

The nude ranch that wasn’t

I heard this story at Moss Springs Campground, on the top of Mt. Fanny, above Cove. The storyteller was a one-eyed farrier and a good friend. He often prefaced his tales with “What I am about to tell you is the truth, but it makes a pretty good story anyway.”

In the late 1930s there was an old bachelor man, Darby Ferris we’ll call him, who lived with a little half-cocker, half-coyote mutt named Sandy on a couple of thousand acres up in these hills. In those days you only had to be about 40 to be considered an old bachelor man.

From the time Darby was a little kid he had powerful interest in Brazil. My great-aunt Lulie was the librarian in these parts and she told me that Darby never checked out a book that didn’t have something to do with Brazil or jungles. He read the entire Tarzan series three times before he was 16.

Darby’s folks both died in a wreck three days after he graduated from high school. He never worked hard at getting rich off of ranching. Never even bothered to fence. Just kept a couple of horses, one bull, two or three cows, a few chickens and a good big garden. Ate some venison too. Had a pretty nice cabin that his folks built. It didn’t take much to keep him and Sandy going.

Not long after Pearl Harbor, a railroad man got in touch with Darby and offered to buy the whole ranch at 20 dollars an

acre, half on the barrelhead and the other half in two years. Darby jumped at the idea and he and Sandy took off for Brazil.

Nobody knows what they did down in South America, but at the end of two years Darby got word that the railroad was defaulting on the mortgage, that he wasn’t going to get the other half of the money and that the ranch belonged to him again. He and Sandy came home to find that they had logged off most every piece of marketable timber on the place and that he now owned four sections of stump farm.

He must’ve had a little money left because he went down to Ontario and bought a 1-ton Model A Ford truck that still sits up where the house used to be. Then he and Sandy spent three months down on the high desert catching wild horses. Most of them weren’t wild at all, just farm animals turned out during the Depression by folks who didn’t want the banks to turn them into Canadian steak. At the end of the gather, he had 15 pretty good horses.

That next spring Darby bought ads in the La Grande and Pendleton papers announcing that he was starting a nude ranch where folks could come and pay to ride horses and enjoy nature without being bothered by clothing. That was two years in Brazil talking and an idea way before its time. There were married couples in is this part of Oregon who had never seen each other naked in the daylight. Every customer Darby lured to the ranch was a

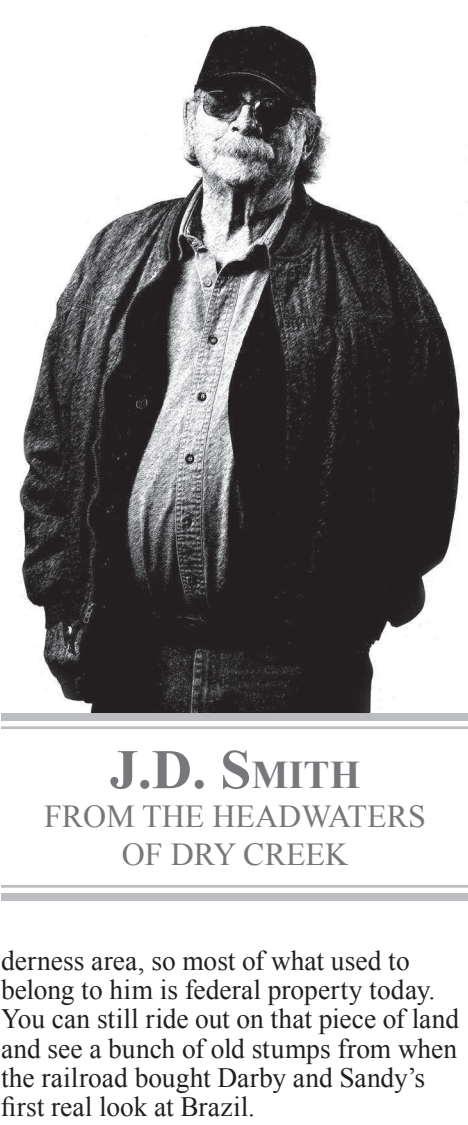
single man. It took the whole summer for that idea to wither away.

What happened next is a matter of speculation, but I heard the same thing from half a dozen people so I think it could be true. Folks say that later that fall Darby rode one of his horses a full day downwind from his place, into the wild parts of the mountains, and started a fire that grew pretty big pretty fast.

It was wartime, before smoke jumpers and retardant bombers. Forest fires were fought by hand and most of the hands were in Europe or the Pacific. Somebody had to get the firefighters and their equipment to the fire. Darby just happened to have 15 horses and solid knowledge of the lay of the land, so the government hired him and his horses to do all the packing at 100 dollars a day.

