



Offbeat Oregon History: Corvallis and cows

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

It's probably fair to say, with studied understatement, that the mid-Willamette Valley town of Corvallis is into alternative transportation.

Corvallis is one of the most bike-friendly towns in the state. There are probably more electric vehicles per capita there than any other town. Every year at Da Vinci Days locals compete to navigate human-powered "kinetic sculptures" of various and crazy description through an obstacle course. And, of course, engineering students at Oregon State University regularly work on projects such as solar-powered racing cars.

It's a municipal tradition that goes way back; Corvallis has always had a funny relationship with transportation. That may be because, its name to the contrary, it's not in the heart of the valley, but rather fetched up tight against its western wall; so as soon as the river stopped being the main inter-city arterial, the town's importance started to fade relative to other, more centrally located municipalities.

That process hadn't really gotten started, though, in 1860, when a Corvallis entrepreneur got the tradition started with his invention of a new kind of riverboat — one that he no doubt hoped would be the first of a mighty inland fleet, and powered by something far easier to come by in the valley than steam engines:

Cows.

This inventor's name, as far as I have been able to learn, has been lost in the mists of time; historian Howard Corning, in his 1947 book, just refers

to him sarcastically as a "genius." This is either a very un-clever jab or a reference to the Genius of Georgia, a horse-powered riverboat that tried and failed to do the same thing on the Savannah River in 1820 using earlier and less efficient drive technology.

The Genius of Georgia, which the "Genius of Corvallis" surely knew all about, was a massive thing, an 85-foot-long catamaran 55 feet wide, dominated by a massive 40-foot-wide capstan wheel with two dozen horses yoked to it. The horses plodded around in circles around the wheel, which drove a pair of side-mounted paddlewheels.

The Genius of Georgia successfully made at least two 200-mile round trips between Savannah and Augusta, but after the second trip it disappears from the historical record; presumably it didn't turn out to be cost-effective.

This new undertaking, though, forty years later and on the opposite side of the continent, would be different — or so its inventor surely hoped. There were a few key differences that should have made it so.

For one thing, it was powered by cows rather than horses — or, to be more precise, by oxen. Oxen were in plentiful supply in the Willamette Valley in 1860, because they were the draft animal of choice on the Oregon Trail, which was then in full swing. Oxen were not as fast as horses, but they had more endurance and more power at slow speeds; they were to horses what diesel engines are to gasoline ones. Plus, with their four stomachs, they could get their nourishment entire-

ly from hay rather than needing to be supplemented with grain.

Also, by 1860 the treadmill had been invented, and capstans — great wheels which horses (or, in this case, cows) rotated around like a merry-go-round with no riders — were obsolete.

So our anonymous inventor built a broad, flat hull; mounted a wide treadmill near the stern; and mechanically linked its output shaft to a pair of side-mounted paddlewheels. With fine and self-deprecating humor, he christened the vessel the "Hay Burner." He purchased oxen to drive it. Then, presumably with a load of grain for the Portland markets, the Genius of Corvallis embarked on the Hay Burner's maiden voyage, heading for Canemah — the little waterfront town, now a neighborhood of Oregon City, that faces the river just above the falls.

The spectacle of this strange new vessel churning along the Willamette River turned plenty of heads. The hull was low in the water, and from far away it looked like a team of oxen nonchalantly plodding down the middle of the river.

Things went well for a while. Then, near the then-thriving town of Wheatland near Salem, the cattle drove the boat onto a gravel bar — or, as Golding wisecracks, "walked ashore" — at McGoogin's Slough. Hours of hard and fruitless work followed as the crew tried unsuccessfully to pull the boat off the bar against the brisk river current.

Meanwhile, with nothing to do but eat, the oxen ramped up their "fuel consumption" considerably.

It was definitely a drawback of cow power that even while idle, the Hay Burner's "engines" had to eat.

By the time a passing steamer had come to the rescue and pulled them off the bar, the "engines" had wolfed down most of the "fuel" on board.

