



# Offbeat Oregon History: CG's revenge

By Finn JD John  
For The Sentinel

Anyone who's spent any time in the town of Cottage Grove, at the southernmost tip of the Willamette Valley, knows the town has a somewhat checkered relationship with the city of Eugene.

Everything is friendly and amiable between the two towns, to be sure. But it's rather like the relationship between a wealthy older sibling who's a bank president, and a younger one who works on the green chain in a sawmill. There is a core of tension between Lane County's biggest city and its third-biggest (Springfield is, of course, number 2).

And that tension has not always been as mild and understated as it is today.

The few years just after 1910 were when it was arguably at its worst, because that's the year it flared into a sort of open warfare between the two towns — a war fought at the ballot box, using a then-brand-new weapon: The Initiative and Referendum System.

Here's the story:

As the new century dawned, the little riverside town formerly known as Eugene City was growing fast. The town had gotten its start as the southernmost terminus of the riverboats that brought grain down the Willamette River to the market in Portland before the railroads were built; but by the turn of the century the riverboats were history, and the new engine of Eugene's growth was the University of Oregon.

Then as now, the U of O was something the town took great pride in. And as a driver of commercial success, it was hard to beat. Eugene soon outpaced all its rivals in size and economic power. It was also, of course, the county seat.

The problem was, from the standpoint of Lane County's third-largest town down at the southernmost tip of the county, Eugene's municipal boosterism was taking over county government. County officials were not nearly as diligent in allocating resources to fix roads and infrastructure outside the Eugene-Springfield area as they were in collecting taxes there. "Grovers," as they sometimes call themselves, were feeling the pinch of the old "taxation without representation" complaint — or, at least, they had convinced themselves that they were.

And their complaints fell upon deaf

ears ... until someone floated a new idea: Carve off South Lane County, join it to North Douglas County, and form a new county: Nesmith County, named after pioneer lawyer-politician James Nesmith.

Lane County's response to this proposal of secession was as predictable as it was ferocious. They immediately moved to organize opposition, and campaigned fiercely against it. Douglas County swells were only slightly less fierce.

"They have deliberately included a maximum of taxable property with but a minimum of expense," raged state Rep. John Buchanan, whose district covered Douglas and Jackson County.

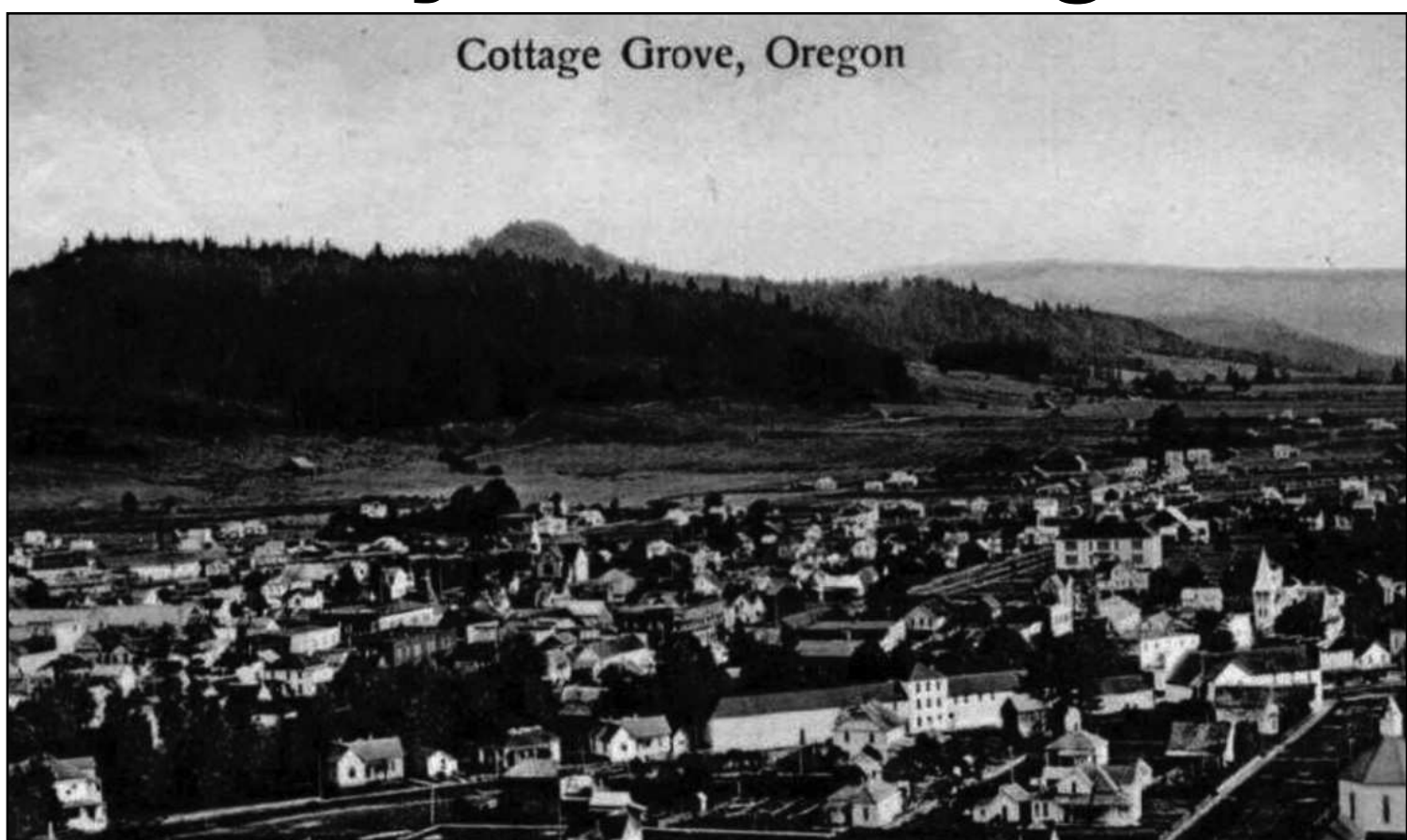
This, of course, was exactly Cottage Grove's major beef — that the South County was being treated as a revenue machine, from which taxes could be extracted far in excess of the services Lane County chose to provide there.

