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BAKER COUNTY
COMES BACK

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SPECIAL REPORT

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AS PART OF OUR EFFORT TO ASSESS THE RESULTS OF TRUST GRANTS, we asked one of our staff members, a former journalist, to do an investigative report on several grants the Trust had made in a single Oregon county. Her assignment was to examine the collective stories behind the grants to see what they would reveal about the life of a rural community experiencing economic turmoil, a predicament that has become all too common in our state.

It is generally thought that general purpose, responsive grantmaking cannot be “strategic” in nature; the Trust’s experience in Baker County contradicts this conventional wisdom. In this case, our grants were part of a grand strategy. But unlike the mode of a more “proactive foundation,” the strategy was developed by the grant recipients, not the grantmaker. Our first few grants in Baker County were responses to intriguing requests. As we followed their implementation, we became familiar with the overall economic and community development strategy that was emerging in that county. Most of our subsequent grants were based on both the merits of individual projects and how these activities served this overarching scheme. Our long string of grants to Baker County reflects the powerful attraction of a unifying rationale that enhances the importance of individual projects.

This report first appeared in our 1998-99 Annual Report. Because so many rural communities are facing challenges similar to those in Baker County, we are disseminating this Special Report to a wider audience in hopes it might serve as a valuable model to other communities and reinforce the lesson that vision, planning, and cooperation are critical ingredients for community and economic progress.

Charles S. Rooks
Executive Director



BAKER COUNTY COMES BACK

How the Meyer Trust is Working to Help Rural Oregon Survive

by Marie Deatherage

Lit by the waning rays of late afternoon sun glowing through the multi-colored skylight, Barbara Sidway stands looking down into the atrium of the Geiser Grand Hotel, where diners are finishing their meals at the white linen-clothed tables below.

“I don’t want to sound self-serving,” says the hotel’s owner, “but I think this building is a perfect metaphor for this community. When it was built, it represented the belief that the gold wealth was never going to stop.”

Pointing across the atrium, Sidway continues, “Right there was the third elevator the Otis company installed west of the Mississippi River.

“But the heavy equipment at the mines was taken over by the war effort, and after World War II, with the world gold price set at Bretton Woods, the economic prospects for the community declined. Even logging and agriculture were affected. The hotel closed after the film crew from *Paint Your Wagon* checked out in 1968 and it sat empty for years. The building was literally falling apart, and by the summer of 1993, its demolition was planned, it was going to be turned into a parking lot for a bank.”

But today Barbara Sidway is showing me around the newly restored Geiser Grand, now a certified national historic landmark on a prominent corner on Main Street, a matter of pride for Barbara and Dwight Sidway and Baker City. In 1998 its restoration was recognized with a National Trust for Historic Preservation Honor Award, the first of its kind given in Oregon.

The city and county the Geiser Grand Hotel calls home have undergone similar transformations.

Nestled among snow-capped mountains, picturesque Baker City has been compared with a European village.

SETTING

Baker City is the county seat of Baker County, a 3,089-square mile county of snow-capped mountains, sagebrush-clad hills, and lush grassland valleys of northeastern Oregon. The southern extension of the rugged Wallowa Mountains comprises the northeastern part of the county, while the Elkhorn Ridge of the Blue Mountains—with peaks between 8,000 and 9,000 feet—frame Baker County to the west. Its eastern boundary is the Snake River, which has carved the deepest gorge on the North American continent in Hell’s Canyon just after it flows north out of Baker County. About half of Baker County is owned by the federal government and managed by the U.S. Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management as national forest or rangeland.

Baker City is situated near the southern end of the Powder River Valley, at an elevation of nearly 3,500 feet above sea level.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Baker City was the largest city in what is known as the inland empire of the Columbia River Basin, that part located east of the Cascade Mountains. With a population of 6,663 in 1900, it had more inhabitants than Spokane or Boise, and many boosters saw a future without limits. One enthusiastic writer predicted it would soon have a population of 100,000. Around the turn of the century, Baker City considered itself the center of culture between Denver and Portland, with elegant restaurants, symphony orchestras, and theatrical productions.

But by the mid 1980s, Baker County had the highest unemployment rate and the next to lowest per capita income in Oregon. Between 1983 and 1986, nearly 40 Baker City businesses closed their doors and by the 1990s, many buildings on Baker City’s Main Street stood empty.

The Sidways were relative newcomers among the legions of people who joined together to turn things around in Baker County over the past two decades. The aim of their collective and energetic efforts has been nothing less than saving their special corner of the world. Along the way, they turned to the Meyer Memorial Trust, among others, in their quest to keep their community alive.

In many ways, the Baker County story illustrates how global economic and political forces are reaching into the smallest communities in the furthest reaches of the country and capsizing their economic lives. It shows just how resourceful communities can be in the face of devastating economic changes, and offers one model for rural towns struggling to survive. The story also reveals how foundations might be called upon to help communities as they endeavor to restore their spirits and regain their economic equilibrium.

A COLONIAL HINTERLAND

The devastation of communities with resource-based economies is particularly acute in the Pacific Northwest.

Economists and historians have labeled the Pacific Northwest a “colonial hinterland.” As Carlos Schwantes explained in *The Pacific Northwest: An Interpretive History*, “For the better part of its recorded history, life in the Pacific Northwest revolved around supplying the world with raw materials—furs and skins, logs and lumber, wheat and a variety of agricultural commodities, fish and other seafoods, precious and base metals... No matter how valuable its natural resources were to succeeding generations of entrepreneurs, the Pacific Northwest remained geographically remote from the continent’s centers of economic and political power. Even in the closing years of the twentieth century, north-

westerners must still grapple with the economic and social consequences of their hinterland status.”

Nowhere are those economic and social consequences more apparent than in the hinterland within the hinterland. Baker County is hundreds of miles from Oregon’s centers of economic and political power, which are thousands of miles from the nation’s leading economic and political centers. Although it is located on an interstate highway, Baker County has been without commercial airline service since 1978 when the nation’s airline industry was deregulated, and it lost passenger rail service in 1997 to Amtrak budget cuts. The nearest scheduled airline service is nearly 100 miles away.

THE BAKER COUNTY STORY

Because of its isolation, Baker County’s story is an effective microcosm of changing economic realities in America in their most extreme state.

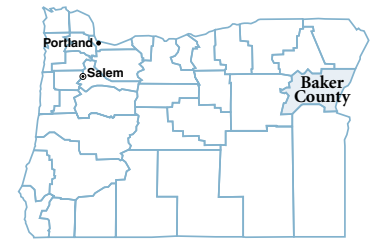
But where the plot diverges from the customary line is in the response this community has made in the face of seemingly overwhelming challenges. The effort basically involved the total dedication of a community, with many members volunteering their time outside their own considerable work schedules, donating hour after hour, week upon week, month in and month out, year after year.

Rather than looking to just recover lost jobs and failed businesses, at the lowest economic point in its history, Baker County instead decided to turn itself into the “premier rural living experience in the Pacific Northwest.”

It would not surprise Baker County residents that their chosen path would be ambitious and filled with challenges. As fourth generation Bakerite Chary Mires, who has donated countless hours to several local historic efforts, matter-of-factly explains, “There have always been people here who thought big.”

“Eight years ago,” she continues, “there was a study that showed that one out of 10 people in Baker County could trace their ancestry to the Oregon Trail. Those people were the risk takers of their day, and that’s the background of a lot of people around here. We’re just continuing that tradition.”

There is a palpable sense of the importance of the Oregon Trail in Baker County lives, as descendants daily remind themselves and each other of what their forefathers and foremothers endured in making their way to a new life in a new land. Their awareness of the past creates a strong sense of responsibility for the future and enlarges the sense of individual and collective contributions. One local man, for example,



Baker County is located in a mountainous area of north-eastern Oregon, 300 miles from the population centers of the Willamette Valley.

continued on page 20

HISTORY OF BAKER COUNTY

Most students of Baker County history begin with the Oregon Trail that traversed the county through the Powder River Valley, a welcome and promising sight to the pioneers who had just passed through the seemingly endless and monotonous sagebrush plains to the east. One wagon train immigrant described the “Powder Creek” valley as “the most handsome that we have seen since leaving Bear River. The valley is several miles wide, covered with a heavy coat of grass and the creek runs through its center, its banks lined with willows, cottonwood, etc.” Although immigrants looked longingly at the lush grasses that grew in the valley, knowing there was no good access to markets they kept moving west to the Willamette Valley.

