

My Involvement in the Discovery Center and Wasco County Historical Museum

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I was sworn in as Wasco County Judge in January of 1983. One of the responsibilities of the county court is to promote economic development in the county and its area. There had been a concern expressed that the county did not have a county museum.

Three young men came into my office one afternoon: Dan Durow, Mark Holloway and Rod McKee to talk about the very thing we had been thinking about. Dan said, "We need to stop some of those billfolds that are going up and down the freeway; maybe a county museum or something relating to the Oregon Trail."

The county court decided to appoint a committee or a task force to study their suggestion. We appointed about ten people with the instructions to meet as often as they deemed necessary and at the end of six months, come to the court and make a report. I attended most of those meetings. At the end of six months, if they wanted to continue on the committee, fine; if not, we would appoint someone else.

We appointed at least two committees. At that time, there was talk of forming a national scenic area in the Columbia River Gorge, and if it was formed, there might be some federal money for a convention center and an interpretive center.

The Gorge Act was passed in 1986, but it had nothing in it about money for the states involved. An Oregon Trail center in The Dalles would be great, but there was no money for that either. The last committee that we appointed eventually became a formal organization called Citizens of the Columbia Gorge. I was President, Jill Durow was treasurer, and Carolyn Wood was Secretary.

We felt that there needed to be some pressure put on congress to ensure some funding. I told Dan Durow that if he would write a presentation, I would go to Washington D.C. and present it to the Interior Committee of which Senator Mark Hatfield was a member.

The day I made the presentation, it just happened that Senator Hatfield was not present. We were discouraged and disappointed. The good senator later read the presentation and carried the ball to have \$5 million for a convention center to be in Washington and \$5 million for an interpretive center in Oregon.

The legislation passed, so the race was on among the Oregon counties, Multnomah, Hood River, and Wasco, to decide who would have the center. The \$5 million for the Interpretive Center was

to go to the Forest Service and it would be their responsibility to build and operate it. There never was any desire shown by Multnomah County to have a center, so the race was on between Hood River and Wasco County.

The Gorge Act included the forming of what would be called the Gorge Commission with representatives from three counties on the west side of the Gorge (Skamania, Klickitat, and Clark) and on the Oregon side, Multnomah, Hood River and Wasco. The final decision on the placement of both the Interpretive Center and the Convention Center was the responsibility of the Gorge Commission.

It was the responsibility of our appointed committee to study different possible sites for the Interpretive Center. We studied several and finally zeroed in on one about two miles west of The Dalles.

The problem was that it had three separate owners; Dale Jones and his wife had a fairly new home on one parcel, there was an operating concrete plant on another, and the third was owned by the Fruit and Produce League.

There was a fourth owner, Marion Taylor. Her property was really not a must in our overall plan, and it was a good thing that it wasn't because she was reluctant to sell her property as she had visions of building condominiums on it. As it turned out, because of the land-use planning, she would not have been able to build.

When our committee finally decided on that particular site, they decided that in case it was chosen by the Gorge Commission and to show that we had done our homework, we should have options on the three most important parcels, but had no money for that purpose.

I got a call from Bill Dick, an attorney whose office was across the street from the courthouse. He wanted me to come over because he had something he wanted to tell me. Bill said that there was a person in Wasco County who wanted to leave some money for a county museum. He said that this person was going to leave the majority of his estate for that purpose and he assured me that it would be a sizeable amount of money. To say the least, I was on cloud nine!

As this whole thing unfolded, we became more aware of our lack of money. With the support of our committee and a business person in The Dalles, we decided to have a fundraiser. It would be by invitation, but also open to the public. We had a dinner at the Shilo Inn, and it was very well attended. I was to make a presentation explaining our plan and our need for money. We thought of having a basket for donations at each table, but the consensus was we needed to get pledges from the people. It worked and over \$90,000 was raised.

There were many pledges from both businesses and individuals. At one time, I had over committed our money by \$64,000! I told Rose, "If all else fails, we might have to give a large donation." But the people came through with their donations...what a relief!

A few days after that, the city manager came to my office and said the city would give \$100,000, a very generous gift. Things were really starting to come together.

Bill Dick called again. When he called, needless to say, I dropped everything and went to his office. He said "this person" would give \$500,000 to purchase land with the understanding that there would be space for a county museum.

With this money in hand and the other pledges, we felt that we had enough money to pursue options on the concrete plant, Merle Henkle's, and Dale Jones' property.

