

Bennett

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That's Pondosa, just across the Union County border along Highway 203, where he has lived since 1983.

Bennett's hope, on this one-hour flight, was to capture a photo of Pondosa to compare to a 1950s aerial image on display in the Pondosa Store, where he lives.

The difference is stark.

Once home to 500 residents, many of whom worked at the sawmill, Pondosa changed dramatically in 1959 when the mill closed and houses were moved.

But the store, built in 1926, when Bennett was three, remains. It has 15 bedrooms, which were rented to single men during the mill's operation.

Bennett's wife Jean, who passed away in 2015, inherited the townsite from her brother, Lester Gaddy, who died in 1982.

Open for business

Although the town has since disappeared, the Pondosa Store is still open for travelers who need a refreshing drink or snack on the drive between Baker City and Union, a route that also accesses several popular Forest Service roads.

The store is open daily from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

And it's busy, Brock said.

"We're really busy — we got a liquor license so everyone's stopping," she said.

Campsites cater to weary travelers, and Brock said they are planning to add a yurt, as well.

She's listed the camping on hipcamp.com. Recently, people from the Netherlands stayed in Pondosa for a week.

"They were just camping Oregon," Brock said.

A delayed birthday

Bennett had to wait an extra week to celebrate his birthday thanks to the pesky virus that has disrupted life for more than two years.

His flight was Saturday, July 2. On Sunday, July 3, visitors were invited to stop at the Pondosa Store to wish him a happy birthday and have a piece of cake decorated to honor his service in the U.S. Marine Corps during World War II.

Brock posted news of her dad's birthday on the store's Facebook page, and she hoped he would receive 99 birthday cards.

He'd opened about 25 by July 2, and those brightened his days, Brock said.

"He got cards from all over," she said. "He thought that was neat, getting cards from strangers."

Anyone who would like to mail a card can send it to Bob Bennett, 50281 Highway 203, Baker City, OR 97814.

For updates on the store, check the Facebook page: Pondosa, Oregon: the geographic center of the United States.

Pilgrimage

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just start knocking on doors.

"Most people that know what you're doing are happy to share their yard for a night," Martin said. "If you look, generally there's a place where you can stay."

Martin said one of the "high points" of his pilgrimage is meeting new people, "trading stories with them, just talking to them, hopefully inspiring a little more interest in the trail."

A trail (re)blazer

Martin's journey started on April 16 in Independence, Missouri, a common jumping-off point for west-bound immigrants. Since then he's passed through Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming and Idaho.

It's a long walk, but Martin said that's not the reason so few people complete — or even attempt — the hike today.

Other long-distance hikes in the West are longer, like the Pacific Crest Trail or the Continental Divide Trail, but are frequented by hundreds of hikers a year.

Those routes are designated for hikers and horseback riders, and unlike the Oregon Trail, they haven't been supplanted by highways.

Over 3,000 people per year attempt an Appalachian Trail "thru hike" — completing the entire trail in one year — which Martin completed previously and is about the same length as the Oregon Trail.

Last year, 451 people summited Mount Everest in the Himalayas. But Martin said he knows of fewer than 10 who have walked the entire Oregon Trail since modern roads were constructed.

And its lack of foot traffic isn't because of difficult terrain, either, Martin said. He said some sections with hills are more difficult than others, but for the most part, he's just walking. "Physically it's very non demanding," Martin said.

According to Martin and against popular belief, most people on the Oregon Trail walked beside their wagons



Don "Dundee" Martin of Prineville with his wagon along Pocatontas Road near Baker City on July 6, 2022.



Don "Dundee" Martin uses a GPS unit to track his progress along the Oregon Trail and allow people to follow him via social media.

instead of riding in them. Martin said early settlers picked the easiest route on purpose — that's how "toddlers, elderly and women and babes in arms" were able to complete the trail, he said.

The reason the hike isn't more popular today, Martin said, is because people have forgotten about it.

"After the trail went out of use, people almost immediately forgot about it," Martin said. "It did not occur to people that this would be a really significant event that ought to be preserved in some way."

"Arguably, the trail should be 2,000 miles of hallowed ground," he said.

And he means that literally — tens of thousands of people died and are buried along the trail, many in unmarked graves.

Preserving the past

Martin not only wants to preserve the historical and cultural aspects of the trail, but the physical trail itself.

Today, the trail isn't so much a footpath as an "imaginary line," Martin said, much of it covered in

interstates and others highways, where walking is "not an idyllic experience."

And many other parts of the trail run through private land.

"It's not well preserved everywhere," Martin said. "The few parts that are on public land, because it's never traveled, are all back to sagebrush. It's not something that you're going to be able to readily travel on foot."

Picking a specific historical route is difficult, Martin said, because the trail was a "living, breathing thing." Pioneers changed the route frequently based on weather conditions or environmental factors for that year.

That's why Martin plans to write an Oregon Trail guide to help and inspire future hikers after he finishes the trail himself.