White settlement began with discovery of gold in 1861. Mining was very lucrative very quickly and brought gold seekers from the Willamette Valley and California in addition to those that were still arriving from the east; within a few months some four to five thousand men were said to have come to the area. Prospectors swarmed over the countryside staking claims. Placer mining was the first extraction method, but hard rock mining quickly followed. One early inhabitant later reminisced that “Gold was the medium of exchange and great fortunes were built on the wealth that flooded from nearby hills.” Farming, ranching, and lumbering in the area first sprung up to supply the local market created by mining, and then expanded to furnish more distant markets as well.

Baker City was sited in 1865, named after Colonel Edward Dickenson Baker, Oregon’s first U.S. Senator and the only member of Congress to be killed in the Civil War. Baker City became the county seat and by 1874 had a population of nearly 1,200, making it the largest settlement in Oregon east of the Cascade Mountains. A new era of growth was ushered in by the arrival of the trans-continental railroad in 1884, with its daily service greatly improving connections between Baker City and the rest of the country. Between 1890 and 1900, its population grew by 155 percent.

The gold wealth—and subsequent success in other businesses—led to the development of a substantial downtown area, a broad main street lined with multi-story and elaborately designed buildings of brick and stone. Fortunately, there were local sources of clay and stone (notably a volcanic tuff rock) that could be easily quarried to provide building materials.

Gold mining went through several boom and bust periods in Baker County in the twentieth century, depending on the price of gold. For example, large dredges operated in Sumpter Valley from 1913-1924 when gold reached \$20 an ounce, and again from 1935-1954 when it was set at \$35.

Over the years, cattle ranching and lumbering grew in economic importance in Baker County and were responsible for the greatest number of jobs. The Sumpter Valley Railroad was built by the Oregon Lumber Company in 1890 to

haul logs from Sumpter Valley to a new sawmill in Baker City. The end of the track extended westward as logging advanced, finally reaching the town of Sumpter in 1896. The rail line greatly improved the ability to move heavy mining equipment into the valley, and contributed to a local hard-rock gold mining boom that transformed the verdant valley into several miles of contiguous rock piles. By 1910 the rail line had reached all the way to Prairie City, 80 miles southwest of Baker City. It provided both passenger and freight service (primarily logs and cattle), but during the 1920s began losing business to cars and trucks. (During the 1930s scheduled passenger service ended and segments of the line were abandoned. Even logging rail traffic diminished and the line was finally abandoned in 1947.)

In 1911, cosmopolitan Baker City decided its name was too quaint, conjuring up images of its early history, and because it was entering the new century looking ahead, not back, citizens voted to drop the word “City” from its name.

Following World War II, the timber industry in the Pacific Northwest expanded greatly to meet the construction demand unleashed after the war. By the end of the 1950s, Baker’s population had finally broken 10,000. Ranching and dairy production also flourished.

The 1960 census counted a population of 17,295 in Baker County, the highest level ever. But even during the 1960s, the county’s population began to decline and by the 1980s, all of northeastern Oregon experienced heavy outmigration as the bottom fell out of the local resource-based economy. Many young people moved away to metropolitan areas.

Employment in the region’s timber industry has been affected by several forces, all beyond the control of anyone in Baker County: High interest rates set nationally and triggered by a national recession discouraged housing construction; devaluation of the Canadian dollar encouraged American builders to import less expensive lumber from north of the border; the distance of the Pacific Northwest from major markets in the U.S. made for higher freight costs than those of competing mills in the South; and national legal and policy decisions led to a dramatically lower timber harvest in area forests.

Historically, the bulk of raw logs processed by Baker County mills came from public lands, but in the last decade or so, timber harvests from Oregon’s national forests have been severely reduced. By 1996, more than two-thirds of the harvest in northeastern Oregon came from private lands; total harvest levels were less than half of what they had been just five years earlier and only about one-third of what they were in 1986, the peak year for regional timber harvests in recent history. In addition, many millworkers saw their jobs exported to Asia in the form of raw logs that were converted into plywood or finished lumber in Japan.



Volunteers have restored the historic Sumpter Valley rail line and locomotives, offering rides to the public during summer months.

Chary Mires describes efforts to match the original wallpaper in the Leo Adler House she helped restore as part of Historic Baker City.



provides an exquisitely eloquent context for all community efforts when he articulates the profound effect it has had on his life to grow up in a household with his grandmother who walked every step of the 2,000-mile Oregon Trail, and then as an adult to shake the hand of the first human being to walk on the moon.

At Fort Hall (near what is now Pocatello, Idaho), the Oregon Trail split, with the northern trail heading to Oregon and the southern branch pointing to California. There is a story, much admired in Oregon, that at the fork in the trail “a pile of gold-bearing quartz marked the road to California; the other road had a sign bearing the words ‘To Oregon.’ Those who could read took the trail to Oregon.”

Chary Mires puts it in plain-spoken late twentieth century terms: “People didn’t come here just because their car broke down, they made a conscious choice to live here. That makes for a more stable community.”

A STRATEGIC PLAN

The beginnings of a response to the economic decline emerged in the 1970s. A Downtown Revitalization Advisory Committee had organized to respond to economic deterioration, and by 1978 Baker’s Historic District had been placed on the National Registry of Historic Places. Soon thereafter, the City of Baker hired a firm to develop “A Plan of Historic Baker City,” completed in November 1982.

But it was a visit from an Oregon gubernatorial candidate in 1986 that sparked the fire in the town’s belly, whose heat is still driving efforts forward today.

“If there was ever a person who didn’t live in Baker County who had an impact in Baker County, it was Neil Goldschmidt,” explains Brian Cole, now chairman of the Baker County Board of Commissioners, who earlier served as director of the Baker City/County Economic Development Department.

“Baker County was in the worst shape of all Oregon counties in the recession that hit the state so hard in the early 1980s,” Cole remembers.

Employment in the forest products industry in Oregon and Washington dropped from 50,000 to 35,000 between 1978 and 1983. Cattle prices were the lowest since the Great Depression, and livestock income in the county had declined considerably. Gold mining on any significant scale had virtually ceased to exist.

“When Neil Goldschmidt came here in 1986, he said ‘You guys come up with a plan and state government will back you.’” Cole continues. “This community said, ‘Let’s take a chance, let’s come up with a game plan and go for it.’”

They began by taking inventory of Baker County’s assets. From nearly every spot in the county, there was breathtaking natural beauty. In fact, nestled among snow-capped mountains and with its many towers and spires visible from a distance, the town of Baker City has been compared to a European village. The county was the gateway to Hell’s Canyon, which offered unparalleled recreational adventures. It had a robust but temperate climate, and was considered a sportsman’s paradise. Baker rated high on “livability” scales, with low crime, good schools, and a substantial downtown core of grand old buildings that had survived decades of neglect and modernization. Baker County also had the best remaining visible segment of the Oregon Trail and several other historic relics. But most of all, the county was stocked with an abundance of committed citizens who were proud of their pioneer heritage and their way of life.

GOOD TIMING

Baker County also had good timing.

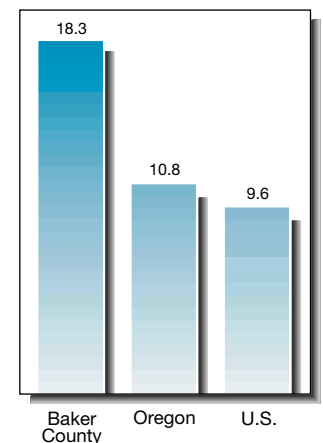
A series of federal acts had culminated in designating the Oregon Trail as a National Historic Trail in 1978, with the National Park Service completing a comprehensive management plan of the trail in 1981.

While Oregon was in the throes of the recession in 1984, voters approved establishing a state lottery, with profits to be dedicated to

“Baker County was in the worst shape of all Oregon counties in the recession that hit the state so hard in the early 1980s.”

