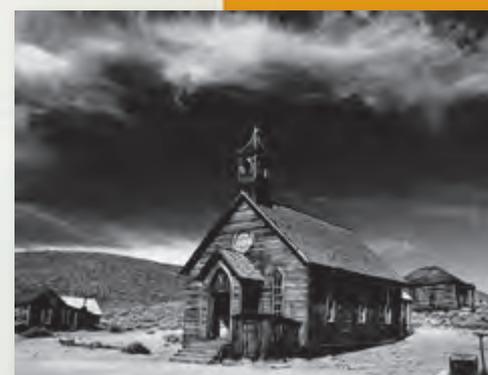
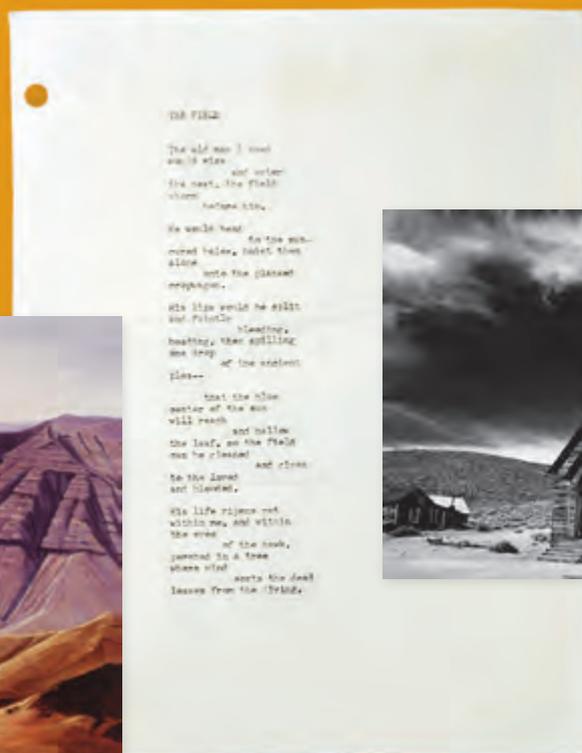


# High Desert Journal

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*Literary and visual arts from the high desert*



# “When the sun goes down

## interview with Jarold Ramsey by Ellen Santasiero

“When the Sun Goes Down in Simnasho ... what happens?”

So began Jerry Ramsey’s provocation to a room full of fifth graders at Oregon’s Warm Springs Elementary School last fall. When the children replied with all kinds of fantastic ideas, Ramsey, a writer in residence with the National Book Foundation’s *American Voices* program, helped them shape their responses into poems and stories.

What seemed like play to the children is serious work to Ramsey, who for thirty years has unearthed, collected, annotated, taught, promoted and, above all, loved the stories and songs that make up the body of Oregon Indian literature. As you read his most recent book, *New Era: Reflections on the Human and Natural History of Central Oregon*, a memoir about growing up on a dry-land farm outside Madras, Oregon in the 30s and 40s, you realize that Ramsey is just as interested in Anglo history as he is in Indian lore. A retired university professor, Ramsey talks about his work with stories as a kind of conservancy – a literary conservancy – believing that it is just as important to take care of our stories, poems and songs as it is to care for our land, water and air.

The minute you meet the intellectual, down-to-earth Ramsey you have no trouble picturing him as the boy on the back of the combine he describes in *New Era*, reading “*Dante’s Inferno* (Ciardi’s translation), which worked out to be approximately twelve straw-dumps per canto.” Bill Robbins, Oregon State University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History, has described Ramsey as “an Oregon original, a person that I compare favorably with Norman Maclean. What else, other than love of place, leads such people to Chicago and Rochester as Shakespeare scholars, only to return to their roots and write their best work?”

Ramsey is perhaps best known for his anthology, *Coyote was Going There: Indian Literature of the Oregon Country*. He is also the author of *Reading the Fire: Essays in the Traditional Indian Literature of America*, and was co-editor of *The Stories We Tell: An Anthology of Oregon Folk Literature*. Ramsey has written four poetry books, two plays and libretti. He lives with his wife Dorothy in his boyhood home. This interview was conducted in November 2004.

**Ellen Santasiero:** You spent every Monday for five weeks with Warm Springs Elementary schoolchildren, helping them write their own stories and poems. What was your deepest hope for that residency?

