



Wallowa County Chieftain Photo/Steve Tool

New Imnaha Tavern owners Brooke Van Sickle and Cody Mawhinney are ready to welcome anyone into the sacred space of the Imnaha Store and Tavern in Imnaha. The couple purchased the business last October. While they plan to expand its inventory, they intend to keep its legendary friendly atmosphere intact.

Legendary Wallowa County tavern under new ownership

Cody Mawhinney, Brooke Van Sickle take over business founded in 1904

By STEVE TOOL
EO Media Group

IMNAHA — While the forested and snow-capped Wallowa Mountains and the city of Joseph may get all the tourist glory, Imnaha has its own special landscape to offer. But one of its most iconic landmarks isn't part of the truly natural, canyon landscape. Imnaha wouldn't be Imnaha without the Imnaha Tavern.

One of the oldest continually running businesses in Wallowa County, founded in 1904, recently changed hands, with Cody Mawhinney and Brooke Van Sickle taking over the tavern/restaurant/grocery store from Dave and Sally Tanzey last October. With their feet underneath them and the business running smoothly, the couple took time from one of their busy days to talk about their adventures as new business owners.

Asked how he enjoys his new role as tavern owner, Mawhinney replied: "It's like cowboying. It's a lifestyle."

Hailing from Baker City, Mawhinney eventually managed an Oregon Department of Transportation crew stationed between Island City and Elgin.

His partner, Van Sickle, is from Washington and has a background in restaurant management and bartending as well as heavy equipment operation.

At the moment, Mawhinney takes care of the behind-the-scenes management, such as ordering, building spreadsheets, paying bills, etc., while Van Sickle maintains a presence on the floor.

"We're working on a system to manage the place right now," Mawhinney said.

The first time he stepped in the Imnaha Tavern, Mawhinney knew he wanted to own the place.

"I noticed the western playing (on the TV), and that's a rule," he said. "I walked in, and it was exactly

my kind of place."

He's keeping the tradition. Westerns play until 5 p.m. and stay on unless someone requests other programming.

"Except during football season," Van Sickle piped in with a laugh. "I told Cody when we first met that I wanted to own a funky little store that was like a cafe, a local meeting place where people can play music or put up artwork and sell it."

Mawhinney began talks to acquire the business about a year ago. He said after that it was all about figuring out money and how to make it work.

"There's a lot of moving parts to figure out," he said. "It's not your average tavern/restaurant/store."

"It's an information center," Van Sickle. "If someone hits a deer they bring it here, it's a veterinary center."

The couple said it hasn't been difficult transitioning to business owners.

"It's been exciting and fun — everything about it," Mawhinney said. "There hasn't been a day where I woke up and didn't want to work."

The couple hasn't made a lot of visible changes to the store, yet. Money spent goes behind the scenes, such as the recent purchase of a new restaurant dishwasher and utilizing only one stockroom, along with streamlining the food production process and ordering new outerwear with a newly designed logo.

One noticeable change is a veteran's wall in the tavern. Veterans can sign their names and branch of service and receive a free beverage, including beer, for their efforts.

"We're both patriotic, and it's the easiest and simplest way to thank our vets," Mawhinney said. "I'm really excited for that wall. Someday, people will come in here and it'll be black with signatures."

The couple also ordered a new taps and had new tap lines put in. They've also added more groceries and other store inventory to help locals get through the week until they can get to town. Creating an ordering system

is one of the couple's biggest challenges.

"It's easy to sell stuff that people forget to bring camping, but this place is a local hub, so we ask people what they need so we can order for them." The business gets deliveries about twice a week and the two visit Enterprise for other items twice a week.

"It gets awkward after a while," Mawhinney said with a laugh. "It's like 'Aw, jeez, there's a lot of people up here.'" One of the couple's favorite things about Imnaha is the lack of cell-phone service.

They have noticed more uplanders making the trip down to the tavern for taco night and to play pool. The couple is having a new pool table made, and pool will be free.

"I'm really excited about the table," Mawhinney said. "It's not worth the money to spend extra on a coin-operated table."

Something new the couple is offering is live music. Two bands have already made the Imnaha journey and Mawhinney promises music at least once a month. The tavern was packed at both events. Thursday night bingo and a family-style dinner is another option the couple is considering.

