

## Family:

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Together, the pair crafted a historically accurate tale about life for the Columbia River Plateau Indians before pioneers arrived for the first half, and a rambunctious, roiling Wild West second half.

This, for many, is an opportunity to see and learn about something that isn't always taught in schools or highlighted in history textbooks. The three tribes of the Cayuse, Umatilla and Walla Walla that make up the modern Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, had long and rich history before the pioneers came.

The show encapsulates this story and includes many of the descendants of those who participated in the actual events depicted and is "truly authentic," Waggoner said.

"The moccasin footprints are now six generations deep," she said.

Minthorn Wannassay's granddaughter, Mitzi Rodriguez, has participated in the show for 10 years in the welcome dance and Lewis and Clark scene and was a recipient of this year's Happy Canyon Appreciation Award. Ingrid Selmer, who has done the show's makeup for 31 years, also was recognized for her work.

In one infamous scene, known as the "Shorty Scene," a man named



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**Costumed actors dance around the Happy Canyon Arena in Pendleton during a dress rehearsal Thursday, Sept. 9, 2021, of the Happy Canyon Night Show.**

Shorty gets shot in the legs by bank robbers and a doctor, played by Jason Hill, and a nurse, played by Waggoner herself, must remove both his legs.

Hill took over the doctor role from his own father, Fritz, and this year, after acting in the scene for ages, Waggoner and Hill are teaching the next generation. Hill will be passing it off to Andrew Porter while Waggoner will be giving it to her daughter, Kaleigh Johnson.

However, they will be transitioning over the next couple of years, because

"Jason and I love it too much to give it up right now," Waggoner said.

"It means so much to me that she would want to do it," she said. "Not only does it continue the tradition but I'm so honored that she would continue the legacy of our family."

Brock Johnson, also a member of the fire crew scene and who happens to be married to Waggoner's daughter, had seen the Happy Canyon Night Show only once before but jumped in to act this year for the first time.

"It's a part," he said, "of being in the family."

## Shortage:

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"Heading into fall it is looking like we're going to have to cut an additional day and probably cut lunches," Millar said. "It is pretty brutal."

Demand for restaurant meals soared over the summer as restrictions lifted across Oregon. Nearly all restaurants saw a huge uptick in customers. But where demand reached new heights, a new challenge appeared — staffing the restaurants which have balanced narrow margins and threats of closure over 2020.

To keep employees from burning out, Millar cut operating hours and closed down the brewery on Tuesdays to keep what employees she has from becoming overwhelmed in an industry well known for its high turnover rate and low wages.

"I think we've reached the mindset of 'we have what we have,'" she said. "We'll keep hiring as much as possible, but we need to understand that we've got to adjust with what the situation is instead of waiting for the situation to adjust itself."

### Not much change

Millar is not alone. Several restaurants across the region have reported challenges with hiring workers over the summer. Some blamed expanded federal unemployment benefits as the culprit for lower workforce participation, even though the region has seen lower unemployment benefits claims now than it had before the pandemic started. Others recognized the high cost of living, taxes and low supply of housing which has made rents and home prices balloon.

Millar explained while business picked up considerably over the summer, the lack of staffing and overburdened industry has a cascading effect with other restaurants, causing a feedback loop of demand and short supply. As one business cuts its hours, patrons look elsewhere for a meal.

"It's a funny, weird thing where I think we would all be excited if there were three more restaurants because we just need more places to send

people to eat so it's a unique situation over here," Millar said.

Earlier this summer, Baker City's Main Event Sports Bar and Eatery was experiencing severe worker burnout in June due to staffing shortages which led to closing the restaurant on Tuesdays.

The situation there has changed little. While the sports bar is open seven days a week, they've had to cut evening hours, close earlier and open later throughout the week.

