

Eastern Oregon town is gone, but its namesake store remains

BY LISA BRITTON
Baker City Herald

PONDOSA — Bob Bennett is just three years older than the Pondosa Store, where he's been selling cold drinks and ice cream since 1983.

Bob, 98, was born in 1923. The store was built in 1926 to serve Pondosa, a mill town about 25 miles north of Baker City, a couple miles from Medical Springs.

Pondosa as a town no longer exists. But Bob is happy to share the story with anyone who happens by his remote store.

Although Pondosa was home to 500 people at one time, it was

wholly dependent on a lumber mill. The mill closed in 1959 — just one year after the area was named the geographic center of the United States with the addition of Alaska and Hawaii.

"They were going to name it Centerville, U.S.A., but the town closed up," said Lori Brock, Bob's daughter who moved to Pondosa several years ago.

Lester Gaddy, brother to Bob's wife, Jean, saw an advertisement in the Eugene Register-Guard.

"The whole town. For sale," Lori said.

Lester, she said, "traded three city blocks for the whole town." Lester died in 1982, and left his property to Jean, his only sister.

Jean and Bob Bennett faced a decision: sell the Pondosa property, or sell their Eugene home and move to Eastern Oregon.

"I had a debate on it," Bob remembers.

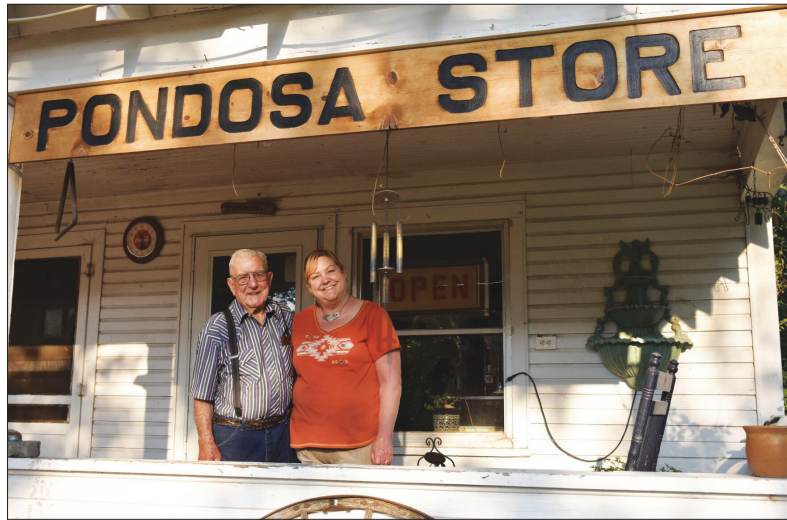
He'd lived in Eugene all of his life, and had recently retired from Georgia-Pacific, a timber company.

But he was tired of the rain west of the Cascades. So the couple sold their place and moved to Pondosa in 1983.

"All this nice sunshine and fresh air," Bob said. "It was a good idea. I kept busy over here."

Although the houses had been sold and moved to other towns nearby, Bob discovered a huge pile of sawdust left at the mill site.

He can point it out, too, on the aerial photo of Pondosa that hangs on the wall of the store. He set to



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald
Bob Bennett, left, and his daughter, Lori Brock, at the front door of the Pondosa store July 20, 2021.

grinding up that sawdust and started selling it as garden mulch. "I'd deliver it in 5-yard loads all over," he said.

That kept him busy for a while, until the pile finally disappeared.

"It took 20 years," he said with a smile.

While he worked at that, Jean ran the store.

"People yet talk about her. She'd visit with everybody," Bob said.

Jean passed away in 2015. During her illness, she and Bob lived in Nampa, Idaho, with Lori and her husband, Dennis.

After Jean died, Lori thought her father might stay in Idaho with her. But he returned to Pondosa in the winter of 2015.

The store is warmed by three wood stoves, so Lori and Dennis

came as often as they could to help haul firewood and move the snowdrifts.

That lasted only a few months before they decided, in February 2016, to move to Pondosa.

Prior to her marriage, Lori had lived in Pondosa for a time, and she met her husband in Baker City.

