

OUT OF THE VAULT

Children die in house fire, father disappears

Three young children died in an early-morning blaze in January 1956 in the tiny town of Rieth, just outside Pendleton. The children’s father disappeared shortly after the fire, setting off a nationwide search.

The fire broke out at 5:30 a.m. on Jan. 30, 1956, just minutes after Chester O’Neal left with sons Chester Jr., 13, and Stanley, 10, to deliver their newspaper route. A neighbor living directly across the street from the O’Neal family roused Raymond Long out of bed shortly after 6 a.m., pounding on his door and shouting that the O’Neal home was in flames. Long was unable to enter the front door of the house because it was not in use and had been blocked with a piece of heavy furniture. “I kicked in the front window in the bedroom and the inside seemed to explode,” Long said.

George Powers, the O’Neal children’s grandfather, arrived five minutes later and attempted to enter the house through the back door. The heat was so intense that he burned off the hair from his forehead to his crown. Neighbors strung garden hoses to the burning house in an attempt to battle the flames. Rieth did not have firefighting equipment or a volunteer fire department, and Pendleton fire crews were unable to respond because Rieth was outside their jurisdiction. The home burned completely; only the steel bed frames, stoves, utensils and the brick chimney were left.

Three of the O’Neals’ 10 children, Phyllis Jean, 8, Carol Jane, 7, and Richard Dennis, 6, died in the fire. O’Neal had wanted the children to accompany him on the paper route, but

they wanted to stay home in bed. He banked the fire in a wood-burning heater before leaving with the two older boys. The cause of the fire was undetermined.

O’Neal’s wife Ethylene was in St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton, having just given birth to their 10th child. Their one-year-old son David also was in the hospital recovering from pneumonia. The three other O’Neal children, Peggy, 4, Connie, 3, and LeRoy, 2, were staying with an aunt in Adams.

Chester Sr. returned home while the fire was still blazing and, learning that his children had died in the fire, left immediately for the hospital to inform his wife. He was there for about an hour, then left the older boys with relatives in Rieth and took to the highway, disappearing for four days.

While police across the United States were searching for Chester, the Red Cross and the local community banded together to provide for the remaining family. An apartment at Pend-Air was furnished with everything the family would need, including furniture, clothing, utensils, dishes and more. A fund was set up to pay the rent and provide food.

Rumors flew around the community about Chester O’Neal’s disappearance. George Powers reported to state police that Raymond Long had heard a radio broadcast that claimed O’Neal had crashed his car, leaving a note that “life is not worth living,” but none of the local radio stations could verify the report.

On Feb. 2, Chester O’Neal walked in to the Red Cross office in Stillwater, Okla., saying he “hadn’t known what he was doing” when he left Pendleton

and didn’t realize police were searching for him. He had returned to a farm he owned in Siloam Springs, Ark., where he has family, and spoke to his wife about having the bodies of the children shipped to Arkansas to be buried next to another of their children, a daughter who died nine years previously. Ethylene originally agreed to his request, then changed her mind and had the children buried at Olney Cemetery in Pendleton.

Her husband, Ethylene said, wanted the family to return to Siloam Springs. She moved into their new home at Pend-Air on Feb. 4 with her seven remaining children, saying she and the children planned to remain in Pendleton.

But when O’Neal returned a week later, the family prepared to pack up for a cross-country move. Loan regulations on the farm he was making payments on, he explained, required his presence on the property. “I appreciate everything the folks here did for my wife and family,” O’Neal said, “and I feel sorry we’ve got to leave again. But I would have left here about the first of May if the fire hadn’t happened.”

The tragedy jolted Rieth into action, and plans were soon underway to fund and equip the volunteer firefighting team that had been organized. A committee hoped to secure a \$10 pledge from each resident of the tiny town, to be used to buy a second-hand fire engine or a down payment on a new one.

■

Renee Struthers is the Community Records Editor for the East Oregonian. See the complete collection of Out of the Vault columns at [eovault.blogspot.com](http://eovault.blogspot.com)

DEAR ABBY

Dating starts to cause cracks in circle of three best friends

**Dear Abby:** I’m 18 and was best friends with “Sam” for two years until we started dating 10 months ago. It has been so much fun. He is the first person I have truly loved.

