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Up from the ashes

FLAMES engulf the Underwood Fruit pear packing plant, located in Bingen just east of the Hood River Bridge, Oct. 18, 2017. This photo was taken by Kyle Coxon from a White Salmon bluff at about 8:15 a.m.

Mark Gibson | The Dalles Chronicle

Underwood Fruit Company to start new plant in January

Ever since the Underwood Fruit Company pear-packing facility burned to the ground Oct. 18, 2017, managers of Underwood Fruit, Mt. Adams Fruit and The Dalles Fruit Company have been packing pears on borrowed time, juggling operations between five fruit packing and shipping facilities, their own and others.

The new plant is about double the size of the original plant, which operated from 1955 to 2017. At the old plant, new equipment was added over time, and packed closer and closer together. “It got tighter and tighter,” said Ed Ing, superintendent of the packing warehouse, where he has worked for 35 years. “This plant

is much more spacious, and we’ve added some capacity as well,” he said. “We believe this will be the largest pear packing facility in the world,” he added.

Innovation

“It’s the latest technology,” added CEO and manager Don Gibson. “We’re adopting recent advances.”

One of those advances is an optical fruit sorter for pears. Optical sorters have been standard in cherry and apple packing plants for some time, but the technology has been challenging with pears because of their soft skin and odd shape, Gibson said.

To be optically sorted, each pear has to be isolated, positioned and scanned. Unlike apples and cherries, they can’t be rolled without damaging the skin. The solution involves moving the fruit through the machine individually on what look like small cups on a conveyor belt.

The sorting process will be

slower than that used for other fruits, but that doesn’t bother Ing. “We’re looking for consistency in the packed box, so the customer will receive the

exact grade demanded by the market,” he explained. Using infrared light, each pear will be evaluated inside and out and sorted according to the param-

eters required by the customer. Quality trumps speed, Gibson added, and food safety trumps everything.

“This whole building is de-

signed for food safety,” he said. “Every surface can be cleaned and sterilized.” For example, the inner walls throughout the facility are faced with a smooth



Photos by Mark B. Gibson

CLEAN, dry and ready-to-box pears will be first sorted by the digital imaging system, above. Sorting the soft-skinned fruit is challenging, and the pears will run through the system much slower than apples or cherries do in similar systems. Standing on the deck from which the process is setup and monitored are, left to right, Brad Pickering, assistant superintendent; Ed Ing, superintendent of the packing warehouse; and Don Gibson, CEO and manager.

PVC-like surface that allow them to be easily washed.

Food safety

That emphasis will be evident the moment the first bin of loose pears is brought into the plant: Placed on a conveyor, each bin will go through a "skid washer" to scrub clean the underside. "That is where most of the dirt and bacteria are," explained Ing.

The pears will then be dumped (not floated out, like cherries and apples — pears don't float) and enter the plant. The empty bins are sent through a secondary cleaning system in which the entire bin is cleaned so no bacteria or contaminants will be transferred back to the grower.

The pears are washed in a room dedicated solely to that function, so that only thoroughly clean fruit enters the sorting and packing area.

"It gets all of the decay or-

ganisms off, and keeps them away from the packed box," said Ing.

The pears are then dried, sorted and packed in a state-of-the-art series of large rooms that occupy most of the facility, as each pear is evaluated, graded, packed to order and shipped to customers.

Among the innovations are six tall robotic arms in a cold room that will sort and stack labeled boxes of fruit. The arms will automate a difficult and dangerous job: Stacking 44-pound boxes by hand is hard work, especially in a cold room, said Gibson. "It's where we had the most injuries, and the most turnover. It's the area where we have the hardest time finding help," he explained. "We hope to fill the line with the same number of workers as we had before," he said, despite a 40 percent increase in capacity."

Many of those workers have been working night shifts and

modified schedules for the past year, Ing said.

For workers, packing fruit is a 10 or 11 month work season, because workers typically start with cherry packing at The Dalles Fruit Company in Dallesport in early summer, and then move to the packing facility in Underwood later in the summer.

Mt. Adams Fruit

With the new facility will come a new logo and name for both the Underwood and Dallesport fruit packing plant: Although under the same ownership, they will operate under the Mt. Adams Fruit Company name and logo in the coming years.

"All three companies will tie into one name now," Gibson said.

