

All come to look for America



MATT HENRY
THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

One experience from my childhood remains indelibly etched in my memory — that of standing up each morning in primary school, facing a talking box mounted on the wall, putting my right hand over my heart (never the left), and repeating the “pledge of allegiance to America,” this communal pact where we claim “liberty and justice for all.”

Even in the fourth grade, I knew I was being lied to, for some have plenty of the two, while most others have far too little. By the time I transitioned to junior high (middle school for young pups), we were no longer being required to salute the box on the wall anymore. The indoctrination having already taken place; i.e., out of all God’s creation, we Americans were the most religious, the smartest, wisest, beneficent, innocent, morally just and generous nation that ever existed. That is, until 10 years of Vietnam, Watergate, numerous assassinations, Iran-gate, Bill Clinton’s sexual escapades, W’s two wars and Obama’s indiscriminate murdering of “collateral damage” civilians by drones did its damage and blew it all to hell.

Being a history major and a Christian has not helped my identity of being an “American” in any way. Learning the well-documented history of the attempted holocaust of American Indians; the ongoing slavery and lynching of Black Americans; the internment of tax paying, loyal Americans of Japanese descent in World War II — all this and more helped to dispel the myth of the supposed righteousness of Americans. The unspoken tragedy of our involvement in the two major wars of the 20th century did a psychological number on us; this idea that we are the saviors of the world belies the truth of the matter.

So, here’s my quandary: What exactly does it mean to be an “American” and who gets to define that? Can it even be defined? With the increasing hodgepodge of various peoples coming to the U.S., will being an “American” be the same thing for a Syrian-American as for a Mexican-, Chinese-, Euro-American? Does our great nation provide us all the same great experience? Can we be an honest people without having to be the best thing since sliced bread? Could we actually become a repentant nation, profusely apologizing to the rest of the world for all the damage we cause? I believe what may be our most dangerous fault as a nation, as a people, is our lack of corporate lamentation, of grieving over our past.

But herein lies the rub — I write like the white American male that I am. Can I claim the title of “American” while so many of you reading this are saying, “That’s not my America?” The American myth is keenly tied to being

white. It is the self-serving and self-deluding description of the dominant majority rather than “we the people.” The two words, “American” and “patriotism,” are often conflated.

That is, it would appear that one cannot be a patriotic American without hugging a flag, embracing weaponry, armed violence, the maintenance of military bases all over the world (why doesn’t Egypt have a base in Dubuque?) and the unquestioned demagoguery of U.S. politicians sending poor people to their deaths in armed conflict somewhere far away.

Recently, I read a statement where someone claimed that they were “as American as it gets” in reference to flags and the glorification of armed conflict, while maintaining the illusion of innocence and moral righteousness.

So what does this mean? By birthright and native citizenship, I am American, but it is very different from that type of Americanism. So again, what is America and who are Americans? Are we always to be defined by our military threat, our flag, our propensity to be a schizophrenic people lulled by the myth of being both innocent and morally just? If you’re comfortable there, I do not recommend getting an honest education or attending a church where the pastor cares more about the prophetic honesty of the gospel than being tied to a paycheck paid by “my country — love it or leave it” congregants.

And about that rather hackneyed phrase, I’ve always felt the inaccuracy of its apparent duality of outcomes, either unquestioningly loving or regretfully leaving. No, the bumper sticker in my mind has always read it as “love it or change it.” Patriotism has always meant for me the genuine feeling of pride from the offering of a nation’s gifts for the global neighborhood, not in its ability to bomb and assassinate.

Thus, true American patriots for me are Emily Dickenson, Aaron Copeland, Mary Cassat, Thurgood Marshall, Clara Barton, Jonas Salk, Jesse Owens, Caesar Chavez, Meryl Streep, Bob Dylan, Billy Graham, Muhammed Ali, Spike Lee, George Gershwin, Duke Ellington, John Steinbeck, James Baldwin, both MLK and RBG, and countless others who define “America” and what it means to be “American.”

So, to be completely honest and accurate, I cannot claim to be an “American.” I can only claim to be what I am: A Christian who lives in America. Perhaps Paul Simon got it when he wrote, “‘Kathy, I’m lost,’ I said, though I knew she was sleeping. I’m empty and aching and I don’t know why. Counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike, they’ve all come to look for America. All come to look for America.”

For many of us, we’re still looking.

