40 years of no growth should be alarm bell

EDITORIAL
Voice of the Chieftain

Residents of Harney County have been described as the hostages of the armed protesters who took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Jan. 2.

By most accounts the protesters, largely out-of-state agitators, have harassed and generally run roughshod over the local community for three weeks and have worn out their welcome.

But the government land management policies that at least partially underpin the protest have constrained the Harney County economy for 40 years.

Once upon a time, Harney County's economy was strong. Thirty-one percent of the jobs, 768 in all, were in the wood products industry. But since 1978, that number has dropped to 6, according to a recent report from the Oregon Office of Economic Analysis.

And while the rest of the state increased jobs 74 percent since the late 1970s, the number of jobs in Harney County dropped by 10 percent. Since 1980, when the population was 8,314 and the job losses began, the county has lost nearly 1,200 people.

"Relative to the late 1970s — just before the state went into the severe early '80s recession and timber industry restructuring — the number of jobs today in Harney County is 10 percent below back then," Josh Lehner, the analyst who prepared the report, said. "Clearly, that is a really long time with essentially no growth."

A lot of things have changed since the 1970s. The timber industry has restructured, and there's more automation in the mills. So, not all of the wood product job losses can be attributed to federal logging policies.

But community leaders and residents say that in a county where more than 70 percent of the land is controlled by the federal government, those policy changes, along with stricter grazing restrictions, increased regulation and the ever-present threat of environmental lawsuits that attend any dealing with government agencies have huge impacts.

"It's continued rules and regulations that do everything to make it more difficult to make a living, to pay your bills educate your kids, pay your mortgage and lead a good life." retired rancher Bill Wilber said.

County Judge Steven Grasty said the job losses in the community have led to a general feeling of despair. His friends, neighbors and their families can no longer depend on the natural resource jobs that once sustained the county.

Many of those jobs have been replaced by lower-paying service sector jobs supporting tourists and the large contingent of government workers who manage the public lands.

Government employment now accounts for 40 percent of the jobs in the county. Those jobs are welcomed, and are vital to the community. In many cases, those employees are longtime residents with deep local ties.

Still, there is a sense that something has been lost.

"We believe the wealth of a nation is based on its natural resources," Grasty said. "We've lost access to natural resources, in particular, timber."

The partner that once encouraged these enterprises has grown distant and unresponsive.

Sooner or later the protesters will decamp the refuge and life in Harney County will return to normal.

But there and in a hundred places across the West, they will wait for the federal government to loosen its grip.

WALLOWA COUNTY CHIEFTAIN

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Volume 134

Remembering Leonard Younce and old-school football

By Rich Wandschneider
For The Chieftain

MAIN STREET
Rich Wandschneider

We're still in the thick of football, just finished getting a national collegiate champion — Alabama — and winding up NFL playoffs on the way to the Super Bowl. Used to be football was a fall sport, but it seems year-around now, just like the election season.

The closest I came to pro football was Leonard Younce, who lived, worked and played and taught bridge in the county for more than 20 years. Len was born in Dayton, Ore., in 1917. He played at Oregon State from 1938-40 and for the New York Giants from 1941-48. He later coached at Oregon State and in the Canadian Football League, and, for one year, 1992, at Joseph High School, where my son Matt was a running back and defensive back.

In Len's day, pro football was a 60-minute affair. He laughed one time that the coach tried to take him out of a game in Pittsburgh when the temperature was near zero.

"I didn't want to freeze," he said, so "I just didn't come out."

There were other stories, too — how he left his helmet on the sideline and tripped on the grass on the way back to get it the first time he got sent into a game; how that game was against the Redskins and Slingin' Sammy Baugh; how Baugh and other quarterbacks were pretty good defensive players in their time.

A few years ago, just as the hubbub about concussions was starting, I wrote a piece for a magazine about my own small football career and how it played around gear, rules and hits. I started in the '50s, when, believe it or not, some of the smaller kids on our freshman team got leather helmets. My last high school year, 1959, was the first or second year helmet bars were required. They had to redesign the bars and helmets the next year because the single bars would get pushed back and necks were broken.

In 1960, my freshman year of college at Denver University, we had drills in spear blocking and tackling. That hard helmet made a pretty good weapon, but of course it hurt your own head when you banged it into someone else's thigh pad or helmet. So they padded up the helmets until the hits and broken necks got bad enough that they finally outlawed spearing. And on and on.

In my magazine piece I went from there to Len. He'd played both ways — guard on offense and linebacker on defense — for the Giants at 6 feet, 1 inch and 208 pounds. And stayed in for kickoffs, punts and extra points, often but not always serving as kicker. They also didn't practice every day, because they all had jobs on the side; Len coached at a Catholic high school in New York.

I asked him one time what he thought about the modern pro game.

"We could have played with 'em," he said. "They'd only have to change one rule: make everyone play 60 minutes. Those 300-pound linemen and 250-pound running backs wouldn't make it."

My magazine article rolled around from here to there and into the hands of Markus Koch, who was an All-American at Boise State and played six years for the Washington Redskins. When he got my piece, he was an officer in the Seattle chapter of the NFL Players Association.

Koch told me I had been way too easy on helmets and football. He said that we were going to hear a lot more about football concussions from a number of former players and football widows, that the injury story had remained pretty much hidden from fans by teams afraid of losing audience and players afraid of losing jobs and appearing soft.

What could they do to make football safe, I asked.

"Your friend Len had it right," he said. "Play both ways — and maybe leather helmets."

Well yeah, force equals mass times acceleration, and these guys are fast, too — but they only play a few downs at a time.

Small-town high school football like ours hasn't gone back to leather, but there aren't too many 300-pounders out there, either. And the eight-man game relies on speed, agility and making the one-on-one block and tackle. Not too much of that pile-up stuff. Most of our players go both ways, too. And, just as important, they play other sports as well.

They play in front of parents and friends, scores of them. Here in a small town, sports are still participatory, not yet gladiatorial.

I can still see and hear Len coaching the Joseph kids, that big smile on his face, slapping them on the back, thinking that at 72 he could still "play with 'em."

And maybe outlast a 300-pound NFL lineman on a cold day in Pittsburgh.

Columnist Rich Wandschneider lives in Joseph.

Water-use conflict a question of rights

LETTERS to the EDITOR

Logically, the only thing that can stand in a dichotomous relationship to individual rights is the unrightful counterclaims of a mob. Is this how Mrs. Swart (Jan. 4 letter) means to characterize the side she's taken in the matter she addresses? If not, perhaps she won't mind explaining why she portrays the water-use conflict as a clash between individual rights and the claims of … what else but other individuals?

The only just resolution of any conflict is one that honors the rights — not mere wishes — of all parties. Is this what Mrs. Swart dismisses as "the magic (or impossible) solution?"

It's an absurd premise that one person's rights are incompatible with another's and should therefore be ruled alienable after all, Jefferson be damned.

It would be timely to ask what this portends other than a never-ending, ever-escalating war of rightless whims. On such chaotic terms, it is just a matter of time before everyone else's turn to step down and be stepped on will come.

Above all, let it be acknowledged that the side you've taken deserves infinitely better representation than as the party incommoded by the constitutionally guaranteed rights of each one of us.

What the devil did you think you were saying for it? In its defense and honor, I say please speak for yourself.

Tim Anderson
Wallowa

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