

Elmer and the truck with no brakes

For a few harvest seasons I was detailed from my job as a hired man on a big cattle ranch to help Elmer harvest a thin crop of oats from a dry sidehill that his family had farmed for more than 100 years.

I was in my early 30s, half hungover every morning from chasing barmaids around pool tables, and Elmer was an 89-year-old widower without a surplus of teeth. He wore bib overalls, lived in the house his mother built in the late 1800s, required a booster pillow to see over the steering wheel of his four-door sedan, and hoarded scrap iron like they were going to stop making it.

He lived and slept in the kitchen of the grand old three-story home. The rest of the house was crammed with stuff, floors to tin ceilings. Paths and tunnels led through stalagmites of magazines and winter coats and cigar boxes and unopened mail. Propped in the doorway to the living room was a tidy bundle of one hundred curtain rods.

Our work day began with a ritual. At sunrise I'd wander from my little bunkhouse on the prairie, up the steep gravel road that we called Elmer's Lane, and park my old red stock truck on the creek side of the house. I'd then walk a few steps onto a small back porch, tap on the door, look through the window and Elmer would wave me into the kitchen.

Each morning we'd spend a quiet half hour at a little wooden table while Elmer ate his cornflakes. He didn't hear well

enough to be much of a conversationalist. I never ate breakfast with him. Sometimes we'd lunch together on white bread, Spam and mustard sandwiches. Elmer drank instant iced tea without the ice.

His harvesting machinery was not modern. It was orange, open-air and reasonably dependable. My job was simply as an operator. I made no decisions. Elmer was no longer strong enough to steer the beast but he had farmed that same steep chunk of high mountain country with mules and horses and he knew his own land. He stood behind me on that combine every swath for three seasons, pointing out how to negotiate around certain swales and springs and when to run up and downhill instead of across the contour. Elmer figured that if the machine rolled he was supposed to be on it.

When we'd get a hopper full of grain, we'd crawl up to a couple of small corrugated granaries by an old yellow pine that was larger than four grown men could hold hands around. On a good year, there were more oats than could be stored. When grain bins were full, the final few combine loads went into a green World War II military dump truck.

I only saw Elmer's temper once, during that first year, when we hauled the load of surplus to be stored at the Farm Service. I was to drive the old green truck. Elmer would lead in his car to show me the route and make sure the weigh ticket was accurate. My instructions were to put the

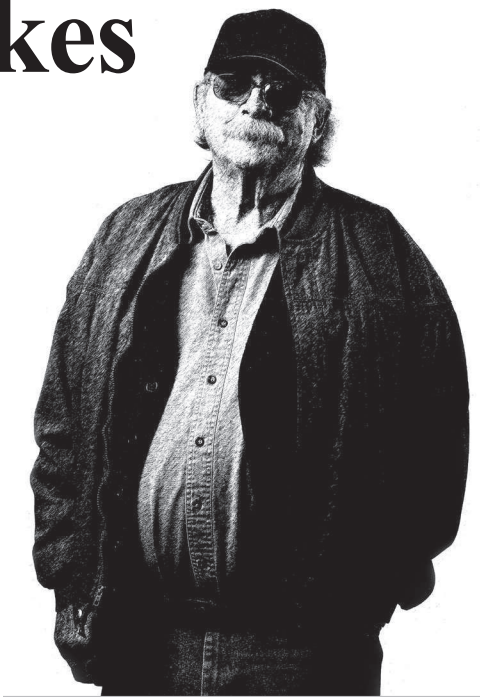
truck in compound low, first gear, granny, drive it up the hill to the top of the ridge and then be sure to leave it in the lowest possible gear all the way down the gravel road onto the flats by the irrigation ditch.

I set up everything as instructed and everything seemed to be going as planned. When I topped the hill, Elmer's car was a quarter mile out in the lead, doing 15 mph at tops down the middle of the road, as was Elmer's habit. I could see the top of his tractor hat just above the seat back. The engine in the old truck was sounding strong. I lit a Camel for the ride down into the flats.