—BRIAN COLE

1983 AVERAGE UNEMPLOYMENT RATES (percent)



THE FOUR PHASES OF BAKER COUNTY'S STRATEGIC PLAN

Phase I: 1987-92

Goal: Establish a “demand generator” for the visitor industry
(Oregon Trail Interpretive Center)



Phase II: 1990-95

Goal: Develop “complementary” visitor attractions designed to increase visitor stays
(Sumpter Valley State Park & Railroad, Hells Canyon, Destination Downtown, Oregon Trail Regional Museum)



Phase III: 1994-2001

Goal: Encourage visitors to become Baker County business owners
(“If you like playing here, you would love working here” marketing campaign)



Phase IV: 1994-2001

Goal: Target growth industries to attract to Baker county
(Marketing and business development program)

economic development and job creation programs. Neil Goldschmidt became Oregon’s governor in 1987, having run on a platform that promoted an “Oregon Comeback” and included provisions for economically distressed areas of the state to obtain Regional Strategies grants from lottery dollars.

Baker County was one of the first to begin developing a regional strategy. In early 1987, it hired its first economic development staff. Brian Cole, a recent business graduate of Willamette University, set about developing a strategic plan for the county’s comeback, which the county adopted later that year. The plan had four distinct phases and was based on first developing a tourist industry. Visitors would find the place so inviting and desirable, they would decide to move to Baker County, bringing their businesses and jobs with them.

Because the 150th anniversary of the Oregon Trail was approaching, the strategic plan began with an Oregon Trail Interpretive Center (OTIC) on Flagstaff Hill where the trail immigrants first caught sight of the Powder River Valley, and where the ruts made by their wagon wheels are still visible on the land. The interpretive center was the centerpiece of Baker County’s strategic plan, which not surprisingly was the first request received by the Oregon Economic Development Department’s Regional Strategies program.

In Spring 1988, Governor Goldschmidt announced a Regional Strategies commitment of \$590,000 toward engineering and construction of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center. State government also allocated Oregon Department of Transportation funds to build a turnoff to the center from Highway 86. It was to Baker County’s advantage as well that, during the late 1980s, members of Oregon’s congressional delegation occupied powerful positions, notably Senator Mark Hatfield on the Senate Appropriations Committee. In 1988, Congress appropriated \$1,360,000 to the Bureau of Land Management to begin development of OTIC.

Leo Adler, one of Baker’s most successful native sons, also donated a key \$103,000 to the project.

Another powerful presence emerged in Oregon during the 1980s. Following the death of Fred Meyer and the bequest of his personal estate to establish a charitable foundation, the Meyer Memorial Trust began granting several million dollars each year to nonprofit efforts in Oregon.

Given the indefatigable efforts and passion of Baker County residents, it is not surprising that proposals started arriving from Baker County within the first few years the Trust began operating. After the community came together, developed a formal strategic plan, and embarked on its



The Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, located on Flagstaff Hill five miles east of Baker City, was the centerpiece of Baker County’s strategic plan to revive its economy by establishing a “demand generator” for the tourist industry. It opened just before the 150th anniversary of the Oregon Trail.

quest to become the Northwest’s premier rural living experience, proposals arrived in earnest. Since 1985, the Meyer Trust has awarded 24 grants of more than \$1.7 million dollars to Baker County projects and has been a part of nearly every major feature of its comeback. (See a complete list of grants on pages 24-25.) Early support from the Trust also helped local groups leverage funds from other foundations.

The Oregon Trail Interpretive Center opened its doors in May 1992, just in time to join in the national sesquicentennial celebration. According to Brian Cole, the completion of OTIC was significant in two ways. First, it brought more than 1.2 million tourists to Baker County over the next several years and developed a significant tourism industry.

“But even more important,” Cole continues, “it flat out changed the attitude here. Before, people here thought, ‘We’re 350 miles from Salem, 3,000 miles from Washington DC, nobody ever listens to us anyway, so why try?’ Now, people say: ‘We can do anything we dream up.’”

According to Cole, “It’s not unusual to have a strategic plan, but we stuck with ours, and that’s very unique.” In the words of Chary Mires, “Good ideas are a dime a dozen. They’re not worth a darn unless someone makes them happen.”

The completion of OTIC can be largely attributed to a small group of local business people who met at least once a week, planning, organizing, writing, calling, visiting, and cajoling a variety of officials, groups, and other resources, before and after their own jobs, often at their own expense.

Many of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center exhibits pay tribute to “the courage and hardships of pioneers on their 2,000 mile trek to the promised land.”



Standing beside the Powder River, Brian Cole explains how the Leo Adler Memorial Parkway will provide a foot and bike path through Baker City.



Businessman and native son Chuck Rouse was one of those there from the beginning.

When he thinks back to what he and his buddies were able to accomplish, he says with a chuckle, “I guess it just goes to show what you can do if you’re stubborn and not real bright.”

In answer to my next question, this “not-real-bright” Bakerite referred to Maslov’s Heirarchy of Human Needs.

From 1994-98, following his position with Baker County, Brian Cole worked in the Oregon Economic Development Office, “watching communities across the state work or not work, evaluating their ability to envision projects and get them done.” Based on his observations, Cole came up with a four stage model of community development, which he explains by applying it to Baker City.

STAGE 1: APATHY “A community doesn’t envision its future, it doesn’t engage its citizens. Nobody wakes up on a Saturday morning and thinks about the future of his community. During Stage 1, not much change happens. Baker City stayed at Stage 1 for about 80 years.”

STAGE 2: AWARENESS “People in the community have a vision, there is a concerted effort, but it lacks unity and effectiveness. Different groups start to compete for limited resources. The city hasn’t invested in staff, there is no grant writer, nobody who picks up details. Baker City was at Stage 2 for about 10 minutes.”

STAGE 3: ACTION “The community envisions projects, and gets them done. It hires staff, there is unity and a sense of direction. Between 1987 and 1996, while Baker City was in Stage 3, we succeeded at just about everything we put our mind to. Mainly on the coattails of Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, it created the mentality ‘We can do anything.’”

Baker County put its mind to quite a lot during those years. It asked for key assistance from the Meyer Trust at each step along the way. First, of course, was the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center. The Meyer Trust provided help at two critical points: it awarded \$42,100 in September 1989 to Baker County’s Oregon Trail Preservation Trust for “an aggressive and informative fundraising campaign,” which the Baker County group called “critical to the project’s development,” especially since statewide publicity materials were developed much more slowly. In August 1991, the Trust granted the same group \$350,000 for a national campaign to market OTIC during the 150th anniversary celebration. The Trust funds were crucial in helping the center exceed the number of visitors it expected by about 200,000 during the first year and a half the center was open, and contributed to a 50 percent increase in attendance at other local historic attractions. Local stores reported that business increased by about 30 percent during the same period, and area lodging had occupancy rates of 90 to 100 percent. Officials estimated that tourists contributed approximately \$23 million to the Baker County economy by 1992.

Within the next several years, the Meyer Trust made a number of additional grants to Baker County nonprofit organizations to develop the complementary attractions envisioned in the second phase of the strategic plan.

“The Meyer Memorial Trust has always been there for Baker County at times in which critical funding has been necessary to advance our project and strategy,” Cole says. “In fact, you could say that Meyer Trust funds have often not only made our projects possible, they made them work.”

In several cases, a Trust grant supplied the missing piece that allowed completion of the puzzle. Nearly always, Trust grants served as catalysts for further support from the community and other outside sources. For example, in the case of the Hells Canyon Overlook, the Meyer Trust funds were the final piece needed to ensure the availability of federal funds and complete the project. The grant to help purchase the Sumpter Valley Dredge was a key element that moved the project quickly enough to rescue the dredge before it had deteriorated beyond the point of repair,

THE FOUR-STAGE MODEL OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Stage I:
Apathy



Stage II:
Awareness



Stage III:
Action



Stage IV:
Alliance



The skylight and atrium are the focal points of the dining room at the Geiser Grand.

so it could become the basis for the first new state park to be developed in Oregon in 21 years.

Perhaps the most critical support from the Trust during this phase was the \$224,000 grant to restore the façade of the Geiser Grand Hotel.