"We're very, very busy. On Sundays and Mondays we're one of the only restaurants open on Main Street so we're extremely busy, but extremely short staffed," said Jessica Eastland, manager at Main Event Sports Bar and Eatery. "If we had an adequate staff, it would be a very profitable time for us but that's the thing — we've got people who are working overtime hours when we could have had other employees working those hours so that we weren't paying more in wages. Our wages right now are through the roof because we have so many employees that are working overtime every single week because we are so short staffed."

### Rolling with the punches

For Bruce Rogers, COVID-19 has presented the challenge of keeping not one, but two businesses profitable. He and his daughter, Harvey Rogers, own Timber's Feederery in Elgin and Local Harvest in La Grande.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges in staffing for both restaurants. With the shortage of workers and revolving mandates for public dining, the owners had to adjust.

"This far into it and with what we've seen, the rules have changed and the rules are different and will change

again," Bruce Rogers said. "We're just chameleons at this point. We just change and go with the flow while doing our best to remain a profitable business."

On top of the shortage of workers, Timber's Feederery is facing a hurdle as Harvey Rogers takes maternity leave. She said she typically works open to close every day, and her absence has forced Timber's to limit orders to takeout and outdoor dining for the time being.

Both restaurants closed indoor dining to save costs with a limited staff during the early part of the pandemic. The father and daughter looked at new ideas to stay afloat during unstable times.

"When you couldn't have inside dining, we switched over to to-go and delivery only," Bruce Rogers said. "We had to start up a delivery service to remain competitive at that point, but when we opened back up again we shut the delivery off."

Timber's Feederery and Local Harvest changed hours from seven days a week to five days a week, and both close an hour earlier than they used to. One advantage to owning two restaurants is the ability to rotate staff from one location to another if one restaurant is short.

"We have several employees that are able to work at both places, mostly our top three people are very versatile for us," Bruce Rogers said. "They fill in everywhere for us."

### Older, younger helping fill gaps

With pandemic-related federal unemployment programs ending on or before Monday, Sept. 6, Bruce Rogers is expecting an increase in prospective employees. In addition, students returning in the fall to attend Eastern Oregon University in La Grande are promising for filling positions.

## Fire:

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Charlton hopes to reopen the bar soon, perhaps by the end of September. To do so, she'll need to serve food, so she plans to either open a food truck or serve food from the bar. Meanwhile, Sheldon Delph, a retired teacher and local historian whose parents opened the Long Branch decades ago, is seeking funding for the repairs and is looking at writing grant applications.

"I wouldn't dare not open," said Charlton, 78. "They'd hang me from a pole."

### An institution

Since the fire, a steady stream of people have flocked to the Long Branch to see the damage, Charlton said. Some arrive with hopes of a meal, only to be disappointed. Others stop by to see the damage and express their sympathies. To many, it's a testament to how much the business means to the region.

For decades, the Long Branch has served as an institution for Weston. Its massive breakfast meals — ham, eggs, hashbrowns and pancakes as big as your head — drew people from across the region. It has served as a pitstop for travelers, a destination for weekend bikers, a place of celebration for the community. It's a place

where people felt welcome, where you could find a ride home after a night of drinking or pay days in advance for your parents' meal.

"Women felt safe here," said Tracy McCarthy, a resident of Milton-Freewater and longtime customer who visited Charlton at the Long Branch on Sept. 9. "Nobody bothered us."

One resident who came to the Long Branch on Sept. 9 was Tim Smock. The day before the fire, the community held a celebration of life at the Long Branch for Smock's father, Don Smock, a longtime customer and farmer who, for decades, had come to the restaurant almost daily, mostly for its famous chicken fried steak, according to his son. The wake drew more than 50 community members, friends and family from across the region.

"It was fantastic," Smock said of seeing his family again.

Charlton has not spent the last several days sulking. Though she remains concerned over what insurance will cover, she remains optimistic. Through the pandemic, she said she's grown used to handling hardship, and this is just another one to overcome. Over three decades of management, she's endured many challenges.

"Whatever will happen," she said, "will happen."



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

**The damage from a recent fire is visible Thursday, Sept. 9, 2021, through the front window of the Long Branch Cafe & Saloon, Weston.**

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