

Beaver believers

Umatilla County OSU alums preserved in oral history

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

In 2013, Oregon State University's planning for its sesquicentennial began in earnest.

Ahead of its 150th anniversary in 2018, OSU originally planned to conduct 50 interviews as a part of an oral history project.

Chris Petersen, a senior faculty research assistant for OSU's Special Collections & Archives Research Center, said the project eventually ballooned to 243 interviews of Oregon State alumni, faculty, staff and current students that comprise 150 oral histories.

Petersen wanted to feature Beavers from every region of the state, and as a Pendleton native and Pendleton High School graduate, Eastern Oregon wasn't going to get short shrift.

OSU identified four Umatilla County residents for the oral history project, and in 2014 Petersen made the trip to Pendleton to record the history of their lives.

Through the OSU Alumni Association, Petersen found Pendleton City Attorney Nancy Kerns and Hermiston farmer Bryan Wolfe. Wolfe was actually unavailable the week Petersen made the trip to Eastern Oregon, but Wolfe traveled to Corvallis to round out the interviews.

Petersen was more familiar with former Columbia Basin Agriculture Research Center Director Dick Smiley, having worked a summer job at the Adams facility during high school.

Petersen also wanted to make sure he included an alum from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and through a contact passed along by his mother, he tracked down Jerimiah Bonifer, a technician for the tribal fisheries program and the only person interviewed for the project who graduated through OSU's Extended Campus online degree program.

During the extensive interviews, OSU was just one chapter in their oral autobiographies.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Oregon State graduate Nancy Kerns stopped in Pendleton after college during the Round-Up and has been here ever since.

Nancy Kerns

Class of 1978



A chance encounter during a vacation in Pendleton led Kerns to a legal career in Pendleton.

After graduating from Oregon State with a degree in American studies and getting her law degree from the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma, Kerns practiced as an attorney in Portland and Klamath Falls.

Kerns was on a break in 1986 when she visited Pendleton for the Round-Up.

"My brother lived here and it was the Round-Up and I came to enjoy the visit here," she told Petersen. "And during the Round-Up — as you know, having grown up here — there are a couple of good parades. And my brother is an attorney and he introduced me to the guy that was standing next to me at the

parade, who was the district attorney. So by about the end of the parade, he offered me a job. And I'm still in Pendleton."

Kerns spent the ensuing years as a Umatilla County deputy district attorney and in private practice before she accepted a job as assistant city attorney for the city of Pendleton in 2006. In 2011, she was elevated to city attorney, the first woman in Pendleton history to inhabit that role.

Already the daughter of OSU alums, Kerns' daughter, Virginia, has established a third generation of Beavers.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Bryan Wolfe speaks during a recent Hermiston City Council meeting.

Bryan Wolfe

Class of 1966



Wolfe is a fifth generation farmer, his family moving from to the "mountains of Northeast Tennessee" to the "mountains of Northeast Oregon" in Wallowa County the 1890s.

He grew up on his family farm near Enterprise and graduated from Wallowa High School in 1962.

Wolfe immediately enrolled at OSU, although it was a bit of an adjustment. Wolfe recounted to Petersen about the time he invited his father out to Corvallis to watch a Beaver basketball game.

"And I can remember Dad and I walking into Gill Coliseum to find a seat to watch the ball game, and he just stopped. 'Man, this place would hold a lot of hay,' he said."

Wolfe returned to the family farm after graduating and was involved with the farm's cattle expansion into Umatilla County. Wolfe relocated to Hermiston permanently in 1975 and focused the farm's attention on irrigated crops.

In an interview with the *East Oregonian*, Wolfe said he didn't know why OSU would want to talk to a "little Eastern Oregon farm boy," but his involvement in the community isn't reflective of the humble moniker.

Wolfe serves on the Umatilla Energy Cooperative Board of Directors, the Oregon Board of Forestry, the Oregon Energy Facility Siting Council and was named Hermiston's Man of the Year in 1999.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Retired CBARC director Dick Smiley has spent nearly his whole life in agriculture.

Dick Smiley

Retired CBARC director

Smiley's career as a scientist has taken him to Australia, the Ivy League, and the OSU Extension Service, but his life started in a farming family in rural California.

The son of a ranch foreman and hog farmer, Smiley grew up in rural San Luis Obispo County on California's central coast before embarking on an academic career in soil science at Washington State University and Cornell University in New York.

Smiley was hired as a professor of plant pathology and the station director in 1985, filling the latter role until 2000.

"One of the nice things that happens at a research center like this, compared to being on campus, is that when growers have a problem, or their advisory people from the agri-business sector have a challenge that comes along — wheat isn't growing real well, or other crops are not growing real well, or as expected — they'll walk in the front door with buckets or bags in hand, and they don't really care too much what you're doing at that particular time, because they need help, and they expect help," he told Petersen. "Our obligation is to make sure that we can help them if possible."

Known for his research into turf grass and nematodes diseases in small grain, he retired from the plant pathology program in 2014 but continues to conduct research at the station.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Jerimiah Bonifer graduated from Oregon State University in 2014.

Jerimiah Bonifer

Class of 2014

When Bonifer attended his commencement ceremony, it was only the second time he had ever set foot on OSU's Corvallis campus.

The descendant of a French-Canadian fur trapper and a member of the CTUIR, Bonifer grew up on the reservation and graduated from Pilot Rock High School.

After a couple of summers of commercial fishing in Alaska, Bonifer got married in 2008 and had a son six months later. With a young family in Pendleton, Bonifer decided to take courses with Oregon State's Extended Campus program and work a fisheries technician job with the tribes at the same time.

"I received education leave that allowed me to perform some of my schooling here at work, on work time," he told Petersen. "They paid me, essentially paid me a couple hours a day to go to school. That's the level of commitment that the tribal government and the tribal community has for getting our tribal members educated so that they can come back and be the decision makers and the policy makers for our community and so that we truly do have ownership of what we are about, where we want to go and who we want to be in the future."

His work as fisheries technician now encompasses field supervision and data analysis, including radio telemetry studies on adult steelhead and examining the ability of fish to pass through irrigation dams on the Umatilla River.