"Twenty-five years later, we're back," she said with a smile.

The Pondosa store has 15 bedrooms. During the days of the mill operation, the 12 bedrooms upstairs were rented to single men — two to a room. They all shared one bathroom.

In addition to the store, the town boasted a gas station, meat market and post office.

"That old vault is where they stored the payroll," Bob said, point-

ing to a structure just across the driveway from the store.

Although the store was closed for a bit when Jean was sick, and again in the depths of the coronavirus pandemic, it is now open seven days a week.

"Once we got Dad vaccinated, we opened back up," Lori said.

Lori, who is a registered nurse, administered her dad's second dose, on Feb. 11 at the Baker County Health Department in Baker City.

"We're here and adding to our business," Bob added.

Lori said the store stocks "mostly refreshments and snacks" — soda, ice cream, candy and chips. But Bob can serve up burritos, too, and he offers some essentials, such as flour, sugar, milk and eggs.

They've also applied for a liquor license.

The store is open daily from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Offerings have expanded outside as well. This spring they developed three campsites, and Lori posted the availability on the website hipcamp.com.

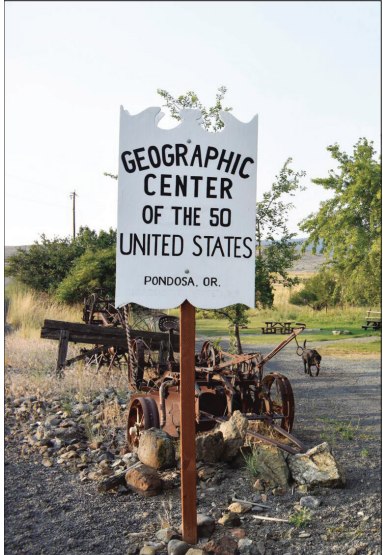
"We get campers off the freeway," Lori said. "North Carolina is the farthest away."

Between the store and campsites is a deck surrounded by trees and flowers in an area dedicated to Jean's memory.

"We fixed up Mom's little park," Lori said.

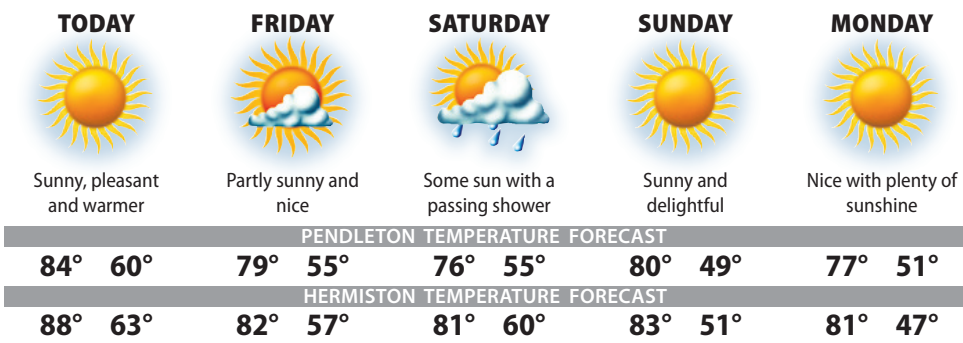
She said it's proven popular as a resting spot for touring car clubs as well as travelers on motorcycles and bicycles.

"It's like a little oasis in the middle of the desert," Lori said.