With Martin's GPS mapping a current route to the coast, he's a pioneer of the modern Oregon Trail — re-blazing a trail with hopes others will follow.

Expansion

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"It's been a long time coming," Hayes said. "We are excited. We'll be more excited when we're not under construction."

The project had been in the planning stages even before Hayes started as county manager almost four years ago.

Fundraising has been happening during that time, he said.

The impetus for the expansion is overcrowding in the Senior Center's main reception area, which also accommodates staff who don't have their own offices.

The building now has three offices. Hayes said the expansion will remodel one office into a hallway and storage area leading to the newly constructed offices.

Community Connection offers a variety of services to seniors, and conversations are confidential, Hayes said.

When workers do an assessment now, in the reception area, it can be difficult with other people talking and machines making noises around them.

"It's going to be nice to be able to get some people some private offices to increase confidentiality as well as privacy," Hayes said.

Construction began in mid May, beginning with earth work, moving irrigation lines, and more before workers started building.

Hayes said the project is projected to be completed by the end of October.

"Sid Johnson Construction Company is the contractor and they're doing a really good job," he said. "They do good work and have a good reputation."

The construction is not affecting lunches at the Senior Center, Meals on Wheels, bingo nights and other services and programs.

"It's all in the office, which is behind closed doors," Hayes said.

In addition to contributions of \$125,000 from Community Connection of Northeast Oregon, and \$25,000 from the local group, Baker County Senior Citizens Inc., the project has received grants from the Leo Adler Community Fund (\$25,000, and a pending grant for almost \$30,000), D.E. and Jane Clark Foundation (\$10,000), Oregon Community Foundation (\$10,000), and the Autzen Foundation (\$5,000).

Ambulance

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But on Thursday, July 7, Baker City Manager Jonathan Cannon updated a memorandum he had originally written on July 1.

The revised memo states, in part, that "Metro West indicated in a phone conversation on 7/6/2022 they will honor FireMed memberships until September 30, 2022. This means if you ride in a Metro West or Baker City ambulance your FireMed membership will be valid. If you receive a bill from Metro West and are a FireMed member then you should call Metro West at (541) 266-4300."

That news came as a relief to John Heriza of Baker City.

Heriza, who's 90, said he and his wife, Liz, have been FireMed members for many years.

They never needed to use their membership until this spring, when Liz, who's also 90, was transported by ambulance three times, John said.

Although the city fire department responded to two of those calls (the third response was by AMR, another private company that the county hired temporarily in late May, prior to choosing Metro West), John Heriza said he has been concerned that if he or his wife needs an ambulance again, and Metro West responds, they might not be covered through FireMed.

He said he's pleased to learn that Metro West will honor FireMed memberships.

Heriza said he's still waiting, though, to get the details about Metro West's program, called LifeGuard, that's similar to FireMed.

According to Cannon's up-

dated memo, "Metro West will offer LifeGuard Memberships which are very similar to FireMed Memberships. More details will be released as they become available on when and how FireMed customers can transition to LifeGuard."

Metro West will replace the city fire department as the ambulance provider for the Baker Ambulance Service Area, which includes Baker City and about two-thirds of the rest of Baker County.

Metro West will also be responsible for the Huntington Ambulance Service Area in the southeast part of the county.

The situation stems from the Baker City Council's decision on March 22, 2022, to notify the county that the city intended to cease ambulance service Sept. 30, 2022.

Cannon told councilors that he doesn't believe the city can afford to continue to operating ambulances because the city collects only about half of what it bills for ambulance runs.

Under Oregon law, Baker County, not the city, is responsible for ensuring ambulance service.

In response to the city council's notice, county commissioners sent out a request for proposals for ambulance providers. The county received two proposals, and on June 8 commissioners chose Metro West, in part because the company, unlike the other applicant, is not asking the county for any financial subsidy during the five-year contract.

The city council initially voted to have Cannon prepare a proposal as well, but councilors later reversed that decision.

Mitchel Trent Thomas

April 17, 2022

Mitch Thomas, 47, of Baker City, passed away Friday, April 17, 2022, at his home in Baker City. A celebration to honor his life will be held on Friday, July 22, at 6 p.m. at the Junior Show/Pioneer Posse Grounds in Milton-Freewater, Oregon.

Mitch was born in Walla Walla, WA, to Monte and Dawn (Kayser) Thomas. He was raised on the family ranch in Milton-Freewater, with his older brother, Terrill. He attended school in Milton-Freewater and graduated from McLaughlin Union High School in 1994. Following high school, he attended Walla Walla Community College and then Washington State University. After earning his undergraduate degree in Animal Science, he went to work for the Forest Service in Prairie City, Oregon and Fallon, Nevada. In 2002, he earned his master's degree in Rangeland Science from the University of Idaho.

Due to the efforts of his brother, Terrill, and sister-in-law, Heidi, he met his future wife, Katy Coddington, at the Pendleton Round-Up in 1999. Katy and Mitch hit it off right away and were married in March of 2003.

