



# The Dalles Chronicle

SUNDAY, March 26, 2017



ONE DOLLAR



## HISTORY

Guess this week's History Mystery

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## SPORTS

Riverhawks celebrated for solid winter campaigns

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SERVING NORTH CENTRAL OREGON SINCE 1890



# A changing landscape

■ By RaeLynn Ricarte  
*The Dalles Chronicle*

It's hardly surprising that properties along von Borstel Road in Sherman County would be inhabited by von Borstels, but it is notable that so many members of the family remain in agriculture at a time when small farms are on the decline.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates a 2 percent annual decrease in the number of family farms across America. In addition, the average age of a farmer has grown by nearly eight years since the mid-1980s, from 50.5 years to 58.3 years.

With many of the younger generation choosing careers that pay better and have more reasonable work hours, Alan and Judy von Borstel consider themselves fortunate that their son Nick will one day be the fifth generation to run the family's wheat and cattle operation.

Nick, the youngest of Alan and Judy's three children, plans to return to the property near Grass Valley, which has breathtaking views of seven peaks in the Cascades Range, after completing his education. He is a senior at Oregon State University majoring in crop and soil science with an emphasis in agronomy.

His sisters also help out on the farm, but have chosen careers in the medical field; one to care for humans and the other for animals.

Jana is a veterinarian at Mid-Columbia Veterinary Clinic in Goldendale and Shelby a nurse in The Dalles.

Alan and Judy have not yet decided how to transition to the next generation, which is a complicated endeavor during a time when properties need to be larger to turn a profit.

"Every farm family has to decide what it wants to do," said Judy.

That decision will be made later; right now, Alan and Judy's goal is to pass along a farm that is still viable, no small feat when the market price of wheat fluctuates and is currently at the same price it was in 1982 when Alan started farming.

"We bought our farm from my folks and are trying to use sustainable practices," he said.

The original family homestead, built in 1916 by Carsten and Margaretha (Patjens) von Borstel, is still standing, although it is no longer occupied. The weather-beaten structure is a reminder to their descendants that hard work and a vision for the future allowed early family members to carve out an existence from land with shallow soil that sometimes seemed to produce more rocks than crops.

"We raise rocks here and Alan and the kids have spent a lot of hours removing them," said Judy.

"Doing that work in the summer helped pay my way through college," added Jana.

Carsten and Margaretha immigrated from Krautsand, Germany, to Sherman County in 1891 and first lived in a rustic cabin while they worked the sun-baked soil.

The county is referred to as the "Land Between the Rivers" because the Columbia forms the northern border and the east and western boundaries are marked respectively by the rugged canyons of the John Day and Deschutes. All but a few miles of the southern border is marked by Buck Hollow Creek, which runs through the von Borstel holdings.

Sherman is the only county in Oregon without forestation and covers about 831 square miles. It is the third largest wheat producing county in the state, despite being 29th out of 36 counties in size, according to the Oregon State University Extension Service.

Alan said a military road to Camp Drum in The Dalles, which was later named Fort Drum, ran through von Borstel lands. Built when Oregon was a territory, the Army post was used to deal with Native American conflicts as settlers travelled through the area. Alan said enough traffic was generated along the road that even today little wheat will grow today where there were once wagon ruts.

The early von Borstels had seven children and left each with a section of land. Divisions also happened with the next generation — Alan's grandparents had six children — so siblings and cousins settled next to each other.

Judy, who grew up on an irrigated row crop farm — primarily berries, beans and corn — in the Willamette Valley, met Alan at a von Borstel wedding. She had been invited because her sister had married Alan's cousin years earlier.

"Now that's a story to tell," grinned Alan.

Judy's sister lives less than two miles down the road. Their Sherman County community, as well as the von Borstel clan, is full of individuals with varied viewpoints on politics and farming, but they still get along and help each other out.

"I'm very lucky to have married into a big extended family that is very loving," said Judy.

She and Alan have been married 32 years and, like many farm wives, Judy has supplemented the family income by working in another profession. She is a registered nurse and has been employed since her marriage at Mid-Columbia Medical Center, first full-time in medical/surgical and pediatrics nursing and, for the last seven, part-time in oncology at Celilo Cancer Center.

"It's a one-hour commute each way that can be two hours in the winter," she said.

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## Inside



Alan von Borstel, above, is a wheat farmer and cattle rancher in south Sherman County. In the first 2017 edition of *Farm & Ranch* he talks about major challenges facing the agriculture industry.

Contributed photo

## Portland police chief placed on leave by mayor

PORTLAND (AP) — Portland's police chief has been placed on administrative leave by the city's mayor. *The Oregonian/OregonLive* reports Chief Mike Marshman was placed on leave by Mayor Ted Wheeler late Friday. Marshman's executive assistant, Lt. Michael Leasure, also was placed on leave. The mayor's office offered no details of why the two are under investigation.





Von Borstel

Continued from Page A1

Alan, who has six siblings, was one of three graduates from Kent Grade School. All three students, one a cousin, also graduated from Sherman High School and OSU together — Alan with a degree in agricultural engineering.

“I always wanted to come back; I wasn’t sure it was going to work, but I wanted to try it,” he said.

The von Borstels, like other farmers in the region, grow soft white winter wheat, which is lower in protein than other species and is used primarily for pastas, cookies, cakes and pastries.

Alan said market prices have stayed down due largely to the fact that world production of wheat and other grain crops has tripled since 1960 and continues to grow.

Wheat is grown on more land area than any other commercial food and global trade is greater than all other crops combined, due in large part to the fact that wheat is the leading source of vegetal protein in human food.

Bountiful harvests have benefitted consumers, but made it more difficult for farmers to turn enough of a profit to keep going, said von Borstel.

Therefore, it is important that Americans think carefully when crafting new regulations that can drive up operating costs and hamper production on smaller farms, he added.

In 1900, 42 percent of the U.S. population lived on farms, but that number has dropped to about 2 percent today, according to the federal department of agriculture.

There were six million farms in 1935 and there are now about 2 million. Although there are less people producing commodities, the size of the average farm has doubled by necessity.

“Although many people don’t like the idea of bigger corporations, you have to get bigger to stay in business,” said Alan.

Because there are so few people growing food for 321 million Americans,



Harvest season on the von Borstel farm now involves the use of high-tech machinery that increases efficiency.

Contributed photo



George and Marie von Borstel stand on sacks of wheat from the 1937 harvest.

most of whom live in large urban centers, there is a growing disconnect about how policies approved at the state and federal level play out on the ground, said von Borstel.

“Farming is a culture and they don’t understand our way of life,” added Judy.

Alan is secretary for the Oregon Wheat Growers League, based in Pendleton, and said farmers in the organization join others in the belief that it is time to educate citizens

about what is going on in their industry.

“It’s time for ag to tell its story,” he said. “We need to help people understand what we do and how we do it if our family farms are to survive.”

He said a class of society is being lost with the reduction in family farms and with it an iconic way of life. If policies don’t change, he said the possibility of farms being owned and operated by one family for generations could be destroyed.



Judy von Borstel, above, listens as her husband, Alan, counts off some of the major challenges facing the industry

Mark B. Gibson photo



During the recent long, cold winter, Alan von Borstel was kept busy feeding pregnant cows and keeping their water from freezing over.

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