When we first started dating we weren’t exclusive, and he hooked up with my best friend. We all go to school together and see each other every day. Since then, I’m uncomfortable being around her.

I have expressed my feelings to Sam, but there’s nothing we can do. I often feel hot and cold about our relationship and get close to breaking up with him. I have considered therapy, but my family can’t afford it. What can I do so I don’t hurt myself and him? — **Hurting In California**

**Dear Hurting:** You didn’t mention what you and this young man plan to do in the fall, but if it involves continuing your education, your paths may diverge at that time. In the meantime, you and



JEANNE PHILLIPS  
Advice

Sam should be free to see others because, if your emotional needs were being met, you wouldn’t be blowing hot and cold about the relationship.

**Dear Abby:** I started sucking my thumb when I was 1. My parents tried for years to break my bad habit, but it wasn’t until I started going to slumber parties at 16 that I stopped.

I am now 27, and a few months ago I woke up with my thumb in my mouth. Since then I have caught myself sucking my thumb in the middle of the night. It seems to happen when I’m really tired.

I am now in a committed relationship and would die of embarrassment if my boyfriend saw me doing it. How can I stop once and for all? — **Wet Thumb In The South**

**Dear W.T.:** I have heard from other adults who suck their thumbs, so comfort yourself with the thought that it’s not all that unusual.

DAYS GONE BY

**100 Years Ago**  
**From the East Oregonian**  
**Jan. 20-21, 1918**

Two one hundred thousand bushel capacity grain elevators will be constructed in Umatilla county this coming season by the Farmers’ Union Grain agency of the county, according to an announcement made today by R.W. Ayers, manager of the agency. A site has already been purchased at Athena for the construction of one and the other is to be erected at Pilot Rock.

**50 Years Ago**  
**From the East Oregonian**  
**Jan. 20-21, 1968**

Stating he is “intrigued” by the suggestion, Congressman Al Ullman

is investigating the feasibility of using nuclear waste water for irrigation of his proposed Columbia River South Side Project. The suggestion was first made some months ago by Orville Cutsforth, retired Morrow County rancher. Noting the need for more nuclear power generators to supply electrical power needed by 1970, Cutsforth stresses the inability of the Columbia River to accommodate more heated water, a waste product of the nuclear power generator facilities. Temperature of the river has already been raised to where some believe it is detrimental to fish life, he says. “Using this water for irrigation would lengthen the growing season by 20 to 30 days,” Cutsforth claims.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Today is the 20th day of 2018. There are 345 days left in the year.

**Today’s Highlight in History:**

**On Jan. 20, 2017,** Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45th president of the United States, pledging emphatically to empower America’s “forgotten men and women.” Protesters registered their rage against the new president in a chaotic confrontation with police just blocks from the inaugural parade.

**On this date:**

**In 1649,** King Charles I of England went on trial, accused of high treason (he was found guilty and executed by month’s end).

**In 1887,** the U.S. Senate approved an agreement to lease Pearl Harbor in Hawaii as a naval base.

**In 1936,** Britain’s King George V died after his physician injected the mortally ill monarch with morphine and cocaine to hasten his death; the king was succeeded by his eldest son, Edward VIII, who abdicated the throne 11 months later to marry American divorcee Wallis Simpson.

**In 1942,** Nazi officials held the notorious Wannsee conference, during which they arrived at their “final solution” that called for exterminating Europe’s Jews.

**In 1945,** President Franklin D. Roosevelt was sworn into office for an unprecedented fourth term.

**In 1953,** Dwight D. Eisenhower took the oath of office as president of the United States; Richard M. Nixon was sworn in as vice president.

**In 1968,** in what was billed as “The Game of the Century,” No. 2 ranked Houston defeated top-ranked UCLA 71-69 at the Houston Astrodome in the first prime-time national telecast of a college basketball game.

**In 1969,** Richard M. Nixon was inaugurated as the 37th President of the United States.

**In 1977,** Jimmy Carter was inaugurated as the 39th President of the United States.

**In 1981,** Iran released 52 Americans it had held hostage for 444 days, minutes after the presidency had passed from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan.