Although a packing plant of this size would typically take 3 years or more to design and build, the Underwood plant

will soon begin operation after only a year, although construction work will still be underway for non-packing areas like the upstairs office and the storage area.

The first pears will be running through the facility in January. "We're real excited about it. We are anxious to get this running and get everyone working again," Ing said.

Having the pear-packing plant back will be a relief, Ing added. "The fire was awful. You get up in the morning, your whole life can change pretty quick. But the months following the fire have been really hard also."

"We pack fruit for a lot of growers, and there has been more cost, more uncertainty, since the fire," added Gibson. "We've had people watching the quality, getting things right. The whole team has done a fantastic job getting us through it."



Mark B. Gibson photo

A CONSTRUCTION worker is dwarfed by a network of beams that will fill a large warehouse connected to a shipping dock. Electric pallet movers, called Rovers, will run on tracks throughout the maze-like network of beams to store and retrieve stacked fruit boxes prior to loading onto trucks.



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Holidays Full of Fruit

Caleb Lundquist | The Dalles Chronicle

A beautiful box blushing with red apples, a tower of perfectly packaged pears or a basket blooming with a bounty of assorted fruits — all three and dozens more make up the array of gifts offered annually by Hood River's own The Fruit Company.

Millions across the nation have heard of The Fruit Company, which has prepared, packaged and shipped fruit-filled gifts from Hood River since 1999. As the holiday season comes in full swing, The Fruit Company find themselves at the peak of production, fulfilling thousands of

orders per day.

"We do about 70 percent of our business during November and December," said Scott Webster, co-founder of The Fruit Company. "We're a very peak-based company."

The Fruit Company employs 34 full-time staff, but total employment fluctuates throughout the year. At their peak, they have around 300 employees helping ensure orders are met on time. That's quite a jump in employment, but they need it, especially given their growth.

"We started with 535 gifts our first Christmas season, and this year we'll do around



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370,000,” said Webster.

With an ever-increasing demand for their product, The Fruit Company relies heavily on its employees, both full-time and seasonal, to retain the quality and efficiency they offer their customers. Orders come in at all hours of the day, and production must match the demand for weeks on end.

“We continue to see our most important asset being our employees,” said Webster. “Having to ramp up to nearly 300 employees for the holiday season, our 34 full-time employees must be able to lead. I couldn’t be more proud of our employees and what they do in producing the finest high-end fruit gifts in the market today.”

The Fruit Company’s growth has come at a steady pace, with a few significant milestones; they received a boost in notoriety in 2003 when Oprah Winfrey featured them in her magazine. In fact, with the exception of a couple years, The Fruit Company has seen continual growth in size and sales. They have begun selling product on Costco.com and finding success with sales such as Cyber Monday.

“We recently purchased a facility in Kentucky that now serves as our eastern distribution center,” said Webster.

With their growth, The Fruit Company continues to innovate their product line, maintaining classics as well as offer-



ing new gift choices for returning and first-time customers. Personal customization — letting the customer be involved in the gift design — has be-

come a focus for the company. Though the weeks leading up to and through Christmas will prove their busiest, Webster knows from experience that

production will continue into the New Year.

“Since November and December are so busy, new people learn about us,” said Web-

ster. “Because of this, we see about 10 percent of our annual business come after those months, in January.”

To learn more about The

Fruit Company visit www.the-fruitcompany.com.



Pictured from R to L: Jason Lewis, Branch Manager and Ben Crew, Insurance Agent

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READY to rope, four horseman await the start of a community branding at corrals on Tygh Ridge, south of Dufur, in 2014.

