



OPINION

Offbeat Oregon History: Survival ninja

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

The history of Oregon sometimes resembles an old

manuscript from which every other page has been ripped out. Throughout the 1800s and much of the 1900s, most people only deemed stories worth preserving if they featured wealthy men of northern-European extraction. But there are one or two individuals who have overcome this handicap through sheer colorfulness or competence. Case in point: Marie Aioe Dorion, the Ioway woman who accompanied the Astorian Party on its ill-starred overland journey from St. Louis to Astoria in 1810. Portland Oregonian writer Joseph Rose recently compared Marie Dorion to Hugh Glass, the character played by Leonardo DiCaprio in the 2016 movie *The Revenant*. The comparison is spot-on. If anything, Glass's story isn't extreme enough to measure up. The legendary part of Marie's story starts relatively late in her life, several years after she got married in 1806 to a French-Canadian translator named Pierre Dorion. Pierre seems to have been something of a rough-and-ready hard-drinking saloon-brawling tough guy. By 1810 when the Astorian party was preparing to journey to the West Coast, she and Pierre had two children, both boys: Paul, who was 1 or 2; and Baptiste, who was 4 or 5. The Astorian party was a project of wealthy investor John Jacob Astor. His plan was to equip an expedition to follow in the footsteps of the Lewis and Clark expedition, establish a trading post at the mouth of the Columbia River, and use it to leverage a great worldwide trad-

ing empire. And he was in a hurry to do this, because certain British rivals were making similar plans via Canada. To establish his outpost, Astor equipped a sailing ship, the *Tonquin*, and sent it "around the horn" to Astoria to set things up. Meanwhile, he also outfitted a large overland expedition which would blaze a trail that others could follow, to establish trading posts along the way as part of his planned worldwide network. It was this overland expedition that Marie Dorion was, reluctantly, dragooned into. And that happened in an unusual way. Her husband, Pierre, was approached by the leader of the overland Astorian expedition, Wilson Price Hunt. Hunt offered Pierre a good salary and a \$200 cash bonus to sign up with the Astorian party. This might have represented a problem, because Pierre was already making plans to accompany another trading expedition under the direction of New Orleans native Manuel Lisa. But Pierre didn't see it that way. He saw it as a golden opportunity to cadge \$200 from this Eastern sucker and disappear in the night with Lisa's expedition, doubling his money. Home he went to tell his wife, Marie, all about it, and to have her get the two boys ready for a surreptitious nighttime departure. He stopped at a watering hole along the way to celebrate his scheme, and by the time he made it home, the \$200 had been somewhat depleted. But upon arrival, he found a buzz-harshing welcome from his wife. Marie was dead set against his scheme. Absolutely not, she told him; we will do nothing of the sort.

If Pierre had engaged the family's word of honor to work for the Astorians, and accepted \$200 to secure it, she told him, they would follow through on it. Stealing \$200 and sneaking off into the woods was not an option. Pierre, emboldened perhaps by the liquor, reacted poorly to this unexpected resistance, and apparently decided that the best way to make his point would be to rough her up. Accordingly, he hit her — whether it was

a punch or a slap is not clear.

Marie responded to it by picking up a club and laying her husband out cold. While he was unconscious, Marie gathered all her necessaries, collected the two boys, seized for safekeeping the remainder of the \$200, and slipped out the door. When Pierre woke up, in a cold and empty house, he found his options considerably reduced. So, presumably with some reluctance, he presented himself as agreed a few days later, ready to embark on the expedition. During this time Marie had been hiding out in the nearby woodlands with the two boys. When she saw that Pierre was going to honor his obligations, she strolled out of the woods and resumed her place at his side as if nothing had happened. One thing, though, would never be the same. As author Bill Gulick puts it, "There is no record that Pierre Dorion ever attempted to beat his wife again." There is, by the way, another version of this story. In it, Pierre beats Marie to punish her for reluctance to join the expedition, and she, after fleeing into the woods for a day or two, returns chastened and ready to obey him. This version may be accurate, but given what we know of Marie's temperament and character, it seems most likely that it's just a cover story that Pierre told to explain her extended absence. On the other hand, Marie may have had good reason not to want to go on this journey. Living in St. Louis as the Native American wife of a French-Canadian interpreter, she almost certainly moved in the same circles as the Shoshone wife of a French-Canadian interpreter living in St. Louis at the time — none other than Sacagawea, who had just returned from a similar expedition a few years before. And Sacagawea may have known about a thing Meriwether Lewis did on the journey back — a deed that was like a modern echo of Odysseus' taunting of the blinded cyclops in *The Odyssey*. While the Lewis and Clark party had been traveling through the lands of the Blackfeet tribe in northern Montana, a group of young Blackfeet had slipped up and tried to steal a horse and some rifles.

