

VOICE of the CHIEFTAIN

ROLL OUT THE BARRELS

This past week has seen Wallowa County endure what might have been a major crisis, if not disaster: the detection, characterization and recovery of one barrel which once contained herbicide, and eleven others—whose former contents are a bit more mysterious—from Wallowa Lake. Fortunately, the saga has a happy ending. Thus far, the barrels have contained no toxic contents, and were probably empty when they were placed in the lake. Joseph's drinking water is safe. We can swim again without concern. Fish and fowl are unaffected by toxins. (A bald eagle was keeping a close eye on the diving operations, just in case...) And there was never any presence of "Agent Orange."

The Environmental Protection Agency and Oregon DEQ did the right thing in responding promptly to public and environmental concerns. By thoroughly investigating the barrels and the surrounding sediment, they provided facts from which we who live and recreate here can make sound decisions, and sleep better at night. We owe them a debt of gratitude (and tax dollars), along with our Sherriff's marine patrol, and especially Deputy Marc Christman, for keeping both divers and boaters safe.

But while we rested easy in learning the facts of the barrel's distribution and contents, people outside the county were not so



An EPA image of the 2,4-D or 2,4,5-T barrel reveals that it is rusted and corroded.

lucky. The Portland Fox News station KPTV and Rob Porter of The Oregonian both reported the erroneous story that barrels containing Agent Orange ingredients were found in Wallowa Lake.

They leapt to this conclusion because of over-enthusiastic reporting, and an error of a single, small, and seemingly insignificant word. The word "or." A lowly article, to grammarians. The most mundane of words, but to this story, and to the arc of our lives, the most important two letters in the alphabet.

The label on the herbicide barrel said "2,4-D or 2,4,5-T. To make Agent Orange you need 2,4-D AND 2,4,5-T in the correct concentrations and proportions.

EPA spokesman Bill Dunbar noted that an EPA press-release was partly to blame for the Agent Orange Debacle because it incorrectly stated that one barrel "was labeled 2,4-D AND 2,4,5-T" although the image provided by Blue Mountain divers clearly showed the label as 2,4-D OR 2,4,5-T—meaning only one ingredient was or had been in that barrel.

To make matters worse, one caption on my initial story also said "2,4-D and 2,4,5-T." It was a careless error, but an error with consequences.

The Agent Orange story, which had roots in this careless wording from two local, on-the-scene news sources, soon blossomed

into "Wallowa Lake contains barrels labeled Agent Orange." (Oregon Fishing Forum) and "Agent Orange Zone" which now has its own blog. A documentary filmmaker from New York called The Chieftain and wanted to film a story that seemed to revolve vaguely around how Agent Orange destroyed a small town's economy, ecosystems, and probably the human population.

The lines between facts, errors of a single word, and full-blown rumormongering can be blurry. Rumormongering and the creation of disasters are much more fun and sell a lot more papers.

Efforts by The Chieftain and EPA to correct and curtail these stories met with little to no response, although the stories are slowly fading as they run out of rumor-stoked oxygen.

The bottom line for Wallowa County is that we have all pulled together, kept our rural common sense and level-headedness, and are ready to move on. There may rightfully be lingering questions about the EPA's costs of cleanup, the long-term sources of our water, and the loss of some tourist revenue. As your editor, I will make occasional errors of spelling, grammar, and judgment. But bear with me if you can. I love this place, and entirety of people who call it home. We are a community, and although our opinions may be diverse, we rely on one-another more than anything. That unity of community and concern was evident this week. Thanks.

Things are the same all over

I just returned from my 60th class reunion. My wife has begged me not to tell anyone it was the 60th. I tried comforting her by telling her I graduated at age 9. While I was at the reunion I decided that age does some terrible things to people. Thank God they had name tags with our senior picture on them or I would have recognized few. In some cases it was like going to a wake for all of us. Ageing can be cruel. Some of the old grads had fallen apart a little at a time while others kind of crashed and burned. The one thing they seemed to have in common was they loved talking about it. I heard more about bad hearts, knee and hip replacements and just about everything but STD. There were very few success stories but what do you expect from a bunch of underachievers. One thing I noticed was that I was glad to see everyone, even the ones I didn't particularly like then. It did seem that once everyone got older they grew up and got a little nicer.

