience that not only had there been no improvement, after 12 years the problem was actually getting worse.

The groundwater was becoming more polluted, and little progress in reducing nitrogen pollution by irrigated agriculture was documented. I stated that if the next progress report looked like the last one, DEQ would have to begin looking at regulations to improve water quality.

Even as acting administrator for DEQ's eastern region, I knew I would need backing from higher up if any regulation was necessary. So I told the chain up the line at DEQ what I was going to say and got agreement on it. Later we arranged an information item for the Environmental Quality Commission to brief them on the situation.

At the EQC meeting Phil Richerson, the most knowledgeable person in the state regarding the local water quality, briefed the Commission on the status of efforts and on the water trend analysis for the management area: The pollution was getting worse.

I supported the position that no action was needed by the EQC at that time. But I said we would be back after the next progress report was finalized and may need to be talk about developing a more accountable approach to improving water quality. I left the DEQ assuming there would be follow-through by the department. Apparently that has not happened.

Other players in the groundwater management area had already spent millions of dollars on water quality improvements in the basin. The citizens of Pendleton, Hermiston and other cities have spent millions on upgrades to treatment plants, the food processors (ConAG, Simplot, et al.) had spent millions upgrading their wastewater systems. Soil and Water Conservation districts had done education and outreach.

Only big industrial agriculture could not document progress on improving water quality in the basin.

Only big, industrial agriculture could not document progress.

About 80 percent of the nitrogen loading in the basin is coming from big irrigated agriculture. These irrigators are not what comes to mind when most people think of farming. If you've seen it from the air, you know these are industrial operations — just as mega-dairies are industrial scale and need to be regulated as any other industry.

What's worse is that these mega-dairies are also industrial scale irrigators. The Hidden Valley farm will add up to 5,000 acres of large scale irrigation and fertilization. By issuing this permit, adding

more irrigation over groundwater that is already polluted, the DEQ and ODA almost guarantee that the pollution will continue to get worse. The permit will result in a significant increase in what is already the biggest contributor to the problem — industrial scale irrigation (we are not talking about your grandparents' farm here).

It's clear that the only way to solve the Lower Umatilla Basin groundwater pollution is to decrease the amount of nitrogen and irrigation that is reaching the groundwater from industrial scale irrigation.

After nearly 30 years of increasing pollution, a new management plan is woefully needed. To be successful that plan must bring the irrigators to the table and get documentable and, yes, enforceable commitments to reducing nitrogen application per acre by industrial scale irrigators.

The nuclear option: Groups that are continuing to fight the Lost Valley mega-dairy are right to do so. The problem cannot be solved while allowing large increases in nutrient application at the present rates. It's time to halt increases in industrial agriculture until the existing pollution problem is solved.

I remember an analogous situation in Western Oregon back in the late 1970s or 1980s. In Washington County there was serious surface water pollution. After years of struggle the agencies were unable to make progress in solving the problem. Progress was stalled by the fact that the competing cities were not working together but staying in their silos. Finally, as a last resort, the Environmental Quality Commission imposed a growth moratorium on Washington County. Practically overnight everyone came to the table and worked out plans to address the problems, the moratorium was lifted, and progress continues to be made in protecting water quality while the economy booms. Perhaps it is time that the EQC consider such a move here. As a last resort, consider a prohibition on any further increase in large-scale irrigation/fertilization within the GWMA until there is an aggressive, and enforceable, plan to improve the groundwater quality. It's been almost 30 years now and the problem is only getting worse.

Mitch Wolgamott is a former acting administrator of the Department of Environmental Quality's Eastern Oregon, and a former chair of Oregon Rural Action. He lives in Summerville.

Tribal leadership must be transparent, accountable

By BOB SHIPPENTOWER

Among his many and diverse high-level titles, Chuck Sams is the publisher of the *Confederated Umatilla Journal*, the monthly newspaper of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. In this role, Sams is responsible for the content of the articles and information that appear in the *CUJ*.

Sams, former Executive Director Dave Tovey, Deputy Executive Director Debra Crosswell, and *CUJ* Editor Wil Phinney were recently sued in tribal court by a former tribal employee. The plaintiff charged the defendants with violating her privacy rights by writing an article which included her confidential personnel information. The article was a front-page story in the *CUJ*.

The defendants settled the case with the plaintiff for an undisclosed amount of settlement funds. I was on the BOT when this situation initiated. At the time, I advised Sams and Phinney, as the *CUJ* publisher and *CUJ* editor, respectively, to run a short, general, article on the situation, in the spirit of transparency and to demonstrate to tribal members the tribal government was being straight up with them. They, of course, refused to. They obviously tried to keep the situation under wraps.

I understand the *East Oregonian* made an inquiry to the tribal administration about the situation for a possible story, but was stonewalled by the director of communications, who is none other than Chuck Sams. He wrongfully claimed this is an issue of tribal "sovereignty."

The CTUIR accepts tens of millions of federal taxpayer funds every year to support tribal operations, including our court and legal institutions. Thus, this situation is a matter of public information for the general public. It is inappropriate and improper for these senior managers to try to hide their serious misdeeds behind the time-honored principle of sovereignty.

While the specific terms of the settlement are confidential, the reason these defendants were sued by the plaintiff is not confidential.

This is not a witch hunt. This is an issue of accountability. Sams, Crosswell and Phinney have never been held accountable for their mismanagement and poor judgment that cost the tribe, and tribal members, at least tens of thousands

of dollars, maybe hundreds of thousands. They are at work every day as if nothing happened.

In fact, the Board of Trustees actually promoted Crosswell to the interim executive director position. And Sams can now add yet another title to his name; the BOT promoted him to be the interim deputy executive director. However, poor Phinney must feel left out as he did not get promoted — he had to settle for retaining his editor's position.

It is blatantly unfair in situations like this when some are rewarded for their failures, and others have been terminated for much less serious issues that cause tribal members to lose faith and trust in tribal government.

However, many will remain silent in fear of retaliation, such as having an employment application be denied, or having a housing application be denied. I have been around long enough that I am not so

naive and gullible to act like these things do not happen in our tribe.

If I cost our tribe tens of thousands of dollars, maybe hundreds of thousands, because of my incompetent actions, would I realistically expect to keep my job? Or would anyone in any organization?

Of course not. We would be fired with clear justification. These senior managers are in their high-paying positions because they are expected to be competent and have good decision-making skills, and to not make very poor decisions like they did in this situation.

A directly related issue is the *East Oregonian*, as an independent newspaper, has an obligation and responsibility, on behalf of the public, to be a "watchdog" on the tens of millions of taxpayer dollars the CTUIR receives annually.

However, all the *EO* does is accept and repeat whatever Chuck Sams, as the director of communications, decides to provide them. And, of course, this is all one-sided feel good articles and information. This does not begin to meet the values and principles of the profession of journalism.

An annual random audit by a private firm is not enough. Tribal officials should have no problem with this.

Bob Shippentower is an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and former member of the Board of Trustees.

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LETTERS POLICY

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