Not only was the vacant building not contributing to the local economy, it was considered an eyesore after a previous owner, allegedly in a fit of pique, had painted the entire exterior—even the windows—a color that inspired one local writer to brand it “a malignant, mustard-orange tumor.”

Community members contacted the Sidways, who had done similar restorations elsewhere in the U.S. The Sidways were impressed with the restoration and economic development efforts already underway in Baker City, and they agreed to take on the daunting project.

The grant from the Trust kept the project alive during a critical phase when a delay in receiving state funds threatened to sidetrack or derail the project and other downtown development. The Trust grant also enabled Baker City to use state funds to acquire two key parcels of land that made possible the Leo Adler Memorial Parkway along the Powder River, another key component of its strategic plan.

The Geiser Grand restoration project was complex and difficult. Barbara Sidway shakes her head at the memory of slogging through ankle-deep water the first time she entered the structure. It took many months to make the building dry enough to begin interior work. Once the major elements were in place—replacing the cupola that had been



Reopened in 1997, the restored Geiser Grand Hotel is the centerpiece of the historic renovation of downtown Baker City, now a major tourist destination.

the building’s distinctive trademark but had been lopped off when the hotel had been reroofed and installing a new skylight at the top of the atrium—the Sidways turned their attention to details, from locating a source of linen like that once used on the walls to using feathers to create a faux finish, as would have been done in 1889.

All restoration was performed by local and regional tradespeople and workers and involved a great deal of ingenuity, often supplied by resources the community didn’t even know it had. For instance, much of the garland decorating the atrium was missing, and Barbara Sidway tried to locate replacements without success. When news of her search reached the local baker, originally from Switzerland, he told her that in Europe, bakers contributed to public buildings by applying garlands with pastry dough, using cake decorating techniques! Soon thereafter, Baker City’s resident European-trained baker applied the missing garland, truly replicating the original.

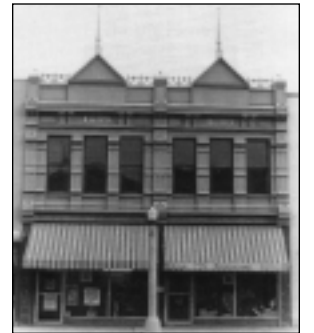
The Geiser Grand reopened in 1997, and it has already served as a catalyst for completion of other restoration projects in the historic district.

Ironically, Baker County’s languishing economy actually contributed to its historic preservation because there was no money available to tear down and replace the substantial original structures. Many downtown buildings had undergone “unsympathetic modernization” during the 1950s and 60s, however, which contributed to a loss of the community’s identity as a special place with an important historic legacy.

In 1990, Baker City readopted its original name, reflecting a return to its historic roots. In 1992, downtown business and property owners approved an economic improvement district to tax themselves to fund a full-time downtown manager and other promotional programs. In 1998, they overwhelmingly approved a five-year extension of the program.

Beginning in 1992, the historic district has also received annual funding for its Destination Downtown program, designed to make downtown Baker City a shopping destination for both local residents and visitors, some of whom would be induced to establish new retail business, thereby creating new jobs. Historic Baker City leveraged a \$270,000 Regional Strategies grant for what it says is one of the largest rural historic façade restoration programs in the nation. More than 75 historic renovations have been completed thus far, along with other streetscape improvements.

Brian Cole summarizes Baker City’s Stage 3 development this way: “By 1996, we had several good projects chasing money, sometimes competing with each other for the same funds. At that point, we ran the risk of going back to Stage 2 rather than on to Stage 4.”



The Mint Fox Building in downtown Baker City, before and after facade restoration. Unsympathetic modernization in the 1950s and 1960s removed much of the town’s historic identity, which has been restored by renovation efforts.



Leo Adler, one of Baker City's most successful native sons, left his estate to a foundation that awards scholarships to Baker County high school graduates and supports worthy community projects.

STAGE 4: ALLIANCE *“The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. We get everyone around the table and ask, ‘What if we did this together?’ Baker County reached Stage 4 soon after the Leo Adler Foundation started handing out grants in Baker County.”*

Leo Adler was born in Baker City in 1895. By age 15, Adler had established a magazine distribution business that eventually became the largest in the western United States. He lived most of his life in the same house on Main Street, where he cut a familiar figure in the community he loved. When he died in 1993 at age 98, Adler left his entire estate of some \$22 million to his community, with 60 percent committed to establishing a scholarship fund for the county's high school graduates. The remaining funds went into the Leo Adler Community Fund for community development projects in Baker County. Today the philanthropic foundation that bears his name has assets valued at \$32 million. In 1998, it awarded over \$900,000 in scholarships to graduating youth and it contributes between \$500,000 and \$750,000 to worthy community development projects each year.

One effect of the Adler fund is to make local projects feel less desperate. As Chary Mires points out, “We know that more than \$600,000 is going to be available each year for the community. For the first time, each group can look down the line and think, ‘That’s okay, I’ll get mine next year.’ We can all afford to be magnanimous.”

At the same time, some in the community have been concerned that the existence of the Adler funds might make outside foundations less likely to help Baker County because they might feel its problems are solved from within.

The first round of Leo Adler Community Development grants was announced in December 1995, the allocations consistent with the many contributions that he had made to his community during his lifetime. By February 1996, according to Brian Cole, community leaders noted that while the decisions made by the Leo Adler trustees were “all meritorious decisions, there was a ‘disconnect’ between those funding decisions and the ‘strategic direction’ for the community.”

“What if,” Cole asked others in Baker County, “the community took a long-term view of how this local fund would impact their community? Looking back 20 years from now, how will Baker County be demonstrably better than it was in 1996 as a result of these contributions?”

Cole says that community leaders longed for a better mechanism whereby the Leo Adler Community Fund could be leveraged to ultimately connect the fund to the county's strategic plan.

THE PARTNERSHIP

That’s when the Baker Community Partnership was conceived. Local economic development staff identified ten “large-scale” projects that, if completed on their optimal timeframe, would fuel Baker County’s strategic direction.

Not just any project is adopted by the Baker Community Partnership, only those that meet certain requirements that Baker County leaders feel give them a good chance for success and make significant contributions to the community. To be eligible, projects must have the attributes listed in the table to the right.

Founders and participants of the Baker Community Partnership believe it is a model that “should endure forever.” Because projects enter the Partnership with a clearly defined project scope and budget, each project graduates from the Partnership when the project is completed. New projects can join the Partnership if they have all of the required attributes. Cole anticipates that between five and 12 projects will always be active.

The most recent and largest grant the Trust has made in Baker County was \$467,500 in 1997 to support nine projects of the Community Partnership. It was the first time an applicant had approached the Trust in this manner, with the message that it wanted to be treated as a whole, and would rather risk being turned down than to separate out the projects and compete with one another.

“This is a new approach for our philanthropy,” admits Charles Rooks, executive director of the Meyer Trust, “but we realized that unlike most places, there is a group of leaders in Baker County that has a real coherent vision for where they want to be and how they are going to get there.”

Part of the money was used for projects the Trust had funded earlier, including \$50,000 to expand the Sumpter Valley Railroad, \$45,000 for improvements to the Sumpter Valley Dredge State Park, and \$25,000 for the Oregon Trail Regional Museum, the highly regarded museum in the city’s former natatorium that features local history and an outstanding rock collection.

Other Partnership projects were new to the Meyer Trust. The Leo Adler Memorial Parkway — a greenway that turns attention back to the once-neglected Powder River that runs through Baker City — garnered \$132,500 of the 1997 grant. The two-and-a-half mile pathway system will connect the river to the historic district, the city’s park land, and the city’s new sports complex. A significant portion of the \$50,000 allocated to Historic Baker City helped restore Leo Adler’s house, which community

BAKER COMMUNITY PARTNERS MUST:

- *Have an active group of committed volunteers*
- *Have a clearly defined scope with a budget and funding sources identified*
- *Build on previously completed projects and other Partnership projects*
- *Be a key component of the community’s 15-year strategic plan*
- *Enjoy support of community volunteers from other Partnership projects*
- *Already have some financial resources in hand*
- *Consist largely of capital elements*
- *Be sustainable once each of the capital elements is completed*

The historic Sumpter Dredge, which removed millions of dollars in gold from the Sumpter Valley floor during the 20th century, became the featured attraction in the first state park to be developed in Oregon in more than 20 years.



volunteers and labor crews from the Powder River Correctional Facility spent many hours repairing and restoring. Now open to visitors, the community views the home as an “ideal opportunity to showcase Leo Adler’s amazing story and to welcome visitors to the Baker City Historic District.”

