

Just the right blend of history and story telling

Book Review

By David Sykes

Calamity - The Heppner Flood Of 1903

By Joann Green Byrd

University of Washington Press, 202 pages, \$22.50

I have to admit when I picked up the new book "Calamity The Heppner Flood of 1903", I did so with a bit of hesitation. What exactly was I getting into? Was this a history book about a terrible tragedy with facts, figures and data? Or a narrative story of the people, their lives, and how a terrible event affected them? To my delight "Calamity" turned out to be both.

Written by Eastern Oregon native Joann Green Byrd, (cousin of Heppner's Cliff Green), "Calamity" has just the right blend of history and story telling to keep history buffs informed, and the story readers entertained. If you like names and families you will find a rich vein of first names, last names and relatives to enrich you. If you like a good story you will turn page after page with ease and enjoyment.

Myself, I am interested in the lifestyles, living conditions and society of America in small western towns at the turn of the century. So reading about Heppner in particular during that time, was a special treat for me.

Byrd most definitely rewards the mind's eye, as not far into chapter one,

you find yourself strolling the dusty streets of Heppner, circa 1903. Look over there, it's the Palace Hotel, that majestic structure on Main and May (where Les Schwab now stands). Walk on farther and you will pass one of Heppner's five saloons, McAtee & Swag-gart's, with the sounds of a "Peer-less Electric Self-playing piano playing music from the most celebrated artists of the world to the most commonplace ragtime" reaching your ear. And when the subject of Heppner's saloons comes up, someone will be quick to mention that Heppner "also had six churches." And yes, if you go down farther on Willow Street (where the former Heppner Gazette-Times building once stood) you will find the Chateau de Joie (translation: Castle of Joy), with Madam Mollie Reed, and as Byrd semi-delicately puts it, her five "employees". Seeing the same streets and many of the old familiar buildings come to life in "Calamity" brings to relief the breadth, depth and color of Heppner's history.

Then there are the people, and especially the families, of the era. Byrd uses a very effective technique to familiarize, and personalize us, with the families who lived, and on that fateful June day, died

here. Starting on the day of the flood, a Sunday, she will describe what people were doing, who they were visiting and what children they were caring for. She follows them closely right up to that fateful hour when the flood waters raged, then she draws back. Picking up another family, or individual, and

once again leading us through their "ordinary Sunday" as chapter four is so aptly named, until we, the readers, know tragedy is coming, but the innocent souls of Heppner of course, do not. One almost wants to somehow warn them, especially the families with their children, as they go about their lives on that soon to be horrible Sunday.

When the telling of the actual flood begins, the author piles up a multitude of words and descriptions to paint the picture of catastrophe, the scope of which most of us will never know. Byrd could just as well have said: "a wall of water then came crashing through town carrying with it debris, bodies and trees." But once again she draws upon her writing talents and meticulous research taking us to a place we will never go.

I will not ruin the book by quoting her best, or for that matter, any of her descriptions of the natural calamity unfolding in Heppner that June 14 so long ago. Suffice it to say that I myself found the best description of the actual flood waters residing on page 32.

Then the water is gone. What is left is terrible. With 238 dead it will stretch the limits of the toughest of survivors just to carry on. And once again the author guides us through the wreckage, both physical and human, until we understand what a determined and resilient people lived here. Some moved away, but many stayed and rebuilt. They put their minds and backs into the job the same way they lived their lives, with determination and hard work.

