

Bridging the urban/rural divide

Bridging the urban/rural divide was the goal of the people gathered in my friend Molly's Portland living room last month. Many such small groups have been meeting to share ideas, to talk, to search for ways to understand each other in an increasingly polarized society. This one has been finding ways to listen to eastern and central and southern Oregonians. Since I was in town for our Side Porch Poets monthly workshop, they asked me what life is like in Pendleton.

The first thing we noticed was connection. One man in the group had counted my daughter-in-law's late uncle Mike Farrow as a friend. The woman leading the group is close to Bobbie Ulrich, who wrote "Empty Nets: Indians, Dams, and the Columbia River." I had met Ulrich at the Fishtrap Writers Gathering in Wallowa County.

I wasn't surprised. Much of the polarization in our society, the kind we hear about in the news and find on Facebook and Twitter, springs from over-simplification — the source of so many stereotypes.

I talked about life here on the East Side — medical care, transportation, education, shopping. Our concern with both

environment and income. The way we check road and weather conditions rather than traffic. I bragged a bit about our art galleries, the Oregon East Symphony, Tamastlikt Cultural Institute, the First Draft Writers' Series, yoga, our bird club, the best T'ai Chi anywhere. And the beauty of our region, how much we love it here.

Of course not all rural Oregonians agree on the big issues, I said. One reason many of us were so upset at the takeover of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters is that the people of that community had spent years building consensus, making sure all voices were heard. Not everyone here is against the re-introduction of wolves, I told them — the Tribes, as well as quite a few individuals, are not — but many who are seem encouraged by the prospect of managing the packs. It seems to me, I told them, that the rural/urban issues stem from not feeling heard, and that with improved communication, that problem is growing smaller.

I hadn't heard a "Portland hunter" joke for years. "Am I a Portland hunter?" one woman wondered. She had filled her deer tag here for the past five years. This led to a discussion about guns. Complexity again.

And stories: What do you do when your across-the-fence new neighbor invites his friends for frequent shooting parties that terrify your border collie? After an initial confrontation, a poet from another part of rural Oregon said, you invite him to dinner and work things out. After all, you need each other.

But truth be told, we all need each other, wherever we live. Sometimes, when our experiences are different or we disagree, we forget that. First Draft brings Northwest writers to Pendleton because stories connect us, let us step inside each other's skin. Remember what it means to be human.

It's not always easy. When four teens broke into a Foster Farms chicken barn near Fresno and brutally killed 920 chickens, Amy Miller, one of two Ashland poets who will be featured at First Draft on August 17, was upset.

"I wish I could show you / how we saved him," read the first lines of her poem "For Those Who Would Kill Chickens." "Named him / Steven, stupid name / for a chicken ..."