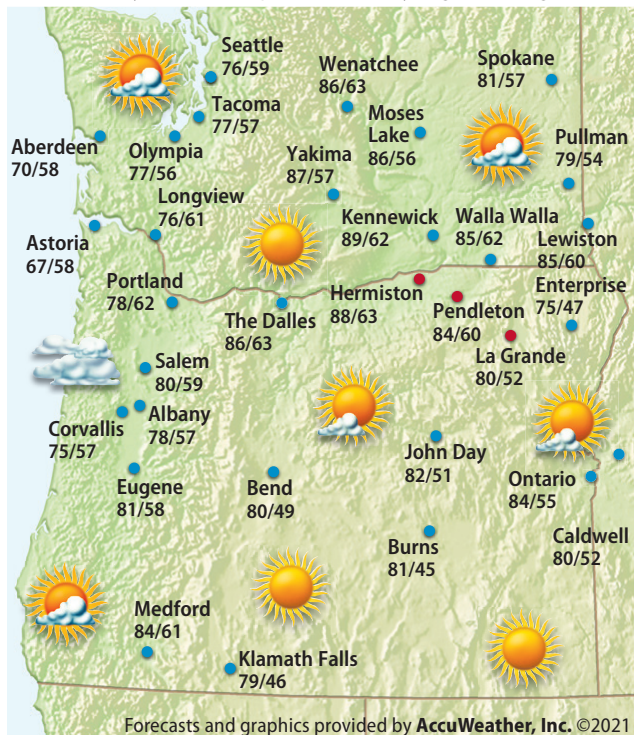
Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald
Pondosa proclaimed itself as the geographic center of the U.S. after Hawaii and Alaska were added as states in 1959.

Forecast for Pendleton Area



OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.



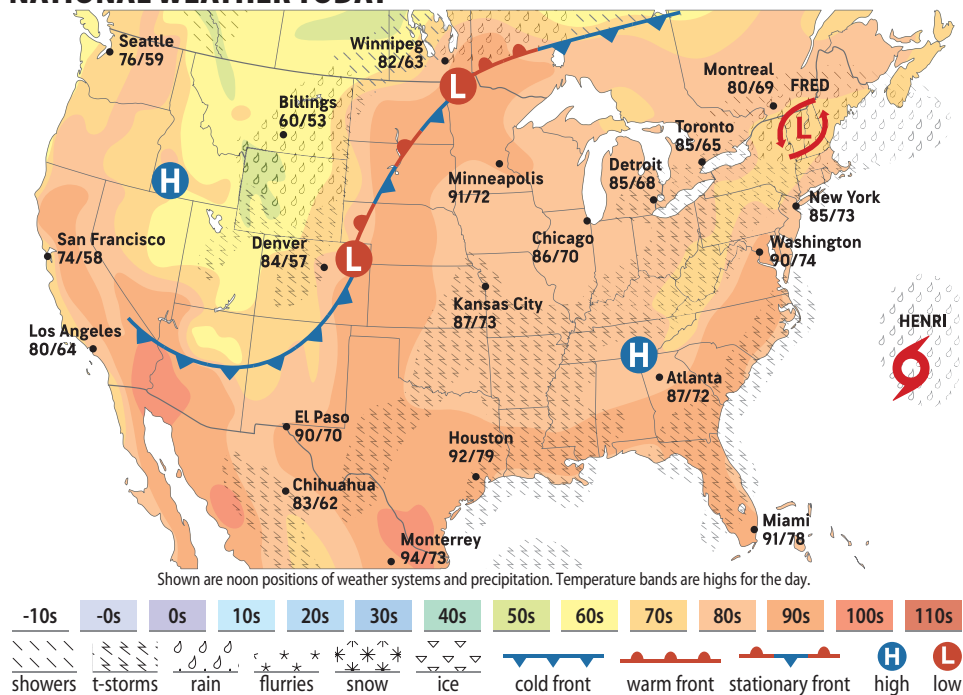
ALMANAC

PENDLETON through 3 p.m. yest.			
TEMP.	HIGH	LOW	
Yesterday	75°	58°	
Normals	88°	58°	
Records	106° (1897)	43° (1904)	
PRECIPITATION	24 hours ending 3 p.m.	Trace	
Month to date		0.01"	
Normal month to date		0.18"	
Year to date		4.37"	
Last year to date		8.68"	
Normal year to date		8.49"	
HERMISTON through 3 p.m. yest.			
TEMP.	HIGH	LOW	
Yesterday	79°	61°	
Normals	91°	57°	
Records	105° (1967)	44° (1987)	
PRECIPITATION	24 hours ending 3 p.m.	Trace	
Month to date		Trace	
Normal month to date		0.10"	
Year to date		1.93"	
Last year to date		1.66"	
Normal year to date		5.24"	
WINDS (in mph)			
Today	WSW 4-8	Fri. SW 7-14	
Pendleton	W 6-12	W 7-14	
SUN AND MOON			
Sunrise today	6:00 a.m.		
Sunset tonight	7:56 p.m.		
Moonrise today	6:47 p.m.		
Moonset today	2:15 a.m.		
Full	Last	New	First
Aug 22	Aug 29	Sep 6	Sep 13

NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)
High 105° in Zapata, Texas Low 29° in Bodie State Park, Calif.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



July jobless rate drops to 5.2%

BY MIKE ROGOWAY
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon added 20,000 jobs in July and the state's jobless rate dropped from 5.6% to 5.2%, the steepest monthly decline in nearly a year.

The numbers out Tuesday, Aug. 17, from the Oregon Employment Department indicate the state is continuing its rapid recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, but the rampant spread of the coronavirus' delta variant has introduced considerable uncertainty for the fall.

And tens of thousands of unemployed Oregonians face additional hardship when expanded federal benefits expire next month.

The national unemployment rate was 5.4% last month. In Oregon, July's job gains were more than double the monthly average of 9,100 over the prior six months. Oregon counted 105,000

workers as unemployed last month, a little more than half as many as in July 2020.

Hiring was strongest in the government and the leisure- and-hospitality sectors, which added 12,800 and 7,100 jobs, respectively. Those segments were among those hardest hit by the pandemic, and both had been struggling to find workers after the state began widespread reopening last spring.

Employment at hotels, restaurants and bars remains well below where it was before the pandemic. The employment department says the leisure- and-hospitality sector has regained just 60% of the jobs lost to the pandemic recession.

Expanded federal benefits in place since the pandemic began in March 2020 will end the week of Sept. 4 unless Congress steps in with a last-minute extension, a prospect that

looks unlikely given the sharp partisan divide in the Capitol.

That would mean an end to \$70 million in weekly benefits for tens of thousands of Oregonians, many of whom are not counted in the monthly unemployment figures.

The expanded programs include a \$300 weekly bonus, extended benefits for people who remained unemployed for a long period of time, and a program called Pandemic Unemployment Assistance for contractors and other self-employed workers who aren't usually eligible for jobless aid.

Oregon had 115,000 people receiving assistance under such temporary federal programs at the end of July, though that figure has been falling rapidly for several months and may number fewer than 100,000 when the expanded benefits expire after Labor Day.

IN BRIEF

Oregon State Hospital must resume admitting patients within 7 days, court rules

PORTLAND — The Ninth Circuit Court on Monday, Aug. 16, decided the Oregon State Hospital must again admit certain patients within seven days, overturning a federal judge's May 2020 ruling that put a pause on that directive.

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. District Judge Michael W. Mosman modified a 2002 court order requiring the state psychiatric hospital to admit people no longer than seven days after they've been found unable to aid and assist in their own defense. His decision removes the time limit on keeping those patients in jail to accommodate the state hospital's limited admissions policy as the pandemic worsened.

Advocacy group Disability Rights Oregon has long protested Mosman's decision, saying that leaving patients in jail violates their constitutional rights. The group appealed the decision with the Ninth Circuit Court, urging

the judges to consider the constitutional rights of patients awaiting trial.

The judges sided with Disability Rights Oregon, ruling the state hospital must resume admitting aid-and-assist patients within a week. They also asked Mosman to assess whether a modification to the admissions policy for aid-and-assist patients is still necessary in the long-term, considering things like the hospital's capacity and its ability to comply with public health rules during this phase of the pandemic.

"Our hope is that the judge determines a modification is no longer necessary," Cooper told The Oregonian/OregonLive.

A state hospital spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The state hospital began staggering admissions at the beginning of the pandemic, converting two of its units to test and monitor newly-admitted patients for two weeks before placing them in the general population. That required the state hospital to limit its pace of admissions.

— The Oregonian

CORRECTIONS: The *East Oregonian* works hard to be accurate and sincerely regrets any errors. If you notice a mistake in the paper, please call 541-966-0818.

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