**JR:** One was to give them good reasons to write. I told them repeatedly that we’re all unique, and that’s one reason we have writing, to express that, to get it out. These are Indians after all, and I told them that for a long, long time their stories were told by other people, with good and bad results, mainly not so good. I said it’s time for you to tell your own stories. You’ve got the gifts, you’ve got the words, so go to it. One kid said, *you really mean it?* I said, *yeah, I really mean it. Go to it.*

**ES:** You’ve practically devoted your whole career to making Indian literature accessible to the rest of us. Why is an Anglo person such as yourself interested in promoting and preserving Indian literature?

**JR:** I grew up here and I can’t imagine understanding this country without learning something about the stories that the first people told about it. So that’s my local connection. I think I can say honestly that even if I were somebody from New York City I would find Indian stories interesting and worthwhile. Robert Frost has a great poem called *The Gift Outright*, which he recited at John F. Kennedy’s inauguration. It’s a wonderful poem about American history and American culture, but there is one line in it that really sticks in my craw. He

says something about this great land vaguely realizing westward, “unstoried.” He uses the adjective “unstoried.” Well, not true, Robert Frost, not true at all. By the way, it’s precisely that vaguely realizing westward that led to the almost total eradication of the literary traditions of the Indians.

**ES:** Can you reflect on the integration of the wave of newcomers to central Oregon who came after irrigation came to the region in the 40s? Can we learn anything from how those newcomers were integrated into the region to help current newcomers integrate more easily?

**JR:** I am the product of two homesteading families. We were among the first here on Agency Plains. There wasn’t much else but dry farming and some cattle and sheep raising until the irrigation project came in 1946-48. This was real land reform, the kind that we generally associate with South America. There should have been some kind of educational program to help us old-timers deal with the sudden influx of all those people from elsewhere, mainly from Idaho. I don’t remember any overt episodes, but there really was a lot of tension. On the one hand I suspect that some of the newcomers were probably fairly arrogant and brash. It irritated the old timers greatly to see their beloved fields – which they thought were flat – made more flat, and dust blowing like a second dust bowl. Their coming led to the consolidation of my beloved little one-room school with the Madras schools. Our market road was renamed “Boise Drive,” which really rubbed people the wrong way. But on the other hand, I think the old-timers here gave the newcomers a pretty chilly reception. They really did, so much so that the newcomers defensively organized clubs depending on when they came here, there was the 46 Club, the 47 Club, etc. What I’d like to do is get the members of these clubs together to talk about those times. I think they would talk not just about the mechanics of irrigation in this new untouched country, but the social aspects of it, too. I think it’s time we healed those wounds a little bit. These people have been here for fifty years. They were pioneers too, don’t ever doubt it. They brought something entirely new to this country and they transformed it. Who is to say it isn’t for the better? The newcomers brought some really wonderful things. They brought 4-H, they brought a notion of community organization which had never been heard of here. When I was little, there were probably not more than 14 or 15 families on this whole big plateau. Our sociology was based on fewness. It was social change and disruption on a fairly small scale compared to Bend, but I see the same thing happening there. I guess my hope about the newcomers is that they take the time and trouble to learn the stories of what this country was like at least before they came. It certainly is exasperating to the rest of us to see how indifferent some of them are to those earlier times.

**ES:** If you were to put together a syllabus for central Oregon residents so that they could know and learn more about this place, what would be on the list?

**JR:** Phil Brogan’s *East of the Cascades*. He was a native of Jefferson County, a remarkable man, a journalist at *The Bulletin*. He was one of the most able scientific writers I’ve ever encountered. The book is written in his characteristic kind of dry style. He never rose to the heights of letters, but the book is very readable and it’s dead-on accurate. Reub Long and A.R. Jackman’s *The Oregon Desert* is certainly obligatory reading. I can’t think of a better introduction to the old high desert than that. A book by Bend resident Russ Baehr, *Oregon’s Outback*. Russ spent a lot of time with old-timers beginning 30 or

# Simnasho ...”

in



Jarold Ramsey: “I think we have to try to conserve things of the spirit, things of the imagination, including stories ...” photo: Thomas Osborne.

40 years ago when there were lots of really old-timers still around. In some cases he got them to talk as they would not have talked to anybody else. Witness my great uncle Walter McCain, whom I had never heard say more than seven or eight words at once. Russ Baehr got him to talk about his escapades as a boy. Ray Hatton’s books. He has written wonderful books on natural history, mainly, but they are all to some extent about human history. I would modestly include my book *New Era*. Also, my anthology, *Coyote was Going There*, which concentrates as much as I dare on this part of the country, although it covers all of the Oregon country. In the area of oral literature, I would recommend a book that Suzi Jones and I did some years ago called *The Stories We Tell*. I would also recommend that people check out the holdings at the three county historical societies and at the High Desert Museum. History is not just in the books – maybe it’s most securely there, but when you put something in a book, you leave a lot out. The great thing about the High Desert Museum is that they have things like that steam saw mill. How do you get that into a book?

