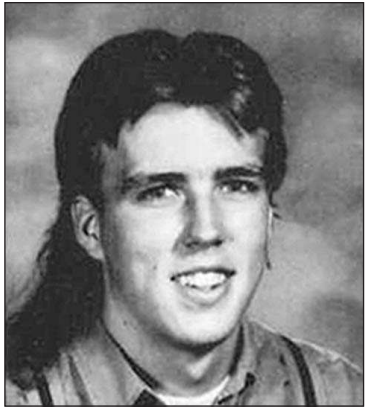


The INDEPENDENT

Vol. 18, No. 22

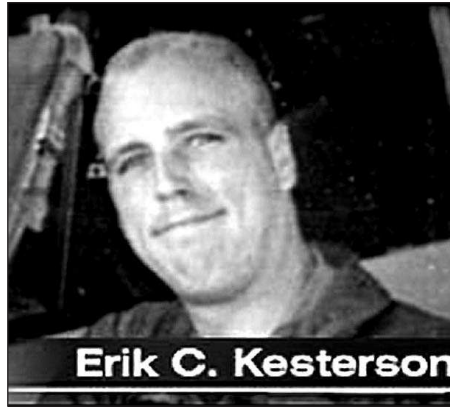
"Voice of the Upper Nehalem River Valley"

November 20, 2003



1992

War Comes Home to Vernonia



2002

The news said that Chief Warrant Officer Erik C. Kesterson, 29, was one of 17 U.S. soldiers killed when two Black Hawk helicopters collided in Iraq. That is the way people hear about the death of their friends or classmates or students.

What the news doesn't say is how Erik Kesterson's death left a hole in people's lives.

Steve Giere, who was the principal at Vernonia High School when Erik graduated in 1992, explained part of it in a letter in *The Oregonian* (Nov. 19, 2003): "There were only 39 seniors in Kesterson's graduating class, but he would have stood out even if there had been a hundred times that number. He was friendly, considerate, respectful and liked by all — just a really nice kid."

The 29 year-old Kesterson spent much of his youth in Vernonia and joined the Marines after graduating from Vernonia High School. He spent eight years in the Marines as a crew chief and gunner on Huey and Cobra helicopters. Shortly before leaving the Marines, he

pulled seven men out of a helicopter that had crashed in California and burst into flames. He was awarded the Marine Corps Medal of Heroism for his actions.

He worked for Evergreen Airlines after leaving the Marines, then enlisted in the Army after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. He chose the Army because their warrant officer program allowed him to do what he loved, fly helicopters, as a member of the 101st Airborne Division stationed in Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Kesterson's father, Clayton, and stepmother, M.J., live in Independence. If you have watched the news or read their statements, you know how they hurt. Clay Kesterson said of his son, "He's a good man."

The cause of the helicopters' collision is uncertain, though it appears that Erik's helicopter lost power when it was struck by enemy fire. Whatever the cause, 17 soldiers lost their lives last Saturday. One was from a small town in Oregon.

Historical Society sues County, City, Museum

In June, 2003, when local volunteers went to open up the Vernonia Museum for visitors, they discovered the locks had been changed, apparently by someone working for or with the Columbia County Historical Society.

It was an odd situation because local volunteers had been asking questions about some missing Indian artifacts and hadn't been able to get answers about when and why they were removed.

The volunteers took their concerns to the Columbia County Board of Commissioners, which didn't have any answers, either. Columbia County owns the old Courthouse, where the St. Helens Museum is located. It also has a long-term lease (\$1.00 per year) with the City of Vernonia for the former Oregon-American Lumber Co. headquarters, which houses the Vernonia Museum. The county also pays for maintenances and utilities for the Vernonia Museum. When the commissioners included the Historical Society on their agenda, several volunteers spoke about their concerns. One person who didn't speak was the Historical Society president, R.J. "Bob" Brown. He had an attorney and two volunteers speak for him.

There were never any explanations about the missing artifacts or why volunteers were locked out without notice. The artifacts are still missing.

The county closed both museums for a while and, subsequently, did some reorganizing. The Vernonia Pioneer Museum Association now operates the Vernonia Museum.

Now, charges and countercharges are flying between Columbia County and the Historical Society.

The Historical Society filed

suit, October 10, in Multnomah County against the county, city and local museum association, claiming that it is "the owner of all the objects at the Courthouse Museum and the Vernonia Museum."

In addition to its claim of ownership of everything in the Courthouse Museum, according to the suit filed by Michael J. Morris, of Bennet, Hartman, Morris & Kaplan, the historical society since 1962 "managed and operated the Vernonia Museum in which it displayed a portion of its collection of historical artifacts, photographs and other objects."

The society is seeking \$500,000 or the return of "its" property, plus attorney fees.

Columbia County filed a counter suit, Oct. 28 in Columbia County, claiming management and ownership of both museums and their contents.

This summer, the society sent the county a tort claim notice of ownership of all artifacts and contents. The county responded by asking the society to provide proof of ownership, but hasn't yet received it.

The county also has a dispute with R.J. Brown and the historical society over a \$36,848 federal grant for the Lewis and Clark bicentennial.

The historical society and Brown urged the county to let Brown administer the grant, but there was no written agreement. The society retained two consultants for approximately \$11,000. The consultants agreed to do the work for \$500 each and donate the remainder of the fees to the society although the money came from the county grant funds.

The county returned the grant to the federal government, but the historical society is demanding payment as part of the total it is to administer.

Do you think winter is here?



Drivers had no problem slowing down during Wednesday morning's sudden snow storm.