Special Meeting Announcement

County Museum Levy Petition Kick-off

January 20, 5:30 PM at County Museum

County Museum supporters are proposing a 3-year property tax levy of 5 cents/ $1000 evaluation to maintain viable operation of the three county museums. Such a levy can only be put on the ballot by the County Commissioners; they have agreed to do so provided at least 1000 signatures are collected showing community support for such a levy. This meeting will be the kick-off of the petition drive to meet that requirement.

Without this additional funding, only the Transient Room Tax money would be available which is not nearly enough to maintain current museum operations. So, without the proposed tax levy, sometime this summer, the museums would be closed to regular public use with only one and a half full time employees, and without the Museum Manager position now held by Todd Kepple.

This meeting is not an official Historical Society meeting but it is important that our members turn out and support this essential effort. A lot of help will be required for a successful campaign.
Production of Minor Crops in the Klamath Basin
By TODD KEPPLE

It's widely understood that farming and ranching are risky businesses, particularly in the notoriously frosty Upper Klamath Basin. But over the years many in the agriculture industry have taken on even greater risk by experimenting with unconventional crops.

As a matter of fact, just about every type of agriculture was experimental in the early settlement of the Upper Klamath Basin. Pioneer settler R.A. Emmitt loved to tell the story of how he sowed the first field of grain in the Basin in the mid-1880s, and had to endure "jibes and jokes" from his neighbors who were skeptical of his chances for success.¹

Emmitt brought in 1,300 bushels of grain that year, but even so, as more people took up farming in the Basin, it was easy enough to grasp the Basin's limiting factors: a short growing season, lack of rain and extremely low relative humidity in the summer, and the occasional summer frost.

Longtime Extension Agent Rodney Todd states that climate isn't the only - or even the primary - limiting factor. "It's really a matter of attempting to develop and hold onto markets, rather than just finding a reliable crop," says Todd, crops agent in Klamath County for Oregon State University from 1974 to 2005. "There are no new crops under the sun, but there are certainly new markets that come along from time to time."

(Photon: Bentgrass seed cut from a field on Wocus Bay in this 1932 photo by the Oregon State Agricultural Extension Service.)

After more than a century of agriculture in the Basin, most farmers are still restricted to just a handful of choices for what they might grow. The production of cattle and calves has always been the county's leading agricultural output. The major field crops for nearly a century have been barley, alfalfa and potatoes.
Still, we learn from numerous sources about experiments conducted with various alternative crops and livestock endeavors, some of which became significant sources of income for at least a few producers.

Several farmers from around the Klamath Basin brought samples of their produce for display at the Klamath County Promotion Club in Klamath Falls in October 1904. There was a striking array of apple varieties in the exhibition. Nathan S. Merrill brought seven varieties of apples, including White Bellflowers, King of Thornyskins and Gloria Mundii. Several growers displayed various strains of pippins, including the Newton Pippin, still regarded today as one of America’s most important heirloom varieties. Among the apple varieties displayed by F.L. Armstrong were Link River, Klamath Seedling and Klamath Pippin—probably now among the thousands of local varieties across America that have become extinct. Mr. and Mrs. J.W. Hamakar’s offerings of fruit included Italian prunes, white and yellow peaches, plums and butternuts.  

Other produce exhibited in 1904 included a 19-pound beet, a 21-pound cabbage and a 75-pound squash. In the grass and grain category there were displays of broom grass, pellucilla (millet) and billion dollar grass.

Henry Semon, credited with being among the first to ship potatoes from the Basin, also experimented with red clover in 1930. Tests eventually revealed that alsike (pronounced “AL-sick”) clover, a white-flowered variety, would be more profitable for Basin growers. Semon’s yield of the extremely fine Alsike seed ran as high as 11 bushels per acre.  

The total harvest of alsike clover in the Basin was estimated at 100,000 pounds in 1932.  

By 1951, production of alsike clover seed topped more than $2 million, with the Basin claiming as much as half the production in the U.S.  

Longtime Basin resident Marvin Newell recalls harvesting alsike seed with a team of horse-drawn mowing machine in the 1940s. The clover had to be harvested at night so that dew would provide enough moisture to keep the seed from falling out of seed heads. A battery-powered headlight was mounted on the mowing machine to allow night-time mowing.  