They were spotted, and combat was engaged, and one Blackfeet man was stabbed and another shot and gravely wounded. The brazenness of the incident put Lewis into a paroxysm of how-dare-they wrathfulness. So he hung a Jefferson Peace Medal around the corpse's neck, so that when it was found, the Blackfeet would know who had killed him. This was a terrible idea. Theft, by the moral code of the Blackfeet, was more or less a lark. The tribe viewed its members' attempt to steal horses and guns from another group the way modern Americans would view a group of local high-school kids climbing the town water tower in the night to paint it John Deere green. But the moral code of the Blackfeet treated killing much more seriously. They were a warlike tribe. Blood was answered with blood. And the extra little touch of decorating the corpse with a medal made them furious. Since that time, Blackfeet had been sworn enemies of the European-Americans from down the river. That meant the turf was burned, and the Astor party would not be able to follow in the footsteps of the Lewis and Clark expedition. They would have to find another way. Hunt, the expedition's leader, did not know this yet. But he would soon find out. And if Marie knew about it, possibly from talking to Sacagawea, she certainly would have had good reason not to want to go. Nonetheless, when the time came, she and the two boys were there with Pierre, ready to do their part. We'll talk about the journey that lay before them in next week's column.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Wheel City

Given the tree come before the ire, but an additional slogan for Cottage Grove could be "Wheel City." Residents see and hear new, used, vintage, restored and remodeled cars, race cars, and pick-ups plus vans, RVs, SUVs, humvees, busses, limosines, funeral coaches, horsedrawn coaches, rickshaws, bikes, trickes, work trucks, fire trucks, graders, street sweepers, food trucks, food carts, tractors, trailers, walkers, scooters, motorcycles, unicycles, strollers, rolling suitcases, ambulances and the power chair. Roll on Grovers.
Bob Hardy
Cottage Grove.

Editor's note: Part III of the current Offbeat Oregon History series was not readily available as of press time. It is scheduled to run in the July 26 edition.

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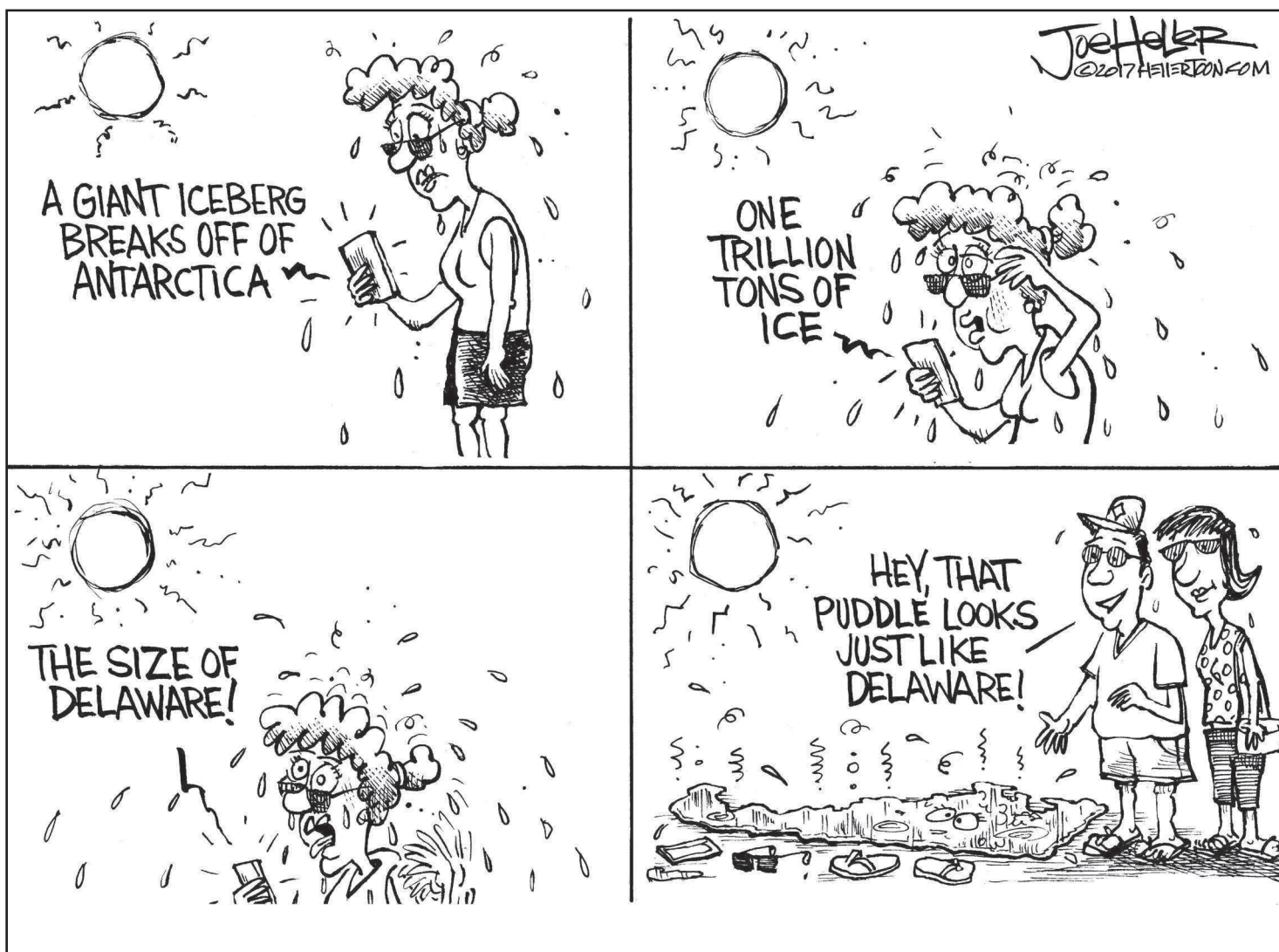
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