**ES:** What about Lewis and Clark stories?

**JR:** Sure, in some broad sense, but they had little impact here. That reminds me of another astonishing book titled *When the River Ran Wild* by George Aguilar, which will be published in June 2005 by Oregon Historical Society Press. George is a Wasco elder of Filipino and Wasco descent. His father was drowned on the Columbia fishing when he was just a baby, so he was raised over here by his maternal grandparents, the Polk family. He is just steeped in traditional Wasco Chinookan lore. When I met him in 2000, he told me shyly that he had been doing some writing and I said I’d like to see it. I read his material and I could see that he was really working on a book that was partly genealogical but it was also broader than that. He was trying to conserve traditional Indian culture on the Reservation. I couldn’t be more excited if it were one of my own books. It’s going to give a completely new perspective on central Oregon Indian culture and on Lewis and Clark. George is able to trace some of the Warm Springs families today back to people who were alive when Lewis and Clark

by **Henry Sayre**

*A basaltic cliff, embroidered with lichens,  
Illumined by the sun, orange and yellow,  
The work of a great painter,  
Careless in the splash of his brush.  
An ocean of sagebrush which dimly breaks  
Against a purple coast too far away ...*

– C. E. S. Wood, Prologue, *The Poet in the Desert*, 1915

# An idea of order

This much we know: The great American Impressionist painter Childe Hassam visited Oregon twice, in August and September of 1904 and then again, from September 3 until sometime in late November of 1908. On both occasions he was the guest of Charles Erskine Scott Wood – c.e.s., “Ces,” his friends called him – Portland cultural icon, one-time soldier (who at the surrender of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce in 1877 transcribed his famous surrender speech – “From where the sun now stands, Joseph will fight no more forever”), lawyer, poet, painter, political radical, social libertine and founding trustee of the Portland Art Museum.

Wood lured Hassam out West by commissioning him to paint a mural for his library, a seascape, recognizably the Isles of Shoals in Maine, provocatively populated, in the words of Woods’ wife, Nannie, by “a lot of naked ladies bathing on rocks at the sea.” She would admit that the paintings were “admired by some, but the majority of people do not care for them.” Busy installing the mural in the library, he drank heavily, chased the ladies, and otherwise, as Nannie said, “led us a merry dance.” But Wood liked him and escorted the painter around Oregon, to a log cabin on Mount Hood, to Cannon Beach, down the Willamette Valley, all culminating in a trip to Wood’s beloved Harney County, where, at the south end of Malheur Lake, on the Blitzen River, the Wood family had established a camp on the property of the P Ranch, formerly owned by the cattleman Peter French. There Hassam got so drunk that Wood had to cart him off to Seattle to dry out. “My heart aches for one with such cravings,” Wood wrote to his daughter.

Wood bought the property on the P Ranch – about 140,000 acres worth – in 1907, and a year later, in August, the federal government declared Malheur and neighboring lakes a national bird sanctuary in order to protect the area’s three-hundred-plus species of birds from plume hunters harvesting swans, egrets, herons and grebes for feathers for the millinery trade. Not a month later, on September 3, 1908, Wood, together with Judge Charles Carey, then Vice President of the American Bar Association, met Hassam at the railroad station in Ontario, outfitted themselves for an extended stay at Wood’s camp,

and made the 187-mile trek into the heart of Harney County, where they would stay until late November. One day that fall, someone photographed Hassam and Wood, painting side by side, in their boots and their Skivvies.

The rest is conjecture: It was hot. They had driven the wagon out to this spot, in the middle of nowhere, bursting upon an ocean of sagebrush that stretched across to the edge of the alkali flats, behind which the purple hills of the Steens Mountains rose like a wall of storm cloud perched on the horizon. They stripped, set up their easels, Ces a little behind Hassam – “Muley,” they called him, because he was as pig-headed and obstinate as a mule – and began to paint. They hadn’t been at it five minutes when the Judge jumped from the wagon, dancing a little jig unbefitting a man of the law, waving his camera – one of those damn Eastman Kodak “Brownies” – and threatening to take their picture.

“I need evidence!” Carey guffawed. “Proof! Two grown men painting in their underwear!”

They ignored him. They always painted in their underwear when it was this hot, unless the ladies were around.

“And if the ladies are around,” Muley had once opined, “we prefer painting in the buff.”

