

Think less about liberties and more about community well-being

OTHER VIEWS

Steven Locke



Growing up in a rather large family where we had a rather Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest perspective, our father used to gently admonish us with the phrase “To hell with you Mac, I’m aboard, pull up the ladder.”

As dad was trying to teach us a valuable lesson, my mind worked overtime picturing hobos trying to board a moving train, and one hobo pulling up the ladder before the rest could board. I thought that Dad had been listening to too many Woody Guthrie songs about

riding the rails.

My older brother disagreed, pointing out that Dad was a Marine during WWII, fighting his way up the island chain towards Japan. He pictured Dad and a bunch of Marines have just returned from losing half of their company on some nameless, steamy tropical island. What is left of the company is climbing up the nets over the side of a troop ship; exhausted, tired and angry. Shells are still exploding around the ship and there is the constant worry of an errant Kate or Val bomber that could make a bad day even worse. As an exhausted Marine drops over the gunwale onto the deck, he says, “The heck with everyone else, pull up the ladder.”

My brother is probably right. Dad was a Marine where cooperation and looking out of oth-

ers were essential for survival. Marines were weighted down with 80 pounds of guns, gear and ammo as they tried to climb up and down cargo nets in heaving seas and could have used an extra boost climbing in and out of those landing crafts.

Dad once told us a story of grabbing an overloaded, exhausted Marine who had lost his grip as he was crawling up a cargo net and pulled him aboard before he was crushed between the Higgins boat and the troop carrier. As a Marine he learned a valuable lesson of cooperation and looking out for others.

Collaborating and thinking of others paid off for Dad in the South Pacific during WWII and later when he moved to Wallowa County and bought a ranch. He became a schoolteacher, 4-H leader, school board mem-

ber, helped start and build the Day Camp and Ferguson Ridge ski run. He was a member of the ditch company where he ironed out differences, settled disputes and made sure everyone got their share of irrigation water. Upon retiring he spent three years in Ecuador as a Peace Corps volunteer. Similar to others like Jack McClaran, Bob Anderson and Harold Klagas, to name just a few, they were always thinking of how their individual actions affected people in their community. They were always giving, and reminding us that as a community we had to think less of our individual liberties and more about the health and well-being of the community.

So how does Martin Niemöller’s missive on collaboration and looking out for others apply to Wallowa County? It

doesn’t. The communists want to take our guns and tell us when to cut the alfalfa and when we can take our cows out to the hills. The socialists want to tax us and take our money and spend it by giving away free stuff. Wallowa County doesn’t have any trade unionists (thank goodness) and besides that, they are kind of like socialists; we don’t need them either. Not sure about the Jewish community but they have Israel to worry about and certainly don’t need to get worked up over Wallowa County.

So that just leaves us ... The hell with you Mac, I’m aboard, pull up the ladder?

Steven Locke is a retired professor of education who has worked and lived extensively in Latin America and China. He grew up and currently lives on his family ranch outside of Joseph.

Workers:

Continued from Page A1

It’s also stressful for employees to enforce the mandate with customers, some of whom refuse to comply.

“It definitely wears on (employees),” Brown said.

In addition, Brown said he recently had four employees, all of whom are fully vaccinated, test positive for COVID-19.

Although none had severe symptoms, they had to miss work for 10 days, which forced a reduction in his restaurants’ hours.

The surge in COVID cases driven by the more contagious delta variant has affected other restaurants in Baker City.

Dairy Queen, for instance, posted a sign on its window stating that the restaurant would be closed for two weeks, starting Sept. 3, due to staffing shortages resulting from COVID-19. Dairy Queen was slated to reopen, with regular hours, on Sept. 18.

Some employers have attributed the workforce shortage to expanded federal unemployment payments.

But even though those benefits ended in early September, Brown said he’s not optimistic that this will result in an influx of potential workers.

The scarcity of workers has had an obvious effect on the restaurant sector, with many businesses, in Baker City and elsewhere, reducing hours, and in many cases closing altogether on some days.

Hungry for workers

Among Eastern Oregon counties, Baker County saw the largest percentage decrease of workers employed in the leisure and hospitality industry, dropping nearly 17%, or 120 workers, between July 2019 and July 2021. Harney County saw an increase of 3%, or 10 workers during the same time period, and Umatilla County saw the largest total decrease of employment in the sector, losing 180 jobs from July 2019 to July 2021.

Across all industries in Eastern Oregon, leisure and hospitality saw the biggest decrease in employment from July 2019 to July 2021, dropping 8.2% from its 2019 levels for a total loss of 570 jobs. The second hardest hit industry was manufacturing, which saw a 6.6% decrease along the same time period for a total loss of 570 jobs as well. Compared to the rest of the state in regards to employment, however, the leisure and hospitality industries were in far less dire straits in Eastern Oregon — Oregon overall saw nearly a 20% decrease in employment within the sector; far above any other industry with regards to job losses.

Other Eastern Oregon counties didn’t fare much better. Union registered a 10.3% drop in leisure and hospitality workers since July 2019. Malheur County, which borders Idaho and remained open for much of the pandemic, saw a 9.75%



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

An acrylic painted “closed” sign reflects in the mirror at the Sumpter Junction restaurant in Baker City on Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2021. The restaurant has been closed for 18 months due to the pandemic and an inability to find workers.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Business owner Tyler Brown poses for a photo inside Sumpter Junction, one of his restaurants, on Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2021. The restaurant has been closed since March 2020 following statewide shutdown orders that shuttered businesses across the state to fight the pandemic. Sumpter Junction has yet to reopen due to a lack of workers.

decrease in the sector, while Umatilla County saw a 6.8% drop, beating out the regional average. Surprisingly, Wallowa County saw only a marginal decrease from its July 2019 numbers; it lost just 10 jobs.

