

## EDITORIAL

# Brighter outlook

Baker County seems to be beating the COVID-19 pandemic.

And unlike previous periods this year when the number of infections dropped substantially, there's reason to believe this downturn will be longer lasting.

With 35.5% of the county's residents vaccinated (30.9% fully, 4.6% partially), and at least 6% having protective antibodies from a previous COVID-19 infection, the pool of vulnerable residents is much smaller than it was this winter.

The county has made significant progress during May at controlling the virus.

From May 1-20, the daily average of new cases was 2. That's less the half April's daily average of 5.4 cases. If the current pace continues through the end of the month, May will have the lowest daily average since October 2020.

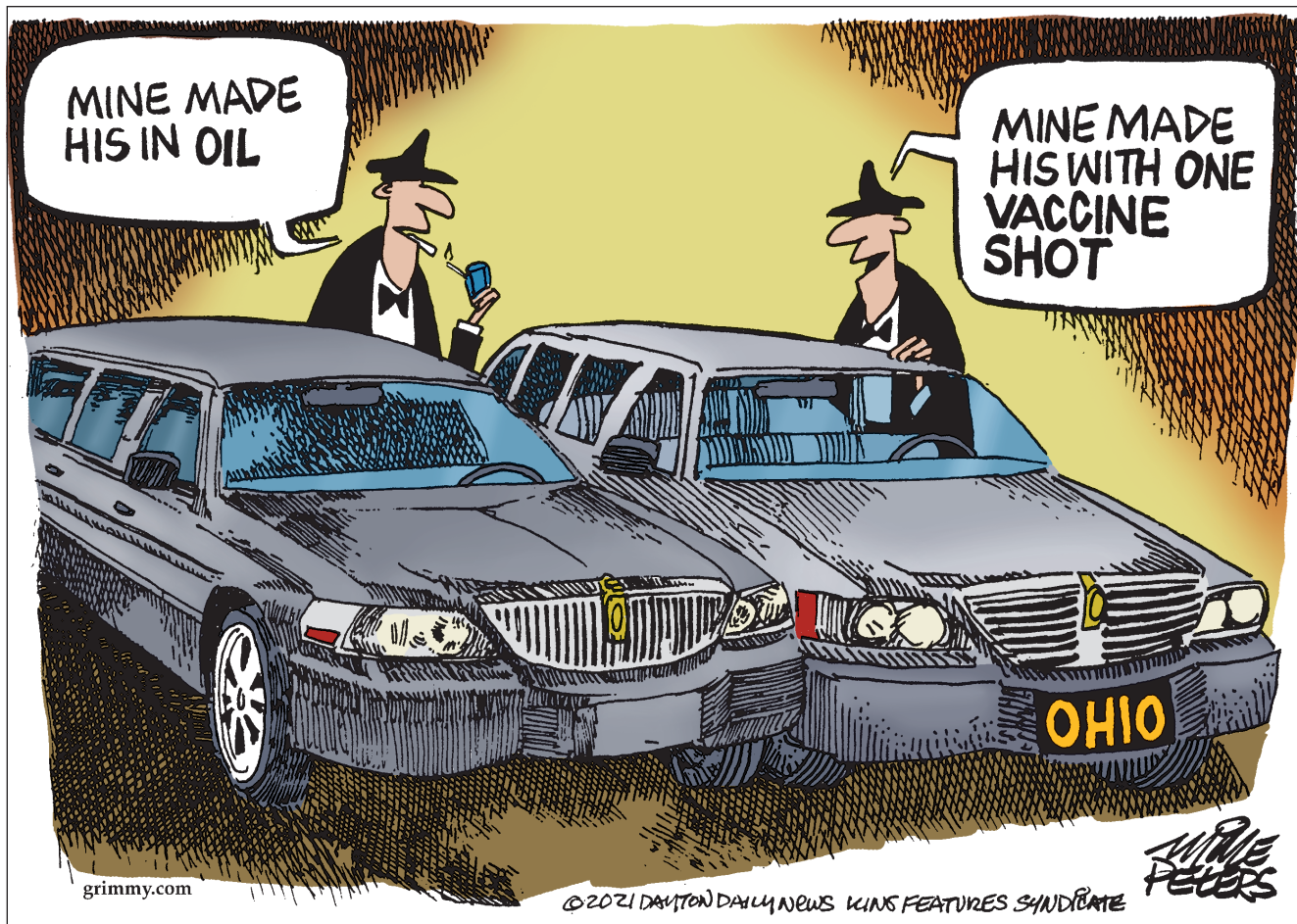
The situation has been even more promising since the first week in May. From May 8-20 the county's daily average was 1.15 new cases. That period includes five days with zero cases, and six days with only one new case.