He and Sandy took a pack string to the fire most every other day for the months of September and October. After the first couple of weeks, Sandy got footsore, so Darby rigged a little platform on top of a set of panniers so she could ride. All together, Darby and his horses worked 41 days before the snows came and put out the fire by Halloween. At that point, Darby booked passage back to Brazil for him and Sandy. They were never heard from again. Probably both buried down there.

Darby didn’t have any heirs. The government didn’t bother much with genealogy when they went to creating the wil-



J.D. SMITH
FROM THE HEADWATERS
OF DRY CREEK

derness area, so most of what used to belong to him is federal property today. You can still ride out on that piece of land and see a bunch of old stumps from when the railroad bought Darby and Sandy’s first real look at Brazil.

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Biden joins the really big crowd

OK, see how many Democratic presidential candidates you can name.

Five? That’s pathetic. There are kids in grade school who can probably come up with eight. Kids in grade school in New Hampshire who have probably met eight.

Joe Biden’s leap into the race will make, by *The New York Times’* count, 20 people officially in the running, with more still milling around the sidelines, sniffing the air.

No wonder Biden is leading in the polls. Potential campaign theme: “Vote for Joe — You Can Already Spell His Name.”

Also new to the competition: Rep. Seth Moulton, 40, who celebrated his entry into the race by answering a question from a reporter about what he’d do in case of a space-alien invasion. Joining a cast that includes six senators, five other past or present members of the House and five people who are or have been mayors or governors. Plus two folks who have never been elected to anything and are safe to ignore unless one of them saves a drowning puppy.

Biden is, of course, a way bigger deal than any of the random members of Congress who are running on variations of the What Have I Got to Lose platform. He’s got incredible name recognition, and everybody has stories about what a lovely guy he is in person.

On the other hand, he’s been in national politics since 1972, and parts of his résumé will require a lot of explaining. Biden is going to be asked why he once helped weaken gun control, opposed busing for racial integration, supported the Iraq War and seemed to ignore complaints about sexual harassment by a Supreme Court nominee. Meanwhile, Beto O’Rourke is going to get questions about that computer hacking scandal when he was 15.

Then Biden, 76, is going to have to talk about age. We live in an era that celebrates 90-year-old park rangers, 85-year-old surf-



GAIL COLLINS
COMMENT

ers and 105-year-old stockbrokers. But still, the idea of an 80-year-old first-term president has to give some pause. Defending the idea by pointing out that Ronald Reagan was in office until his late 70s will require discussing exactly how well that actually worked out. After which someone will suggest that Donald Trump has given all post-70 presidents a bad name.

On the other side of the age divide, we’ve got South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg, 37, talking about how it’s time for millennials to be “stepping up.” To think about this in a serious historical context, Buttigieg and Moulton were born while “M*A*S*H” was still on the air. Joe Biden was born before the debut of “Howdy Doody.”

Buttigieg is younger than Beyoncé. Biden is younger than Ringo Starr. Although older than Mick Jagger.

(By the way, Moulton said that if an alien invaded the Earth he’d give him “a beer and a burger.” This is a question we need to pursue in the candidate debates.)

We certainly aren’t short on opportunities to get familiar with the Democratic pack. This week CNN broadcast town hall interviews with five major candidates on the very same night. You could have caught them all in less time than it takes to watch three episodes of “Game of Thrones” and a basketball playoff game.

If you missed it, I can tell you that Elizabeth Warren called climate change an “existential question” while Kamala Harris said it was an “existential threat.” Someone asked Bernie Sanders whether he thought the Boston Marathon bomber should be allowed to vote. (Yes.) Warren gave a ripping explanation of her plan to put a “2-cent wealth tax in place on the 75,000 largest fortunes in this country” in order to pay for universal child care and her other priorities.

Buttigieg said it was important not to overwhelm people with too many specifics “before we’ve vindicated the values that animate our policies.”



Perfectly fair to regard this as a cop-out from a guy who doesn’t seem to have many actual positions. Or you can decide to follow his lead. When somebody asks you whether you think Warren is better than Harris, just say that you’re not quite through analyzing the values that animate their policies. It’ll definitely shut down the conversation.

However, if you complain a lot about the nefarious influence of big-money donors in our election system, this is an excellent time to pick somebody you like and send him or her a little cash. And it doesn’t have to be too little. Sanders, who has gotten more than a million contributions, recently wrote a rather plaintive note to supporters pointing out that most of his new first-time donors were giving \$3. Remember, Hillary Clinton’s total campaign cost \$1.4 billion. Bernie would need

\$4.28 from every man, woman and child in the country to come up with that.