Elmer neglected to tell me that there were no brakes on the truck. I figured that out halfway down the grade when I was in granny low and gaining ground on the car. I stomped on a limp pedal. Pumping it had no effect. Elmer's car was getting closer. No horn, not that Elmer could've heard it. No lights. There weren't many alternatives. I could take the ditch and roll the load. I could smack Elmer's car with his own truck.

A few seconds before the truck and the car were to mate, Elmer happened to glance in his mirror and jerked over just far enough for me to blow past. I didn't get the whole thing stopped until way down by the highway, where Elmer came running up to the truck, steamy and fussy, and asked me what in the heck had I been thinking. OK, so there were no brakes, he'd admit that, but he had driven that same truck without brakes off that hill a hundred times and never had this sort of thing happen. What was my problem?

Elmer was too small and too old for me to get huffy. I just looked him in the eye



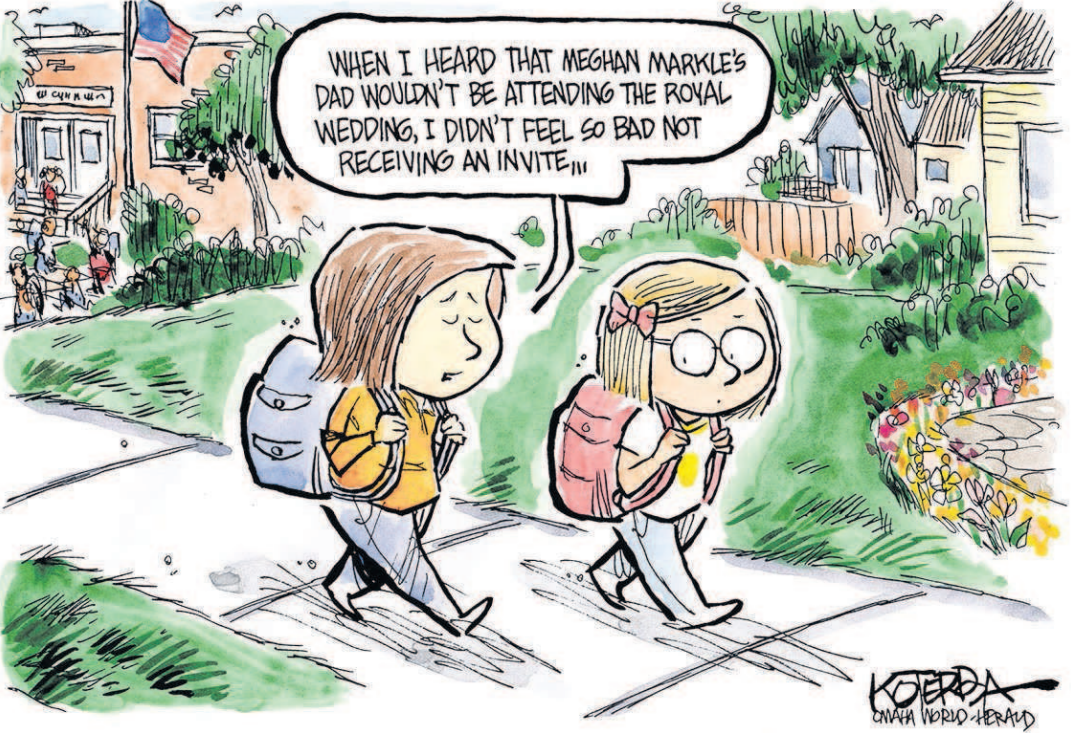
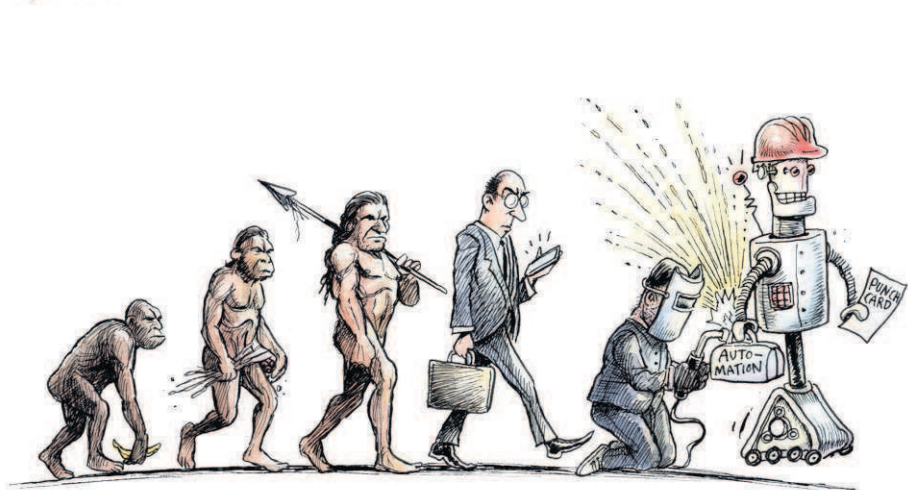
J.D. SMITH
FROM THE HEADWATERS
OF DRY CREEK