A major grass seed operation was established on the Wocus Marsh area of the Geary Brothers Ranch west of Klamath Falls. Since the marsh had only recently been reclaimed, it was considered an ideal location for producing pure grass seed. In 1934 the ranch harvested 50 tons of Seaside bentgrass seed, a variety of creeping bentgrass that was popular for use on golf courses. It was believed to be the biggest crop of bentgrass seed ever harvested on a single farm in the country.  

Like many farmers of the time, the Geary Brothers faced a variety of pests, including grasshoppers. While use of poisoned grain was the standard weapon in fighting ‘hoppers, the Gearys also used turkeys to prey on the insects. Similarly, a flock of 5,000 turkeys owned by S.J. McKee and H.A. Funk was pastured on ‘hopper-infested fields near Tulelake in 1934. It was estimated the birds consumed up to a ton of grasshoppers per day.  

One crop that has come and gone repeatedly in the Klamath Basin is sugar beets, with the first known experiments being conducted here in 1905.  

By 1907 there was hope a sugar beet factory might be soon established – a dream that was frequently courted over the years but never realized.
Beets were still being grown in 1917 and '18, though the local press reported that a shortage of foreign labor was hindering production. Testing of sugars in local beets was reported again in 1929. A thousand acres was committed to sugar beets in 1938. The sugar beet crop at Tulelake was reported to be in good condition in July 1946.

Beets largely disappeared from the Basin until 1993, when they were again touted as a viable crop for the Basin. Several growers signed contracts to grow sugar beets for Spreckels and Holly, but by 2001 the crop had again disappeared from Klamath County.

Sugar beets and another root, mangels, were being used as a means to provide succulent feed for dairy animals in 1932, according to an Oregon State Agricultural College report.

The idea of using root crops for winter feed was revived in 1978 and '79, when County Extension Agent Ron Hathaway and sheep producer Dale Fleming teamed up on an experiment to grow turnips on six acres, and then turn a herd of sheep into the field in the fall. It was hoped that turnips could be planted following the cutting of grain in a field and supply feed by fall. Hathaway said the sheep did well on the turnips, but the experiment revealed there was not enough time to grow sizeable turnips late in the season.
Just as sugar beets have come and gone, mint production has also waxed and waned. The Evening Herald reported in September 1920 that a mint crop was being distilled at Eagle Ridge.\(^\text{18}\)

Repeated attempts at producing a corn crop have been made. The Evening Herald reported in August 1919 that a fine corn crop was expected to be harvested near Fort Klamath.\(^\text{19}\) Harry Paschke grew corn for silage at least three years in a row in the 1970s.\(^\text{20}\) Many years earlier, a different crop was being chopped for feed. The Herald reported in 1919 that H.A. Talbot was chopping Russian sunflowers for silage.\(^\text{21}\)

Strawberry plants for transplanting have been considered a relatively new crop for the Klamath Basin in recent years, but again there’s a history behind the crop. Strawberry plants were being produced locally as far back as 1952.\(^\text{22}\) Plants were also being harvested in Butte Valley in 1985.\(^\text{23}\)

One experiment in 1953 that proved to be a lasting success for a handful of growers was horseradish. Rootstock provided by a commercial processor was planted on a half-acre plot at the Tulelake Field Station, giving rise to the crop later produced by several growers in the area.\(^\text{24}\)

Besides field crops, there have also been numerous experiments with various types of alternative livestock, with some yielding more hope than others. The Odessa Fur Farm was reported to have made a shipment of foxes worth $8,000 in 1923.\(^\text{25}\) By 1938, at least 11 fox breeders were listed in the county.\(^\text{26}\)
In the poultry arena, Roy Gooding operated the Basin’s largest egg farm, starting around 1930 on the Lakeview Highway a few miles east of Klamath Falls. By 1978 it had a capacity of 65,000 laying hens. Willamette Egg Farms bought the Gooding operation in September 1991, and closed it a few years later.

Turkeys have been raised at a number of locations around the Basin. A rail car of fat turkeys was shipped from Klamath Falls in November 1924. The Herald reported in October 1931 that turkeys were being raised at the Bloomingcamp Ranch on the Skillet Handle along the west side of Upper Klamath Lake.

Turkey Hill near Malin is named for a turkey farm that operated 2 miles north of the town. Manager Bruce Hagerman reported in 1937 that the farm was producing as many as 40,000 birds per year.

Buildings from the turkey farm near Malin remain standing to this day.

(Photograph: Turkeys are shown in this 1932 photo by the Oregon State Agricultural Extension Service.)

