

Apple of the pine

By J. D. SMITH
For the East Oregonian

Forty-some years ago, on Christmas morning, a thousand rats and I fled from our bedroom in a cane field on the north end of the isle of Maui. Someone had set fire to the other end of the field. The rats had a better handle than I on what was going down and were in a hurry to get the puck out of there. Several ran right over my bedroll, waking me enough to recognize that the crackling in my dreams was a big fire in real time.

My partner and I had abandoned hitchhiking the night before and spread our blankets in the cane. Neither of us, fresh out of the Snake River country, realized that the science of sugar cane agriculture involved (at least in those days) torching off the whole works. Sugar burns quickly. To this day I cut rodents a bit of slack when I find mouse turds in the silverware drawer. Those rats saved my buns that morning.

Hitching in Hawaii was neither easy nor fun. Ninety percent of the traffic through paradise was rental cars filled with folks who had plopped down a few thousand for plane tickets and a week in a condo alongside the Pacific. They were darn sure not going to stop and pick up a couple of hipnoid types smelling of sugar smoke with rat paw prints on their foreheads.

I had already forged formal agreements with both my wife and my mom that I had enough stuff and I expected and wanted no new stuff in celebration of the Nativity.

The rest of the folks, the native Islanders, seemed a bit testy about long haired Caucasians with alternative lifestyles at the time that Walmart started selling tie-dyed Hawaiian shirts. They slowed their rides only long enough to flip a finger and a few counter-racial “Hauli go home” epithets our way. So, when the 1940s open Jeep rattled to a whoa and a skinny brown shirtless guy waved a c’mon to us, we sprang at the chance. Anywhere he was headed was going to be an improvement.

I rode shotgun. Wedged beside the gearshift and the emergency brake was a machete in a green canvas case. I tried a couple of sentences of introductory thank-you chit-chat, but the driver just glanced my way and shook his head. Not an English as a second language type. By the time he had the old military rig up to full 45 mph speed, it was so noisy and front-end wobbly that we couldn’t have discussed the weather anyway, so my partner and I just hunkered and let things happen.

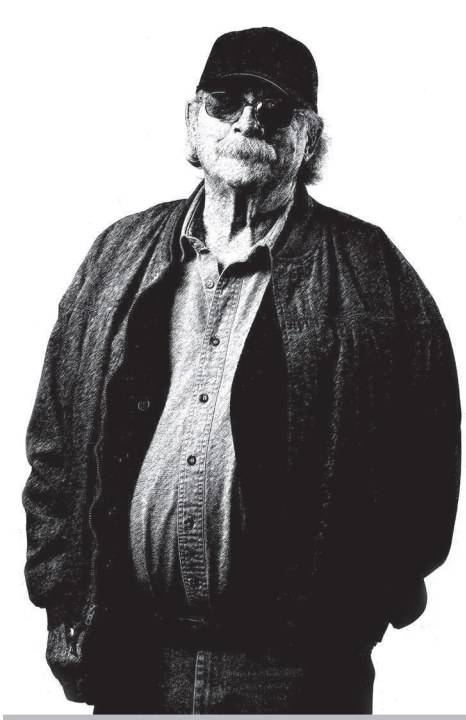
Ten minutes into the voyage, I was almost asleep when the Jeep skipped from the blacktop onto a red dirt road that led onto a tableland where we four-wheel drifted to a stop in what looked to be a miniature Christmas tree farm. The guy reached down for the machete, looked me in the eye, pointed to his mouth and bailed out. Two strokes of the blade later, he walked back, holding a pine-

apple the size of a chicken and the color of a wedding band. He flipped down the tailgate, and with precise surgical skill provided us with one of the most delicious, healthy, locally-harvested breakfasts I have ever eaten.

