

School

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School buildings were closed and classes went on-line in March 2020 at the onset of the pandemic.

Students continued to attend classes remotely through the rest of that school year, and they started the next, in September 2020, the same way.

The return to in-person classes was a slow process, particularly for older students.

Elementary students, in grades K-6, returned to in-person classes for a full four-day weekly schedule on Oct. 14, 2020.

Middle school and high school students began attending classes one day per week on Nov. 9, 2020, moving to two days per week on Jan. 25, 2021, and to a full four-day schedule on April 12, 2021.

The 2021 school year was typical in one sense, as students in all grades started with in-person classes.

But students were required to wear face masks until state officials ended that mandate in early March 2022.

The spring term, then, marked a return to normal for the school district, and that situation will continue when classes resume after Labor Day, said Lindsey McDowell, the district's public information and communications coordinator.

"With regard to COVID-19 health and safety protocols, we are beginning the year much as we ended the last one," McDowell wrote in an email to the Herald. "We will continue enhanced cleaning and sanitation and provide masks and COVID-19 tests to those who want or need them, though they are no longer mandatory."

Although the pandemic is no longer affecting school operations, McDowell said the district continues to follow guidelines from the Oregon Health Authority and Oregon Department of Education, including asking students and staff who are ill to stay home.

Those who test positive for COVID-19 should stay home for at least 5 days from the onset of symptoms or the date of a positive test.

McDowell said teachers returned to schools on Aug. 29 for their in-service week. Unlike last year, teachers were also able to gather on Aug. 30 for an in-person meeting.

Baker High School sports are also underway, with football, cross-country, volleyball and soccer teams in action.

Lair, who replaced Mark Witty, who is retired but also overseeing the district's Oregon International School, said she is eager for classes to begin.

"As staff, we are intentionally pushing ourselves out of silos and familiar spaces to be collaborators and critical friends," she said. "We are all here for our students, and one thing I am really excited for in the coming year is working with a student advisory committee at the secondary level and spending time with our youngest learners, as well. We are here to give our students the tools to thrive in society and innovate our future world into existence. I am so excited for this new school year to get underway!"



Oregon State Police/Contributed Photo

Excavation work is done Aug. 16-17, 2022, in the Finley Creek area by state forensic personnel in response to recent interest shown by cadaver dogs brought in by the Finley Creek Jane Doe Task Force involving the unidentified remains of the woman found in 1978.

No human bones found at Finley Creek Jane Doe site north of La Grande

BY DICK MASON

The Observer

ELGIN — The Finley Creek Jane Doe case, which has taken many twists and turns over the past four decades, has taken a pivot in the wrong direction, but investigators, including the Oregon State Police, are refusing to give up.

The Oregon State Police recently led an excavation project at a site near Finley Creek, 18 miles north of La Grande, where the remains of an unidentified woman were found in August 1978.

The work was conducted Tuesday and Wednesday, Aug. 16-17, by the OSP Forensics Service Division, the State Medical Examiner's Office Forensic Anthropologist, the OSP's major crimes detectives and members of the Union County Search and Rescue team. The operation was in response to recent interest shown by cadaver dogs brought in by the Finley Creek Jane Doe Task Force involving the unidentified remains of the woman found in 1978.

Union County Search and Rescue conducted a grid search of approximately three acres around the original burial site and the recent locations of interest by the cadaver dogs. Over 50 bones were located by the search and rescue team. The State Medical Examiner's Forensic Anthropologist examined each of the bones and none of them were determined to be of human origin, according to an OSP press release.

Forensic scientists and detectives conducted excavations at the two points of interest from the cadaver dogs. They also excavated the original burial site. The three locations were examined by sifting dirt and material through screens in an attempt to locate even the smallest of bone fragments or other evidence that could be of use in determining an identity through DNA testing.

"Unfortunately, nothing of evidentiary value was discovered during the operation," the press release stated.

The OSP said the agency and other law enforcement partners will continue to stay in contact with all interested parties in hopes of successfully resolving the identity of the Finley Creek Jane Doe and bringing closure to her family, according to the press release.

Melinda Jederberg, of La Grande, a leader of the Finley Creek Jane Doe Task Force, which she founded in 2019, said she appreciates the hard work the OSP did at the site and said it has helped the investigation move forward.

"We are very thankful for the work they did," she said.

Jeberberg hopes OSP can follow up its excavation work with deeper digging at the two sites where the two cadaver dogs alerted handlers earlier that they smelled human bones underground. Jeberberg said that after 44 years, human bones at the site may be deeper than the depth excavated.

Investigators believe bones of the Finley Creek Jane Doe may remain near the burial site because when her skeletal remains were found in 1978 an arm was missing, said Suzanne Timms of Walla Walla, Washington, who is assisting with the search as a volunteer. Timms is certain the Finley Creek Jane Doe is her mother, Patricia "Patty" Otto, of Lewiston, Idaho, who has been missing since Aug. 31, 1976.

