The Eagle/Sean Hart

The John Hopper Homestead, built in the late 1800s, is one of six homesteads preserved on the Silvies Valley Ranch.

The Eagle/Sean Hart

Guests and staff enjoy a cocktail before dinner in the bar at The Retreat at Silvies Valley Ranch.

The Eagle/Sean Hart

Dan Hixson, who designed The Links at Silvies Valley Ranch, tees off on the 16th hole of the Hankins course.

Silvies focuses on a new crop: tourists

Eastern Oregon ranch look for new ways to remain profitable

By SEAN HART
EO Media Group

Most business owners want to make money.

Scott Campbell had already done that.

In his latest venture, The Retreat and Links at Silvies Valley Ranch, the retired veterinarian hopes only to break even.

His goal: improve the rural Eastern Oregon economy by bringing in outside money.

His method: invest his own money to make Grant and Harney counties a destination for tourists.

After six years of building on the ranch in the secluded Silvies Valley between John Day and Burns, Eastern Oregon is now home to a high-end reversible golf course, luxurious lodging and a ranch-to-table restaurant.

The resort recently wrapped up its first season, and plans are underway to begin selling vacation homes on the serene country property.

"What we're trying to do here is give back to our community in a way that's sustainable," Campbell said. "One little thing like this is not going to change the world, but you've got to start someplace."

The Eagle/Sean Hart

A view of Silvies Valley Ranch from one of the peaks visited on a tour of the ranch.

Recognizing the need

When Campbell graduated from Burns High School in 1975, he said that Harney and Grant counties often boasted the highest per-capita state income with high-paying jobs from lumber and support industries.

Growing up on a ranch, the son of a rural doctor, Campbell said he intended to return to the area after college. But few opportunities existed for him and his wife, Sandy, a registered nurse.

Instead, they moved away and Campbell purchased a veterinary hospital in Portland in 1987. He grew the business into Banfield Pet Hospitals, which leased space from PetSmart, with 750 hospitals in 42 states, the United Kingdom and Mexico.

Campbell sold the business and retired a decade ago, about the time he purchased the Silvies Valley Ranch as a real estate investment.

During his time away, however, the counties' economies fell from the best to the worst in the state with the implosion of the lumber industry. He said Oregon State University's dean of forestry told him, even with a virgin forest that had never been harvested, newer technology would allow sustainable logging in the area to be completed by only a few hundred people — not nearly enough to bring back the economic prosperity of his youth.

"You really just need to create a stronger economy," Campbell said. "What's going to be the economy here?"

Community focus

On 90,000 acres of private land with an additional 50,000 acres of federal grazing allotments, Silvies Valley Ranch is a working operation with 2,700-3,500 head of cattle and 1,700 meat goats — all certified organic, vice president Colby Marshall said.

Marshall, also originally from Burns, formerly served as deputy chief of staff for Rep. Greg Walden. He said, after spending time with the Silvies team, he and his wife knew they wanted to raise their children here.

"This is a hometown project, so there's a passion to help those communities we come from," Marshall said.

Campbell said local contractors and materials were used to construct and make upgrades for the resort and golf course. It took six years — instead of one or two with help from outside contractors — but the goal was to help the local community, he said.

In August, the business employed 93 people: about half for the resort and golf course, a quarter for construction and a quarter for the ranch, Campbell said. Next year, when the resort is fully operational, another 30-40 employees will be needed, he said.

With the increase in property value, Campbell said the construction already completed would add significantly to Grant County's tax base, even before building any of the 500 vacation homes approved by the legislature for the property. He said the goal is to sell 5-10 per year, which would be needed for the resort to "break even on a cash-flow basis."

Marshall said they plan to market what the property has in abundance: beautiful vistas, recreational opportunities and quiet.

"It's a new frontier for recreation. It's a new frontier for tourism. It's a new frontier for golf," Marshall said. "If we can attract people here, we can maybe start changing the economy in a positive way."

Economic opportunities

For The Links, course designer Dan Hixson created a reversible course — the first to be started in 500 years, Campbell said, though a course in Michigan was completed before it and several others are now under construction.

The two 18-hole courses share some fairways and greens, and staff alternate between them daily to offer golfers a more diverse experience. Hixson designed the "big, wide course with lots of architectural challenges" to be enjoyable for different levels of golfers.

"We knew we had to have a quality that would draw people from markets all over," Hixson said. "It's really cool to think about people coming to Eastern Oregon who have lived in Oregon their whole life and have never been here."

The Links also features a nine-hole, par-3 course, and a seven-hole challenge course is under construction.