While in California I spent some time with a rancher friend and went to the livestock sale in Turlock. I was just sitting when I saw someone smiling and waving at me. Jake Stanley from Hermiston was there buying cattle for a feedlot in the NW. The return trip I had the company of my eccentric brother who came with me for a visit even though the last time he visited I worked him for a week modifying my deck. One of the reasons he likes to visit here is that sometimes his wife annoys him. He mistakenly thought that by leaving her home he would be safe. Wrong. First problem was the pilot light on the hot water heater went out and she was incapable of lighting it. He called the utility company and had them send a technician over to light it. He then called his wife back to inform her of the appointment and got no answer. Spent the next hour and a half calling and finally got her to answer. The next day the outside temperature got to 103° and the wife called to inform him the air conditioning had quit. Inside temp was 87°. Since the air conditioner was new it was still on warranty and he called the guy who installed it and arranged for an appointment to fix it. He then called his wife back

OPEN RANGE

Barrie Qualle



to tell her to be sure she was at home at 2:00 p.m. to let the guy in. No answer. Again he spent 2 hours trying to call to no avail. Finally he called the neighbor and asked him to go next door and tell Linda to answer the phone. The kindly neighbor complied and called back to say she wasn't home. An hour later he finally contacted her and scolded her severely for not being attentive to his phone calls. It was a pretty good rant and he ended up hanging up and realizing he hadn't told her about the 2 o'clock appointment. He called back and she didn't answer.

I just finished helping a friend gather his herd to move to the forest. I wish there was a program like the weed program to remove all the old barbed wire from the range. It seems all the old ranches are littered with it and in tall grass it is especially dangerous. Any one who has ridden a horse into some of this knows how bad it can be. A valuable horse can be ruined quickly and maybe ruin the cowboy as well. There are plenty of hazards like badger holes, rocks etc. nothing can be done about but the wire is fixable. It is the same all over the West. In a lot of cases the fields are leased and neither the leasee or the leasor want to pay the price to clean it up. I am considering limiting my riding to the arena or branding pen.

Remember everyone the Kickoff to CJD Ranch Rodeo is Saturday June 29th. A great chance to watch local cowboys compete in classic events. Should be about 12 teams all local. Things start off Friday the 28th with a trail ride to the top of the Moraine and anyone can join. Ride starts at 2:30 p.m. at the rodeo grounds and get back about 5:00. Dinner and Cowboy Calcutta follow and the public is invited. Have a ball!

Finding common sense in the middle

Common sense. People like to talk about finding "middle ground," but I think the object of discussions, when there are widely divergent points of view, should be to find some common sense ground that most sides can stand on.

In a recent "TED Talk" on the radio, a very smart guy delivered a sermon on the new meats—grown in labs or made from plant materials or cobbled together in some scientific way to give us the protein we need without cows. His big concerns were methane and health.

I read Michael Pollen years ago, and found his descriptions of meat packing plants and the feedlot to table process devastating. Pollen didn't have problems with cows, but with what we have done to them. The thing that sticks in my mind is corn. Cows do not easily digest the corn we now like to fatten them with; they have evolved a complex digestion system over thousands of years that makes them the perfect harvesters of grasses.

Corn—in our cows or in our gasoline—is a complex issue for a number of nutritional, political, botanical, and economic reasons, and the subject for another day. Back to cows and other grazing animals. Over millennia, grazers, humans, and a wide range of natural environments have developed complex and complementary relationships. In the far north caribou and reindeer graze on lichen, sedges, and grasses, and have provided food and clothing for the people forever. In the deserts of Asia and North Africa camels find and efficiently use sparse vegetation and water and have provided food, clothing, and transportation for the people forever.

Cows and sheep came out of the Middle East to feed and clothe Europeans, and then Americans and now people across the world. Cows and sheep graze on ground that often cannot be easily planted and harvested for food crops—and even when they graze on flat farm ground and eat hay produced on farm ground they are part of a complex relationship between soil and animal that has proved effective over time.

This week the Wallowa County McClarans are celebrating the 100th anniversary of

MAIN STREET

Rich Wandschneider



their family ranch. It has been, I think, a fine example of sensible—and thoughtful—agriculture on hard ground. The ground is the canyon country of the Snake River and its tributaries. Joe McClaran started with sheep. His son, Jack and wife Marge, converted to a cattle operation. It's remarkable today in that the fourth generation of operators is women—three sisters, the children of Scott and Vicki McClaran. The ranch is a leader in a movement—of women running ranches—that is growing in the inland West.

Adaptation is key to agricultural success. When students in a class I taught at Eastern Oregon asked Scott McClaran what kind of cows he favored, he said "our cows," meaning cows raised on the ranch, adapted to the canyons. Although they occasionally have to bring in new blood, the McClarans have not been concerned that the cows are black or brown, this breed or that. Common sense.

In a more recent conversation, Scott told me that he thinks we are finally getting it right about agriculture in the Zumwalt—after trying small homesteads, fruit trees and potatoes, we've learned to use the ups and downs of the country through the season for grazing. Kind of like the Nez Perce did.

The Indians grazed horses from about 1730 and cows from the 1840s in the canyons, picking up the best of what white settlers brought them and adapting things to their own cultures.

Which puts me in mind of more common sense. For hundreds of years, European settlers in the new world tried to make Indians white, "take the Indian out of him," they said, and "save the man." Take away language, religion, ceremony, and hair; do things our way. Today we are listening to Indians as we deal with wildfire and salmon, and applauding their dancing and drumming in the old Nez Perce lands.

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