and asked him if on any of those hundred trips driving that brakeless truck, had he ever followed himself down that hill? He thought for a minute, smiled a little, and reckoned that I did have a point there. We didn't eat Spam that day. Elmer bought me a burger in town. The next year, he followed me down the hill.

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You can't live here anymore

Income disparity — a euphemism used to describe a society in which rich people see their wealth grow while the rest of us languish economically — displays itself in many ways. Think of air travel, where first-class passengers are afforded ever more luxury, while travelers in economy are increasingly treated like a herd of cattle trucked from one feedlot to another.

The ongoing gentrification of American cities clearly demonstrates the national tendency toward satisfying the rich above all others. But it wasn't always this way. After my Army discharge in 1962, I went to San Francisco to attend college with little more than an ancient Pontiac, \$80 in cash, a wife I'd married while I was stationed in Germany, and our 10-day-old son.

I found a job that paid \$375 per month at a wholesale meat market in the Mission District. For \$125 per month, we rented a comfortable two-bedroom apartment near Golden Gate Park. Tuition at San Francisco State was \$48 per semester, and we made it through two years with money enough to enjoy ourselves along the way.

But San Francisco is a beautiful city currently favored by well-heeled Silicon Valley transplants, and the average monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment today is \$4,431. The Sierra Club, founded by John Muir in 1892, was finally forced out of town in 2015, due to exorbitant rent.

Probably because there aren't as many people involved — or as many obvious victims — the gentrification of small Western towns has yet to receive much attention, but it seems to occur in any town where there's natural beauty and lots of nearby public land to play in.

In 1966, when my family and I arrived in Ashland, Oregon, it was a town of 10,000 with a summer outdoor Shakespeare festival, a college, a few lumber mills, and many boarded-up storefronts. We bought a three-bedroom house near the college campus for what would barely cover three months' rent for a two-bedroom San Francisco apartment today.

Half a century later, things are very different. A pivotal change occurred in 1970, when the Angus Bowmer indoor theater opened, allowing the Shakespeare festival to extend its season from spring through fall. Two more indoor theaters followed, and in 2015, when the Sierra Club left San Francisco, Ashland's 20 millionth theater patron visited town.



MICHAEL
BAUGHMAN
Comment

Dozens of excellent restaurants have opened through the years, and there's no McDonalds, which can be taken as a blessing, unless you're a low-wage worker in need of a job, or the president of the United States. Award-winning brewpubs, wineries and coffeehouses followed the restaurants. When Ashland began to appear on lists of the best small towns in America, and the best places to retire, the rich began to arrive in numbers.

Many of the newcomers build what seem to me to be absurdly huge houses, a high percentage of them occupied by older retired couples. My wife Hilde and I visited one such couple in an 8,000 square-foot, three-story dwelling, where the husband proudly explained that he and his wife commonly communicated through an intercom system and sometimes went days without seeing one another.