The rest of the trip to Oregon City was uneventful. The Hay Burner arrived, discharged its cargo, and took on a big load of hay for the homeward journey.

It was then that the boat's owner made an awful discovery: The Hay Burner was vastly underpowered for an upper-Willamette boat. The bovine mariners simply could not generate enough horsepower to drive the boat back up the river against the brisk river current.

And thus ended the maritime careers of the cattle, and Corvallis's fledgling reputation as a hotspot for innovative naval architecture. The cattle were auctioned off; the Hay Burner was pushed off the dock at Canemah and allowed to go over the falls; and the "Genius of Corvallis" and his crew took passage on a regular steamship for the long, slow, humiliating ride home.

A few animal-powered ferryboats soldiered on in Oregon waters into the early 20th century — probably the best example was Jehu Switzler's horse-powered ferry, which crossed the Columbia River at Umatilla regularly for a dozen years or so after 1896. But as far as I've been able to learn, no one else ever tried to use animal power for long-distance marine transport; and I have never found any reference to any other boat in Oregon powered by cows — ever.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Baseball game shooting

Now these are 3 words one would not expect to see in a news headline.

Though the shooting of Republican lawmakers at a baseball game practice was tragic, it should not come as a great surprise. While lawmakers expressed their sympathy and said that their "thoughts" are with the victims, no one expressed "thoughts" of sensible gun control.

Stephen Thoemmes
Cottage Grove

Opinion on Governor

People tell me that Governor Kate Brown is an environmentalist, but I don't see it. Seems like when it comes to timber and other extractive interests, she just rolls over.

While Kate touts she's "committed" to the Paris Agreement goals, she can't say "NO!" to the Pacific Connector Fracked-gas pipeline in So. Oregon, or, the Jordan Cove LNG terminal in Coos Bay!

We almost lost the Elliott State Forest because of her dithering last year. Then, new Secretary of State Richardson joined the State Land Board, almost putting the kibosh on the whole thing, with new Treasurer Tobias Read also in favor of selling! Thankfully, better heads prevailed.

Kate has shown no interest in PUSHING for a strong Cap & Reinvest bill to limit the big air polluters in Oregon. Her much ballyhooed "Coal to Clean" bill won't do much until 2030!

The toxic aerial spraying of Pesticides across our timberlands and citizens, doesn't bother her, either.

I read the papers daily. I never see anything directly from Kate to her Oregon constituents. What exactly DOES she stand for? When will Oregonians find out? Will Oregon ever begin comprehensive climate change work? Will she step up to MAKE it happen?