Timms also wants state police to dig deeper at the two sites the cadaver dogs alerted handlers.

"Cadaver dogs are right 95% of the time," Timms said, adding dogs can smell human bones at least 13 feet deep.

Timms said if bones cannot be found at the Finley Creek site that dental records could be used to prove that her mother was the person buried there. She said that a forensic dentist has examined photos taken of the Finley Creek Jane Doe's teeth in 1978 and says that they match the X-rays of her mother's teeth her dentist in Lewiston had.

"He is convinced that they are from the same person," Timms said, adding she is hoping Oregon's state forensic anthropologist will determine the Finley Creek Jane Doe is her mother based on the dental records.

Timms first suspected that the Finley Creek Jane Doe was her mother in 2021 when she saw an image created by a forensic artist, Anthony Redgrave, the operator of Redgrave Research Forensic Services. Redgrave, who is from Massachusetts, was assisting the Finley Creek Jane Doe Task Force, and the image he created looked very similar to Timms' mother. The images were created based on photos of the skeletal remains found in 1978 — those bones are believed to have been cremated by the state after they were found, Timms said.

Other details have contributed to Timms' belief that the Finley Creek Jane Doe is her mother. The remains were found with a white shirt and red pants, which is what Patty Otto was last seen wearing before she disappeared in 1976.

Timms believes her mother was murdered in Lewiston by her father and then taken to Finley Creek where he buried her in a shallow grave.

The OSP's autopsy records for the Finley Creek Jane Doe, however, do not match those of Patty Otto.

Timms believes the discrepancy is due to an error made by the OSP's medical examiner while doing examinations of the skeletal remains of two Jane Does in his office at about the same time in 1978. She suspects he assigned his reports to the wrong remains, because his report for the second Jane Doe matches her mother's autopsy photos and dental records.

Timms applauds the work the state police is now doing on the case, especially that of Sgt. Sean Belding.

"He wants to get this right," she said. "I have faith in him."

Blazes

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At 365,000 acres, it is the biggest federal wilderness in Oregon, with enough room to allow fires to burn without threatening private property or areas outside the wilderness.

One of the purposes of the 1964 Wilderness Act is to allow natural processes, including fire, to happen without human intervention.

However, when a fire either poses a threat to private property — there are a few such parcels within the wilderness — or burns close to the wilderness boundary, Pederson said fire officials consider options such as limited firefighting.

That's why these blazes are called "managed" fires, he said.

The boundary issue is affecting the Wallowa-Whitman's approach to dealing with the Nebo fire, which is about 20 miles southeast of the Sturgill fire, in the Lick Creek area north of the Imnaha River.

The Nebo fire moved north on Wednesday, Pederson said, to within about a quarter mile of the Tenderfoot trailhead, which is at the end of the 100 Road and near the border of the wilderness.

He said fire crews are using machinery to grind trees and brush along the road to reduce the amount of fuel. They also planned to light backfires to create a wider fuelbreak between the 100 Road and the north edge of the fire.

Pederson said firefighters and helicopters might also be needed to prevent the Nebo fire from moving south into the Imnaha River Canyon.

Although the extreme weather has contributed to both the Nebo and Sturgill fires spreading rapidly, Pederson said he's generally happy with the effects the fires are having. In particular he's pleased that the flames are reducing the fuel load, including dead trees that litter the ground near the Nebo fire, remnants of the 1989 Canal fire and the 1994 Twin Lakes fire.

Neither of those was managed as a wilderness fire.

Pederson said the Sturgill fire, during its run on Wednesday, did cause a bit more high-severity burning than he would prefer in the upper part of the Sturgill Creek drainage, based on a reconnaissance flight he made on Thursday.

However, Pederson also said that that high-intensity fire was expected, given the weather. And he said the mixture of burning intensity, as well as some unburned areas, creates the mosaic pattern that fire managers like to see.

The more intensely burned areas will serve as firebreaks when future blazes happen, he said.

"This is hopefully going to set us on the path where we can have more natural fire in the wilderness," Pederson said.

"Ultimately the goal is the healthy and resilient forest we want to have."

Heat

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The lingering heat could allow mosquito populations to hold on later than usual.

Hutchinson said the number of mosquitoes appearing in traps — along with positive tests for West Nile — usually drops with fall temperatures.

"When we start getting low temperatures at night or when we get a good stretch of cooler weather, that usually starts to shut things down, but sometimes when it stays hot for a while those numbers will drag on a little bit," he said.

The good news, Hutchinson said, is that the Keating Valley mosquitoes are now under control, at least temporarily.

Hutchinson said the district conducted an aerial spraying in the Keating Valley area the evening of Aug. 29. He deploys treatments once mosquito numbers reach a certain threshold.

