
GUEST VIEWPOINT

State must overcome racist past

By Douglas Card

Published: Monday, February 26, 2007

Oregon's 148th birthday slipped by unnoticed this year, but Oregonians will be taking the date of Feb. 14, 1859, seriously, because 2009 will be the year of our state's sesquicentennial commemoration.

In his kickoff speech for this event, Gov. Ted Kulongoski quoted William Faulkner's famous line: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." In Oregon's case, that past exerts more influence than most of us realize.

The more I learn about Oregon history, the more I realize how wonderful, yet how terrible, it was.

Yes, the history of brave pioneers carving a democratic society out of the wilderness - creating first a provisional, then a territorial, and finally a state government - is an enthralling, almost mythical story. Nevertheless, we also have our less-than-noble history, topped by our brutal exploitation of American Indians and hostility even to "free Negroes."

This sesquicentennial will come just 13 years after we commemorated the Applegate Trail, which brought the first emigrants through here. The elimination of Indian culture came terrifyingly fast, and the creation of a democratic state amazingly quickly. These events inspire passion - in our Applegate Trail commemoration, even though we had Native American participation at all our events, we were accused of both "celebrating genocide" and "political correctness."

No figure better exemplifies this cultural schism than our county's namesake, Joseph Lane. He was an excellent democratic leader in this wild frontier. He was also a racist, running as vice president in 1860 with John Breckenridge on the Southern Democratic secessionist ticket.

As a mostly white state, we are struggling today to cope with a new wave of immigration. Perhaps the cause of our failure to overcome the past lies in our inability to truly understand it, to face up to it. We expect other societies, such as the Germans and Japanese after World War II, to recognize their guilt and apologize for it. We prod Southerners to make up for their own racist past and shudder when they wave the Confederate flag.

We like to think of our own heritage as a liberal one, a "free state" in the Civil War. The truth is, we were more of a border state, and had to have outside soldiers stationed here to ensure we wouldn't join the rebellion.

"Secesh" support was especially strong in the "Long Tom Confederacy." Members of the Knights of the Golden Circle, a pro-South terrorist group, met and drew straws to see which of their pro-North neighbors each would murder; had the first candidate not balked at killing his Unionist friend, our own county could have been plunged in to the kind of violence we saw in other border states.

Voting statistics tell the story of society's attitudes. In the 1857 vote on the Constitution, Oregonians voted 69 percent for statehood, 75 percent against slavery, but 89 percent for barring free Negroes from our state.

In the four-way 1860 presidential election, Abraham Lincoln barely won a plurality in Oregon with 36.2 percent of the vote, well below his national average of 39.9 percent; Breckenridge-Lane, with 34.4 percent, almost doubled their national vote. In Lane County, Breckenridge and Lane easily beat Lincoln, 45.8 percent to 41.1 percent.

In the 1950s, Oregonians began to shed some of this baggage from the past, passing a public accommodation civil rights act. Yet the racist clauses of the 1857 Constitution, though officially repudiated, remained. Finally, in 2002, we voted on removing them once and for all. While 71.7 percent voted to eliminate them, more than a fourth of the voters, especially rural residents, voted to keep this "peculiar" part of our heritage.

In Lane County we were, predictably, a little more liberal, with 77.1 percent approving. Support in excess of 90 percent was recorded in many south Eugene and university area precincts, but the percentage was down in the 60s in rural parts of the county, including some of the old Long Tom Confederacy region.

Yes, when it comes to Oregon's heritage, we have a lot to be proud of, but much to think seriously about as well. We don't all agree, and this upcoming sesquicentennial should give all of us a time to think, learn and talk about how we feel about our past, present and future.

With the schools, the media, and community groups joining the state in leading the charge, expect some raucous debate on this one, for we feel strongly about our heritage and how it should guide our future.

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