Not all the partners are located in Baker City. \$25,000 of the Trust’s 1997 grant was for improvements to the fairground in Halfway, a small community of about 350 in the foothills of the Wallowa Mountains. Trust funds are helping the town build a pavillion next to the rodeo grounds that will provide Halfway with an indoor space for events the community is unable to consider with present facilities.

Halfway Mayor Dick Crow (his great grandmother was “the third white woman in this valley”) showed me around the grounds, proudly describing the boat show, the indoor track meet, and other community gatherings that are planned after the pavillion is completed. “We’re famous for taking \$50 and turning it into \$150,” he chuckled.

The reluctant member of the Partnership, the last to join, was the Baker Sports Complex, the group working to build “northeast Oregon’s premier multi-use outdoor sports facility.” Its directors, having enjoyed early fundraising success, were concerned that joining the larger group might slow down their own progress. They were certain they could raise the money without help.

“However,” Sports Complex Director Kathleen Chaves explains, “they agreed to join when they saw it was good for the whole community. Now they have all bought in to the value, especially as the Meyer grant happened and we are benefiting from other foundations through the partnership.”

The sports complex was given \$100,000 of the Partnership grant from the Meyer Trust, which helped it open on schedule in spring 1999. Its 28 acres includes a service building with concession stands, announcers’



Above, an aerial view of the 28-acre Baker Sports Complex early in the morning before the baseball, softball and soccer fields, and tennis courts are filled with Baker County children.

Below, crowds stream in to the new sports complex to celebrate the opening of the facility on May 1, 1999, providing Baker County youth with healthy recreational opportunities.

“One key to success is that people put the community need over their own personal need. People here have a deeply rooted respect for heritage, a sense that we’re not doing it just for ourselves. We understand how important our past is for our future.”

—ALICE TRINDLE

booths with public address systems, and restrooms; four baseball and softball fields with bleachers, dugouts, and movable fences; four soccer and football fields; a jogging path with exercise stations; and a paved parking lot.

Actually, the success of the Baker Sports Complex provides one of the best illustrations of the ability of those in Baker County to form partnerships. The effort was founded and led by Joe Rudi and Carney Lansford, two former major league baseball players, who retired to Baker after their baseball careers ended. They made considerable donations of their own time and money, and gave the project visibility and credibility, earning it the support of many segments of the community. The school district donated a parcel of land adjacent to the high school, two board members who are licensed contractors donated their services to manage construction, the City of Baker City waived utility assessment fees, the Powder River Correctional Facility provided inmate labor, local businesses provided equipment and services, area farmers donated fertilizer, grass seed, and services, and on and on.

Before the complex was built, Baker County did not have enough facilities to afford every interested child the opportunity to participate in organized sports. The community saw a social value in providing recreational activities, especially as so many families were facing economic difficulties. “Many households in Baker County are experiencing a great deal of stress with the economic transition our community is being forced to enter,” Chaves explains. “The closing of the last lumber mill in spring 1996, and layoffs in several industries, has put a strain on many households. Our community has a critical need to provide alternative, healthy activities for our youth.”

A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

This sense of community was referred to again and again during my visit to Baker County to explain how such a strong partnership was formed in the face of individual needs that are so great.

Alice Trindle, executive director of the Oregon Trail Marketing Coalition, put it this way: “One key to success is that people put the community need over their own personal need. People here have a deeply rooted respect for heritage, a sense that we’re not doing it just for ourselves. We understand how important our past is for our future. And in small communities, everyone knows they have a part.”

A touching illustration of the local sense of community came when Tabor Clarke and Brian Cole were showing me plans for the Leo Alder Memorial Parkway along the Powder River, midday on a Monday. Two

teenage boys on skateboards were hanging out along the river bank, and came over to find out what we were doing there. Tabor Clarke told them about the planned project, then asked why they weren’t in school at that time of day.

“I’m on work experience,” one replied.

“What work are you experiencing?” Clarke asked.

“Oh I did that already last year, I’m 15 now, I don’t need to do anymore, so I get to just go home.”

Clarke looked skeptical. The boy, apparently recognizing some weakness in his logic, quickly changed the subject. “We hope you don’t get rid of the motocross place,” he said. “We like that part.”

“No, you’ll still have a place to ride your bikes,” Clarke said, “we just want to make it nicer for you. We want you to keep using this place.”

The boys looked surprised and pleased, and said polite goodbyes. It seemed to me that even though they were a little uncomfortable being caught out of school, they left the encounter feeling that adults in the community cared about them.

It was only six days after the massacre had taken place at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, and nearly every television news and talk show had at least one segment where people asked aloud how two teenage boys could have amassed an arsenal and devised and executed such an elaborate plan without adults knowing about it. I wondered if those two Colorado boys had been exposed to the kind of expressed community concern I had just witnessed.

When I commented on that, Clarke explained how he used to think his contribution to his community was to operate a successful business. “There was a time I felt the best thing I could do for my community was to build a thriving business, so I avoided getting involved in community projects,” Clarke explained. “But I helped out in getting the economic district measure passed, and found an enormous sense of satisfaction came out of that.

“I grew up here, fourth generation,” he continued. “I thought I knew this community, but discovered I was not connected at all. I thought I was, but I wasn’t. I learned that when you are really connected to your community, it’s so self-gratifying.”

THE PEOPLE

Again and again, no matter who I asked or where I posed the question about why things work the way they do in Baker County, how it managed to reach consensus on its goals and priorities, I was told that the difference is “the people.”

“I grew up here, fourth generation. I thought I knew this community, but discovered I was not connected at all.”

—TABOR CLARKE

“We focus completely on the goal, we’re not worried about who’s on the podium at the end or whose name is on the plaque.”

—CHUCK ROUSE

Chuck Rouse attributes his group’s success in completing the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center partly to certain qualities the members shared. “Here you had a group of real close friends come together who didn’t care about taking credit,” he says. “We established a mindset to keep egos out of it. We focus completely on the goal, we’re not worried about who’s on the podium at the end or whose name is on the plaque.”

Chary Mires answers my question by telling the story of her grandfather’s long struggle to get a dam built on the Powder River: “He didn’t own one single acre of land, but he thought we needed a dam to ease flooding and ensure a summer supply of water. The local ranchers didn’t want one, they fought him all the way, so he decided he would just have to live longer than they did, so he did! It took 30 years, but he finally got it built. I tell you, it’s the people!”

The reservoir behind the dam is named for Mires’ grandfather.

An unusually large number of people I met in Baker County are highly complimentary of their elected officials and bureaucrats. According to Alice Trindle, “You could never legislate the quality of people who are in our government agencies here.”

Marv Sumner, vice president of a local bank, relates what he said was well understood in Baker County: “You know that joke about how people complain about the weather but nobody does anything about it?” he laughs. “Well, here in Baker County, when people complain about the weather, Brian forms a committee and they start holding meetings to plan how to change it.”

Brian Cole and Roger Lee, current director of the Baker Economic Development Department, are given much of the credit for making new businesses feel welcome in the county and for minimizing the bureaucratic difficulties that are legend in many communities.

“Before Bahlen (a manufacturer of ranching equipment that built a facility in Baker City in 1996 that now employs 55) came here,” recalls Randy Johnson, who relocated his metal fabrication business to Baker City in 1988, “a local group met with them and asked them what they needed. They told us getting free land would really help. Within 24 hours, we had a deal.”

When asked who arranged that, Cole and Lee laugh and say, “Well, it’s kind of a floating committee.”

Cole is certainly one of the people in Baker County who wakes up on a Saturday morning thinking about the future of his community.

Cole showed me around the Baker City fairgrounds, passionately describing the town’s most ambitious plan of all in recent decades: to rebuild the national guard armory and fairgrounds and put up a public

safety training building that he hopes will include a one-stop facility for the county’s social service program. When I remarked on his enthusiasm, he sheepishly revealed that while he was at home for a few days recovering from surgery recently, he and his young daughters spent their time together drawing prospective armory designs.