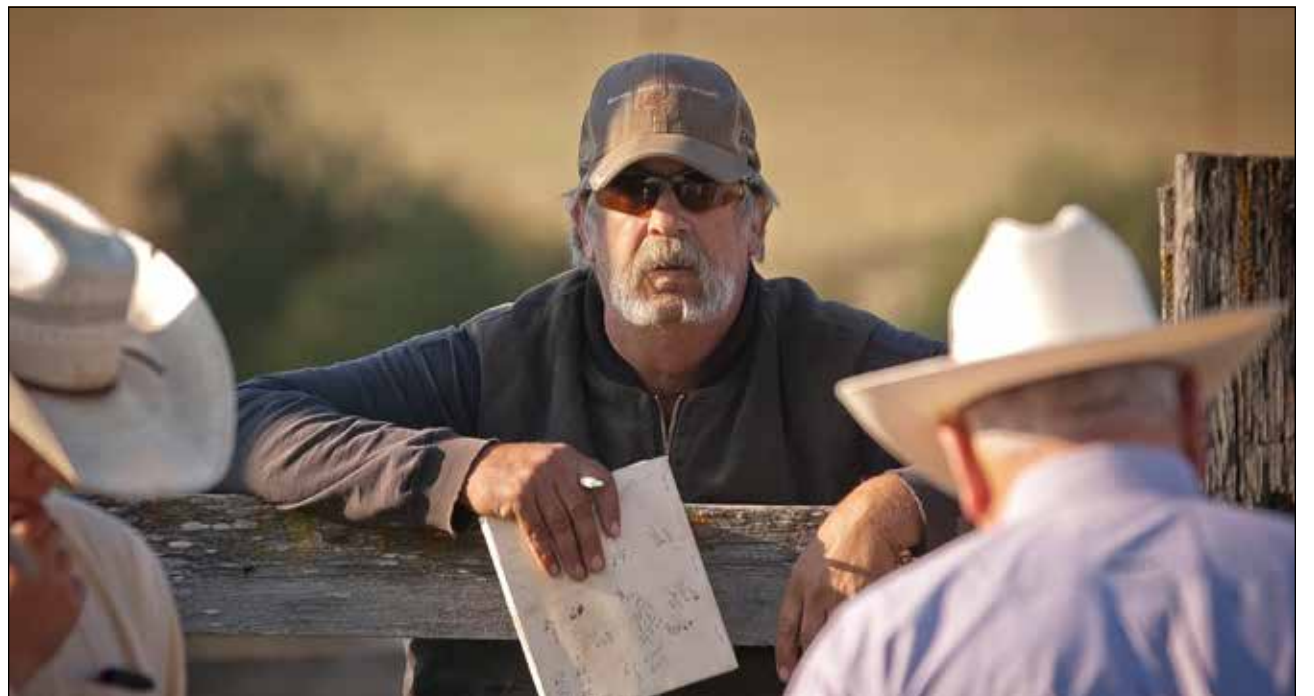
ly simple and have a language all their own. They are made up of numerals, pictures, characters, such as a clash, circle or cross, and capital letters of the alphabet. There are many different combinations and both letters and numerals can be upright, lying down or “lazy,” connected, reversed, used singly, joined, or hanging. Picture brands, such as a setting sun, are usually used alone.

An upside down “R” represents the “Crazy R” ranch or, if the letter is turned 90 degrees, the “Lazy R.” A short horizontal line over the “R” would be read as “Bar R” and if the letter is within a circle, the “Circle R.” The letter within a four-sided box tilted 45 degrees would be the “Diamond R.”

Although brands can look like hieroglyphics to the untrained eye, the ability to read these symbols is referred to as “callin’ the brand.” They are read from left to right, top to bottom or, when one character encircles another, from outside to inside.

The rancher or cow boss typically runs the show at branding time and is usually the person who performs castrations on male calves at the same time. The brand must burn deep enough to get through hair and the outer layer of skin, but no farther, so the person applying the iron has to work very carefully.

A clean, precisely applied brand is easier to read and more difficult to alter.



BRAND inspector Joe Forrest compares notes with cattle buyers and sellers at the Brendon Johnson ranch near Wamic in 2014.

Bill the Bull and the art of the bluff

Mark Gibson | The Dalles Chronicle

I call him Bill the Bull, but that is not his real name. He is not my bull, but we are uneasy neighbors and he has broken loose, running down the hill toward town.



He leaves big tracks in a new lawn, then heaves himself over an old fence, crushing it flat. I come at him

from the side, trying to circle him back up the hill — quickly, in hopes he will end up where he belongs before he realizes how weak and puny I am.

Bill starts to turn, then makes a leap over a steep bank; I rush to get ahead, hoping I can somehow cut him off. But I'm too slow, and a thousand pounds of bull crash past me. I retreat up the hill to retrieve my shoe, which I lost in a wedge of downed timber.

"He's not my bull," I explain after rushing past a family backyard barbecue, pushing him away from the green lawn and children. "Sorry about that," I add.