Matt Henry, a native Buckeye, is a Roman Catholic musician, a retired ABC/UMC pastor and a volunteer at the Outreach and the Warming Station. No one should be cold, hungry or lonely.

Echo Toy Run gears up for 18th year

Bikers to deliver holiday gifts to Good Shepherd

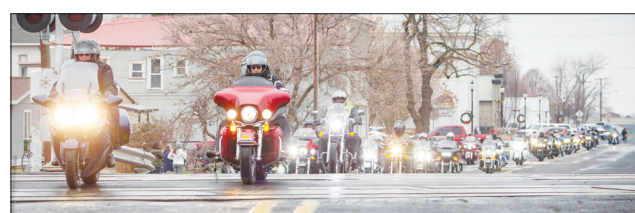
By TAMMY MALGESINI
East Oregonian

ECHO — Area bikers and other community members are getting revved up for the Echo Toy Run.

Participants meet each year on the first Saturday in December on Echo’s Main Street. At noon, kickstands are up as bikers prepare to deliver toys to Good Shepherd Medical Center, Hermiston.

Motorcyclists, as well as those driving cars and trucks, are invited to gather Saturday, Dec. 4, for the 18th annual toy run. The event is coordinated by family and friends in memory of Alan Sells, according to Amanda Silvani, one of Sells’ daughters. The Stanfield man organized the toy run for the first 15 years of the event’s existence. He died in a motorcycle crash Aug. 1, 2019.

Those planning to attend are asked to bring new



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Riders depart Echo for the 17th annual Echo Toy Run on Dec. 5, 2020. The 2021 event is Saturday, Dec. 4, leaving from downtown Echo at noon to deliver toys to Good Shepherd Medical Center, Hermiston.

unwrapped toys, which will be delivered to Good Shepherd. The hospital distributes the gifts to children who are in the hospital during the holiday season, as well as throughout the year. Any extra toys are donated to the Hermiston Police Department’s Christmas Express program, Silvani said.

Good Shepherd requests that donated toys are packaged in a way that enables them to be wiped down and sanitized. In addition, participants are asked to observe social distancing as much as possible while placing donations in bins in the hospital’s parking lot. Good Shepherd is providing each rider with refreshments in a

to-go bag, Silvani said.

Silvani said there has been an overwhelming desire to keep the toy run going since her father’s death. A number of motorcycle groups, she said, are committed to the cause that was dear to her dad’s heart.

Sells, who led the pack for 15 years, always had stuffed animals strapped to the front of his 2004 Harley Wide-Glide and on the back, a large American flag waved in the wind. In addition to catching up with his motorcycle buddies, Sells often jokingly said, “It’s the one good thing I do every year.”

For more information, call or text Silvani at 541-720-9304.

COMMUNITY BRIEFS

Symphony holiday festival offers free general admission

PENDLETON — The Oregon East Symphony will present the in-person return of its annual Holiday Music Festival.

The festive holiday concert is Sunday, Dec. 12, 2:30 p.m. at the Vert Auditorium, 480 S.W. Dorion Ave., Pendleton. Masks/face coverings are required of all audience members.

To celebrate, the symphony will offer free general admission. To find out where to obtain complimentary tickets through partnering local businesses and organizations, visit www.OregonEastSymphony.org.

Balcony seating and reserved floor seating are available by purchase — \$15 to \$65 — through either the symphony office, 345 S.W. Fourth St., Pendleton, by calling 541-276-0320 or visiting the website.

Inland Northwest Musicians to perform holiday concert

UMATILLA COUNTY — The Inland

Northwest Musicians are excited to present Handel’s “Messiah,” directed by R. Lee Friese.

The free holiday concerts are Saturday, Dec. 11, at the Hermiston Community Center, 415 S. Highway 395; and Sunday, Dec. 12, at the Weston Memorial Hall, 206 E. Main St. Both performances begin at 4 p.m. A reception will follow each show.

For the safety of the performers and the community, audience members are asked to wear face coverings during the concert.

Founded in 1999, Inland Northwest Musicians includes volunteer musicians from throughout the region. INWM performance ensembles include the Inland Northwest Orchestra, Inland Northwest Chorale and the Willow Creek Symphony. Admission to all concerts is free of charge, funded by corporate sponsors, grants, local concert sponsorships and individuals. Donations are accepted at performances. For more information, visit www.inlandnorthwestmusicians.com.

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