

EDITORIAL

Reckless
burning

On the worst day imaginable to be reckless with fire, at least two people were.

Both incidents happened Wednesday. Fortunately, both ended without mishap.

Around noon the Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center at Union County Airport near La Grande received a report from a citizen about an abandoned campfire.

The place was what the Forest Service calls a “dispersed campsite,” of which there are several along Road 77 in the Eagle Creek canyon north of Richland. The caller had found both trash and a campfire that hadn’t been doused, said Peter Fargo, public affairs officer for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. The good Samaritans extinguished the fire. The Dispatch Center sent firefighters to make sure all was well.

Wednesday evening a very similar situation played out, this one in the Eagle Cap Wilderness about 6 miles south of Wallowa Lake.

Whoever started the Eagle Creek fire was reckless in two ways. Campfires have been banned in dispersed campsites since mid-August. Worse still, almost any kid who recognizes Smokey Bear knows you never leave an active campfire.

(The Eagle Cap Wilderness fire was legal. However, starting today campfires are banned across the Wallowa-Whitman, including in the Wilderness.)

These two acts of indiscretion would have been troubling on an ordinary day. But they didn’t happen on an ordinary day. They happened on the day when the most destructive wildfires in Oregon history were ravaging much of the state west of the Cascades.

Although the fire danger is comparatively lower in our area, it is still high and, in places, extreme. Moreover, with fires devastating populated areas in Oregon, Washington and California, firefighting resources are limited. If a blaze starts here, local crews probably won’t be able to summon help if it’s needed.

Northeastern Oregon has fared far better than most regions this summer. And we’re fortunate that lightning, which starts a majority of the blazes here most years, is not in the immediate forecast. But warmer temperatures, possibly nearing record highs this weekend, are predicted. The fire season is not over.

With summer weather continuing, lots of people will be visiting the forests again, as they did during the Labor Day weekend. If we’re all diligent we will get through safely, albeit with the reminder, from the drifting smoke of distant fires smudging our skies, the danger that continues to lurk.

—Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Your views

Democrats well-represented in slavery, segregation

Of the 10 U.S. presidents listed by Gary Dielman in his opinion piece “The White House and slavery” (Baker City Herald, Sept. 8) three were members of the Democrat Party. They were Andrew Jackson (seventh president), Martin van Buren (eighth president), and James K. Polk (11th president). All other presidents listed were of political parties which no longer exist. Please note that none of the 10 listed were members of the Republican party. Also, it should be noted that the great emancipator of the slaves was Abraham Lincoln, a Republican party member.

Other noteworthy Democrats in regards to slavery and civil rights were:

1. Jefferson Davis, Democrat, and president of the Confederacy. A slave owner and slavery advocate.
2. Nathan Bedford Forrest, Democrat and Civil War cavalry general was the first grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.
3. Woodrow Wilson, Democrat and 28th president of the United States, imposed segregation on the federal civil service system
4. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Democrat and 32nd president of the United

States placed 120,000 United States citizens in internment camps during World War II based only on their Japanese heritage.

5. Theophilus “Bull” Connor, Democrat and commissioner of public safety in Birmingham, Alabama, in the 1960s and is known for the notorious use of attack dogs and fire hoses on Black civil rights marchers.

6. Orval Faubus, Democrat and governor of Arkansas refused to comply with the landmark decision “Brown versus Board of Education” which decreed segregation of public schools unconstitutional. He used the National Guard to prevent Black students from attending Little Rock Central High School.

7. Robert Byrd, Democrat and U.S. senator for 51 years ending in 2010. He was an exalted cyclops of the Ku Klux Klan and helped the KKK’s return to West Virginia.

So, since Dielman points to centuries old history and slavery it is obvious what is the common denominator.

Neal Jacobson
Baker City

Let’s be inclusive in our blessings of people

Black Lives Matter is a phrase that

rubs some folks the wrong way. The response is often All Lives Matter, and locally, an All Lives Matter billboard.

Black Lives Matter attempts to raise awareness of a long history of killing and devaluing the lives of Blacks, from slavery to lynching to you-can’t-vote to terrible schools to don’t-use-white-drinking-fountains to don’t-touch-a-white to redlining real estate to job discrimination to biased imprisonment to immoral harassment and killing by police.

Yet Black Lives Matter still bugs some people who say we shouldn’t single out Blacks. What about White Lives? BLM is just not right! A phrase so exclusive of most people is plain wrong!