Their daughter, Neah Lane Thomas, arrived in September of 2004. During this time Mitch worked for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) as a Range Management Specialist, in Vale, Oregon. Between 2008 and 2009 the family moved to the Baker Field Office, in Baker City, which allowed them to be closer to family and the ranch. Their son, Payson Reed Thomas, was born in February 2012.

Mitch loved his family more than anything and he loved to help his dad and brother on the ranch. When he wasn't working for the BLM, he was working for them. He also loved to travel and explore the world.

His curiosity for seeing new places and meeting new people was insatiable. Neah and Payson were named for places he enjoyed along the way.

Mitch was involved in many organizations over the years including 4-H, FFA, Cayuse Junior Rodeo Association, NHSRA, PRCA, Boy Scouts of America, the Cattleman's Association and the Society for Rangeland Management. He gave his time to these organizations when he could. In his younger days he enjoyed competing in rodeos as a calf roper, team roper and steer wrestler. As the family grew his focus turned more toward ranching, seasonal firefighting and building a beautiful life for his family.

We will greatly miss his silly sense of humor, quiet persistence, curiosity for life, his down to earth and genuine nature and how he loved the people around him. Survivors include his wife, Katy; daughter, Neah; son, Payson of Baker City, his mother, Dawn Thomas, sister-in-law, Heidi Jones-Thomas and niece, Macy Thomas of Milton-Freewater, Oregon, and numerous relatives and friends in the Northwest.

He is preceded in death by his father, Monte Thomas and brother, Terrill Thomas, of Milton-Freewater.

In lieu of flowers, memorial donations may be made to either the Milton-Freewater Junior Show, P.O. Box 379, Milton-Freewater, Oregon, 97862 or to the Brenden-Colson Center for Pancreatic Care, OHSU Foundation, P.O. Box 29017, Portland, OR 97296.



Marlene Eleanor (Sprague) Jacobson

February 19, 1934 - June 27, 2022

We lost our beloved mother, Marlene Eleanor Jacobson. A longtime resident of Baker City, Oregon, she passed away at age 88 on June 27, 2022, at Settler's Park. A celebration of life will be held at a later date, time and place TBA.

Marlene was born on Feb. 18, 1934, in Guttenberg, Iowa, to Eldred and Dorthea Sprague. Marlene was the fourth of 12 children. While in her teens, the family relocated to Salem, Oregon.

It was in Salem that she met her great love, Cliff. Having Cokes with her sisters at a diner, she was taken by a man in a uniform sitting at the counter. She insisted her sisters return with her to the diner, "hoping to see that handsome soldier again." Four months later, in April 1951, she and Clifford married.

In 1958 Marlene and Clifford settled in Baker City. Together they had three children: Debbie, Lorrie and Michael.

First and foremost she was devoted to her family and was constantly caring for us. A self-taught cook, she whipped up delicious meals in a matter of minutes in a tiny kitchen. On holidays, she did so dressed in pantyhose, high heels, a silk dress and jewelry, for fear of running late and not "looking nice at the table." And the pies! Perfect crust with fresh berries from sister Arlene's farm.

Marlene was in constant touch with her brothers and sisters. Driving across the state at a moment's notice in an hour of need and for happy gatherings. We picture them with heads together deep in conversation or doing the jitterbug together. It seems she was most relaxed when with them. The same goes for Dad's family: She adored them and never missed a family reunion.

Marlene was a natural gardener. We cringed to find her in the yard standing on a kitchen chair weaving clematis and ivy through a trellis. She called them "viny things." The rose was her favorite flower. Every fall she dug and wrapped them to be stored and replanted the following spring. A farm girl at heart, she never shied away from physical labor and maintained a trim figure on her 5-foot-2 frame.

She loved antiques and became an aficionado, collecting chandeliers, silver, jewelry and china in blue, her favorite color. Her keen eye led to the opening of her own shop, The Treasure Trove, in 1984 in Baker City. It was a lifelong dream come true.

Marlene remained active and embraced the joy of her grandchildren, Karen and Kamren Harris, and great-grandchildren, Caitlyn, Alayna, Loren, Julian and Zan. Caitlyn could not pronounce "Great Grammy" and called her "Grapes." She loved her new nickname.

Mom taught us to stick up for ourselves, be kind to the underdog and know every birthstone in the calendar year.

Clifford preceded her in death in 1986, as did her son, Michael, in 1988 and son-in-law, Ken Harris, in 2014.

She is survived by her daughters, Debbie Jacobson Harris and Lorrie Jacobson Kramedian; son-in-law, Simon; and all the grandchildren.

The family asks that in lieu of flowers donations be made in Marlene's name to the Special Olympics through Tami's Pine Valley Funeral Home and Cremation Services, P.O. Box 543, Halfway, OR 97834. Online condolences can be shared at www.tamispinevalleyfuneralhome.com.