Unsurprisingly, the manufacturing jobs lost aren’t affected by seasonal employment changes normally seen in the leisure and hospitality industries. Still, manufacturing in Eastern Oregon lost 200 jobs from the start of the pandemic in March 2020.

Morrow County saw an 8.4% decrease in workers in the manufacturing industry since July 2019; a drop of 160 workers. Not to be outdone, Umatilla County registered a neat 10% decrease of workers within the same sector, within the same time period, numbering 340 lost jobs. Baker and Union counties saw a 5% decrease in the sector during the same period, corresponding to 30 and 70 workers lost, respectively.

At Behlen Mfg. Co.’s plant in Baker City, where 110 employees weld and otherwise assemble gates, panels, troughs and other livestock equipment, maintaining a full workforce during the pandemic has been “challenging,” said Stacy Delong, the plant’s human resources manager.

Only 30 jobs were lost in the Baker County manu-

facturing industry from July 2019 to July 2021, representing a 5% decrease.

However, Delong said Behlen, a Nebraska company that opened its Baker City factory in 1996, has been “fairly successful recruiting new applicants the last couple of months.”

Among the company’s techniques was setting up an electronic reader board on Campbell Street, Baker City’s busiest thoroughfare, advertising a job fair at the factory on Aug. 18.

“We found that to be successful,” Delong said.

She said she hopes that the end of the federal unemployment payments will persuade more people to apply for jobs at the Baker City plant.

Behlen’s goal is to add about 40 workers, to a total of 150, by the end of 2021.

“Our approach has been to broaden community outreach through communication and to best utilize our current advertising resources and simply engaging current employees to encourage friends and family to apply,” Delong said. “Fortunately, Behlen Country offers excellent benefits and competitive wages. This does give us slight edge over other employers not able to offer such benefits. We are not there yet, there is a lot of work to do.”

Delong said demand for

the company’s products has continued to increase, “and we don’t foresee any kind of decline anytime in the future.”

Out of woodwork

Another of Baker City’s larger manufacturing employers is Marvin Wood Products. The company, which employs about 170 workers at its factory, would like to hire about 30 more employees, plant manager Sandi Fuller said in June of this year.

To entice people to apply for jobs, Marvin Wood Products earlier this year boosted its entry level wage to \$17.73 per hour, plus a 50-cent bonus for people who accept rotating shifts, and other incentives including signing bonuses of \$500 and up to \$1,500 to help people move to Baker City.

Shelly Cutler, executive director of the Baker County Chamber of Commerce, said she has recently heard “positive feedback” from some businesses that have struggled to retain their workforce, although she said she doesn’t know of any local restaurants that are fully staffed.

Cutler said she believes the county is in the “very early stages of recovery.”

She is optimistic that the cessation of federal jobless benefits, combined with higher wages and incentives

some businesses are offering, will entice people to re-enter the workforce.

Cutler also said she has been sending an increasing number of relocation packets to people who might be interested in moving to Baker County — including younger people who would need a job.

Anna Johnson, a senior economic analyst at Oregon Employment Department, wrote that difficult-to-fill positions were largely unrelated to the pandemic.

“The phrase ‘no one wants to work anymore’ was already a common reason given for why vacancies were difficult to fill,” Johnson wrote. “Now, with lack of applicants and lack of qualified candidates still being a major factor in hiring difficulties, the reason has expanded to become ‘no one wants to work any-

more... because of high unemployment insurance benefits.’”

Johnson reported that between April and June of this year, only 14% of difficult-to-fill vacancies had relatively high jobless benefits reported as the primary reason employers had trouble filling job openings.

Johnson also noted that leisure and hospitality was the top industry for the pandemic-related, difficult-to-fill vacancies. Among the hardest to fill jobs were restaurant cooks.

Reasons for the vacancies vary — among those offered up include lack of child care, high unemployment benefit pay and low wages at leisure and hospitality jobs. According to the report, the number of employers citing low wages as the reason for the vacancies grew to 15% in spring 2021.

ATTENTION VETERANS! Drive-Thru/Walk-In Flu Vaccination Clinic

October 4

8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.

or until vaccine supply is depleted

Enterprise Telehealth Clinic

401 Northeast 1st Street, Suite A, Enterprise, OR (in parking lot)

No appt. necessary | Masking required for all who present for flu shots

NOTE: We are only able to vaccinate eligible Veterans (no family members)



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Walla Walla VA Medical Center & Clinic



Choose VA

Wallowology! Hike FREE!



A Burning Need?
Restoring fire to the forests of the Blue Mountains

Indigenous peoples used fire to tend the landscape in accordance with natural cycles for millennia. As climate change intensifies, intentionally managing forests with fire can help foster resilience in forests to a warming world.

Sat, September 25th
9am - 3pm • Meet at Wallowology!

Join Wallowology Ecologist David Mildrexler on a tour of a recently burned prescribed fire area in the Wallowa Mountains. This hike will take you to see first hand the effects of prescribed fire on forests, and will allow time for discussion of burning as a forest management tool.

Pre-registration required at info@wallowology.org
Please note that portions of this hike include some side slopes and off-trail exploration.

Wallowology!
Natural History Discovery Center
508 N. Main • Joseph • wallowology.org • info@wallowology.org

inside every Wednesday

GO!

EASTERN OREGON

GoEasternOregon.com

arts events entertainment