Now, flip the calendar pages five hundred months forward, to a Friday afternoon office party on the second floor overlooking Main Street, Walla Walla, Washington. I was feeling humbuggy, partly because I had been blindsided by the party. I only worked a couple of days per week for the orchestra that occupied the offices and had missed the party memo. There were presents for me, but I had none for my comrades in the music wars. Plus, I had already forged formal agreements with both my wife and my mom that I had enough stuff and I expected and wanted no new stuff in celebration of the Nativity.

Twenty miles away, my wife was experiencing shopper’s gridlock in a monster box store while standing in front of a display of artificial Christmas trees. Either we had turned into tree huggers or our son’s “whatever” approach to the holidays had deterred us from going up into the mountains and slaughtering a baby fir for decorative purposes. We own 2 cubic yards of ornaments that live in boxes above the hot water heater. Some type of tree, even a petrochemical totem, seemed obligatory. Luckily, she spotted the “Made in China” label, resisted the marketing, and wandered out of the catacombs of international commerce.

About then, in the very depths of my yule-inspired depression, the Christmas spirit became wholly manifest when the symphony’s boss man presented me with the perfect gift, a whole fresh Dole pineapple in all its green and yellow glory. Not only did its fra-



J.D. SMITH
FROM THE HEADWATERS
OF DRY CREEK

grant presence jerk my memory back into Hawaiian Christmases of yore, but the little red tag hanging from its spikey green top inspired me with a solution to the tree dilemma

That year, on a blanket chest in our living room, minimally lighted, surrounded by presents and assorted Yuletide doodads, stood in all its magnificence a fully decorated fresh pineapple. Later, on New Year’s Eve, we butchered and ate our surrogate Christmas tree. Try that with your hundred-dollar Colorado blue spruce.

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

Emerging drone industry just the jolt Pendleton needs

By MIKE FORRESTER
For the East Oregonian

It’s interesting to check on the Pendleton Unmanned Aerial Range situation in Pendleton from time to time.

- Ken Bisconer, director of West Coast flight operations for a Virginia-based aerospace firm, told me recently he needs to line up housing in Pendleton for 12 families within 30 days. Bisconer’s firm, PAE ISR, has contracts with the aviation arm of the U.S. Navy to equip aircraft with advanced communications systems. PAE has leased a hangar at the Pendleton airport which houses work stations which were busy while we met in his office. Bisconer said he has hired 22 workers this fall, all of whom have served in the military and have security clearances. That is because defense contracts are so central to PAE’s work. NASA recently announced it wants the PAE firm to take a lead role in developing a plan for how to integrate drones into general aviation traffic in the national airspace. In aerospace vehicle testing, Pendleton is a hot place to be. Lots of buzz about Pendleton’s friendliness and its place in the beautiful Northwest. Veterans of the industry say most U.S. test ranges are located in “pits” and lack the retail or entertainment or outdoor recreation of Pendleton.

- Another aerospace firm, CUBIC ISR (ISR stands for intelligence surveillance reconnaissance) based in San Diego, is sending some 10 workers a month to Pendleton for short stays while waiting for a sizable hangar in Pendleton to become available. Other firms in the industry are doing business with Pendleton’s UAS facilities — Airbus, Pacific Northwest National Labs, and companies developing drones for more efficient application of crop nutrients and pesticides on farmland. An affiliate of Airbus has been running tests involving 16 or so personnel in Pendleton to develop an “air taxi” carrying passengers through the air in urban areas. Pacific NW Labs, based in the Tri-Cities, introduced at a Pendleton open house a monoplane called Tiger Shark for climate change research in Arctic regions. Darryl Abling, manager of the Pendleton UAS Test Range, said the Arctic Shark will undergo more intensive testing in the months ahead.