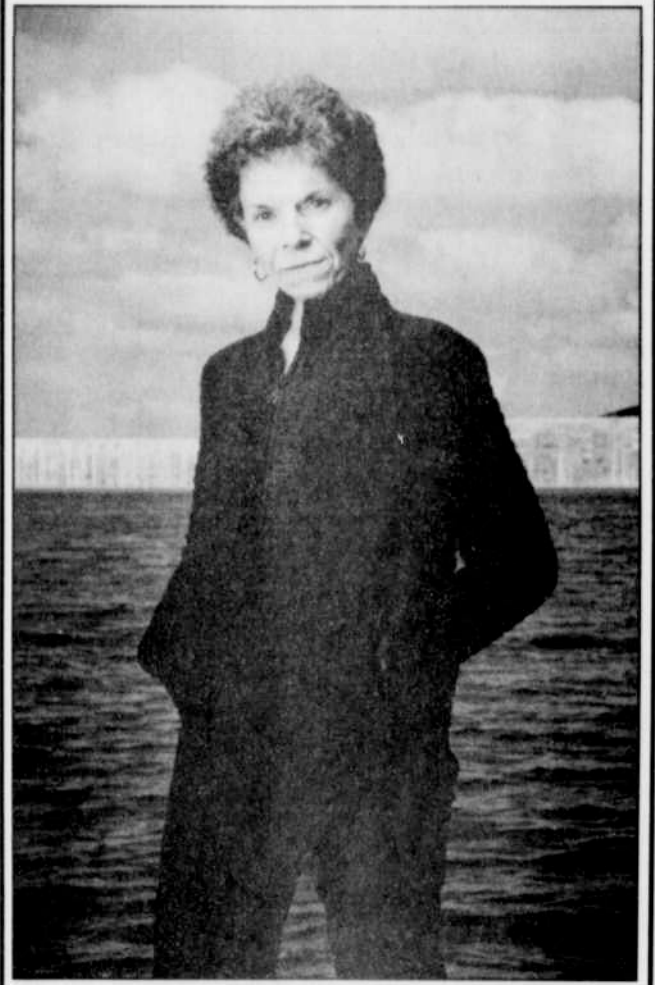
Byrd gives us much information on the help, both monetary and with goods and workers, that was received in Heppner, Lexington and Lone in the days following the flood. This help came not only from around the immediate area, but also the state and the whole country. In these days of FEMA, and other government agencies with their endless streams of money, it speaks volumes about the times, when most of the relief and rebuilding money came in the form of donations. Even more telling is that in the end, Heppner turned back some of the money, saying it had enough, and the money should be given to someone else more needy.

A person I talked to about this book said: "It is probably the definitive work on the Heppner flood". And they are right, because Byrd's research is extensive and well documented. But this book is much more. It is a fascinating look into how

the people who experienced a terrible natural disaster survived, rebuilt and carried on with their lives. As poet William Davenant once said: "Calamity is the perfect glass wherein we truly see and know ourselves."



About the Author



The above photo of the author was taken at the Willow Creek Reservoir, formed when a flood control dam was constructed across Willow Creek in 1983, eighty years after the Heppner flood. -Contributed Photo

Joann Green Byrd is a native of Eastern Oregon who has a 47-year career as a journalist, working first for the East Oregonian in Pendleton and later for the Spokane Daily Chronicle, the Herald in Everett, Washington, the Washington Post, and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

Port of Morrow Manager Gary Neal gives update to Heppner Chamber of Commerce

continued from page one

He said the Port will begin moving more containers to the Puget Sound area.

Overall "last year has been good for the Port,"

Neal said, pointing out all the many improvements. And he predicted business would keep being good in the future.

He said the coal

fired plant at Boardman could be in danger of closing if PGE is not given a rate increase. "We want it to operate, but it may need \$500 million in new pollu-

tion control or it may shut down," Neal said.

With the Umatilla Army Depot scheduled for closing after the last of the chemical weapons are de-

stroyed, Neal said he toured the facility along with some other officials, but did not seem too impressed with the possibilities once the Army is gone. He said the buildings are generally run down and there are environmental issues with the property. "I don't see any value to the buildings," Neal said. He said the Army has indicated they do not want to do clean up, but to "just leave it". "We need to make sure the Army cleans it up and doesn't leave us with a liability," he said.

He said overall the businesses at the Port have weathered the current

recession pretty good and it "hasn't hit us very hard. It is pretty solid out there, and we are going to be busy."

Neal said his next big project is to build an Agricultural Information Center on the freeway where people could stop and take "virtual tours" of the various facilities at the Port. "We want to educate people about food production and agriculture," Neal said. He pointed out that Greg Smith secured \$1.2 million in funding for the site, which will pay for the building, and then the port will need to come up with the funding to install the displays inside.

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- 26% of vehicles had at least one tire under inflated by 8 psi.
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