Another large producer some years later was Modoc Turkey Farms. The Herald and News reported in November 1950 that the company was in the process of shipping 40,000 turkeys that year. The birds were hatched in incubators at Tulelake, pastured in Swan Lake, and processed at Merrill.

Speaking of birds, several local residents experimented with emus, ostriches and rheas in the 1990s. Before emus there were chinchillas. The Herald and News reported in February 1964 that there were 146 chinchilla “ranchers” within the region. And long before chinchillas there were muskrats. The Evening Herald reported in March 1929, that A.J. Streeter’s muskrat farm on Crooked Creek near Fort Klamath was held to be a success.

The following month the paper reported that Calvin Baker was operating what was believed to be the biggest muskrat farm in the country at Aspen Lake. Additional details reported the following year indicated the La Pine Muskrat Farm at Aspen Lake expected to produce up to 300,000 pelts per year. That same year there were 400 muskrats released at the Oregon Muskrat Breeders Association Farm 10 miles south of Klamath Falls.

The introduction of muskrats to the Upper Klamath Basin touched off a spirited debate about the rodents. Many local residents considered them to the bane of dike and irriga-
tion ditch managers, while others enjoyed trapping them and selling the pelts. In 1933 Charles Mack Jr. called for an open season on muskrats with a goal of complete extermination.37

A.J. Streeter, president of the Oregon Muskrat Breeders Association, fired off a sharp reply to Mack’s article, denying the claim that the animals damage dikes and promoting their value for furs. “If allowed to develop, the muskrat industry will bring more money to the Klamath basin than does the lumber industry,” Streeter wrote.38

In 1950, nearly 12,000 muskrats were trapped on the Lower Klamath and Tule Lake wildlife refuges. Refuge managers, however, saw some value in having the muskrats on the refuge, as their burrows provided habitat for birds, and it was believed the muskrats rejuvenated wetland vegetation. The refuge also kept half the muskrats pelts gathered by trappers. The pelts were worth $1 each at the time.39 Some muskrat trapping in the Basin continues even today.

A number of experimental operations have been conducted over the years at the Liskey Ranch on Lower Klamath Lake Road. Three geothermal wells have been used to heat hothouses for the production of tree seedlings, flower and vegetable seedlings, tropical fish and, most recently, insects.

The Liskeys currently raise batches of spider mites that become food for predator mites, which are in turn sold as biological control agents for use by farmers around the world. Tracey Liskey reports they have about 100,000 of greenhouse space devoted to the spider mite operation, producing a new crop of insects every 14 days.40

Tracey says his father, Jack Liskey, once used the geothermal resource at the ranch to cook potatoes for cattle feed.

“Dad would buy a bunch of skinny cows coming off the range, and feed them cull potatoes, which he could get for free,” Liskey says. “But the cows would choke on the spuds, especially in the winter when they were frozen. So we ended up cooking the spuds in two-ton baskets, and that way cows wouldn’t choke on them, and they liked them and did really well on them. That was back in about the 1960s.”

Looking back over the years, Crops Agent Rodney Todd returns to the importance of adjusting to changing markets as Basin farmers prepare for the future. “It’s not that we can’t grow those things well. But you’ve got to have a steady stream of whatever your market wants,” Todd says. “You could not fault the quality of what we can grow here, at least at the peak of our harvest season. Unfortunately, that doesn’t work for the produce broker who has to serve a chain of supermarkets that have a year-round demand.”41

1, Evening Herald, June 5, 1935.
2, Klamath Republican, Oct. 27, 1904.
3, Oregonian, Oct. 21, 1934.
4, Oregon State Agricultural College report for Klamath County, 1931-32, p40.
8, Oregonian, Oct. 21, 1934.
9, ibid.
10, Klamath Republican, Feb. 9, 1905.
11, Klamath Republican, May 16, 1907.
12, Evening Herald, Feb. 26, 1918.
13, Evening Herald, May 2, 1929.
14, Evening Herald, March 25, 1938.
16, Oregon State Agricultural College report for Klamath County, 1931-32, p36.
19, Evening Herald, Aug. 27, 1919.
21, Evening Herald, Sept. 18, 1919.
26, Polks Directory for Klamath County, 1938.
27, Evening Herald, Nov. 20, 1924.
29, Evening Herald, Sept. 29, 1937.
33, Evening Herald, March 1, 1929.
34, Evening Herald, April 15, 1929.
35, EH April 11, 1930.
36, EH March 8, 1930.
37, EH Feb. 7, 1933.
38, EH Feb. 18, 1933.
39, H&N May 7, 1952.