A farmer comes out to help, and eventually we pen him in his corral: Bill the Bull is eager to reach the cows just beyond, and for all his experience he has yet to realize gates swing both ways. He goes in and I slam the gate. The farmer agrees to host Bill until the next



day, when the owner should be home and can load him into a trailer.

Bill vanishes into the corral.

It's a long walk uphill to home, and somehow Bill the Bull is there to greet me: He has apparently learned to push a heavy steel gate up and off its hinges, and is grazing in the unfenced orchard by my little rental house.

The bull's owner is out of town, but if I call up to the house his wife will come

down with the kids to herd him around, something they did when he was a calf. But they haven't spent much time around Bill lately, and he is no longer a little boy.

He's not my bull, but my son plays in this yard and the bull is loose, just down the hill. So I arm myself, pounding a round file into an old hoe handle. It won't penetrate his hide, but will perhaps deliver enough of a poke to convince him I'm the boss, a fact he is eager to

challenge.

Moving slow, I walk down to the orchard.

I'm in luck. He is standing in the grass, facing the paddock gate. I slip in front of him, reaching behind my back to open the gate. He thinks I want him to back away, so instead he paws the ground and lunges forward. For a moment we are nose to nose, then the gate pulls open and he charges past me and through, kicking his heels and air-butting with his

head. "Hah," he bellows.

"Hah!" I bellow back, quickly securing the gate behind him before he realizes he is on the wrong side of the fence.

He soon figures out he was tricked and throws a tantrum.

I retrieve my old fencing toolbox and work my way around the paddock. Bill follows me along. The first part of the fence is tight and strong. It is not my fence, but I fixed it anyway after Bill squeezed through the first time. He eyes

me through the wire, frustrated at his inability to leap through and crush my head like a grape, and takes a gallop around the paddock.

The fence becomes loose where I had stopped my work, wires dipping and rising like telephone lines.

As I approach the most recent hole where he had bulled his way through that morning, he charges up, prancing and throwing his head.

He had forgotten it was

there!

He kicks and paws the ground, charges the hole, throws back his head and snorts. "I'm going to get out again," he wants to say. "And then I'll trample you into bloody pulp."

But I have my modified hoe handle, and stand in the breach. Bill the Bull is thoroughly bluffed; he has no idea how puny this particular

human is.

I begin repairing and tightening the wires, mumbling threats about Rocky Mountain oysters, fresh steak and hamburger.

But my threats are empty. He knows it, and I know it.

I finish the fence and head to dinner, throwing him a flake of hay to mollify his annoyance.

Like uneasy neighbors on a disputed border, we sit in our

in opposing trenches to eat and rest, calling temporary truce and watching the sunset.

Author's note: Bill the Bull was eventually sold at auction in The Dalles, and I moved to a new neighborhood. Having survived all our encounters, I can honestly say I miss him, just a little, and think of him every time I eat a hamburger.

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Iconic fruit label goes big

Kirby Neumann-Rea | Hood River News

This fruit label is visible from the highway.

Hood River artist Mark Nilsson created a huge re-production of one of Hood River valley's most famous fruit labels, "Duckwall Brand," on the north

face of the Duckwall Pooley packing house in Odell this fall.

Nilsson finished the work in time for the traditional employee photo session Duckwall Pooley holds each October, when all employees are on

hand for fruit packing.

Nilsson completed the 30-foot-wide mural over a three-week period. You can see it from Odell Highway, including the prominent "100 Years."

"It is really quite the honor," Nilsson said.

"I'm keeping fairly true to the label, but obviously it's my brush strokes and kind of how I feel, so definitely some of my own touches," Nilsson said while working on the mural. "The duck is the part where I really get to be artistic, but the lettering's the lettering, the background's the background."

"This is old school graphing out, no fancy equipment, it's drawn and measured by hand, a lot of leveling to make sure it's square. So far so good," said Nilsson, whose large murals can also be seen at HR Bicycles and inside the Hood River Library.