UNIFORM POPULATION

One characteristic that might make consensus easier to achieve in Baker County is the marked uniformity of its population. In a 1996 estimate, fully 96.5 percent of Baker County residents were white. The largest minority group was made up of those who can trace their ancestry to before the Oregon trail: Native Americans comprised 1.5% of the population.

This uniformity may well lead to the adoption of shared goals that would be less likely to be universally accepted in more diverse communities. For example, the document *Crafting a Unified Vision for Baker County*, published as a result of a two-day community forum in October 1998 that was sponsored by the Baker Progress Board, included the goal of “Discipleship — make disciples for Jesus Christ by providing an environment for all people to meet God to strengthen their faith.” There was no mention of other religions.

PARTNERSHIP II

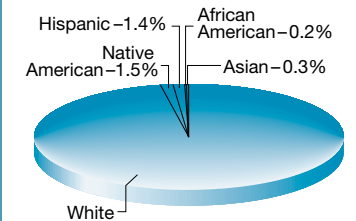
Not that everyone feels included in the Baker Community Partnership. Some in the community noticed there was a decided lack of representation of social service agencies.

Carlene Collins, executive director of the local community development corporation, says her organization is “one of the ones that got left out” of the larger effort. “It wasn’t intentional on anyone’s part,” Collins says. “Maybe we weren’t as vocal as some of the other groups, we just quietly go about our business, we don’t squeak.”

Those who work in Baker County’s many social service programs have called attention to the fact that a “premier rural living experience” cannot afford to waste the lives of any of its citizens, and they are concerned that Baker County has the highest juvenile arrest rate in Oregon. Representatives from more than a dozen agencies have formed Partnership II with a mission that sounds a lot like that of the original Baker Community Partnership: “To make Baker County the premier rural living experience through a strategic plan to eliminate the abuse of alcohol and drugs and resulting harm to our community.”

Baker County began serious efforts to help residents overcome problems with substance abuse some years ago. In fact, the Meyer Trust

BAKER COUNTY
1996 ESTIMATED
POPULATION BY RACE



MEYER TRUST GRANTS
IN BAKER COUNTY

- Oregon Trail Regional Museum**
\$50,000 (1985)
To develop the museum
- Sumpter Valley Railroad Restoration**
\$27,393 (1985)
To restore this historic railroad
- Baker County Council on Alcohol and Drug Problems**
\$80,000 (1987)
To expand its residential facility
- Sumpter Valley Railroad Restoration**
\$40,000 (1989)
To extend the rail line to Sumpter
- Oregon Trail Regional Museum**
\$50,000 (1989)
To renovate the museum building
- Baker County, Oregon Trail Steering Committee**
\$42,100 (1989)
To develop funding for the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center
- Baker County**
\$47,000 (1990)
For the Hells Canyon Overlook
- Eastern Oregon Museum**
\$8,000 (1990)
To repair the historic museum building in Haines
- MayDay**
\$4,600 (1991)
To assist victims of domestic violence
- Northeast Oregon Economic Development District**
\$30,000 (1991)
To support local small businesses
- Oregon Trail Preservation Trust**
\$350,000 (1991)
For a national marketing campaign for the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center
- Education Service District of Baker County**
\$4,100 (1992)
To furnish and equip an alternative school

has made two grants to the Baker County Council on Alcohol and Drug Problems; it awarded \$80,000 in 1987 to expand treatment facilities, and another \$67,000 in 1997 for a treatment center for youth.

“Until residents can raise children free from the abuse of alcohol and drugs and eliminate its ravages on family and community,” Mary Tomlinson, Partnership II coordinator explains, “Baker County cannot, in truth, be the ‘premier rural living experience.’”

In 1998, Partnership II received \$154,800 from the Leo Adler Foundation to begin its work. Brian Cole serves as a liaison between both Partnership groups.

During my visit, I saw moving evidence that members of the initial Baker Community Partnership are indeed sensitive to the needs of their less fortunate members. Randy Johnson took time away from his business to show me around the Technical Training Center that is a joint effort of local businesses and adult education programs (also supported by \$15,000 from the 1997 Meyer Trust grant) to provide better technical training opportunities for local workers to make them more useful and attractive to relocating businesses. At one point, he mentioned how nice it will be when the training center and other adult education facilities are located alongside the planned one-stop social services center at the fairgrounds.

“Now,” he volunteered, “if somebody goes to the welfare office, everybody in town can see their car out front and know they’re there. In the future they won’t know whether they’re there to get food stamps or take a class. Think how that will give them a lift up.”

PRISON LABOR

The participation of labor crews from the Powder River Correctional Facility (PRCF) has also contributed to an awareness of the damage caused by drug and alcohol abuse within the community. In another stroke of very good timing, Baker County was selected as the site for a state minimum security prison in the late 1980s. With a capacity of 178, PRCF opened in 1989 to “provide minimum security inmates with the opportunity to participate in a residential alcohol and drug treatment program or labor camp program prior to their release.”

At site after site I visited, I heard how highly various groups in Baker County value the assistance their community projects have received from labor crews from the prison. From the Leo Adler House to the Oregon Trail Regional Museum to the Baker Sports Complex, community leaders voiced their gratitude for the very low-cost work crews the prison provides.

According to Ron Brinton, leader of the Sumpter Valley Railroad Association and editor of the local weekly newspaper, “A lot of these

projects base their work on the fact that they can get a prison crew. A lot of them wouldn’t be there if it wasn’t for that prison.”

In April 1999, when Museum Association President Chary Mires and Director John Meeks led me through the Oregon Trail Regional Museum, it was in complete disarray following a thorough renovation, partly financed through the museum’s share of the Meyer Trust partnership grant.

I asked if they thought they would be able to finish the work in time to open the museum before the summer tourist season was over.

“Oh, we’ll have it open by the end of next week,” Mires quickly replied. “We’ll just get a prison crew in here and they’ll have it put back together in no time.”

The prison crews work alongside many community volunteers, who learn that most prisoners are where they are because of drugs and alcohol. As Mires explains, “Working side by side, you realize they’re just your son and my son.”

Mires always gives inmates a tour of the museum when they finish their work, as she did when they helped completely restore the Leo Adler House. Mires feels strongly that through their labor, inmates develop pride in their community and a sense of belonging. Kathleen Chaves points out when their work was done, some inmates bought bricks to be inscribed with their names for the “Wall of Fame” at the Baker Sports Complex, so they could bring their children to show what they had helped build. She feels their participation in community service probably reduces recidivism rates at the facility.

ASSESSING SUCCESS

It is difficult to find anyone in Baker County who does not, at least publicly, think the county’s strategic plan is working.

As usual, Chary Mires provides a candid perspective: “There’s agin’ers,” she admits, “who go around asking ‘What do you think you’re doing, we’d be better off if all the money spent to restore downtown had been spent elsewhere, why take us back to the good old days, they weren’t very good!?’ But I never even listen to those people.”

Roger Lee explains that, generally, Baker County uses Oregon benchmarks to determine if its strategic plan is working as hoped. “We have selected approximately 40 of these to track in our community,” he says. “Progress and success is monitored using indicators such as employment rates, unemployment, relative wages (to other Oregon communities), poverty rates, average payroll, and the like.”