The application kept the bugs at bay, based on results from a trap on Aug. 30.

During an aerial spray, a plane drops adulticide, a pesticide used to treat adult mosquitoes, over large breeding sites of standing water. The vector control district, which is funded by a pair of property tax levies, also uses trucks to "fog" breeding sites.

"The trap results are reflecting that we did really well with that (Aug. 29) application," Hutchinson said. "The traps were really low out in that area this week, so that's good news."

And despite the continu-

ing heat, Hutchinson said he's already started to see a drop in the number of mosquitoes in Baker County traps, which usually coincides with a change in type of mosquito as well.

Culex tarsalis mosquitoes are the most likely vectors for West Nile, Hutchinson said, as opposed to the floodwater mosquitoes more prevalent in spring and early summer, and when the weather cools off in the fall.

Hutchinson said he's sent roughly double the amount of mosquito pools to the OSU lab this summer as compared to last summer, but this year's positive case count still hasn't eclipsed last year's. Last year, 19 pools of mosquitoes, along with one horse and one human, tested positive for West Nile virus in Baker County, while 18 pools of mosquitoes and one horse have tested positive in 2022.

Most people who contract the virus don't show any symptoms. About one in five people infected develop a fever and flu-like symptoms, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Hutchinson advises people who plan on enjoying the Labor Day weekend outside to take precautions against mosquito bites by wearing long pants and sleeves and applying bug repellents containing DEET, oil of lemon or eucalyptus, or Picardin.

Other steps people can take to limit the spread of West Nile virus include reducing areas of standing water and making sure screen doors are repaired and fit tightly.

Barn

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The Baker County Fair started in 1921, and the original race horse barns were built in 1935.

"They'd race during the rodeo," Bird said.

A 1936 program lists Buck, owned by Chas. Whiteley and ridden by C. Summers, and Blue, owned by Vera Jones and ridden by D. Summers.

Horse owners and racers in 1946 included Benita Smelcher, Jane Smelcher, Ralph Cook, Don Rock, Ve Makinson, Percy Laird, Ray Harding, Wayne Curtis, Doc Summers and Dorothy Summers.

In the 1950s, local racers were joined by Native Americans from Warm Springs. By that time, all 20 stalls in the horse barn were filled, with overflow into the cow barns.

In 2007, the horse races were replaced by mule races, which are still held during the Panhandle Rodeo, a mainstay of fair weekend.

The horse barn — one of three original buildings at the

fairgrounds — fell into disrepair.

(The other original structures are the grandstand, which was reconstructed in 2012, and exhibit hall, which was rebuilt after suffering snow damage during the winter of 2016-2017.)

In 2019, a fundraising effort began to build a new horse barn, kickstarted by a grant from the Leo Adler Community Foundation.

In all, 85 donors contributed \$95,000 to build the new barn. Much of the money came from individual donations, in addition to contributions from Baker County and the county Transient Lodging Tax.

Each horse stall features a Dutch door — the top and bottom open independently — and the exterior is built with blue-stained pine.

Smokey Creek Barn Company, owned by Donnie Higgins, handled the construction.

It's not quite finished — an addition of 16 feet is planned for storage with a six-foot sliding door.



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Lynda Bird handles the scissors during a ribbon cutting to dedicate the new horse barn at the Pine Valley Fairgrounds in Halfway on Thursday, Sept. 1, 2022. An effort to raise money for a new barn started in 2019. In all, 85 donors contributed \$95,000.

"It'll make it convenient," Higgins said.

Fair and Rodeo

The 101st Baker County Fair and Panhandle Rodeo is Saturday through Monday, Sept. 3-5.

Youth will show their animals on Saturday and Sunday. The livestock auction happens at 9 a.m. Monday, followed by the parade at 12:30 p.m.

Fair admission is free. The Panhandle Rodeo happens Saturday and Sun-

day at 7 p.m., and Monday at 2:30 p.m. Mule races are held during the rodeo performances.

Tickets are \$15 for reserved seats, \$12 general admission, \$6 for ages 6-12, and free for ages 5 and younger. Admis-

Halfway horse racing

Danny Summers, who grew up in Halfway, became a professional horse jockey and rode at major racetracks on the West Coast and Canada.

He died in 1937 at the age of 22 when his horse fell during a race at San Mateo, California.

He is buried at the Pine Valley Cemetery in Halfway.

sion is free for veterans on Monday.

Throughout the weekend, the midway will feature music, vendors, concessions and games for the kids. On Sunday, the EV Locals will perform from 3-6 p.m.

On Saturday and Sunday, the kids dance starts at 9 p.m. at the Pine Valley Grange Hall.

After the rodeo, on Saturday and Sunday, Frank Carlson will play live for an adult cowboy dance on the midway. A cowboy dinner will be available for \$15.