Privately, Ces was not so sure. He was pretty certain that Muley would stop short of dropping his briefs and making a nudist camp of it, though he had to admit that preponderance of evidence might suggest otherwise. He knew the man well enough to know that he was at least as much blush as bluster. But properly piqued, Muley was also the kind of man capable of saying to himself “What the hell” and baring his bottom to the breeze. It was a toss-up.

Thankfully, Ces was confident it would remain so. There were no ladies around. He’d seen to that.

There were plenty of fish. That was a problem.

“What will they say in Paris?” Carey shrieked. “It’s proof. We are the Great Unrefined!” He waved at the horizon. “How dare we call this a landscape!”



Childe Hassam and C.E.S. Wood painting in the desert. Courtesy of Oregon Historical Society.

It was a landscape, certainly, barren only ostensibly. Full of fish. "Trout a thousand miles long!" Hassam exclaimed. And game: "Mallard ducks so thick they knock your hat off when you put your head out of cover!" These were his very words, written to fellow Impressionist J. Alden Weir back East not two weeks into the trip.

The artist evidently preferred fishing and hunting to painting, which was not the point of the expedition.

From Wood's point of view, this was the most beautiful place on earth, its light like no other, as if filtered by its very barrenness into the full spectrum of the rainbow, dancing in points of color into the illusory depths of its countless mirages. It was a lens, the very retina of the Creator contemplating the space of imaginative Being.

It was hard to grasp. It needed a painter like Hassam, which required Hassam to actually paint.

Wood had taken to retiring most mornings after breakfast to the carpenter shop, while Hassam enjoyed his cigar. There he would prepare two stretchers, one for himself and one for old Muley. He took a certain satisfaction in the precision of his cuts, perfect 45-degree angles that, when he laid them out on the workbench and nailed them together, resulted in perfect 90-degree corners. He stretched them with canvas, pulling it tight side to side with all his strength, so taut that had they required drums to accompany their songs at evening camp, his canvases might have served. And then he would walk back to the tents, to present Muley with the blank prospect of his day's duty.

It sometimes worked. This day it didn't.

When Wood arrived back at the breakfast tent, Cookie told him that Mr. Muley had departed some fifteen minutes earlier aboard Jericho, apparently intent on tracking a flock of Sandhill cranes that had flown overhead.

"Sir," Cookie addressed Wood, "did you know that them cranes mate for life? Mr. Muley said so." He shook his head. "Who would of thought it. Birds. . ."

It was a fact. Since his arrival Hassam had taken, each evening, to studying *Studer's Popular Ornithology*, with its color illustrations

by Theodore Jasper. He was becoming something of a birder. The Sandhill cranes particularly fascinated him.

In part it was their sheer size – they stood over four feet high, and at seven feet their wing span was nearly that of a bald eagle. It was also the fact that the rusty gray feathers on their body exploded above their bright yellow eyes into a rounded crown of magnificent red. Such incident of color in an otherwise dull prospect of plumage appealed to the painter. It was, above all, their social behavior that attracted Hassam. Not just their monogamy, but the fact that each fall the pairs who throughout the spring and summer had nested individually, jealously driving off intruders from their nesting grounds, which might be a hundred acres or more, gather together again, first three or four pairs together, then ten and fifteen, their trumpeting "garoo-a-a-a" filling the now drying marshes around the lake with sound.

"They depend on one another," Hassam had said at some point the week before, as he sat studying the image of one in *Studer's* where it was depicted standing beside a great white heron, a bird unknown in these parts. "That's what's interesting."

It amused Wood to think that mutual dependency was a concept somewhat foreign to the painter's imagination, as if the idea had never occurred to him before that someone or something might need someone or something else to survive.

"It's the very thing that drives civilization," Wood had observed.

"And parasites," Muley had retorted.

Wood turned to the cook. "Did he take his fishing gear with him?" he asked.

"No, sir," Cookie replied, "But he did take his paint box."

This was a surprise. "His easel?"

"No, sir, just his paints."

Of late, Muley had taken to painting on the lids of his cigar boxes. "It makes a good surface," he explained. "Kind of slippery, but absorbent." They were well stocked with cigars, and at the rate Muley smoked them, lids would soon be in plentiful supply.

Wood turned his mind to cleaning up the camp. The Judge

# Burning

**MY NEIGHBOR HATES THE SAGEBRUSH** in her pasture. Bad news for her, because sagebrush grows well in her pasture, easily sprouting and rooting in the decomposed granite sand that covers most of her 17 acres. But good news for her, too, because there's a missionary glee to her effort.