Another positive trend is demographic.

For the first 20 days of May, the county didn't record a single COVID-19 infection in a resident 70 or older — the age group that's vastly more at risk of becoming severely ill or dying. Statewide, 75% of the deaths attributed to the virus were people 70 or older.

For the first half of May the largest share of cases — 29.6% — was in county residents 9 and younger. Seventy percent of the county's cases during that period were people younger than 40. It's hardly surprising that that age group has a much lower vaccination rate — about 14% — than among people 70 and older, of whom about 64% are vaccinated. Most of those younger residents only recently were eligible to be vaccinated, of course, and those younger than 12 still aren't. But the statistics tell a compelling story about the potential benefits of vaccination.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



## OTHER VIEWS

## Don't force fact checkers to register

**Editorial from The Detroit News:**

A group of Michigan Republican lawmakers is floating the idea of registering "fact checkers" with the state. The bill they've introduced flies in the face of the First Amendment, and they should ditch this dangerous and dumb idea.

The legislation, spearheaded by state Rep. Matt Maddock, R-Milford, isn't likely to pass, but it's troubling that any elected official thinks it's acceptable for the government to interfere with the workings of a free press — one of the most treasured rights we have as Americans, and one that's protected by the U.S. Constitution.

Maddock has been a leading voice among state Republicans who questioned the results of the 2020 election. Maddock's wife, Meshawn Maddock, is co-chair of the Michigan Republican Party.

The bill, the "Fact Checker Registration Act," defines a fact checker as someone who publishes in print or online in Michigan, is paid by a fact-checking organization and is a member of the International Fact Check Network. The network is an effort of

the Poynter Institute, which helps train journalists and fact checkers in best practices.

Maddock envisions fact checkers having to file proof of a \$1 million fidelity bond with the Secretary of State. That office would have to develop a process for registration.

Someone who believes they've been negatively affected by a fact checker could bring civil action in any district court. Fact checkers in violation of state registry requirements could be fined \$1,000 a day.

"Social media companies deplatform people, politicians, and businesses on the basis of 'fact checkers' who relish their roles punishing those whom they deem 'false,'" Maddock wrote on social media. "... My legislation will put fact checkers on notice: Don't be wrong, don't be sloppy, and you better be right."

Such rhetoric could help garner enthusiasm among Maddock's Trump-loving base, but it's not the job of the government to regulate what any journalist does in such sweeping fashion. Libel laws already exist to protect against the intentional spread of false information.

"Maddock's bill is an unconstitutional trifecta," said Len Niehoff, professor of First Amendment law at the University of Michigan Law School, in an email. "First, the requirement that certain fact checkers register with the state and post a \$1 million bond is a prior restraint on speech that violates the First Amendment. Second, the bill is so unclear about when and to whom it applies that it violates the due process clause. And, finally, by singling out only certain fact checkers who the sponsor does not like, the bill also probably violates the equal protection clause."

These issues come up occasionally. In 2013, a bipartisan group of legislators floated the idea of defining who constituted a reporter as part of a well-meaning bill to ward off ambulance-chasing lawyers following an accident. That language rightly got left out of the law, as it was too close to the concept of licensing journalists.

Maddock's bill clearly seeks to intimidate the work of journalists in their pursuit of the truth by forcing fact checkers to register with the state. It's an idea that needs to be quashed for good.

# Mystery podcasts help the miles pass peacefully

My kids, who normally act as though a five-minute car ride is a more awful punishment than banishment to a Siberian gulag, recently pleaded with me, as I pulled into our driveway after a 100-mile trip, to keep driving.

I declined.

But I did briefly consider extending our trip.

I never imagined that a phrase so dreaded by parents — "Are we there yet?" — might have the opposite of its usual connotation.

This shocking development was prompted by Olivia and Max's fascination with a mysterious episode that happened in Northern California long before they were born.

(Indeed, the incident, which occurred in 1978, preceded their mother's birth by about a year.)

I am to blame.

More specifically, my preference for listening to podcasts when I'm on my daily walk is responsible.

In my generally aimless meanderings through the myriad offerings on iTunes — there are multiple podcasts for every topic you can think of, and for a whole lot you probably can't — I came across the saga of the Yuba City 5.