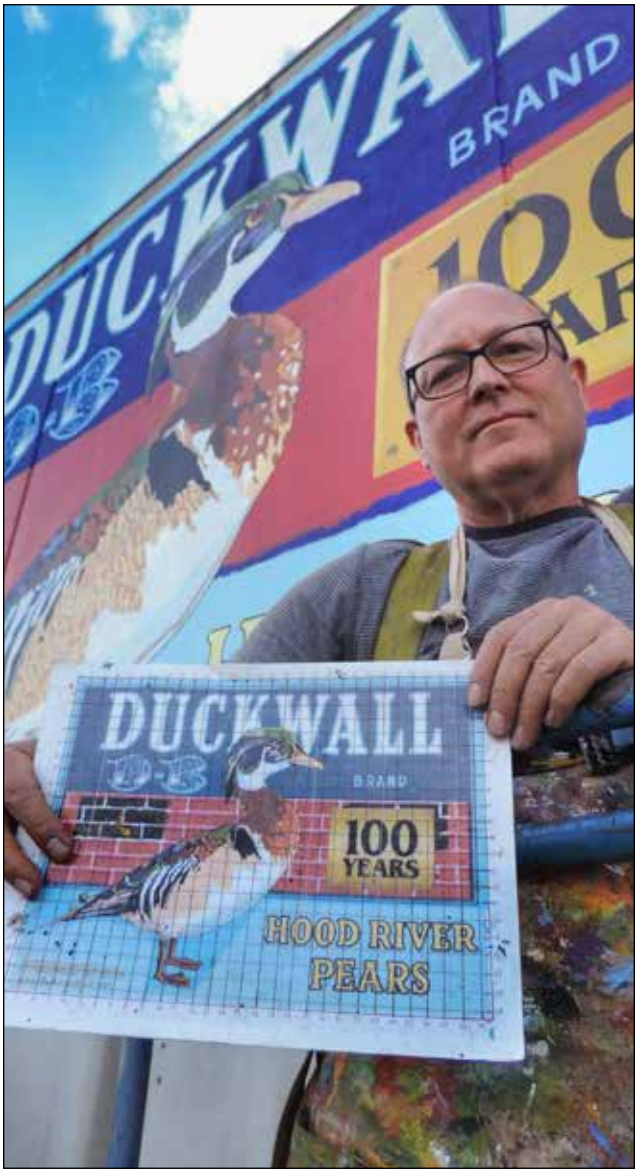
Those works are pure Nilsson expression, but in this case he reproduced, 20-times bigger, a famous fruit box image beloved not just at Duckwall but as a Hood River orchard icon.

The mottled profile of the buffle-headed duck is where Nilsson gets a feathery field for his impressionistic style.

"You want it to be the same duck, not too weird," he said.

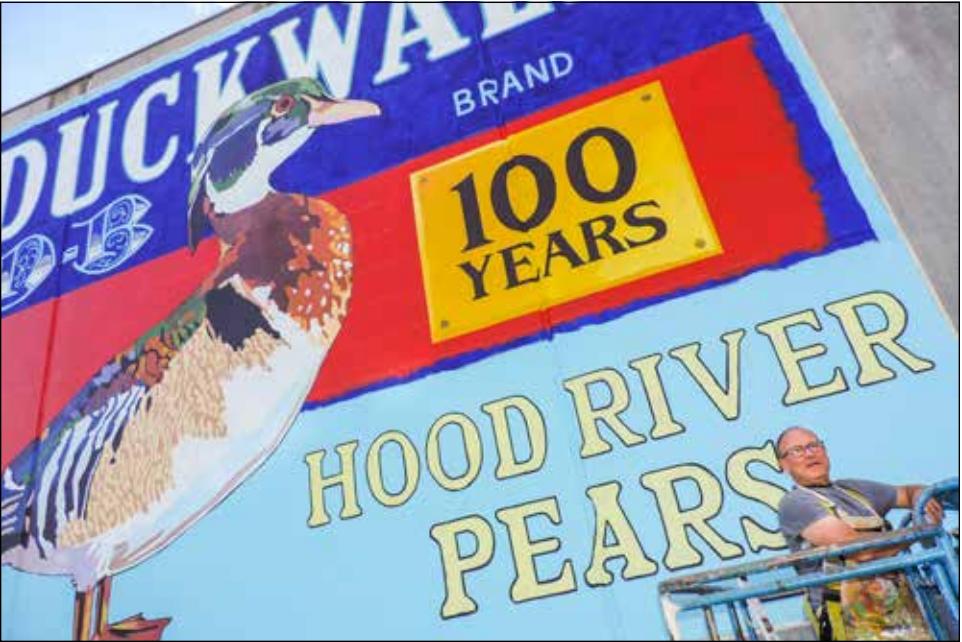
Once the design was laid in, he went over it with a second coat for deeper and richer colors.