She's trying to turn most of her place into lush green pasture for her horses, and she's been out fixing fences and irrigating and pulling weeds and filling holes since she came here a decade ago. A couple of years ago, she hired a trapper to get rid of her gophers and this year she bought an industrial-strength mulcher for the sagebrush. It hooks onto the back of her small Ford tractor and when I first heard its whack-howl this last spring it sounded like a P-51 trying to take off from the middle of a stand of lodgepole. Something like that.

Sonic violence. We're mostly comfortable with it here near the highway in Sawtooth Valley. Such violence is usually in the form of summer flocks of unmuffled Harley riders making the Boise-Sun Valley-Stanley loop or giant semis hauling D-9s down the road at 70 MPH. In the winter, it's the stuttering grind of the big snowplows bouncing on asphalt. In the fall it's the gunshots of the elk hunters in the dying forest across the river. Spring here is mostly without sonic violence, unless you count the Sandhill cranes that fly low over the house, letting loose with their loud mutters just about the time you've stepped out on the deck with a cup of coffee. You can get bad burns from that sort of thing.

Anyway, my neighbor's a good neighbor, and the sound of sagebrush being ground to bits just upriver reassures me that she's working away on her place and tends to spur me toward working away on mine. We share a meal every three months or so, trading hospitality and tips about getting along with the Forest Service, the agency we deal with as property owners in the Sawtooth National Recreation Area.

Her efforts have improved the green looks of the neighborhood. Her irrigation run-off augments the spring-fed ditch that waters the pasture between my house and my mother's house a quarter mile downstream. That ditch ends in a pond, and it's hard to keep it full if my neighbor isn't doing her irrigating.

The pond provides great pleasure for my mother. It's just across the driveway from her kitchen window. It's a sky mirror when it isn't being a wind gauge. Sometimes you can see mother ducks and baby ducks on it. Brook trout swim down into it from the springs, and mark the pond's surface with rings until the local blue heron uses those rings for bulls-eyes. The heron's hard on the frogs and salamanders, too. But unless you're heron food, the pond is a mostly safe place.

**PEDIATRICS. THAT'S WHAT MY NEIGHBOR** has retired from, and it's good to have a doctor in the neighborhood when your mother is 87 and determined to live in a place where the nearest hospital is 60 miles away. We haven't ever called upon my neighbor for her expertise, because part of being a good neighbor in the West is a certain forbearance toward asking for any kind of help – you always try to give more than you get – but it's nice to know there's a medical education just upriver from us, even if that medical education is occupied now with digging fence-post holes and growing grass and eradicating sage.

A good healthy sagebrush is a beautiful thing to me. Its color is blue against spring grass, silver against fall aspen, soft green after summer rain. I love its textures: the rough unbraided bark, the leaves

that look like so many Van Gogh brush-strokes. I love the smell, and I love the sagebrush-covered hill on the other side of the highway more than I would if it were forested, especially now that the pine beetles have gotten into the valley's lodgepole pines and turned most of them into firewood.

Yet as much as I love sagebrush, it doesn't bother me when my neighbor clears her field of it. I take satisfaction from watching her high-headed grass wave in the wind, especially now that there are acres of it. There's genetic joy in gazing at cereal monoculture, I suspect, if you're the end product of a couple of hundred generations of peasants.

Besides, I have my own cherished hatred. Willows. The noise of my neighbor's sagebrush shredder has been echoed this year by my chainsaw, as I've sawn and piled willow bushes in heaps for burning.

Willows burn well. In April, they're full of the previous season's oil but have yet to start running sap, so if you cut one bush and pile it on another and set fire to them both all you will have a half-hour later is cooling ashes in a small heap on the gravel. The ash acts as a fertilizer in these acidic soils, and a couple of years later you will have grass and sagebrush where once there was an impenetrable willow thicket, and small ground-nesting songbirds where you once had magpies and robins and huge ant piles.

Such an activity is rightly regarded as messing with the ecosystem and it's an ethically suspect business. You have to do it the right way, and there may be no right way. Every time I set fire to a willow bush sheltering an ant pile, I worry that I'm destroying some vast collective intelligence with an IQ of 400 and a genetic archive with all the history of the planet in its files.

And sometimes I've burnt willows late enough in the year to have destroyed nests under construction, although I try not to burn willows containing nests of baby birds or even eggs.

Our place is not made up of decomposed granite like my neighbor's. She's at the sandy mouth of Gold Creek, which drains hills made up of Idaho Batholith Granite, geology's equivalent of rotten cheese. Where we are is all glacial gravel chewed out of ancient compressed rock that resists being broken into pieces smaller than softballs. If you pick rock in our fields, you find that there are other and bigger rocks under the rock you just picked. Topsoil reveals itself, upon closer inspection, to be fine quartz sand and bits of punky willow wood. Willows can grow in it. Lodgepole can grow in it. Timothy can grow in it. Cheat grass has a hard time growing in it, which should tell you something.