The story involves five men from Yuba City, California, which is between Sacramento and Chico, who went missing after watching a college basketball game in Chico the evening of Feb. 24, 1978.

The men ranged in age from 24 to 32, and each had either mild developmental disabilities or psychiatric issues. They all lived independently,



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however, and two were licensed to drive.

They failed to return from the basketball game, even though the drive between Yuba City and Chico was a simple and direct highway trip.

Several days later their car was found, abandoned, on a road in the snowy Sierra Nevada mountains about 70 miles from Chico and far off the route from there to Yuba City. The car wasn't stuck. The tires were inflated. Although the keys were gone, police hot-wired the car and it started immediately and had no mechanical problems. There was plenty of gas in the tank to get them back to the highway.

The quartet's whereabouts remained unknown until early June 1978, more than three months later.

A group of motorcyclists found the body of one of the men in a Forest Service trailer about 19 miles from where the car was abandoned. A medical examiner estimated the man had lived for at least several weeks after the disappearance, based on the amount of weight he had lost, and the length of his beard.

A subsequent search turned up the bones of two of the other men near a road about 11 miles from where the car was left, and eight miles from the trailer. The remains of a fourth man were found in yet

another location, this one about two miles from the trailer.

The fifth man has never been found.

It's a tantalizing tale.

I suggested, with no small amount of trepidation, that we listen to a podcast about the Yuba City 5 during a road trip.

I wasn't at all convinced that either Max, who's 10, or Olivia, who's almost 14, or my wife, Lisa, would find the story as compelling, and perplexing, as I did.

I needn't have worried.

We all listened to the podcast with rapt attention.

It proved so popular, in fact, that I downloaded multiple episodes, from several different podcasts, all involving other incidents when someone went missing.

One of these was to me at least as interesting as the Yuba City 5 case, and with two bonus attributes — it happened not far from here, and the resolution was happy rather than tragic.

I find it passing strange that the bizarre case of Keith Parkins isn't better known in Oregon.

Here's what happened:

On April 10, 1952, Keith, then two years old, was visiting his grandparents' cattle ranch near Ritter, along the Middle Fork of the John Day River about 70 air miles east of Baker City.

Keith and his two older brothers had gone to a barn to see a newborn calf. The older boys returned to the house around noon, but Keith didn't. When the boys' mother searched

the barn and surrounding area she couldn't find her youngest son.

Several dozen people volunteered to search for Keith. Several hours later, and about three miles from the barn, searchers found footprints, their size consistent with a toddler wearing the shoes Keith had on.

The search continued, and about 7 a.m. the next day — approximately 19 hours after Keith was last seen — a search party that included Keith's father, Allen, found the boy lying face down in a patch of snow.

Except Keith was alive.

Hypothermic, not surprisingly, but very much alive.

A private plane flew Keith to the hospital in Pendleton, where he fully recovered.

The place where Keith was found was about eight miles, measured in a straight line, from the barn. But Keith didn't travel in a straight line, as his footprints were found well to one side of that hypothetical route. Searchers estimated that he covered about 12 miles during the 19 hours he was missing.

Keith, not surprisingly, remembers nothing of that 19-hour period.

According to contemporary accounts, when an adult asked him how he came to have scratches on his face, Keith replied that a cat had scratched him.

On the podcast we listened to one of the hosts speculated that a cougar might have dragged Keith. This theory could potentially explain the scratches, Keith's response about a cat, and the considerable distance between the barn

and where the boy he was found.

I know little of cougars. But nothing I've read about these predators suggests that one would carry an item — and one that could only be prey — for any significant distance and leave only some facial scratches.

I don't doubt that even a toddler could cover 12 miles in 19 hours.

(I chased my grandson, Caden, around recently, and although he won't turn 2 until July 31, I'm pretty sure he covered almost that distance in 45 minutes.)

It's plumb strange, to be sure.

But it's not implausible.

Even my tentative venture into the labyrinthine world of podcasts revealed immense quantities of tales similar to those of the Yuba City 5 and Keith Parkins.

Some podcast hosts are prone to attributing such events to supernatural forces, a direction that holds little interest for me. The world is a strange place, to be sure, but I'm confident that even abnormal events can be attributed to means that rest solidly in the realm of the empirical.

But I'm no critic of podcasts.

I'm just grateful they exist. I appreciate that their creators — the vast majority of whom, so far as I can tell, don't get paid for their time — make it possible for me to avoid basement mysteries.

I might end up spending more for gas, sure.

But I'll be saving on ibuprofen.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.