- It’s a bit difficult to pinpoint the number of jobs related to Pendleton drone testing. Two full-time city of Pendleton jobs are related to running the test range — Abling, formerly with Northrop Grumman in Southern California, and Steve Lawn Jr., mission control engineer. Steve Chrisman, Pendleton’s economic development director who has led local efforts to bring about the test range, estimates somewhat more than 30 drone related jobs have been created in the first 10 months of this year. A sizable number of them are termed transient. For example, a technician based in the Tri-Cities with Northwest Labs but doing work at the Pendleton Airport. Number of test range man-hours expended so far this year has exceeded 50,000, which results in an average wage of \$50 per hour. Ken Bisconer, who heads up PAE’s effort in Pendleton, has his antennae up continually for experienced job applicants: mechanical backgrounds, military service, work in assembling aircraft. Darryl Abling speaks of a



Engineer Steve Lawn explains how he can design and build hardware onsite at the Pendleton UAS Range Mission Control and Innovation Center on Oct. 19, 2017 in Pendleton.

young man who graduated last year from high school in Halfway, Oregon and did intern work for the Pendleton Test Range before going into the aviation branch of the Oregon National Guard. After several months training in the National Guard, he was reassigned to Pendleton. Latest chapter: He has been hired by PAE as a UAS pilot. Bisconer has been advertising for applicants with electrical experience including an electrical engineer. But he said his company had recently changed electrical engineer to another job category to make the job easier to fill.

So the jobs landscape for test ranges is undetermined. The busiest place some days at the Pendleton Airport is at PAE upgrading communication gear on aircraft under government contract. Time will tell how consistent the work will be. Same for the influence of the drone industry in the Columbia Gorge. Some companies in Hood River are manufacturing drone equipment and subcontracting work to businesses in smaller towns on both sides of the Columbia. If Pendleton’s airport is a hot place for testing drones and related equipment, seems to me there might be mutual benefit between here and the Gorge as time goes on. Another variable on the drone scene is the ups and downs of federal spending. For

example, the U.S. Department of Energy gathers atmospheric data from a small drone developed by the Pacific NW Laboratories in the Tri-Cities and unveiled and tested in Pendleton. Another public-private tie here is, as noted earlier, PAE’s upgrading equipment on contracts with the aviation arm of the Navy.

In a call with the Oregon Employment Division’s Dallas Fridley, who tracks employment stats in the Columbia Basin and Columbia Gorge, I took some notes:

- Aerospace firms such as Boeing and Insitu are making and testing drones in Hood River County and Klickitat County, Washington. Because of the design work, engineering and manufacturing involved, \$75,000 a year is common pay in those counties for drone related work.

-Pay for electricians in Umatilla and Morrow counties is \$64,746 a year.

-Truck and diesel engine specialists in those counties are making \$48,172.

-In Oregon last year, there were 3,220 jobs under aerospace parts, and average wage was \$84,909.

-In the Columbia Basin, there were 4,152 jobs under wood products manufacturing with average wages of \$40,152.

-Pay in Umatilla Countyin natural

The busiest place some days at the Pendleton Airport is at PAE upgrading communication gear on aircraft under government contract.

resources (mainly agriculture) averages \$31,166.

Even though it’s hard to forecast what drone jobs will be available in 2020 or what they will pay, a couple of things seem evident. One, pay for drone related jobs is higher than pay for Umatilla County’s food industry jobs and travel trailer manufacturing. Also, chances of growth in the UAS industry seem just as good for now as chances that the industry will fold up.

Pendleton’s airport has several features attractive in the UAS field: Facilities built for a military air base, low precipitation and abundant farmland contribute to aviation safety, a big enough community to provide key services and amenities but small enough to avoid traffic jams and major crime. But Pendleton needs more housing to accommodate both today’s residents and those wanting to move to Pendleton for jobs and for raising families. It’s a mixed picture. Although a project of 200 apartments and another of 26 duplexes have been completed, Steve Chrisman says the town would welcome a subdivision of houses priced from \$175,000 to \$275,000. He also said some builders looking into the Pendleton situation have been deterred by high development costs, Chrisman said he has received contacts from owners about potential rentals but would rather have those calls go to people in that business.

Pendleton has a welcoming personality known far and wide. I, for one, think Pendleton needs an economic jolt and wish the best for the drone testing community.

Mike Forrester, of Pendleton, is a former editor of the East Oregonian.