The river braids back and forth across the floodplain. Willows are the only plant with roots deep and extensive enough to keep the river from chewing the whole valley into heaps of bare gravel.

So I don't burn the willows on the river banks, and they hold the banks in the same place from big-water year to big-water year. When the really high water hits, the river jumps its banks and forms new channels, willows or not. Seventy years ago, when bulldozers first came to Sawtooth Valley, the long-dead people who then owned the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch channeled the river so they'd have more grass for their cattle. The channeling sped up the river and started a huge mass of gravel moving downstream. Those old owners have bequeathed me a landscape of dream – because of all that gravel moving through, the place I call home is slightly surreal after a big water year. New fishing holes are in the river. Overflow channels have dried up. New beaches of fine quartz sand have been deposited. Above where

**If you're horrified by my ethical lethargy in this matter, you should probably subject your supermarket-bought vegetables to gas chromatography. Or your lawn, if you have a lawn service. Or your roadside, if you live on a road. Or your children's blood. Or your blood. Your tax dollars are probably spraying 2,4-D right now in your city park. Whenever I think about this matter, I always wonder what happened to the ambitious young Dow Chemical vice-president who drank a cup of 2,4-D on national TV to demonstrate that it was harmless. His was a kind of fossil behavior, too.**

I've picked rock and stacked it in low dams in old channels, large deposits of silt are in place, ready to grow new grass.

**MY EFFORTS TO GROW GRASS** are a kind of fossil behavior. It's my non-dozered version of what the Rocky Mountain owners were doing in 1935: creating more pasture. The difference is that in 1935 they needed the pasture. We don't raise horses anymore. Our crossbuck fences are rotten enough that elk walk right through them, leaving holes. A horse would get out on the highway and would tumble through a speeding motorhome all the way from windshield to the *We're Spending Our Children's Inheritance* bumper sticker. And even though we may not get any more big water years, I continue to build the silt-retaining dams. I pull weeds, pick rock, irrigate – and burn willows.

I have a five-year plan to replace the fences, but when I tried to buy a pole sale from the Forest Service this spring they said they're not selling live trees anymore because there aren't many of them left in the valley. I'm still adjusting to the idea that if I build a fence this year, it will be with poles that have already begun to rot. When we built the fences last time, my father was in his early 60s, and he said that this would be the last time he had to build them. He was right. He died at 82, about the time the elk started breasting through the sagging poles between the crossbucks.

A crossbuck fence is a *memento mori* with the authority to enforce its implications. If you build a fence up here, you've got a twenty-year chunk of your life deteriorating right before your eyes.

You can make jokes about selling fossil trees when you go into the local Forest Service office to get firewood permits, but you'll be the only one laughing. They're touchy about the beetle-kill. People yell at them because of the dying forest in the Sawtooth view-shed. People behind the desks start dancing and singing when this happens, and their song goes like this:

*It's not our fault  
It's not our fault  
It's not our fault  
It's Climate Change.  
It's not our fault  
It's not our fault  
It's not our fault  
It's a Natural Process.*

Their song-and-dance might be fossil behavior, too. There were a number of large controlled burns planned for the valley a few years ago, just before the beetle population exploded. Then a controlled burn torched whole neighborhoods in Los Alamos, New Mexico, and a number of careers ended before retirement benefits had matured. The Forest Service might hate pine beetles as much as my neighbor hates sagebrush, but controlled burns pose an unacceptable career risk upon the people setting them.

It's easy to think about fossil behavior when you deal with Forest Service employees. I think of some apocalyptic future when it hasn't rained for years, the yuan buys as many dollars as a dollar now buys yuans, Social Security has gone bankrupt, President-for-Life Jeb Bush rules to the edges of the Beltway from a bunker, and there are still people in tattered green uniforms sitting behind broken desks in the ruins of the local ranger station, waiting to put out fires in timber that has rotted into the ground years ago.

caution has stopped me from setting the willows on fire. Old-growth willows sit on decades of dead shoots, and there's something euphoric about seeing all that deadwood rising up in flames and ash and carbon dioxide, and then, a few months later, seeing new grass rise up from the blackened soil. And once the grass gets going, burning the fields just as the snow goes off kills new willow shoots. Here and there I've left the new growth alone. I've tried to protect lodgepole wherever they've volunteered, so when I burn I pour water in a donut-shape around new ones. Most of those little lodgepoles have willows growing beside them. Add elephant's head or fireweed to their spindly bases, and you have an encouraging tableau of new life, even if it does include a willow.