"I want it to be amazing," Nilsson said.



Photos by Kirby Neumann-Rea

MARK NILSSON paints the 100-year anniversary fruit label mural at the packing house in Odell. He used "old-school" square-foot graphing to plan the work.





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Growing Whimsy

By MARK GIBSON
The Dalles Chronicle

When Dan and Pennie Rooper first moved to their home high up on Pleasant Ridge Road, overlooking The Dalles with a view of both Mount Hood and Mount Adams, they did what many raising a family beyond city limits do: In addition to the five children, they raised a lot of animals on their small acreage.

"We had cows, chickens, geese, ducks and pigs," Pennie recalls. But it just didn't work out. "We fall in love with all our animals, and when it came time to kill them we just couldn't stand it," she explained.

With the kids grown and living elsewhere, the Roopers have found a niche raising, preparing and painting gourds.

"You can do so many things with gourds; carving, painting, staining," said Pennie. "This is a drum, with a pig skin on the bottom. It echoes with a long spring. I like to make purses and bird houses."

She and her husband grow the gourds on an arched trellis next to the houses made from strong fence panels.

The gourds begin life in the Rooper's house, 2 or 300 seeds planted in small pots in spring. When they are two or three inches high in early summer, they plant them out along the trellis.

Having purchased dried gourds over the internet for years, Pennie and David decided to grow their own and for the past three seasons have been growing them in profusion. "I save seeds from the all the gourds I've gotten from friends and over the internet," she said. A mix of varieties, they range in size and shape, growing together on the one trellis.

"The trellis has to be really strong, these gourds get really heavy," explained Dave. Well over 100 are hanging from the trellis drying, some are so big he has to rig netting or straps to bear the weight. "The big ones are so heavy now, it's amazing how light they end up," he said.

Once planted out, it's a lot of water and weeding. And a lot of "twirling."

"He loves to spin them onto the trellis," Pennie said.

He loves the outdoors, Dave said, and enjoys spinning the growing vines along the arch where he wants them to grow. But it's a matter of necessity as well. "If I just let them just grow, they'll take over the carport and everything else. They just grow all over," he explained.

As the vines cover the arch and bloom, the long trellis becomes a place of shade and refuge. "It's amazing to go inside that, it is like a tunnel of gourds."

The vines from last spring are dead, their leaves wilted and limp, but the gourds remain hanging. "It takes months from them to dry," she said. "It will be May of next year before we can use them."

Once the gourds are dry, Pennie takes over. "I'm an outdoorsy type, she likes to be inside," he said.

Once dry, which takes well



Photos by Mark B. Gibson

A COLORFUL cat "catch-all" made from a dried gourd is just one of many whimsical creators Pennie Rooper has created from gourds she grows at her home on Pleasant Ridge.

into the following summer, the gourd are washed and scrubbed cleaned, a simple task that Pennie enjoys.

That, and the painting. "I love to paint," she said. Pennie has been painting most of her life, and was introduced to gourd craft by her sister 10 years ago.

Although her finished items are functional -- standing "catch-alls," hanging lamps, purses and even a drum --

Pennie uses paint and clay to transform the gourds into whimsical fantasies as well.

Many of them are fashioned into animals: Giraffe, Zebra, owls, angels, even a whale. "I add clay for the manes, legs and tails," she explains. One giraffe even has eyelashes. "Boy it was hard getting those on there," she said. The clay is shaped and dried and glued to the gourd prior to its being painted.

"You look at the shape of the gourd, and how you can make that into something," she said.

After two seasons, Pennie has enough gourds to last her for years, she said. "I bet I've got 800 gourds in the house, dried and ready."

But they can't resist growing a new batch together every spring, and each crop offers a new mix of surprising shapes and sizes, inspiring yet another year of craft and painting.



Photo by Mark B. Gibson

HARVEST SHIPPING

Grain is loaded onto a barge at Biggs Junction in Sherman County. Wheat accounts for about 91 percent of the acres planted each year to grains in the county, making it among the largest wheat producing counties in Oregon, according to the counties' website. Most grain is shipped on barges which carry about 116,000 bushels each. The Columbia River averages two four-barge tows a day, or nearly one million bushels per day. That reportedly makes it the [third largest grain export corridor in the world](#). The farmer pays the cost of shipping.



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