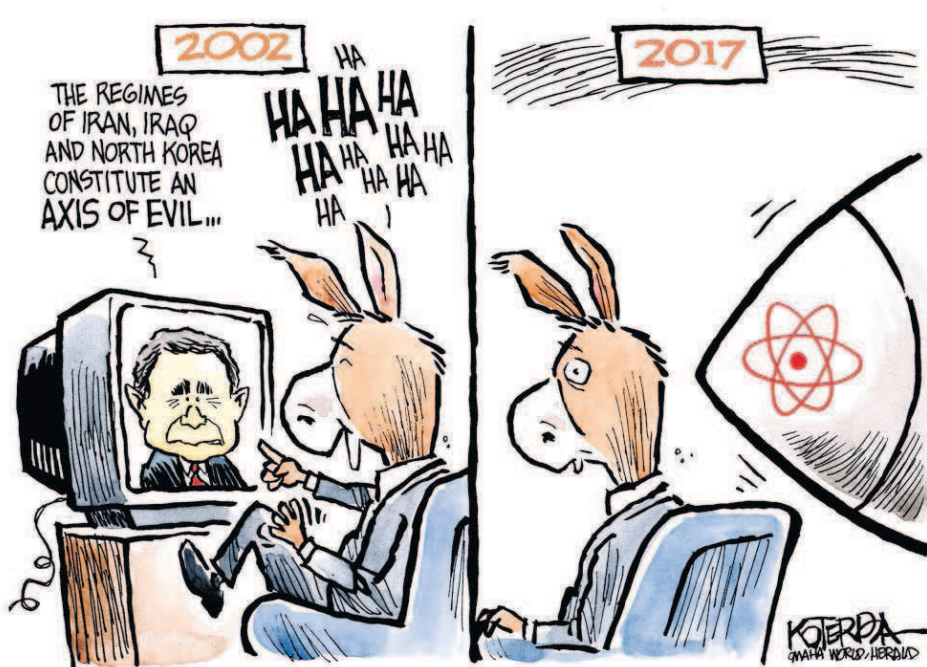
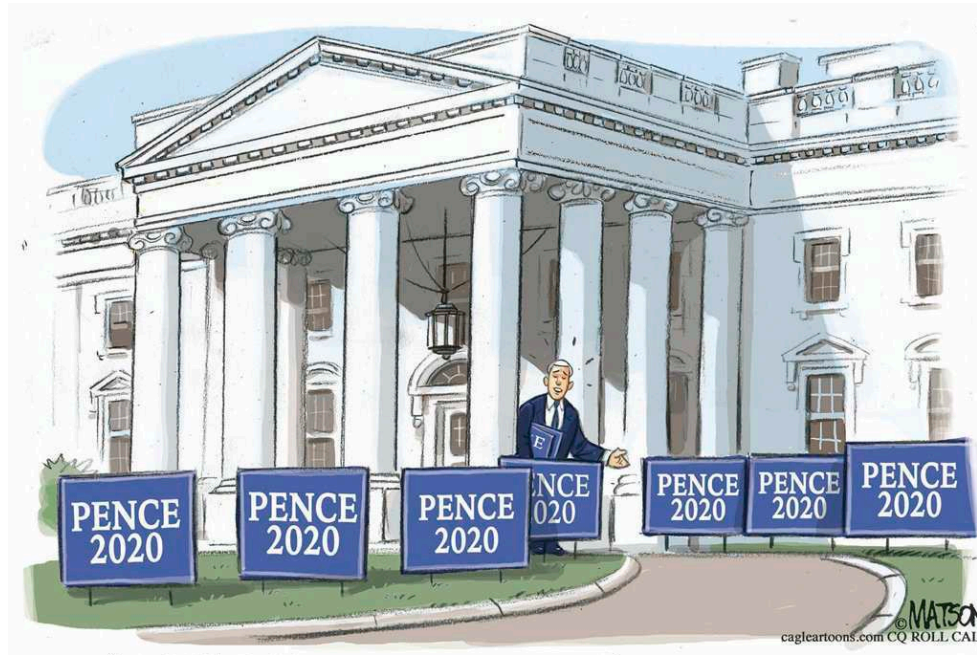
Because, as she told Rattle Magazine, "what I wished for these kids was a time capsule to take them back to some place where they could make a connection with an animal, just one, to know it in their bones and carry that feeling to that later fork in their lives, when maybe they would have made a different choice. ... There's a lot of talk right now about whether empathy is overrated. But I think empathy is our gift as a species, one of the best uses of our unusual brains. We simply haven't used it to its fullest



BETTE HUSTED FROM HERE TO ANYWHERE

yet; we haven't evolved enough to live up to it. That doesn't mean we should stop trying." Listening. Complexity. Learning to live up to empathy. Kudos to those folks in Portland for working on all three.

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



Why don't American men dance anymore?

Walking out of the Hermiston Cinema in 2006 after seeing Antonio Banderas' dancing movie "Take the Lead," I found myself exiting with a group of three young women. I asked, "Say ladies, what do you think about the fact that American men have stopped dancing?"

Immediately, one woman spoke for all three: "We're disgruntled!"

The other two agreed. So, I asked, "When is the last time you've had a chance to dance with your boyfriends or husbands?" Two months for one, a year for the other. The third: "I can't remember when."

As we hit the sidewalk, I mentioned that when I see women dancing they usually have to dance with other women.

"You got that right!" they said.

But despite the fact that women everywhere want to dance, several decades ago American men stopped dancing. As a result, a kind of blandness has seeped into our social lives. But, if American men started dancing again, both they and American women would see love, romance and fun percolate back into their lives. And, with places to dance and meet friends, our communities would become more livable. Oh, yes, children love to dance.

All this is important because we now live in the first society in human history that doesn't delight in dancing. Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you: Since American men have mostly stopped riding horses and dancing, how are women supposed to pick a mate?

As it happens, I just turned 79. But I am in good health, and if there was a place to dance in Pendleton, I could still dance like there's no tomorrow. Or better, 'til the cows come home.

Happily, there's scientific research about the importance of dance.

From the July 2010 issue of Evolutionary Biology, male dance moves can do more than catch a woman's eye:

"Male movements serve as courtship signals in many animal species, and may honestly reflect the quality of the individual. Attractive human dance moves, particularly those of males, show associations with measures of physical strength and balance.



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"We have identified specific movements within men's dance that influence women's perceptions of dancing ability. A 'good' dancer thus displays larger and more variable movements in relation to bending and twisting movements of their head/neck and torso, and faster bending and twisting movements.

"We suggest that such movements may form honest signals of male quality in terms of health, vigor or strength. This suggests that females

prefer vigorous and skilled males. Such cues are derived from male motor performance that provides a signal of his physical condition and so form honest signals of traits such as health, fitness, genetic quality and developmental history."

With even science making its case for dancing, at the moment there's no place in Pendleton where one can regularly dance. Yet, as recently as the 1980s there were several places with live bands every weekend. One of the few jukeboxes in Pendleton is at the Rainbow Café. But its dance floor is given over to a pool table.

