

# Remembering the ‘gadfly’ who was Tom Hebert



Not many people could put up with, much less like, Tom Hebert.

Even his family disowned him.

He was headstrong and stubborn, assertive to a fault, often annoying and rude, sometimes belligerent in his determination to convince others that his ideas not only had merit but were unquestionably necessary to fix things.

Even if his ideas were rebuffed, he would not let a good one die — like he did Feb. 8 at Maple View Memory Center in Monmouth. He passed unceremoniously, without family or friends, at the age of 83.

Hebert had the audacity to deliver pages and pages of unsolicited ideas, whether they be a museum integration plan to Pendleton leaders or plans for a bison ranch on the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Hebert liked his self-given label of gadfly — a persistent, irritating critic, a provocative stimulus, a goad, a blighter, a pesterer and resident irritant.

Most men dismissed him; some women wanted to punch him in the face.

The punching I understand, but many of Hebert’s ideas were rejected out of hand because of his off-putting personality.

You get my point.

As you would expect, Hebert left me loads of information with which to write his obituary, but I thought this guy deserved more than recognition on the East Oregonian records page.

Rather than me waxing poetic about Hebert (I called him Hebert rather than Tom if he was irritating me, which was often), I will let him tell you about himself, starting with his credo:

“Live a life of adventure, admit to failures, and learn from them. Put community before self and buy a good horse.”

Here are more jewels from the man everybody loved to hate.

“Perhaps my life falls between garrulous glorifier and servant. That I can live with.”

“To lose a friend is a kind of death.”

“When I believe that a friendship is on the rocks, I have a panic attack.”

“Usually, my tears are not warranted.”

“To some friends I have become a burden.”

“Gadflies, drivers, and mavericks tread on thin ice.”

“Talkative garrulous Tom is a major part of the problem.”

“Aging doesn’t help. Sometimes I get stressed out and feel lonesome.”

“An axis exists balancing loyalty and the horrors of betrayal.”

“There’s a saying, ‘Don’t let your age disgrace your youth.’ I’m working on it.”

Some things you may not know, but can appreciate Hebert’s claims:

- He was a “government spy, for about an hour,” while working for the State Department in Africa in 1979. “I did my spying over lunch when I ‘borrowed’ certain documents from the Bulgarians’ desks and fast had them copied at the Embassy.”

- Tom worked with John Fusco, producer and screenwriter of the 2004 film *Hidalgo*. Three years later, Fusco wrote: “Tom is not only a fine horseman and talented writer, but he knows more about preserving and promoting Barb horse breeds than anyone I know.”

- He was hired in 1965 to teach English and speech at Prairie View & College in Prairie View, Texas. Hebert was the first white teacher



East Oregonian, File

**Tom Hebert in 2018 poses for this portrait in downtown Pendleton. Hebert, who called himself a gadfly due to his drive to pester local governments to improve, died Feb. 8, 2022, in Monmouth. He was 83.**

at Prairie View, at the time America’s largest historically Black college.

- In the Peace Corps in Nigeria, he created a national support network and then organized the tour of a traveling full-sized Shakespearean stage folded up on a semi-trailer and 45 actors and technicians, 3,000 bush miles, playing in 23 cities and towns. On that Shakespearian tour, he learned the Emir of Kano, then ruler of three million people, had stolen his girlfriend.

- In a late night Ibadan street in 1964 he lost an argument with Wole Soyinka, an eventual Nobel prize winner in literature, about staging Shakespeare’s “Comedy of Errors.” Hebert had personal notes from Soyinka pinned to the “brag wall” in the little trailer he rented from the late Randy Severe.

- In Vietnam with the USO in 1966, Hebert made an assault landing off a Navy LST with a hotdog machine.

- He was held hostage twice and was fired on simultaneously by the Marine Corps and North Vietnamese. “I got under my bed with a bottle of cognac.”