The median sale price for houses in Ashland today is \$432,500, and the median monthly rent for a house is \$1,875. Not surprisingly, few young people can afford to live here. The clearest evidence of this is that even though Ashland's population has doubled since Hilde and I arrived, the number of elementary schools has dropped from five to three.

But the lives of the residents at the bottom of the economy reveal what's happening more powerfully than numbers can. Hilde volunteers at the local food bank, and whenever she's on duty near the end of the month, she serves dozens of local families. They manage to pay their rent, but by month's end, they can't afford food.

This past winter, on a bitterly cold morning, when I was jogging near the Elizabethan theater, I walked into a men's room. A teenage boy just inside the door was wrapping an old man in a wheelchair with blankets.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"I'm trying to warm up my grandpa," the boy answered.

He had pushed his grandpa as close as he could get him to the warm air issuing from a hand dryer, and explained that they had been evicted from an apartment in town after their landlord had doubled the rent. They had spent the night in the park.

This, too, is part of gentrification. Is something wrong somewhere?

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Michael Baughman is a contributor to Writers on the Range, the opinion service of High Country News. He is a writer in Ashland.

Public lands should be for the public to enjoy

Summer is almost here, and people are heading outside to enjoy the great outdoors.

Enjoying and protecting our outdoor places has helped define what's exceptional about our country. Millions of Americans enjoy hiking, biking, hunting, camping, boating, fishing and numerous other outdoor activities that improve our health and quality of life, while contributing to our nation's economic growth, especially in rural areas. In February 2018, the Bureau of Economic Analysis reported that recreation activities account for almost \$400 billion in economic productivity in the U.S. The growing outdoor recreation economy presents a win-win for us all.

However, when we head back home and talk to Utahns and Oregonians, we hear from outdoor recreation enthusiasts in every corner of our states about the bureaucratic red tape they encounter when they try to get outdoors.

While outdoor recreation continues to grow in popularity and economic impact, some barriers still exist. Well-intentioned but overly burdensome federal rules often stymie access to recreation on public lands while not providing any additional protections to our natural resources.

Thankfully, there are members of Congress in both parties who are serious about increasing access to public lands. Our Recreation Not Red Tape Act is evidence of a true bipartisan solution to this problem.

This bill untangles the web of regulations and permitting hurdles that hinder access to public lands. While permits are often necessary for orderly use of land and to ensure public safety, many times they simply thwart access. What's worse, the multiple land management agencies that issue recreation permits often fail to coordinate or miss critical deadlines, which threatens the livelihoods of small business owners and their employees.

Federal agencies should be able to overcome communication difficulties and resolve jurisdictional quandaries



RON
WYDEN
Comment

quickly. Too many Americans are turned away by permitting processes that are convoluted, confusing, and time consuming. Streamlining this process is long overdue. We're all on the same team, it is time to start acting like it.

In Washington, politicians on both sides of the aisle often talk a big game, but fall short on real solutions. Yet holding our government accountable is essential. The Recreation Not Red Tape Act creates benchmarks that measure the effectiveness of federal land managers to ensure that they are truly serving the American people. The Recreation Not Red Tape Act also holds land managers accountable for expanding access to new and existing recreational opportunities.

While some may argue it is not possible to promote activities such as recreation without imperiling other uses of federal lands, or the multiple-use mandate of our public lands, we believe this is a false dichotomy. The solutions this bill puts forward don't amount to a choice between one or the other. Instead, our bill reinforces the basic principle that many uses of federal lands can and should coexist.

Keeping recreation alive and thriving for the American people isn't something that divides us. We all know we should put down our electronic devices every once in a while and go outside. Recreational activities provide an outlet for more physical activity, a healthier citizenry and a greater appreciation for our natural resources. Our economy ultimately benefits from this.

Democrats and Republicans can't seem to agree on much these days, but we do agree about the importance of increasing and enhancing access to outdoor recreation. The Recreation Not Red Tape Act is an opportunity to seize on this moment of bipartisanship, proving that working together is good for the American people and the public lands they are eager to access.

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Ron Wyden is a U.S. Senator representing Oregon.