A number of years ago, cleaning out one of my father's many storage sheds after his death, I discovered a couple of gallons of 2,4-D stored in glass communion-wine jugs. My father was in the habit of bringing chemicals home that no one wanted in whatever containers were handy, and it has often been up to me to get rid of them. In this case, I sprayed the 2,4-D on the willows. It was the year of Willow Mega-Death, and I would come in from spraying, doff my Cold War-surplus rubber suit – it had been designed for Titan rocket crews – take a shower, and try not to think about the chlorinated hydrocarbons-cum-dioxins I had breathed whenever the breeze had taken a wrong swirl.

When I burned the fields the next spring, I could still smell 2,4-D. It is not a happy smell, and I know enough about its effects to worry about the unnatural molecules that have undoubtedly attached themselves to crucial telomeres in my cells, like bombs on railroad tracks. I also know what chlorinated hydrocarbons do to birds and frogs and insects. They tear holes in the web of life. I won't use 2,4-D again, unless I find another cache of it my father has left behind.

If you're horrified by my ethical lethargy in this matter, you should probably subject your supermarket-bought vegetables to gas chromatography. Or your lawn, if you have a lawn service. Or your roadside, if you live on a road. Or your children's blood. Or your blood. Your tax dollars are probably spraying 2,4-D right now in your city park. Whenever I think about this matter, I always wonder what happened to the ambitious young Dow Chemical vice-president who drank a cup of 2,4-D on national tv to demonstrate that it was harmless. His was a kind of fossil behavior, too.

So this spring I burned the rubber suit in the middle of a willow bush. Thick black smoke drifted up the valley and over my neighbor's place, and I was thankful that she wasn't home. The suit had been reinforced with fiberglass webbing, making tearing it nearly impossible – an essential safety feature, as plutonium wasn't the only lethal stuff they put into Titan rockets. After the suit burned, the ash heap drifted around a praying human shape defined by a gridwork of iridescent glass fiber.

**THE POND THAT MY MOTHER SEES** when she looks out from her kitchen wasn't always there. When my parents bought the place in 1953, it was the location of a sawmill. The ditch that is now used for irrigation went through the sawmill and carried sawdust into a slough.

Over the years, the slough filled with sawdust, and when I was five and six and seven, it was a wonderful place to play. The sawdust could be shaped into dams, the dams would fill with water and then break, and whatever had been placed below the dams – small towns made of sticks, roads full of toy trucks and cars, small figures of cowboys and

Three drawings by **Wes Mills**



by **Craig Lesley**

**I SPENT TWO YEARS IN THE LATE 1950S** making America safe for democracy by keeping a vigilant eye out for enemy planes – North Korean and Russian piloted MiGs that might be threatening Oregon's interior near Madras. Watching for enemy planes was first and foremost on my mind. Tuesday and Thursdays after school, my friend Tub Hobson and I stood on the flat roof of the Madras Fire Department, scanning the horizon for hostiles. ¶ With the naked eye, and a single pair of cloudy binoculars traded back and forth, we repeatedly swept all four quadrants, taking no chances enemy planes would sneak by us to attack Culver, Gateway, or, God help us, open fire on Madras itself. Our Boy Scout leader had warned that even seemingly harmless

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places like Metolius were prime targets, given the fact that they grew and stored potatoes there. He told of starvation during the Irish potato famines and how Stalin had starved the Ukrainians by taking away their potatoes. Now our enemies threatened central Oregon's spuds. I was convinced by the leader's speech, but Hobson was more skeptical.

"Hairballs," he whispered.

In spite of our best intentions, strict discipline faltered in about an hour. By that time, my eyes stung from staring over Mount Jefferson, Mount Bachelor, Three-Fingered Jack, and the Three Sisters, roughly the directions of North Korea and Russia, if you drew a line toward infinity.

Tub slugged me hard in the shoulder. "Don't rub it," he challenged.

His fists were bigger than mine and he had already grown the beginnings of a mustache.

"I think I felt a mosquito," I said but didn't rub it, even though it hurt like hell.

"I can throw farther than you can," Tub said.

"Not unless the bears come out of the woods."

"Betcha I can."

Dozens of rocks, some large as apples, mysteriously appeared on the flat composition roof before we manned each shift. We figured other high schoolers, probably the "hoods," threw them off – aiming for the city fire department's pumper truck parked in a gravel back lot a block away.