(Sanders, by the way, is a year older than Biden but doesn’t get a whole lot of comment about it. Maybe because he just seems to have been born 77.)

Everybody’s looking for an angle to attract attention. This week Kirsten Gillibrand announced she just became the first 2020 candidate to offer a written pledge not to “seek, use or weaponize stolen or hacked materials in this presidential campaign.”

Cory Booker just promised to pick a woman for a running mate. It’s an interesting position but not nearly as interesting as a woman picking Cory Booker for a running mate.

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President Trump, ‘Easter worshippers’ and Christian voters

The Free Press of Chattanooga

Democrats, with good reason, have frequently chided deeply religious American Christians for voting for Donald Trump in 2016.

The president, who is a thrice-married, frequently mean-spirited, largely nonreligious individual, nevertheless has favored legislation important to that segment of voters.

Religious voters, if they can’t have a candidate whose personal life inclines closely to their values — a Jimmy Carter or a George W. Bush, who were more forward about their religious convictions — at least want somebody who talks a good game but follows the talk with action.

Right or wrong, they see Trump that way. But, increasingly, they see neither the convictions nor the talk from Democrats.

Take last weekend’s bombings in Sri Lanka, which targeted a Christian minority in a predominantly Buddhist country. Nearly 300 people died and more than 500 were injured at three churches, three hotels and a housing complex.

Whether or not Democrats played follow the leader or had a strategy in some convoluted way for responding, former President Barack Obama weighed in on Twitter at 10:02 a.m. on Easter Sunday by saying “the

attacks on tourists and Easter worshippers in Sri Lanka are an attack on humanity.”

By definition, “Easter worshippers” are Christians, but for some reason he couldn’t bring himself to use that term.

It was mindful of Obama’s presidency when he was unable to characterize the radical Muslims carrying out terrorist attacks as members of the Islamic faith. He didn’t want to lump the terrorists in with good Muslims, he said, and impugn an entire religion.

The president, of course, had also pointed out at the 2015 National Prayer Breakfast that Americans should not “get on our high horse” about radical Islam since “people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ” centuries ago.

Yet, the terrorists continued to slaughter innocents in the name of Islam.

On Sunday, following Obama’s tweet, at 10:45 a.m. U.S. Rep. Ami Bera, D-California, tweeted that he was “deeply saddened over the horrific acts of violence against Easter worshippers and tourists.”

At 11:08 a.m., Jared Polis, the Democratic governor of Colorado, tweeted that he was heartbroken “to learn about the attacks on tourists and Easter worshippers in Sri Lanka.”

At 12:59 p.m., former San Antonio, Texas, Mayor Julian Castro, who is a declared 2020 Democratic presidential can-

didate, tweeted that “the evil of these attacks on Easter worshippers and tourists in Sri Lanka is deeply saddening.”

And, finally, at 1:17 p.m., former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton said she was “praying for everyone affected by today’s horrific attacks on Easter worshippers and travelers” — at least she didn’t say “tourists” — “in Sri Lanka.”

The wording, though perhaps just Democrats falling in behind their former leader’s phrase, was nonetheless eerie.

If Democrats can’t embrace the word “Christian” or “Jesus” — a video of once and future House Speaker Nancy Pelosi trying to do just that in 2010 went viral — how will they attract deeply religious voters who chose Trump, flaws and all?

Several already have made attempts and wound up as the hypocrites they accuse the president of being.

Pete Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and a self-avowed Christian, is the latest to fall in the trap. In a recent interview with *USA Today*, he allowed as to how God has chosen a side.

“We need to not be afraid to invoke arguments on why Christian faith is going to point you in a progressive direction,” he said.

Buttigieg went on to say he was “reluctant to comment on another person’s (faith),”

then preceded to comment negatively on Trump’s. Since then, he’s also trashed the Christian faith of Vice President Mike Pence.

On Monday, though, during a CNN town hall in New Hampshire, perhaps knowing some who might be on the fence about Trump might be watching, he decided God hadn’t chosen sides.

“At the very least,” Buttigieg said, “we should be able to establish that God does not have a political party.”

For him and for the rest of the crowded Democratic field, it’s a matter of authenticity. Voters didn’t find it in Obama, who got 4.5 million fewer votes in 2012 than in 2008 but won a second term against a weak Republican. Some of them oddly found it in Trump, who wasn’t the solid family man his predecessor was but was willing to give voice to — and try to accomplish — what members of the electorate wanted.

The deeply religious part of that electorate is no different. They’re not looking for perfection — and wouldn’t ever find it, anyway — but do want a candidate who gives more than lip service to their faith and then works toward honoring what has been promised.

We don’t believe at this point skeptical Trump voters have found such a candidate on the Democratic side.