To avoid competing with courses in Burns and John Day, the course is not priced for local customers — $290 with a required cart — but residents who are members of the local clubs can golf for $110. The course can accommodate more than 80 rounds per day, Campbell said, but the resort only has 34 rooms, potentially boosting the demand for lodging locally and encouraging local economic activity.

"There's a lot of opportunity for people to piggyback on this," Campbell said. "The communities are going to have to learn how to cater to everyone."

The resort features shooting ranges, but not a trap range because Seneca already has one. Local art is displayed, but guests who want to see more will have to travel to local galleries. Tours of the ranch will be offered, but it's not a dude ranch, Campbell said, so others could provide a more hands-on ranch experience for visitors.

"There's a lot of places that certainly aren't as pretty as Grant County that have thriving economies from destination tourism," Campbell said. "If we can bring in people from outside the state — or the country — that's new money."

The Eagle/Sean Hart

Silvies Valley Ranch Vice President Colby Marshall sends a target down the line at one of the shooting ranges at The Retreat at Silvies Valley Ranch.

The Eagle/Sean Hart

The spacious cabin suites at Silvies Valley Ranch feature living, dining and bedrooms with a hot tub, fireplace, fridge, wine fridge, ice machine, dishwasher, Keurig coffee maker, microwave and dinnerware.

SKI REPORT

Spout Springs
Tollgate, Ore.
CLOSED FOR SEASON

Anthony Lakes
North Powder, Ore.
CLOSED
New snow: 14" on Dec. 4, but more coverage needed to open
Base: 26"

Ski Bluewood
Dayton, Wash.
CLOSED, NO SET DATE
New snow: None
Base depth: 10"

Ski Fergi
Joseph, Ore.
CLOSED, NO DATE SET
Base depth: Not enough

Mt. Hood Meadows
Government Camp, Ore.
New snow: None
Base depth: 23"
Conditions: Six lifts are open, six lifts are closed. Early season hardpack groom. Beware obstacles.

Beloved Boggan's Oasis may be rebuilt

By KATHLEEN ELLYN
EO Media Group

On Dreamz Road, before you cross over the Grande Ronde River between Enterprise and Clarkston, Wash., Bill and Ferrel Vail have just returned from a trip to Lewiston.

Bill has made his way slowly into the couple's trailer, feeling for the support handles a friend recently installed throughout the house to help him maintain his independence.

Ferrel Vail is opening a new bag of cat food on the porch to feed the large, outdoor cat. She and Bill just completed an exhausting day of chasing down insurance details in the aftermath of a fire that destroyed their café, Boggan's Oasis, Nov. 18.

When it's all said and done, the Vails may rebuild the iconic riverside stop.

That's fabulous news for three generations of customers, many of whom have been mailing and calling the couple since they news of the fire spread.

"It was such a special spot for them. Everybody thought it was just a special place," Ferrel said.

But what will it mean to Bill and Ferrel Vail, who in their early 80s and were planning to retire to Palm Springs?

Kathleen Ellyn/Chieftain

Boggan's Oasis on the Grande Ronde River was destroyed Nov. 18.

"We don't know, yet," said Bill. "It depends on a lot of things. But that's going to be our first choice."

Bill and Ferrel are experienced business people, with backgrounds in business ownership stretching back to their youth in Anchorage, Alaska. As they aged, they continued to manage Boggan's by employing managers to do the "heavy lifting."

Much of their kitchen and wait staff is from Anatone, Wash., a tiny hamlet 13 miles up the road. One seasonal worker comes all the way from Pomeroy, Wash., and lives in a camp trailer during season.

"A lot of our employees have been here quite a while," said Farrel.

The cabins, trailer parking and campsites up on the little hill above the property are filled through the summer with campers, outfitters, anglers and photographers. Flocks of bicyclists and motorcyclists have discovered Boggan's and meet there, and many go home and write about their trip.

"The word of mouth keeps spreading," Ferrel said.

Boggan's Oasis can be expected to continue to be a going and growing concern, the Vails said.

But if they rebuild, it will be a different Boggan's. The historic photos and artifacts that graced the walls of the old café are ashes. Yet the spirit of the place and the joy of marking a trip through the twisty and dramatic landscape of Rattlesnake Grade with a stop at Boggan's Oasis would remain.

Some of the many rural friends of the Vails figure that locals, outfitters, ranchers and vacationers may contribute photos and other items to help recreate the original ambiance.

The cause of the fire has not been determined, though the Vails themselves suspect it will be something to do with older portions of the electrical wiring. The cafe has been remodeled twice, but some of the wiring was still old, Bill said