My shoulder remained sore after Tub's slug, but I limbered up and selected a baseball-sized rock. To gain momentum, I ran toward the roof's edge, then flung the rock hard and high. It clanged off the truck's water tank.

Imitating the voice of a baseball announcer, I spoke. "Tub Hobson rounds third and Lesley makes the throw from deep center field. It's going to be awfully close, folks, but he's called out at the plate. What a major-league throw!"

"Pure blind luck, you throwing that far." Tub spit on his right palm, wound up and threw with a mighty oomph.

The rock fell short.

Cupping my hand behind my ear, I asked, "Did you hear a clunk, Tub? Maybe I'm getting deaf."

Disgusted, he thrust his hands in his pockets and shrugged. "Hey, no kidding. How come you always out throw me, Lesley? You got smaller arms and skinnier shoulders." He seemed genuinely puzzled.

"Physics," I said.

"Physics?"

"Remember, you got a C in Mr. Johnson's physics class and I got an A. Momentum and thrust, Tub. Angle of trajectory. Keep that in mind."

"Weenie Arm!"

In that five minutes or so while we goofed off, I suppose a plane or two could have snuck by unnoticed, but fortunately, they didn't.

What did fly across the Madras skies during our watch? A yellow biplane crop duster, numerous magpies, a confused pheasant that wandered into town and dodged sparse traffic. Closer to the earth, we also spotted a few wobbly drunks escorted by the police from the Shangrila Bar to the city lockup, where they idled until their red-faced wives reclaimed them.

Thank heavens no enemy planes threatened Madras on our watch. In those days, the city police car had no radio (tight budget),

so if an emergency occurred, Madge Frudgett, the dispatcher, lit a red beacon on top of the firehouse. The light was visible from anywhere in Madras – except the dark, smoky bars. When he saw the light, Herb Vibbert, the officer on duty, would stop at a house, ask to borrow their phone and call in to see what was happening. All of this took time.

While Tub and I were freezing in the winter, baking in the summer, the light flashed only a few emergencies, but most were routine: stolen bicycles, cows breaking through fences, pregnant women going into early labor. Whoever spotted the flashing light first got to punch the other volunteer squarely in the shoulder and say, "Don't rub it," then add, "Do you see any enemy planes, Horse Face?"

Most shifts were uneventful outside of the throwing and punching. For the last hour of the shift, I gazed toward the snow-capped beauty of the Cascades – the jagged crest of Three-Fingered Jack, the rugged beauty of Broken Top – and I'd dream of catching brook trout later in the summer and hiking alpine meadows filled with wildflowers.

Shifting my eyes, I'd watch the sunlight glinting off the tin potato-shed roofs at Metolius and realize they did make ideal targets. Strengthened by my resolve to complete my duty, I'd stare hard at the sky another twenty minutes until black dots danced before my eyes. But even so, my mind wandered to my uncle Oscar's sporting-goods store and all the equipment I planned to buy with the summer earnings.

Finally, Madge would crunch out onto the gravel parking lot to announce our shift was over and invite us in for cookies and Kool-Aid in the dispatch room. We descended the shaky ladder while two more eager Civil Air Patrol volunteers headed for the roof.

After scarfing the drinks and sticking extra Sinckerdoodles into our pockets, Tub and I made our way toward separate homes, confident we had kept Madras safe for another three hours. We parted at the county jail, where sad-eyed men gestured out the bars, begging smokes.

"See you tomorrow, Bacteria Breath," Tub said.

"Same to you but more of it," I answered. I sauntered home, secretly pleased with his friendship and confident that any major league scouts visiting Madras would covet my throwing arm. Once again, Tub and I had guaranteed that central Oregon was safe from invaders.

Many years later, when the Metolius potato sheds finally did collapse, no one could discern a reason. Old age, gravity, saboteurs. No potatoes had inhabited the sheds for years, but a few transients had been reported taking up residency.

Earl Cordes, Jefferson County Fire Chief, drove out the five miles in response to a call from the sheriff's office. According to the story featured in the *Madras Pioneer*, Cordes yelled into the collapsed building (a dangerous mess) but got no response. "So far I've received no reply," he told the paper. "So they're either unconscious, dead, or not there."

I wonder what became of the so-called transients. Perhaps they were saboteurs, following sinister orders from a foreign power. Were they agents from Cuba, North Korea, the former USSR?

Maybe Cordes is right. "Unconscious," "dead" or "not there" implies no one is threatening central Oregon, but I'm not so easily convinced. Growing up with full knowledge of the Red menace, I know how sneaky those Commies can be. Even now, they could be hiding in seed carrots, the bluegrass fields or lurking in the mint, just waiting for us to lower our guard.