

GEKELERS

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Unfortunately, my branch of the Gekeler tree is weighed down with sadness.

George Oscar Gekeler died of a heart attack in 1929 while cement was being poured on his family's new home. He was 52. My mom was nine.

My grandmother lived to be 98 and, as far as I know, never looked at another man.

It must have been so difficult for the family after my grandfather died. He had been gone so long by the time I came around that no one really spoke of him, but my sisters say they heard he was a lot like his only son.

That would be my uncle Melvin, who went by the nickname "Bun" and owned cattle ranches, first near North Powder, then just outside Wallowa.

He was quiet and hard-working. We would sometimes have Thanksgiving dinner at his house and he would invariably fall asleep in his recliner afterward.

Tragedy struck in December of 1970. I have a weathered copy of the article in the Wallowa County Chieftain.

While out tending to the cattle on a wintry day, he

inexplicably drove his pickup into the path of an oncoming train at a crossing. My uncle died instantly. His only son, Barry, lingered in a coma for 30 days before succumbing.

The last two Gekeler men on George Oscar's branch of the tree were gone.

My grandmother had to be hospitalized when she heard the news.

Seven years later, my grandma lost her "baby" when my mother died of lymphoma at age 57.

It's a story of triumph over unimaginable hardship a century and a half ago and the handful of awful moments that can devastate a family over time.

After all I've learned about this pioneer family, I am struck by the multitude of lives that were created from little more than an oxen, cow, and an enormous amount of determination and effort.

So here's to George Oscar Gekeler, the grandpa I never knew.

Editor's note: Bob Baum retired last year after 43 years with The Associated Press, 23 years based in Portland and 20 as senior sports writer in Phoenix, Arizona. He and his wife Leah live in Island City with their two dogs and four cats.

PARTIES

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Speaker view makes sense when you're watching a work presentation but feels less natural in a group setting. Sometimes, more than one person is talking, or some other noise prompts the camera to switch over, like sirens outside or a dog barking. Gallery view gives you the "Brady Bunch"-style grid where you're all in the same sized window. To change which view you're seeing, go to the top right of the screen and click "Gallery View."

Muting yourself still applies. In a get-together with a couple of other friends, sure, leave yourself unmuted. But when five or more people are joining the video call, it's polite to mute yourself when you aren't speaking. Laptop and phone microphones pick up sound differently than our ears do. What sounds to you like the normal hustle and bustle of making dinner in the background while you listen to your friends talk might be a magnified banging and clashing to them.

To look your best, put your laptop on a stack of books and check your background before you go live so the camera is at about eye level while you're sitting down. Otherwise, you risk incurring the dreaded down-facing double chin.

Be the host with the most

If you're hosting the meeting with Zoom, you'll need to upgrade to a Pro account or have to restart the meeting every 40 minutes when the free version runs out. Google Hangouts and Skype don't set time limits. Try to start your gatherings on time so people aren't left hanging on the hold screen.

Also, if you're setting it up, plan some games that take advantage of the technology instead of trying to work around it. For more on that, keep reading.

OK, we're on the call. Now what?

Social events via video conference require a bit more planning and finesse than a casual hang.

Plan things to do other things than just talking.

In a normal party setting, you'd split off and have side conversations among a few people and migrate around to different groups. Here, you have to keep a conversation going among everyone at once. That's challenging. If you're hosting, it might be more helpful to set an agenda so people know what to expect: "We'll chat from 6 to 6:30ish, then I was thinking we could (play some games / do a scavenger hunt / watch the new season of "Nailed It!" on Netflix / work on our separate crafting projects simultaneously.)"

We have a ton of ideas for that in our ultimate online hangout guide. A few to get your started: Jackbox games, virtual card and board games on Playingcards.io, or tabletop RPGs — either standbys like Dungeons and Dragons, or ones designed specifically to be played virtually. Party classics like Charades, Pictionary and Bingo are easily transferable to a video call.

Another idea: Be apart, together

Pull out your Nintendo Switches and play Animal Crossing (the ultimate game for this moment in history) at the same time. Do crafts or a DIY project. You don't have to be actively engaging with one another the entire time to feel together. Jennifer Peepas, who writes the advice blog Captain Awkward, called it "parallel socializing." She and her friends have logged onto Zoom to knit together.

Scavenger hunts can take advantage of your separate locations and be a fun opportunity to move around a bit. The host names an object and everyone else has a certain amount of time (say, 30 seconds) to find it in their own house. A coffee mug with writing on it. A twist tie. A sock in a color other than white. A roll of toilet paper. (Credit where credit is due: I first heard of this idea on Twitter and vowed to steal it. Mission accomplished.)

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