

# Ordnance buildings are gone, but memories linger

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
STAFF WRITER

If you grew up on the intersection of Bomb Street and Grenade Avenue, you probably lived in Ordnance, Oregon.

The Umatilla County community has mostly been reduced to a tangle of trees and crumbling concrete foundations on now-private property. But in the middle of the twentieth century a few hundred people with connections to the Department of Defense used to live on a collection of streets across from the Umatilla Chemical Depot that included such names as Amatol, Bomb, Cartridge, Detonator, Explosive, Fuse and Grenade. An elementary school, small shopping center, post office, water tower and community building rounded out the town.

For all the suggested violence of its naming system, Ordnance was an idyllic place to spend a childhood, according to its former residents.

"It was really a good place to grow up out there," said Bill Linder, who now lives in Hermiston.

Linder's family lived in Ordnance while his father — like almost all parents in Ordnance — worked at the depot. They eventually moved into Hermiston in 1955 after the DOD announced it was going to phase out the community, about a decade after the town was constructed. Linder's former home on Detonator Street is now a flat cement slab covered by creeping grass and moss, but he could pick it out based on the tree that still stands behind what used to be a flat-roofed, one-story building that housed four apartments.

"It's sad to see it so dilapidated now," he said. "... We had a lot of good times out here."

Former Ordnance kids Linda (Johnson) VanBlokland and Paula (Russell) Simmons remember the same good times. VanBlokland loved 10-cent movies in the community center, tree climbing (she had "the greatest tree in the whole town") and getting pulled around on pieces of metal used at the depot to transport heavy bombs.

"Our dads got into trouble for using the bomb sleds for kids at Lost Lake," she said.

Simmons remembers roller-skating around the smooth cement walkway in front of the collection of shops, neighborhood games like kick the can and acting in plays on the stage in the community building.

Linder, Simmons and Johnson all remember the critters that came with the high-desert climate: Snakes and scorpions for catching, snowy owls that flew past the classroom windows and jack-rabbits for hunting.

The fourplexes at Ordnance had brick structures out front used for holding



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Bill Linder, former Ordnance resident, walks through the theater in the community center building that still stands in the old town site.



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

The old townsite was purchased in the 1960s by Stafford Hansell and turned into a hog farm.



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

A paved road leads down to the community center in the ghost town of Ordnance west of Hermiston. The town once served as a housing community for civilian workers on the Umatilla Army Depot until it was phased out by the Department of Defense beginning in 1955.

coal, and some of the unused ones were commandeered for play forts. VanBlokland said she remembered some of the children climbed in a dark makeshift fort once, only to realize it was chock-full of crickets.

"I don't remember that," Simmons said.

"Oh you're lucky," VanBlokland said with a shudder. "I still think about that sometimes."

Linder remembers he and his friends using a particularly well-placed tree limb to climb on the roof of one of the buildings, and once a friend used a bow to shoot an arrow straight up in the air, only to have it come down point-first on his dad's brand

new car. Children in Ordnance went to school there through sixth grade, then got bused into Hermiston. Ron Furrer, who graduated from Hermiston High School with many former Ordnance children, said he remembered Ordnance was "pretty uptown for that day and age."

The shopping center included a beauty store, dime store and grocery store, while the community center featured everything from a playground to Sunday School classes. Residents could borrow lawn mowers and garden rakes, and surplus items from the depot like wooden ammunition boxes were re-purposed.

family was one of the last to leave in the early 1960s because her father did the maintenance for Ordnance.

The property was sold to state legislator Stafford Hansell, who turned it into a hog farm. A 1964 article in the *East Oregonian* described a "vast pork factory" with 1,300 sows housed inside 348 former apartments with new concrete floors and pens around each fourplex building. An Associated Press story from around the same time said Hansell's wife was irritated that the pigs got air-conditioning before their own home did.

"It made me really sick driving by, seeing the pigs oinking around going in and out of the buildings where we lived," Linder remembered.

Craig Coleman of Ordnance Brewing in Boardman has owned the land since 2005 and jokes he's the "self-proclaimed mayor" of Ordnance now. He said he has put in work saving what parts of the history and infrastructure he can, but much of it had already been demolished or crumbled to pieces of its own accord before he purchased it.

"We were able to save the old schoolhouse, and put it back to use, but everything else pretty much is too far gone," he said.

The schoolhouse is used for an agricultural chemical business housed on the property, and the one dwelling still in good repair is office space. The old community center, which Hansell used as a farrowing house, and a couple of other dwellings are still partially standing, but most of the rest of the buildings have been reduced to rubble and bits of foundation.

"I hate people seeing how horrible it is, because it was a really nice community," VanBlokland said.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY BILL LINDER

An old photo shows one of the housing units at Ordnance before it was reclaimed by nature.

"We thought we had everything, until we moved to town (in Hermiston)," Simmons said.

In the mid-1950s, the government announced it would be phasing out Ordnance and selling it, and

families began leaving. Furrer said as the place emptied out the Army used to let people pay to knock down the wall between their apartment and the one next door to expand their living area.

VanBlokland said her

# BUY 4 COOPER TIRES

# GET A \$100 GIFT CARD\*

COMMERCIAL TIRE




\* See Store for details.

Restrictions apply, see amazon.com/gc-legal. Commercial Tire is not affiliated with The Home Depot®. The Home Depot® is not a sponsor of this promotion. The Home Depot is a registered trademark of Home Depot Product Authority, LLC. All rights reserved.

McKay Creek Estates



## FREE Cognitive Screening

Is Mom a *little more forgetful lately?*

There are many early warning signs of a potential memory disorder, such as Alzheimer's disease. That's why we're offering a **FREE** and **CONFIDENTIAL** cognitive screening. We encourage anyone who is concerned about cognitive decline to take this short, in-person screening. The screening is administered by a qualified health care professional.

To schedule your cognitive screening today, please call **(541) 704-7146**.

McKay Creek Estates  
1601 Southgate Pl.  
Pendleton, OR 97801



Prestige Senior Living, L.L.C.

[www.PrestigeCare.com](http://www.PrestigeCare.com)