These statistics paint a mixed portrait. After many years of decline, Baker County’s population in 1998 finally climbed back above its 1950

Eastern Oregon Museum
\$8,000 (1992)
To improve museum facilities

Baker County
\$80,000 (1992)
To help purchase and renovate the Sumpter Valley Dredge

Sumpter Valley Railroad Restoration
\$100,000 (1992)
To restore a historic steam locomotive

Oregon Trail Preservation Trust
\$224,000 (1994)
To restore and permanently protect the exterior of the Geiser Grand Hotel

Baker School District
\$2,365 (1994)
For an innovative science project

Halfway Lions Club
\$7,700 (1995)
To furnish a youth and community center

Baker County
\$12,600 (1996)
To restore and relocate the Sumpter Valley Railway Depot

City of Richland
\$5,000 (1996)
For telecommunication equipment to reduce this community’s isolation

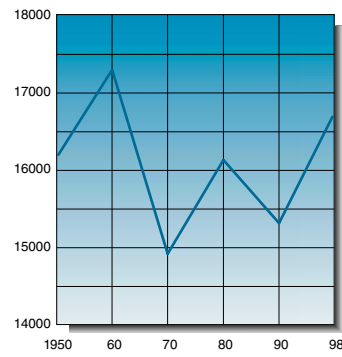
Burnt River School District
\$4,768 (1997)
For a school-wide reading program

Baker County Council on Alcohol and Drug Problems
\$67,000 (1997)
To complete an adolescent residential treatment center

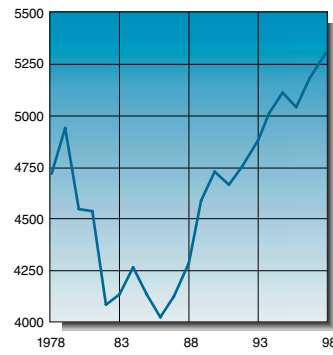
Eastern Oregon Museum
\$25,000 (1997)
To expand the museum and add new exhibits

City of Baker City
\$467,500 (1997)
For nine Community Partnership projects

POPULATION IN BAKER COUNTY



NUMBER OF JOBS IN BAKER COUNTY*



*Nonfarm payroll employment

level. Despite the loss of several major industries and every one of its lumber mills, Brian Cole reports there are over 500 more jobs in Baker County now than in 1979 before the bottom fell out of the timber industry (see graph at left). Cole also points out that Baker County’s per capita income growth between 1988 and 1996 was the fourth fastest in the state and its unemployment rate has been more than halved, despite the loss of its largest manufacturing employer (and last lumber mill) in 1996.

But Baker County’s unemployment rate remains higher than Oregon’s, and its per capita income lags significantly behind that of the state, which is still less than the national average (see graphs on page 39). Poverty rates in Baker County remain higher than the state and national averages, and median family income remains considerably lower, which means that much of Baker County’s work to become the premier rural living experience in the Pacific Northwest is yet to be done.

REMAINING CHALLENGES

Maintaining tourism

Baker County’s strategic plan, beginning with the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, is based on establishing a strong tourism industry, which translates into a stronger economy and job base when visitors decide to move to the county and bring jobs with them.

While the numbers of tourists greatly exceeded expectations in the first few years the OTIC was open, they have fallen short in recent years. Occupancy rates at local lodging facilities are down from their peak as well.

“The OTIC was expected, after five years, to settle at about 200,000 visitors annually,” Roger Lee says. After the center started charging admission to cover operating costs and help with marketing, the number of visitors fell off. In 1997, there were 117,000 visitors, and less than 100,000 in 1998.

“I think the general consensus of the accommodations industry is that they wish more marketing—large scale marketing—would happen,” Lee continues.

Alice Trindle agrees. “We used to think, if we build it, they will come. One thing I would ask of foundations is to include some money for marketing to sustain visitor facilities, like the Meyer Trust did when our Interpretive Center opened,” she adds.

Overcoming remoteness

One of the obstacles Baker County has to face in the very competitive tourism business is its distance from major population centers. It still has no passenger air or rail service.

Baker County’s remote location is also a challenge in recruiting new industries.

In the spring of 1999, Oregon’s well-known Tillamook Cheese company was looking for a place to build a new factory. Baker County enthusiastically submitted a proposal, eyeing the opportunity for new jobs and a chance to revive its declining dairy industry.

“But,” Lee reports, “to our great disappointment we wound up number three on Tillamook’s list, and they are moving forward on negotiations only with the first two. The company continues to say that we gave them the best proposal and most community support, but cited distance from Tillamook and difficulty of increasing milk production as the primary factors for their board not placing us higher.”

“Clearly,” Lee adds, “with the impact it could have had for this area, their decision comes as a big blow.”

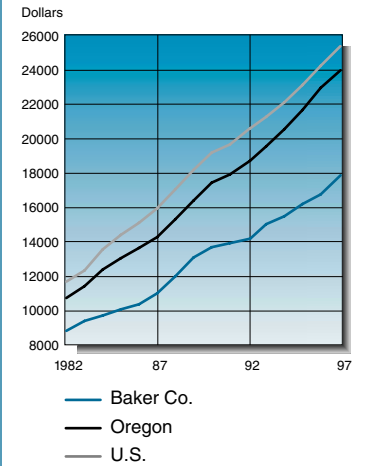
The feeling of remoteness in Baker County is reinforced by the sense that the region is neglected by Oregon policymakers and constrained by outside decision-makers who do not understand the needs of rural communities.

When I visited the Sumpter Valley Railroad, I nearly missed the turnoff, which was marked only by a nondescript small brown “Railroad Park” sign that became visible almost too late to turn off the highway. Representatives of Baker County attractions repeatedly complained that Oregon Department of Transportation signage rules so limit their ability to announce their presence they are convinced they miss many potential visitors. Given my own experiences, it seemed a valid point. In many cases, these locations are remote enough that travelers would likely need regular reassurance they are on the right road and can count on being well directed to particular destinations before they embark on their journey.

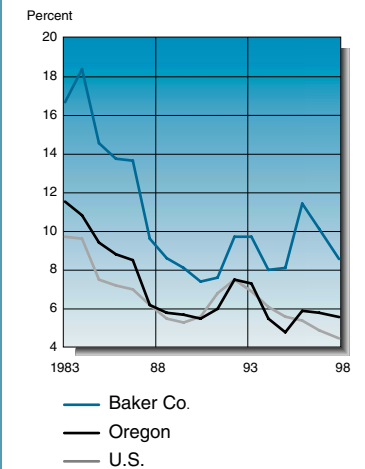
Many residents of Baker County do not live where cable television lines have been laid. Some satellite services carry only Idaho or eastern Washington stations, so many local residents do not have access to television news about statewide issues, or to news developments in other parts of Oregon. This fact should give serious pause to Oregon officials who are presumably interested in encouraging citizen involvement among all Oregonians and in building statewide consensus for their policies, especially given studies that show increasing numbers of residents rely exclusively or primarily on television news for information they use in forming opinions.

What about the promise of the Internet to remove barriers of space? There are local Internet service providers and a number of Baker County

PER CAPITA INCOME



ANNUAL AVERAGE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE



“Jobs in the forest products industry have proven difficult to replace throughout the Pacific Northwest.”

— ROGER LEE

businesses are connected, but they are not yet offered low-cost high-speed access.

Although a fiber optics line runs along Interstate 84, at this writing there is no off-ramp to Baker City that would make it possible for local businesses to have a full range of telecommunications services.

“We are working actively on several fronts to make our telecommunications infrastructure and services competitive with that of metro areas,” Lee says. “These efforts are complicated, and we are often working with 500 pound gorillas that just don’t make decisions quickly. But we are hoping to have improved service and capacity in place before the end of 1999.”

Attracting new businesses

The number of non-farm jobs in Baker county increased from a low of 4,130 in 1986 to 5,540 in June 1999, despite the loss of several major employers during that period. Many of the new jobs are the result of successful recruitment by Baker County officials of new businesses.

“However,” Lee explains, “an even greater increase has come from existing employers, such as Marvin Wood Products that started with 35 in 1986 and now employs 258, and Ashgrove Cement that had fewer than 95 workers in 1990 compared with 122 today. Those and a host of smaller businesses have more than made up job losses from both private and public employment.”

Some public agencies have cut their work force (for example, the U.S. Forest Service is down to 200 jobs in Baker County from a high of 337 in 1990), while other government and service sectors, including the Powder River Correctional Facility, have added 185 new jobs since 1990.

There was a net gain of 15 in the historic downtown area between 1995 and 1998, which generated a net increase of 25 family wage jobs during the same period. When the downtown renovation effort began, 25 percent of commercial properties were vacant. By 1999 the vacancy rate had shrunk to six percent.

Replacing family wage jobs

Many of Baker County’s new jobs are not highly sought family wage jobs.

“Jobs in the forest products industry have proven difficult to replace throughout the Pacific Northwest,” Roger Lee concedes. “Baker County is no exception. Typically they were low skill jobs (all you needed was a good work ethic and a high school education) with high pay. Trying to transition a workforce with limited skills and education into industries which base worker wages on skill levels and productivity has been a serious challenge.”