I got an option on the concrete plant with an eventual price of \$500,000, a decision the mystery donor criticized me for making.

I knew it was too much, but we were putting a thriving venture out of business. There were buildings on the property. I asked the road department if they could use them. They said they couldn't, so, to save money on removing the buildings, I gave Mr. Henkle salvage rights. I wrote the agreement myself instead of getting an attorney, which I should have done. He even took the pump out of the well. I was disappointed with his greed and mad at myself for not getting legal help. The \$500,000 was 2.4% higher than the county appraisal.

The Jones property was the hardest one for me. They were retired, had built a new, modest house with a large swimming pool for his wife to exercise her severe arthritis condition and a large pond that Mr. Jones had stocked with fish. The price that he wanted was exactly 2.4% over the county appraisal, just a coincidence.

I made several trips to their place and each one got more difficult for me and I am sure for them also. I finally drew up an option agreement, this time with legal help.

I took the agreement out for the Jones to read and hopefully to sign. Dale read it and threw it on the floor and said, "Why would I sign it without any money?" I told him that when he signed it there would be money. He signed it and I was very relieved. I keep using the term "I" in these negotiations...it was the decision of the Citizen's Group to do this negotiating, but I did most of it with the very able help of Dan Durow.

December 21, 1988, the meeting to make the final decision as to which county was to get to build the museum was held in The Dalles. We felt quite confident that Wasco County would get it. Some of our committee was so sure that they purchased champagne to celebrate the occasion. They even took the wire (baskets) off the bottles ahead of time.

As the meeting drew on and even before the vote was made, the champagne got warmer and warmer and occasionally a cork would pop. It helped relieve the tension. The vote was finally made and Wasco County was the winner....then the champagne flowed.

Now, the rubber met the road. We had options on the property, the Forest Service was the recipient of the \$5 million. We now had to purchase the property and start the planning process. We eventually acquired the fruit and Produce League property.

As I mentioned, Mr. Henkle had salvage rights, but there were several large slabs of concrete...the floors for his buildings...and much of the offal from the concrete plant that had to be removed.

It was not long after the building removal that Jim Ellett, a local contractor, called me to have breakfast with him. He said that he would donate up to \$100,000 worth of his time and machinery to totally dispose of the concrete and totally clean up the property.

In the meantime, and before he did the work on the site, he had applied to the Gorge Commission for a permit to develop a piece of property on Brown's Creek for the building of a housing development. The plans were good and it would have been a nice addition to The Dalles area. It being partially in the site view of the gorge, the Gorge Commission turned it down.

I feared that since Jim's proposal was turned down he might not come through with his offer to clean up our site. What to do. I wrote a letter to Mr. Ellett telling him how sorry I was that he couldn't complete his planned project. But, I knew that he was a good, honest man and reminded him that ours was not a Gorge Commission project, but one of the citizens of the area.

I heard nothing more from him until I was informed that he had moved equipment to the site and had started work. His original plan was to haul the material off from the site, but he suggested that he dig a large trench and bury it. That proposal was alright with me.

He did the total removal and smoothed the whole area so you would never know there was ever anything else there.

Jim Ellett was one of the most honest and public-spirited persons I have ever known. He just moved in, did his job and moved out. No fanfare at all.

There were several months between the time that the area was cleared and the actual construction began. I knew that to keep the pond full, I would have to go to the site at least twice a week to turn the pump on and again to turn it off.

The pump was in a small building surrounded by a concrete wall. I had to climb down a ladder to get to it. They said the spring was on the other side of the highway. Sometimes when the pump was running, The Dalles Country Club would call and say the water level in their well was dropping, so I would go in and turn it off. The Water Master, Larry Tole, said they were just imagining the water level dropping as our spring and their well were not on the same aquifer.

Living in Dufur, I traveled 40 miles round trip every time I went in. So I accumulated several hundred miles during that time. I also would turn the water into a pipe that went to the shrubs in the parking lot. This had to be done because the pump had been removed from the well. I never could figure out why the water never got to the shrubs. I finally detected a break in the pipe. I talked to Bob DePriest in Dufur and he sent a man and backhoe in, dug it up and repaired the pipe. He donated the cost of that.

The secret of the mystery donor became known when Ernest Kuck passed away. He left his entire estate of 9 million for the building and operation of a Wasco Museum, and \$1 million to his wife. The majority of his estate consisted of tax-free municipal bonds and two ranches that were yet to be sold. U.S. National Bank was the custodian of his estate.