Advocates argued that the new county would be just a small one, less than 2,000 square miles, with an assessed property value of just \$5 million; this would leave Lane County with an assessed-property value of \$18 million and Douglas with \$27 million.

But most of that \$5 million would come from Lane County, not Douglas — 22 percent of Lane County's entire assessed valuation was at stake, as opposed to just 4.7 percent of Douglas's. And, as Rep. Buchanan inadvertently pointed out, it would alter Lane County's cash flow substantially, as South Lane County was something of a cash-cow for them.

Well, when it came time to vote on this statewide ballot measure, most residents of the state of Oregon were not convinced that Cottage Grove ought to have its own county. The measure went down to a crushing defeat, with about 68,000 "no" votes to just 23,000 "yes."

Then as now, it seemed unlikely that Eugene's savage opposition was re-



Cottage Grove, Oregon

sponsible for such a lopsided outcome. It's far more likely that the rest of Oregon, seeing no particular reason to change things, voted to leave them as they were. But Cottage Grove took the loss very hard — and blamed Eugene for it. They bided their time and waited for a chance to be revenged.

And, the very next year, it came.

The University of Oregon, Eugene's pride and joy and the main driver of its economy, was running out of money. It needed new buildings to accommodate its burgeoning population of students, and to hire more faculty members. At stake was the university's reputation, which city boosters feared would soon fall behind the competing state flagship universities in Berkeley and Seattle.

So in 1911 the state Legislature happily voted through a half-million dollar appropriation to redress all the deferred maintenance, and an ongoing appropriation to adjust the university's income from the state, and things looked like they were on track for a golden future there in Duck country ... until the still-embittered proponents of Nesmith County realized what a golden opportunity for revenge this represented.

Galvanized into action, the Grovers passed a kitty, raised a war chest and hired a Portland lawyer to gather signatures, paying 3.5 cents for each one

— one of the first uses of paid signature gatherers in an Oregon ballot-measure campaign. Their plan was to refer the university's appropriations bill to the statewide ballot, for all the voters of the state to vote on — and those voters had already demonstrated their overwhelming propensity to say "no" to expenditures that they didn't directly benefit from.

The Grovers apparently gave the attorney a blank check, for he came back with 13,175 signatures — more than double the amount they needed. And it was a good thing, too, because once Eugene figured out what was afoot, the town's movers and shakers started working all the angles.

A Marion County attorney sued to have the measure removed from the ballot, arguing that the signatures were all fake. A lower court ruled he was right; the Grovers appealed.

The Appeals court, after hearing the case and getting input from all sides as well as from Initiative and Petition System founder William U'Ren, had the signatures gone through one by one, and each one that couldn't be authenticated was discarded. It was well for the Grovers that they had gone in for overkill; nearly half the signatures went by the board, but the stack that remained was tall enough to qualify the

referral.

Onto the ballot it went. And, as everyone had figured they would, the voters of the state voted nearly three to one against giving the University of Oregon its money.

Now indeed was the fury of Eugene focused on little Cottage Grove. The editor of the Eugene City Guard, Charles Fisher, was especially ferocious, and vented his fury both on Cottage Grove and on one of the Portland attorneys hired by the Grovers, a man named Edward S.J. McAllister, who became vulnerable to attack after being caught up in the 1912 "same-sex vice scandal" centered around Portland's community of gay men.

After that, there was some talk in the Cottage Grove Sentinel about getting Nesmith County on the ballot again. But it was never done. As for the University of Oregon, it had to hobble along for another couple of years on a small emergency appropriation. The episode likely did lasting damage to the university — it occurred during a fairly critical phase of the college's growth and put it at a substantial disadvantage vis-à-vis the other West Coast states' flagship colleges.

But Cottage Grove and South Lane County had made their point. They would not be underestimated again.

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