According to Lee, Baker County is targeting industries that need “low to medium skilled people and can tap our existing workforce,” as well as beginning to recruit “higher wage sectors.”

“For example,” Lee says, “we have recruited in several ‘blue collar’ industries like metal fabrication and secondary wood products. At the same time, we are targeting firms in, say, the plastics industry, which have average wages closer to those in the primary wood products industry.”

Providing shopping opportunities

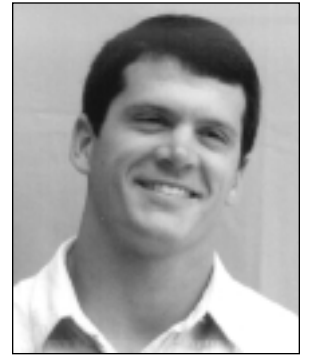
While Baker was once the commercial and retail shopping center for a large area in eastern Oregon, over the past several decades it has lost its hold on the shopping market. One important factor contributing to the decline was the completion of the interstate highway in 1973, which decreased the number of potential customers who had formerly passed directly through downtown on U.S. Highway 30. Not only did the new freeway allow travelers to bypass the city, it also improved the mobility of Baker County residents, making it easier for them to get to other towns to make their purchases. Several representatives of Baker County social service agencies complain that there are few local places for working people to buy clothes and housewares.

Roger Lee confirms the shopping limitations, and estimates that the county has an annual retail leakage of at least \$15 million. Many of the economic development efforts have been aimed at assisting retail outlets in the historic downtown area, with the intent that it would become an additional tourist destination.

According to Brian Cole, “Destination Downtown” has been so successful that over the past two years it has nearly matched the visitor level of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center.

But some residents point out that some of the newer retail shops on Main Street appeal more to tourists than residents. Downtown merchants want additional shopping to be located there, fearing other centers would drain their businesses, but larger stores prefer outlying sites.

According to Lee, “The problem lies in the fact that very few regional retailers will consider a downtown market with limited parking, and smaller square footages for the buildings. A great example is the Emporium, which carries a wide variety of men’s, women’s, and children’s clothing. They are a perfect fit for our community, and after five years of being hounded through our recruitment effort, they understand that they should have a store in Baker City. But they need at least 15,000 square feet on one floor (they prefer 20,000-25,000) and some kind of off-street parking options. Baker City may be able to creatively address



As head of the Baker City/County Economic Development Department, Roger Lee actively recruits new businesses to improve the county’s economy.

*Has Baker County
yet become the
premier rural living
experience in the
Pacific Northwest?*

the latter issue, but there is not a building in the downtown to satisfy the former. Without any other options, they have to look at building outside the downtown area.”

Increasing diversity

Between the 1980 and 1990 censuses, Oregon’s population grew at a rate of eight percent, but the rates of growth among minority groups were much faster. The state’s Asian/Pacific population grew by 99 percent, Hispanic by 71 percent, Native American by 41 percent, and African American by 25 percent. While much of the growth of the minority population is in Oregon’s cities, even the face of rural Oregon is becoming more diverse.

Part of Baker County’s economic development strategy is to attract a significant number of new businesses and new residents. Likely, some of those new residents will have different backgrounds and experiences than those who have spent their lives within the local area.

If one of the reasons Baker County achieved consensus for its strategic plan fairly quickly and painlessly was the relative uniformity of its population, that consensus may be more difficult to achieve or maintain in the future.

THE PREMIER RURAL LIVING EXPERIENCE?

So has Baker County yet become the premier rural living experience in the Pacific Northwest?

How will we know? By the number of jobs and the wages they pay? By raising the per capita income to a certain level? By bringing a targeted number of tourists and their dollars into town? By the number of businesses on Main Street, and the length of time they stay in business? By how many young people stay or return after they finish their Leo Alder-financed higher education?

By those measures, Baker County still has miles to go before it sleeps.

Or should it be measured by how the citizens feel about their town?

By how many volunteer hours they contribute to community service?

By whether they care enough to engage with youth who aren’t at school during school hours? Or by how many people wake up on a Saturday morning and think about the future of their community?

By these measures, Baker County has already achieved premier status.

When the citizens of Baker County set their sights as high as they did, they may have been reflecting the same kind of runaway enthusiasm that inspired the writer in 1900 to predict that the town’s population would soon reach 100,000. Or they may simply have been following in the

tradition of their ancestors who “thought big.”

“Generally speaking,” Roger Lee says, “I think it would be a fair statement to say that we are widely regarded as one of the most progressive and aggressive isolated rural communities in Oregon when it comes to retention and recruitment of new businesses.”

As Chuck Rouse candidly admits, “To be honest, we’re probably not a lot better off economically than when we started this in the mid 1980s. But we’re a lot better off than we would have been had we done nothing.”

It is critical to keep the challenges before Baker County in perspective. “People have no idea what rural Oregon is facing,” Rouse points out. “We get a lot of lip service but as long as Portland and the Interstate-5 corridor [where most Oregonians live] are happy, they’re willing to let the rest of us continue to just barely survive.”

The question of success partly arises, of course, because the Meyer Trust and other foundations want to feel their scarce resources have been allocated wisely and well. Foundations want to invest in projects that have a high likelihood for success, and feel a responsibility to be accountable for their expenditures.

But perhaps more than anything, foundations want to feel they make grants that matter, that their work makes a difference, and that the issues they choose to address are important in the larger scheme of things.

It is not insignificant that the Meyer Trust played a leading role in the Baker City story. The Trust’s responsive approach to grantmaking—which allows applicants to determine their own needs and approaches rather than requiring grantseekers to address only foundation-selected issues and adopt its prescribed solutions—gave Baker County the freedom to seek foundation support in implementing its strategic plan, assistance that proved critical time and again.

Because it has come this far, and its story is now featured by the Meyer Trust, the Baker County example illustrates one model of development available to the countless isolated rural communities facing similar challenges across the country.

Its success with the Trust also demonstrates what could be a formula for selectively requesting foundation support. As one of the Trust’s program officers wrote in evaluating the Baker Community Partnership proposal, “They work extremely hard, are imaginative, and put together resources from a wide range of sources. At various critical junctures, they have come to the Trust for funds that were highly significant in giving them the ability to continue and expand their efforts.”

Even though Baker County’s work is not nearly finished, the grants made there have already given the Meyer Trust a great deal of satisfaction

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because they have helped a community find ways to believe in its own ability to set ambitious goals and work together to reach them. And what could be more important than helping a struggling community with a powerful sense of history and purpose find ways to persevere in the face of changing realities and challenging futures?

THE CAPPUCCINO COWBOY

I turned to academic sources to give me perspective on what is happening in Baker County. In his essay, “The New Regionalism in America,” Richard Maxwell Brown writes about the all-important tension between the classic and counter-classic West: “The classic dimension of western history and culture is that ordinarily referred to as the pioneer West or the Old West, with its distinctive mythology focusing on mountain men, cowboys, Indians, prospectors, gunfighters, and outlaws. The counter-classic West is... the urbanized, industrialized, and modernized West characterized by recurring technological advance.” According to Brown, the tension between the two is responsible for the many creative impulses emanating from the West.

It is interesting to hold recent developments in Baker City up against the backdrop of this historian’s perspective. Baker County’s strategic plan squarely aims at restoring and preserving the classic West that is so well represented in the area—featuring the Oregon Trail, historical museums, a gold dredge and narrow gauge railway, building and façade restoration—while attempting to entice the counter-classic West to town and make it feel welcome. Many of the new shops on Main Street are boutiques and other specialty niche retail outlets that many long-time residents say they have never entered. The business of the year—in a restored historic building on Main Street—sells imported specialty gourmet foods and wine.

The five industries Baker County has targeted because it feels they offer the best hope of rescuing its economy are plastics, transportation equipment, sporting goods, software, and printed circuits. Out of work cowboys and loggers are taking computer classes at the Technical Center.

While I was mulling this irony over on my way out of town, wondering exactly how the two sides of Baker County will manage to fit together in the premier rural living experience in the Pacific Northwest, I pulled up to the drive-up window at the Cappuccino Cowboy and ordered a latte. ■

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