In his will, he left instructions for the forming of a committee to oversee the building and operation of a museum, in perpetuity. The county court was to appoint three members of which one was to be an attorney. The city was to appoint three members with the proviso that one member must be a member of the Wasco County Historical Society. The seventh member was to be the trust officer from the U.S National Bank. The members of the first board of directors for the Kuck Wasco County Historical Museum were myself, Gladys Siefert, Frederick Cramer, William G. Dick, James J. Weeks, Robert Rice, and Doug Forncrook from the bank. I was the first president of the board.

The original intent of the board was to build a separate county museum, as the planning project, it would be separate, but under a covered walkway to the Discovery center. With more planning, it was decided to build one bigger building, with the museum on one side and the Discovery Center on the other, and a common entry area in the middle.

We had more meetings than I can keep track of; meetings in the Forest Service office in Hood River, meetings in The Dalles. The majority of these meetings were before we hired an architect or contractor.

After one of the meetings in Portland, Bret Wilcox reported that since the contracting regulations were different and more liberal for non-governmental entities than for government agencies, we could get more for our money if the \$5 million which went to the Forest Service was granted to the Citizen's Group.

This was something that had never been done before. With the support of the Forest service and the strong leadership and support of Senator Hatfield, it was accomplished. This meant that the Citizen's for the Gorge would be the owner of the official Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center. This action put a terrific load and responsibility on the Citizen's Group. Not only the responsibility of building it, but also of operating the facility.

The first executive director of the Citizen's Group was Scott McFarlane. He helped in fundraising and grant writing. We received grants from Meyer Memorial Trust and Murdock Charitable Trust as a result of his writing ability.

We later had Bill LaMarche and Carolyn Shelton. Carolyn was involved with the building planning and construction. All three of these people contributed a lot toward fundraising and construction. They were my right hand people.

During the long planning process, I had the privilege of working with capable and helpful employees of the Forest service; Sandy Mendoca, Roberta Hilbruner, Jurgen Hess and Art Carroll.

The groups that were involved in the planning and later the operation of the facility were the Citizens for the Columbia River Gorge, the Forest Service, Wasco County, the Gorge Commission, and the Kuck Trust board.

We had what I called a pre-construction celebration with speakers from all entities involved. Our guest speaker was my good friend and true support of the project, Senator Mark Hatfield.

The architect was Thomas Hacker and Associates and the building contractor was Walsh Construction.

I attended many of the meetings with the construction people, the contractor and representatives from the Citizens and Forest service. I took pictures of the construction from start to finish. I put them in an album and gave it to the center.

The grand opening was May 24, 1997, twelve years after the first study group was appointed. It was attended by at least 1,000 people. The program consisted of speeches and recognitions of all the groups involved, and again, our guest speaker was Senator Mark Hatfield.

The first director of the center when it opened was Margaret Ann Lane, followed by Carol Mortland, Mike Perry, Ken Karsmizki, and our present director, Carolyn Purcell.

This (writing of these events) has turned out to be longer than I had anticipated, but when a person gets started, memories flood in and I am sure that I have omitted many things.

I want to especially thank Dan Durow for all of the help and support he gave me and to the overall success of the project.

This would not be complete without mentioning the fund raising efforts and success of Gene Adkisson. The walking paths at the center would not have been blacktopped had it not been for Gene's efforts.

My dear wife Roseanna has always been very supportive of the project and my efforts. We, Rose and I, put well over \$240,000 of our own money into the project.

It was a very rewarding experience for me, although, I am somewhat disappointed with the number of visitors and that the people in The Dalles never gave it their whole-hearted support.

I talked to the mayor and he said, "Well, you know, it's not in The Dalles." The city did put in the sewer and water system which they still maintain. The land is in the county's name, and they maintain the access road.

Brett Wilcox was very supportive of the project. He was on the board of the Citizens' for many years. His counsel was always timely and good. He and his wife, Mary, gave in excess of \$750,000 towards the project and he still supports the center very generously.

I was involved in the project for 23 years. Because of declining health, the result of age, I resigned from both the Citizens and the Kuck Founding Board. We still support it monetarily, and we go out for lunch occasionally.

It gets more difficult for me all the time. I am not complaining. It has been a good project for me and I thoroughly enjoyed it. Time passes on and it is in the hands of younger people now.