For those who feel this way, I recommend you never say God Bless America again — it obviously singles out a certain people. What about Canada? What about Norway? What about Botswana? Why exclude most of the good, God-fearing people throughout the world? That’s just not right! A phrase so exclusive of most people is plain wrong!

If you wish to request a blessing from God, I recommend Tiny Tim — “God bless us, every one.”

Charles Jones
La Grande

Letters to the editor

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the accuracy

of all statements in letters to the editor.

- Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.
- The writer must sign the letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do not include this information cannot be published.

• Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons

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Waking up to a world transformed by fire

I’ve written dozens of stories over the years about wildfires but until one moment, just before dawn on a recent morning, the topic seemed to me professional rather than personal.

Then I rolled out of bed on Tuesday, Sept. 8.

(Almost literally; I am no longer limber enough to exit a bed with anything resembling grace. The daily maneuver would be more correctly described as a barely controlled fall.)

I checked my cellphone.

After perusing the weather forecast and my email I pulled up Facebook (which ought to give you an idea of where social media ranks among my priorities).

The first thing I saw was a post from Alison DeRenzo, the younger of my two sisters.

The post was accompanied by a horrific photograph showing the entire sky glowing a dull red-orange, like something you might see inside a foundry were you so reckless as to thrust your head inside.

Alison’s husband, Jonathan, had taken the photograph.



JAYSON JACOBY

Still a trifle groggy, a condition that usually lingers at least until I’ve gotten through half of my first mug of coffee, I couldn’t make sense of this. I had no reason to believe my brother-in-law would be anywhere near what was obviously a major wildfire.

But as I swiped my finger down the screen and read further, I realized that Jonathan had taken the picture while standing in the front yard of his home in Mill City.

This deepened my sense of confusion and unease.

Mill City, a town of about 1,900 in the North Santiam River canyon 30 miles east of Salem, is also where my parents live.

Something awful had happened while I slept.

The rest of that day was the sort of experience people often describe later as having passed in a “blur.”

It is an apt metaphor.

The word blur conveys the way that the onslaught of information can leave you befuddled, as though you had just ridden a particularly contorted rollercoaster, or stepped from a vessel that has plied rough seas.

These days, of course, the data generally arrive in the form of texts and Facebook posts rather than by phone.

But having grown up when phones were still tethered by a springy coil of vinyl-coated cable, my first inclination was to call rather than text.

My dad answered his cell and said he and my mom were sitting in their car in a parking lot in Stayton.

That’s the town, between Mill City and Salem, where I lived until I was 18 and went off to college.

They told me they had fled late the previous night.

They feared for their home, which stands on the south bank of the North Santiam River.

The outlook was even more dire for Alison and Jonathan’s house. It

lacks the fireproof barrier of a major river on one side. And when Jonathan, who works for Mill City’s public works department, had evacuated early that morning, homes on the next block were engulfed.

I went to work, where I struggled to focus on the screen in front of me and the words I was typing or reading.

I had heretofore understood, in the dim and unimportant way that a person understands the world’s real but rare dangers, that Mill City, lying in a relatively narrow canyon with Douglas-fir forests in places crowding the highway that parallels the river, was potentially at risk from wildfire.

But the threat seemed to me remote.

The forests of the Cascade foothills are quite different, fire wise, from much of the Blue Mountains. The Cascade forests don’t burn often. And the conflagrations that destroyed hundreds of homes this week, from near Portland to the California border, are without precedent in Oregon.

My parents’ home survived. So did my sister’s.

But a century-old home several

miles east of Mill City, the home where my other sister, Julie Pennick, and her family lived for several years, and where her husband, Bill, died suddenly at age 41 in 2015, did not.

Many landmarks from my childhood were also destroyed. A cafe in Detroit where I once had breakfast with my grandpa, who died when I was 9. A meat market in Mehama that packaged the hamburger I still remember, stacked in rows of white butcher-papered chunks in the freezer in our garage. Homes and businesses I have driven past dozens, no hundreds, of times.

I have seen firsthand how flames can transform familiar forests, have hiked among the black skeletons.

But I have not had this experience when the remnants aren’t charred trees but the concrete foundations of homes, the ashy detritus of so many dreams.

I hope to make the drive west this fall to see. It is a prospect that both fascinates and repels.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.