

# When Amtrak became Ain'trak

Remember when you could board a train in Pendleton, take a seat, open a book, relax, watch the Columbia roll on, and step off in Portland a little more than four hours later? I do. I was one of the last passengers on the train that used to service every small city across the West. The one running through Pendleton was jerked out of operation on May 10, 1997.

A disclaimer. My dad was a railroader and I grew up on passenger trains. I am neither an academic nor a historian. The following recounting of this meeting is what I believe to be factual, but it is definitely colored by my despair at the fading power of trade unions and the belief that folks who supposedly represent us in government are mainly out to support big business and screw the working class.

The meeting was billed as a "Forum on Saving the Pioneer." The Pioneer was Amtrak's name for the daily passenger service between Salt Lake and Seattle. Congress had determined the run was not making money quickly enough, so it was to be staked down to the let's-balance-the-budget anthill and eaten by appropriations for higher priorities like defense of Saudi Arabian oil reserves.

It was one element of a federal feasibility study concerning the future of passenger service in the West. We all knew that it was feasible to run a passenger train between

Salt Lake and Seattle because The Pioneer had run that route since June 7, 1977, when Union Pacific canned its passenger service.

The gathering was held in the spanking new Pendleton City Council chambers in the late winter of 1997. I was a little out of my element in a flannel shirt, chore coat, Levis and yellow Western States Cat hat

while most every other male in the room was wearing a necktie. The guy sitting in front of me had sparse gray-blue hair that was held an inch above his pink scalp by spray technology. He looked as though he had spent so long in the uniform of the ruling class that when he took off his necktie at night his neck would still be smaller than the jowls above it.

One hundred other curious souls and I awaited the arrival of the two U.S. senators from Oregon, the chairman-president-chief-executive-officer of the National Passenger Rail Corporation (AMTRAK), the assistant vice-president of government affairs for Union Pacific, and a couple of bushels of local and state-level patricians.

The mayor of Pendleton in those days was an old school nice guy who wore an almost life-sized saddle as a nametag and prefaced his name with "Your Mayor."

He opened the meeting by announcing that it would be postponed for half an hour because one of the senators' airplanes was late in landing. That figured — flying to a

railroad meeting.

The hometown senator arrived first. Five minutes of handshaking ensued.

This guy was young, rich and good-looking, with perfect hair and an autopilot smile. I had him 3/2 as an eventual candidate for president of the United States. His necktie cost more than my pickup truck. Rumor said he owned Henry VIII's golf clubs. The other, big city senator finally schlepped into his chair. He had a nasty head cold. His nose was a day-glo golf ball. His voice was Droopy the Dog's. He coughed the meeting to order. He looked miserable.

The meeting went like all meetings: Senator One: "Gud murning, Ahm glad to be here."

Senator Two: "I, also, am heartened by the opportunity to be with close friends and colleagues upon the occasion of this meeting."

The mayor of Hermiston: "Is there anything we can do to help Union Pacific maintain some type of passenger service?"

Head of Amtrak: "Hard decisions are hard to decide. Give us your money. If you can raise \$2 million by March 15, we'll see if we can arrange to run the Pioneer until October 1. Otherwise we shut it down in early May. The bottom line is the bottom line. No promises. Promises are hard to keep."

Union Pacific: "Passenger trains slow down our freight business."

Chamber of Commerce: "Amtrak service is good for local business. Let's all have a bake sale and raise \$2 million."

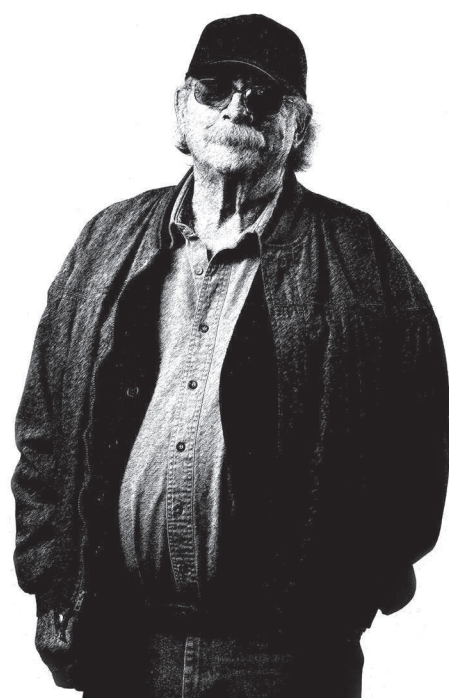
Speaker of Oregon House: "Sorry. We do not have \$2 million to help. We suggest that more people play the Oregon Lottery."

Citizen Number One: "I like trains."

Citizen Number Two: "I hate taxes."

Senator One: "Danks fur cubbing. We'll dink about dis."

Senator Two: "I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all my close friends and



**J.D. SMITH**  
FROM THE HEADWATERS OF DRY CREEK

colleagues for attending this citizen forum. Rest assured, when I am back in Washington, D.C., I'll be back in Washington, D. C."