But back to the question: Why don't American men dance anymore? Beats me. With so much media focus on professional athletes, they now represent manliness?

But your grandparents and parents grew up with romantic songs and sensibilities like Frank Sinatra's 1959 "Come Dance With Me."

When I was kid growing up on a small island near Seattle, every year at the Strawberry Festival there was a street dance where most everyone, including our parents, stepped out to dance.

Since we have a fine Friday afternoon Farmers Market, how about an annual Saturday evening street dance in Pendleton?

If enough Pendleton women made it known that they wanted to dance more, I think a public effort by Travel Pendleton to market Pendleton regionally as a good place to dance could eventually put Pendleton on the map — perhaps the national map.

Because then we could say: Pendleton rocks!

Tom Hebert is a writer and public policy consultant living on the Umatilla Indian Reservation.



Submitted photo
Author Tom Hebert kicks it up in this photo from his 1956 high school yearbook.

Volunteer firefighters are the guardians of the rural West

If the universe wanted to challenge volunteer firefighters, it would arrange for a fire emergency right smack in the middle of a small town's annual festival, when fire crews are busy helping run the parade and other events.

In this case, lightning started a fire sometime between Saturday night and Sunday morning during Mancos Days, a July celebration in this town of 1,400 in southwestern Colorado. Five members of the 15-member Mancos Fire and Rescue crawled out of their beds and responded when the wildfire was reported at about 5:30 a.m. on Sunday, July 30.

As if to test their mettle, smoke was coming from a hard-to-reach cranny of a canyon, with steep terrain full of scrub oak, cedars and pine at an elevation of 7,800 feet. The blaze was also close to homes and less than a mile from the harsh remnants of the devastating Weber Fire, which burned 10,000 acres and caused dozens of evacuations five years ago.

Massive fires tend to dominate the headlines. But people often forget that even the biggest conflagration starts out as a flicker, and that the first sighting is often responded to, not by helicopters and Hotshots, but by local volunteers with day jobs. Before sunup in Mancos that Sunday, the crew headed east up Highway 160 in three Type 6 brush trucks, specially outfitted pickup trucks loaded with 200 gallons of water and many yards of hose. They continued as far as they could on private gravel roads, and got closer in an all-terrain vehicle driven by a local resident. Then they bushwhacked for 30 minutes to get to the fire, according to Mancos Assistant Fire Chief Ray Aspromonte, who was on the crew. Aspromonte, who works in town as a diesel mechanic, was joined by Gene Smith, a machinist in a local lumber mill; Tavis Anderson, a welder for a local construction company; David Franks, a park ranger at Mesa Verde National Park; and Drew Simmons, a planner for neighboring LaPlata County.

Of the approximately 30,000 fire departments nationwide, nearly two-thirds are run solely by volunteers, according to a 2017 study by the National Fire Protection Association, a Massachusetts nonprofit established in 1896. In communities with populations under 2,500, more than 90 percent of the fire departments are all-volunteer.



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By about 8 a.m., at the site of the fire, the crew had felled a burning tree and dug a perimeter around it. The plan was to monitor the blaze. Lacking much water, they hoped that the tiny but volatile fire would sputter out from lack of fuel and lack of wind.

They'd carried in 15 gallons of water weighing 125 pounds, along with fire shelters, tools, first aid kits, and the chainsaw. They rested briefly before picking up hoes and Pulaskis to resume their work.

Most members of this crew are married, with children, and have been responding to calls for years. They are a busy bunch, attending training sessions every Monday

and handling calls almost every day. Last year, they handled 340 calls within a district that spans about 200 square miles.

They were the first responders to the Weber Fire five years ago, and they stayed on it for 10 days. They responded to a nine-alarm fire at the Western Excelsior mill this spring and to a recent double-fatality caused by a motor vehicle accident.

After a man and his son died on Highway 160, firefighter David Franks realized that the pair, along with the rest of their family, had been part of a tour he'd led earlier of the Cliff Palace at Mesa Verde.

As the sun climbed, the crew began dissecting the dead tree to locate its hottest segments. They split the wood and doused the embers with water. They extinguished any persistent flames and relayed information on their radios. Sometime after noon, they gathered their equipment and headed back to the trucks.

Meanwhile, at the Mancos Days festival, the Water Fights, an annual contest between local fire departments, were underway. Firefighting teams from the towns of Mancos, Dolores, Lewis-Arriola and Rico competed, and the Mancos women's team triumphed. Though there's only one woman in the fire department, other firefighters' wives joined her to complete the team. The men's team fell to Lewis-Arriola in the finals.

It's unlikely that many spectators knew about the volunteers who'd been up before dawn to fight a nearby fire. "I'm sure there are some who don't care," said Aspromonte, but "most people seem to think we do good."

Maddy Butcher is a contributor to Writers on the Range, the opinion service of High Country News.

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