- While working for the United Nations during the Biafra war in 1968, Hebert was declared a “mass murderer of children,” placed under house arrest, and expelled on a nighttime gunrunning arms flight and then, as a fellow passenger and reporter later wrote, “instantly held under police guard on a remote corner of the Lisbon airport.” The “brag wall” contained a photo of Hebert in the airport flanked by two soldiers with machine guns.

- He was condemned in the May 16, 1972, Congressional Record “all because I didn’t sleep with a subordinate. I later modified my behavior ... On Nov. 1, 1973, I received a formal letter of apology from the accusing Congressman who was later Clinton’s Secretary of Defense.”

- He was interviewed on National Public Radio regarding a book about trade schools he had co-authored. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 1972 wrote of the book, “‘This Way Out’ is downright subversive. It encourages the ancient idea that a student need not attend college to receive a higher education.”

- He worked for eight years as supervisor of the Tennessee Valley Authority Energy Conservation and Solar Institute. The *Chattanooga Times*, in a 1981 story headlined “He Belies Images of Standard Bureaucrat,” the newspaper described Hebert as a “TVA executive that comes to work sans coat and ties and gets away with it, claims to regard each day on the job as an opening-night performance.” Another in the story said this: “He seems to never slow down; he has a tremendous amount of energy and any task he sets his mind to, he gets done.” Tom conceived of and put together a \$4 million two-barge, prize-winning exhibition at the 1982 World’s Fair. In a 1986 letter of appreciation, a TVA official said, “I think the best compliment that can be made to you is the



Tom Hebert/Contributed Photo, File

**Tom Hebert served in the Peace Corps from 1962-64. His last assignment was as national tour manager for the University of Ibadan’s Shakespeare Traveling Theatre, which played in 23 cities and towns in a 3,000 mile loop to audiences in the thousands.**



Tom Hebert/Contributed Photo, File

**Tom Hebert, near Calabar, Eastern Nigeria in 1964 sharing a taxi with friends. Hebert lived in Pendleton for many years. He died Feb. 8, 2022, at the age of 83.**

fact that you were asked to spend the last months of your time with TVA working directly with the General Manager on ideas that you had generated over

the years. — Thanks for the battery charge. Your thinking is inspiring.”

- In 2013, the *Waitsburg (Washington) Times* had this to say: “We are encour-

aged by this initiative for Cowgirl Ranch Racing, which was floated and facilitated by Tom Hebert, a Pendleton-based consultant who has been a staunch advocate of the Centennial Days of Real Sports ‘reinvention’ since the recent loss of pari-mutual horse racing.” The *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* said of the Centennial’s signature event, “Hebert’s foresight lit a fire under a local non-profit, the business community and the mayor. Cowgirl Ranch Racing was born ... Hebert was an inspiration and we thank him for his vision, patience and perseverance.”

Tom did a lot of work during his 20 years on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, particularly focusing on Cayuse horses, and with

Chief Bill Burke and the late Doug Minthorn, who gave Tom a place to stay when he arrived here, was an outspoken advocate of using a small percentage of casino earnings to fund drug and alcohol prevention. He also helped organize the Ticham, the Tribes’ Conservation District.

Long-time leader Antone Minthorn, in the *Confederated Umatilla Journal*, wrote: “Hebert knows a lot about Cayuse mustangs. He knows all the breeders and he’s always promoting the Cayuse as being a part of the history of our people. He wants them — the horses and the people — to come back together again.”

In 2010, outgoing Umatilla tribal Executive Director Don Sampson (who is ED again) said in a letter to Hebert: “Tom, you’ve been my conscience.” Dave Tovey, the succeeding executive director, said, “Tom, you are a valued community member and have achieved ‘institutional’ status. I was taught early on that ‘show me someone in Indian Country that no one hates, and I’ll show you someone that hasn’t accomplished or tried anything.”

Well, I see I have stretched beyond my word limit. If you would like to read a shorter version, look for Tom’s obituary, which he helped me write, in the *East Oregonian*.

*Wil Phinney retired in January 2021 after a 44-year newspaper career. He lives in Pendleton with his wife Carrie. They have three daughters.*

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