**Today’s Birthdays:**

Comedian Arte Johnson is 89. Former astronaut Buzz Aldrin is 88. Olympic gold medal figure skater Carol Heiss is 78. Singer Eric Stewart is 73. Movie director David Lynch is 72. Country-rock musician George Grantham (Poco) is 71. Israeli activist Natan Sharansky is 70. Actor Daniel Benzali is 68. Rock musician Paul Stanley (KISS) is 66. Rock musician Ian Hill (Judas Priest) is 66. Comedian Bill Maher (MAR) is 62. Actor Lorenzo Lamas is 60. Actor James Denton is 55. Rock musician Greg K. (The Offspring) is 53. Country singer John Michael Montgomery is 53. Sophie, Countess of Wessex, is 53. Actor Rainn Wilson is 52. Presidential counselor Kellyanne Conway is 51. Actress Stacey Dash is 51. TV personality Melissa Rivers is 50. Singer Xavier is 50. Actor Reno Wilson is 49. Singer Edwin McCain is 48. Actor Skeet Ulrich is 48. Rap musician ?uestlove (The Roots) is 47. United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley is 46. Rock musician Rob Bourdon (Linkin Park) is 39.

**25 Years Ago**  
**From the East Oregonian**  
**Jan. 20-21, 1993**

They thought it would never happen in Helix. Last week about 50 students in this small, rural community were told that one of their peers and a teacher tested positive for the AIDS virus. First, a hush fell over the crowd. Eventually the students began to ask questions. Later, they were told it wasn’t true. The grim tale was the attention-getting opener of a AIDS awareness presentation organized by the school’s senior class. It was the first of its kind to be held in a Umatilla County school, organized by the students and facilitated by the Blue Mountain AIDS Task Force.

Singer-songwriter Bonnie McKee is 34. Country singer Brantley Gilbert is 33. Rock singer Kevin Parker (Tame Impala) is 32. Actor Evan Peters is 31.

**Thought for Today:** “Know yourself, and your neighbor will not mistake you.” — *Scottish proverb.*

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WORD★Roundup™

by David L. Hoyt & Jeff Knurek

Find and Circle...

- What “M\*A\*S\*H” stands for: \_\_\_\_\_ □□□□  
Four four-letter colors □□□□  
Three Apollo 11 astronauts □□□  
Movies: “Conan the \_\_\_\_\_” □□  
Two common bar beverages □□

Answers to Saturday's puzzle: TEAL CYAN GRAY / ARMSTRONG COLLINS ALDRIN / BARBARIAN DE-STROYER / BEER WINE

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A B A R B A R I A N Y L  
M R D E S T R O Y E R A  
O A M H O S P I T A L C  
B L C Y A N J I K J A I  
I D K J V Y W I N E E G  
L R Z X A B E E R K T R  
E I A R M S T R O N G U  
V N G C H C O L L I N S

7 LITTLE WORDS

Find the 7 words to match the 7 clues. The numbers in parentheses represent the number of letters in each solution. Each letter combination can be used only once, but all letter combinations will be necessary to complete the puzzle.

CLUES

- 1 rapper (5)  
2 dapper (7)  
3 scrapper (8)  
4 catnapper (10)  
5 kidnapper (8)  
6 trapper (6)  
7 yapper (9)

SOLUTIONS

ING EAD LIST UD DA  
ER MO DR MIN CRI  
EPYH LO SH AL HU  
PUGI AKE UTH NT SLE

Today's Answers: 1. DRAKE 2. DASHING 3. PUGILIST 4. SLEEPYHEAD 5. CRIMINAL 6. HUNTER 7. LOUDMOUTH

ODDS & ENDS

Butcher trapped in freezer uses sausage to bash his way out

LONDON (AP) — A British butcher who got locked in a freezer says he was saved by a frozen sausage that he used as a battering ram.

Chris McCabe says he became trapped in the walk-in freezer at his shop in Totnes, southwest England, last month when wind blew the door shut. The safety button to open the door had frozen in the -4 F chill.

McCabe said he tried unsuccessfully to kick the button free before picking up a 3.3 pound black pudding, a form of blood sausage.

McCabe told website Devon Live that he used the meaty tube “like a battering ram” and managed to unstick the button after several blows.

The grateful butcher told the *Daily Mirror*: “Black pudding saved my life, without a doubt.”

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