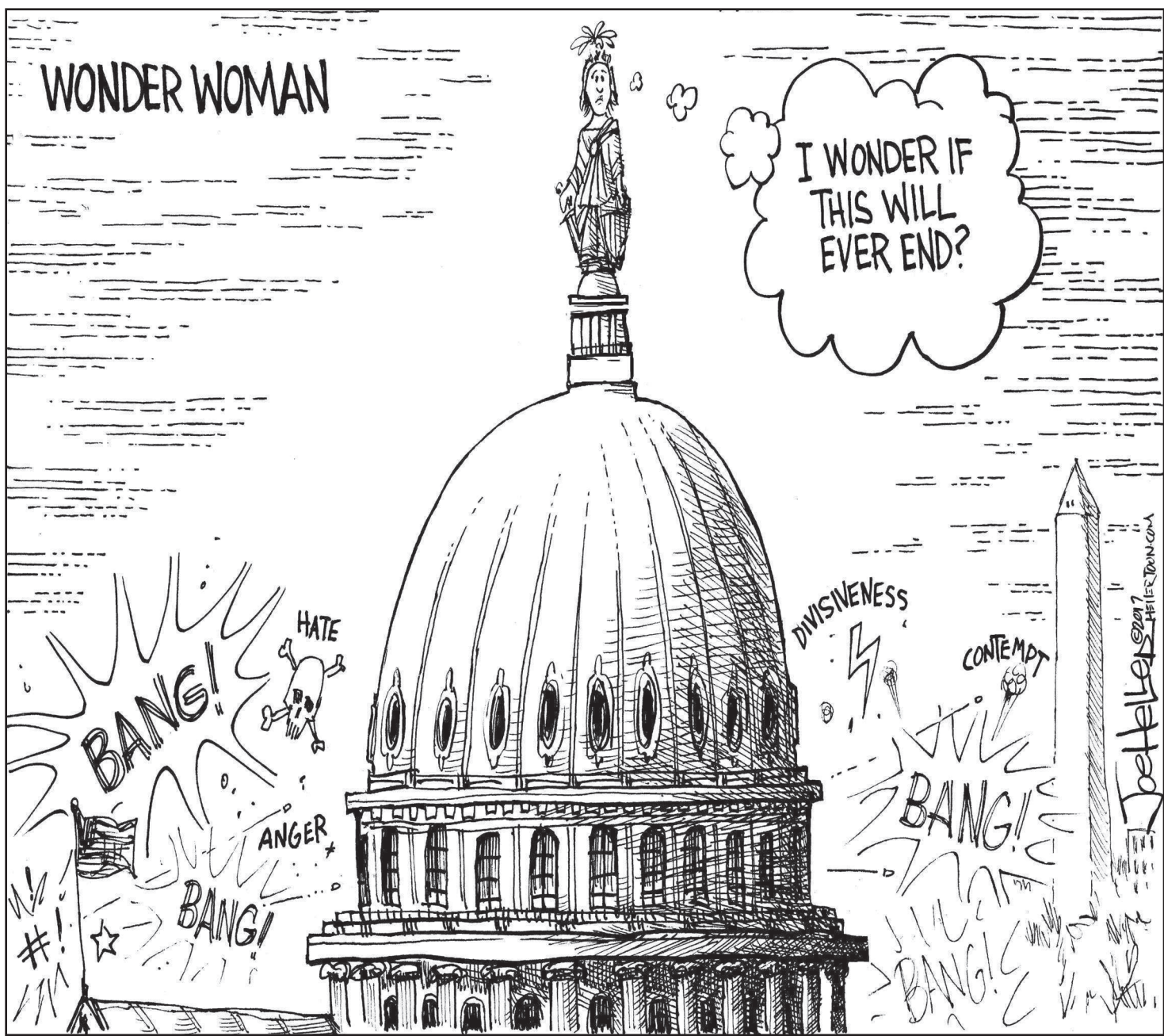
Robin Bloomgarden
Eugene, Oregon

Homeless in the community

The homeless problem is very real for many people in our community. Our country created this problem so fix it. Talking about it, having meetings is going no where. Yes, some people have done it to themselves. Many are veterans that right there is a shame on our nation. Rent is so high wages don't begin to come close to where they should be.

Substance abuse is the other problem. Some people have done this to themselves. Also when homeless people have a car or truck to sleep in, if they try to park somewhere, some people think they have to call the police. If you were homeless would you like to be told to move on?

Mike Ritter
Cottage Grove



Letters to the Editor policy

The Cottage Grove Sentinel receives many letters to the editor. In order to ensure that your letter will be printed, letters must be under 300 words and submitted by Friday at 5 p.m. Letters must be signed and must include an address, city and phone number or e-mail address for verification purposes. No anonymous letters will be printed. Letters must be of interest to local readers. Personal attacks and name calling in response to letters are uncalled for and unnecessary. If you would like to submit an opinion piece, Another View must be no longer than 600 words. To avoid transcription errors, the Sentinel would prefer editorial and news content be sent electronically via email or electronic media. Hand written submissions will be accepted, but we may need to call to verify spelling, which could delay the publishing of the submission.

Cottage Grove Sentinel

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Periodicals postage paid at Cottage Grove, Oregon.

Postmaster: Send address changes to P.O. Box 35, Cottage Grove, OR 97424.

Local Mail Service:

If you don't receive your Cottage Grove Sentinel on the Wednesday of publication, please let us know. Call 942-3325 between 8:30 a.m. and 5 p.m.

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