End of meeting. This was the American political process at its finest. All was right with the world. A meeting had been held. Nothing was accomplished, but a meeting had been held. A box could be checked, pictures could be taken, push pins could be moved on a map somewhere.

End of discussion. End of Pioneer.

J.D. Smith is an accomplished writer and jack-of-all-trades. He lives in Athena.



This image, provided by The Pulitzer Prizes, shows a cartoon by Jake Halpern and Michael Sloan of *The New York Times* that was part of a series that won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning. The Pulitzer committee described the work as "an emotionally powerful series, told in graphic narrative form, that chronicled the daily struggles of a real-life family of refugees and its fear of deportation."

# Professor opposed to OSU Extension District

Ballot Measure 30-126 would establish a new tax to support the growth of extension programs in Umatilla County and Morrow County. Those programs provide valuable services to many citizens of the region, and are almost entirely reliant upon funds allocated by state, federal and county governments. At present, county funds are allocated directly by county commissioners.



**RICHARD SMILEY**  
Comment

Unfortunately, the measure is inflated to include funding for the Columbia Basin Agricultural Research Center. The mission of CBARC is to conduct research and extension for dryland crops in Oregon and beyond. Although CBARC scientists work throughout the Pacific Northwest, they emphasize needs in eight Oregon counties: Wasco, Sherman, Gilliam, Morrow, Umatilla, Union, Baker and Wallowa. Measure 30-126 proposes to alter the fundamental mission of CBARC by shifting 25 percent of its base budget from taxpayers throughout the state to only those who pay property taxes in our two-county area.

CBARC should not have

been included in this tax levy. The measure would increase by 43 percent the "locally sourced" funding at CBARC, from \$175,000 currently allocated by the Oregon Wheat Commission, to \$250,000 that would be raised by the new tax district.

CBARC is one of 11 regional research centers operated by the Oregon Agricultural Experiment Station and consists of two research stations, one in Umatilla County and the other in Sherman County. A single budget and staffing structure is used to operate both stations. The OAES began to disinvest from its research centers during the 1990s. Nationally recruited research scientists who had administered these centers began to retire or resign. The OAES refilled most of those administrative posts with whomever was the current administrator of the local county extension office. The new part-time — and sometimes off-site — administrators of affected research centers invariably emphasized extension. The new leaders had little or no stature in science and most did not acquire competitive grants that are essential for operating a research center. As that process was repeated throughout the state, affected centers had a reduced capacity to acquire grants, and the reputation of the OAES research center network became greatly diminished.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris  
**Shop manager Paul Thorgersen walks through one of the greenhouses in January 2016 at CBARC outside of Pendleton.**

The OAES expanded its disinvestment in 2011, when it directed each research center to acquire 25 percent of its operational expense from a local resource. The OAES reduced its allocation by that same amount. At CBARC, that shortfall was initially satisfied by a short-term operations grant from the Oregon Wheat Commission, which levies income uniformly from wheat producers throughout the state. This was appropriate for a research center that conducts wheat research for the entire state. After eight years, the Commission understandably wants to return to its traditional funding model of allocating

funds for specific wheat research projects. CBARC scientists would be likely to acquire some of the funds that would become re-allocated.

As the OAES has reduced the number of CBARC scientist-equivalents since 2000, there has been a corresponding reduction in CBARC's ability to acquire grants that are critical for paying salaries, wages and benefits of technicians and temporary workers, for purchasing and operating vehicles, for paying fees to use land, equipment and greenhouses at CBARC, for traveling to professional and industry meetings, and for buying computers, software, fertilizers and other supplies and expenses to conduct research and extension. Amazingly, the two most recently hired scientists at CBARC are being paid for only nine months of work. Research and extension at an agricultural research station requires a 12-month commitment. The newest scientists must therefore acquire even more grants to also pay the unfunded 25 percent of their salary and benefits.

If Measure 30-126 passes, the citizens of Umatilla and Morrow counties will provide 25 percent of CBARC's operating expense. It is predictable that at some point the county commissioners or citizens will begin to pressure CBARC scientists to shift most of their research from "non-paying"

counties to focus more effort on the "paying" taxpayers in Umatilla and Morrow counties. Alternatively, will the commissioners start requesting payment of usage fees from other counties where CBARC scientists are conducting portions of their research and extension program? The latter scenario is real. When the city of Umatilla initially hesitated to endorse Measure 30-126, the Umatilla County Extension Service promised to impose upon them an out-of-district fee for services delivered to non-participant cities.

A county service district is not an appropriate way to resolve the very real funding and staffing challenges at CBARC. Citizens of Umatilla and Morrow counties should not be responsible for reversing the disinvestment in CBARC by the statewide Agricultural Experiment Station and Extension Service. Instead, our citizens should challenge those parent institutions to re-evaluate how they will adequately support wheat research and extension in Oregon.

Measure 30-126 should be rejected. A revised measure should be limited to extension programs in the two-county area.

Richard Smiley is an emeritus professor at Oregon State University and former director of the Columbia Basin Agricultural Research Center.