"Our goal is to keep things cheap," Mawhinney said. Menu additions are also on the horizon.

"We still have our chicken gizzards," Van Sickle said. "Those are a favorite."

The business employs five people including three full-time employees. It is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., but can stay open until 11:30 p.m. on music nights. It is only closed on Christmas, New Year's and Thanksgiving.

The couple's favorite thing about owning the bar is the people, particularly the locals.

"We want to keep a friendly atmosphere," Mawhinney said. "That's one thing the locals were worried about, although I've known some of them awhile. We're not changing the place — we're here because we like it."

"It's like a big family out here," Van Sickle added.

New additions join East Oregonian staff

East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Two new faces have joined the *East Oregonian* this summer.

Ben Lonergan joins the staff as a multimedia journalist, replacing longtime photographer E.J. Harris.

Lonergan, who was raised in Eugene, is a 2019 graduate of the University of Oregon with a bachelor of science in journalism from the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication, with a primary educational focus in photographic and multimedia journalism. Lonergan is a former Charles Snowden Program for Excellence in Journalism fellow at *The Register Guard* in Eugene. While at *The Register Guard*, Lonergan covered community events, sports and lifestyles as an integral part of the photography team.

"We're excited to have someone like Ben join the *EO* staff," said Andrew Cutler, *EO* editor. "Ben brings an energy and passion that will help serve the community in telling the stories of the people who live here."

As part of the *EO* staff, Lonergan will serve as the primary photographer, but will also contribute feature stories and videos to help

illustrate stories.

"I am excited for the opportunity to serve the community as a journalist and to produce interesting and compelling art of Umatilla County and the surrounding areas," he said.

Lonergan said his passion for photojournalism started during a job shadow at *The Register Guard*.

"That opportunity cemented my love of photojournalism and convinced me it was possible to make a career out of something I loved to do," he said.

Alex Castle joins the *East Oregonian* this summer as the

Snowden Program intern. Castle will help the *EO* staff with its award-winning Round-Up Magazine, while also handling general assignment stories.

"I'm excited to become a part of Pendleton and Umatilla County for the summer and learn from the people here," said Castle, who grew up in Philomath. "Journalism is about serving the community by telling important stories. I can't wait to help the *EO* in that endeavor."

Castle will enter his fifth year at the University of Oregon in the fall, when he will complete his degree with a major in journalism and a minor in political science.



Ben Lonergan



Alex Castle

Through his first four years at Oregon, Castle has primarily worked for KWVA, the university's on-campus radio station, and has served as the station's sports director since the fall of 2018. There, Castle will continue as the station's play-by-play voice of Oregon football and oversee weekly sports programming, along with the coordination and training of the department's volunteer staff of approximately 20 students. During his time there, Alex has also covered events like the 2017 NCAA Men's Final Four in Phoenix, Arizona, along with the 2018 and 2019 NCAA Women's Elite Eight.

Castle is also a member of the SOJC's Track Bureau, where he covered local track events, including the 2018 Prefontaine Classic and NCAA Championships. This weekend, Alex is in Stanford, California, covering the 2019 Prefontaine Classic and will travel with the bureau in the fall to cover the 2019 IAAF World Championships in Doha, Qatar. In addition to being a 2019 Snowden reporting intern, Alex interned at the locally owned Fox Sports Eugene radio station in the summer of 2017.

"Alex is an enthusiastic and talented individual who is dedicated to reporting news and learning from the journalists already here at the *East Oregonian*," Cutler said.

BRIEFLY

Panda Express coming to Hermiston

HERMISTON — Hermiston's fast food offerings are about to expand with the addition of a Panda Express. The "fast casual Chi-

nese" restaurant confirmed in a tweet that it is building a restaurant at 1530 N. First St. in Hermiston. It is expected to open in December.

The property just north of Walmart housed Stockman's Steakhouse for several years, followed by a brief period as Indian

Kitchen and Steakhouse, an Indian buffet that also offered more American fare.

Currently the nearest Panda Express to Hermiston is in Kennewick. The first Panda Express opened in Glendale, California, in 1983.

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