

# Chuck Rouse Recalls Local Efforts Leading to Funding for National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center

by Sherrie Kvamme  
of the Hells Canyon Journal

In 1979, Chuck and Rosemary Rouse moved back to Baker where Chuck worked as the managing partner at Farmerials. The next two years took everyone through some tough economic times. Consequently, a group of concerned business people decided to meet on a regular basis. The group included Chuck Rouse, Dick Haynes, Chuck's business partner; Gary Schmidt, the manager of U.S. Bank; Jack Turner, the publisher of the Baker City Herald and several others.

They had a specific purpose – figuring out what they could do to improve Baker County's economic crisis. Someone suggested the idea of capitalizing on the ruins of the Oregon Trail.

"We all agreed that the ruins represented a significant part of local history and could be a great asset," said Chuck. "There were a lot of people still living in Baker County whose ancestors had traveled here on the Oregon Trail. After a lot of brainstorming and kicking different ideas around we decided we had something very special right here in front of us that had valuable potential.

"The ruins were on BLM property, so we contacted Jack Albright who was the manager of the local BLM at that time. He liked what we said, and we all agreed to pursue the idea. We formed a local committee to brainstorm options. Gary Schmidt was chairman of our committee, Sid Johnson, who owned Johnson Homes and that year, was also president of the Oregon Home Builder's Association was selected to chair the facilities committee. Mike Wooters was chair of the marketing committee, and I was chosen to oversee fundraising. We did not have any funding at that point, so a few of us threw in a few dollars for a start-up budget.

"The committee started working with the BLM. Initially, we had no idea of the scope or how big this thing was going to be. We knew that to be successful we needed buy-in from the local community, both the state and federal government and the BLM. Sid Johnson started working with the BLM on the facility size and scope. Mike Wooters took on the task of marketing the idea locally to generate community support. He oversaw the effort to generate local financial support through the sale of personalized bricks and tiles to local citizens and businesses. Since Gary Schmidt was Leo Adler's banker, he convinced Leo to commit to a pledge of \$100,000. My job was to generate interest and financial support from the State of Oregon, the federal representatives that included Senator Hatfield, and Representative Les Aucoin as well as the state's larger foundations."

Working with BLM architects and engineers, the committee came up with a \$200,000 budget for the first year, which

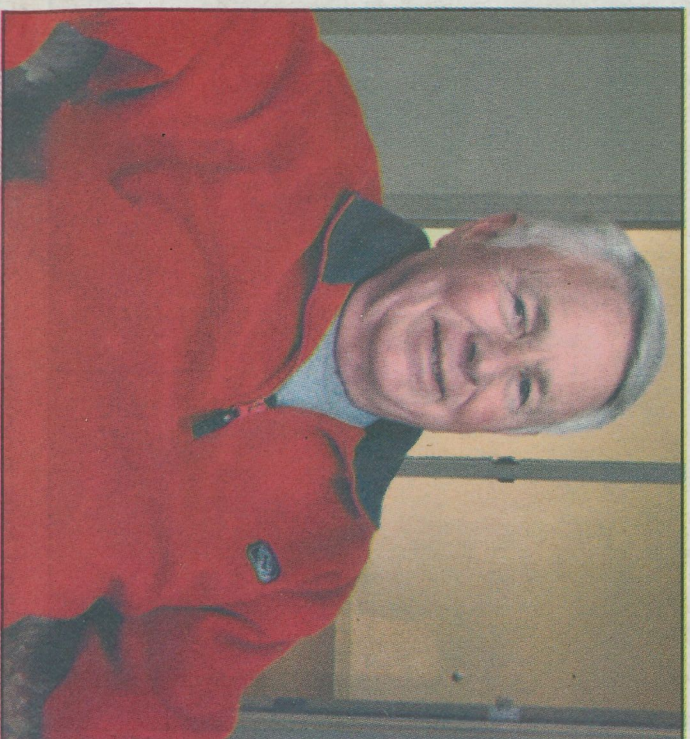


Photo by Sherrie Kvamme

**CHUCK ROUSE** served on a committee of Baker City businessmen who initially conceptualized an interpretive center that could capitalize on the city's proximity to the Oregon Trail.

egon Community Foundation and the Collins Foundation." With these financial commitments from the local community, state and major foundations, the committee was ready to approach the federal senators and representatives, whose support was essential if the project were to receive federal funding through the BLM to build the proposed facility.

In the course of working with the senators and representatives. Chuck had also cultivated relationships with two members of Senator Hatfield's staff, Mike Salsgiver and Susan Long, who were assigned to work on Interior Department projects, as well as Kevin Lynch who served as Les Aucoin's Interior Department staffer. The support of Hatfield and Aucoin was essential since they served on the Senate and House Appropriations Committees. By statute, all spending bills originate in the House and must go through a thorough review in the Appropriations Committee. Once approved by the House the proposed budget then goes to the Senate Appropriation Committee for further review and then approval by the full Senate.

"Mike Salsgiver and Susan Long were very competent at their jobs. They were always questioning the merits and value of the project to the community and to the state," said Chuck. "I admired their approach in that they made it clear that the senator only supported projects whose benefits to the state would justify the costs. I sensed that they were not really convinced that this was a worthy project, and they kept encouraging me to take more time and to try again at a future date. In turn, I kept pushing hard, and I finally had a meeting set up with Gerry Frank, Hatfield's chief of staff. The meeting was at his office in Salem, and Mike made it clear that I had only 10 minutes. It was a tough, tough sale, but after a full 45 minutes, I knew we had a project," said Chuck. "From this point forward, Gerry Frank never wavered on his support. There is no doubt in my mind that this project

he said that at this point not much. I immediately called Gerry Frank at his office in D.C. and told him that our first year's request was no longer in the House budget. He calmly said, 'Just give me a few minutes to see what we can do.' A short time later I received another call from Kevin. He said, 'Chuck, I don't know what you did, but the budget now includes \$700,000,' which was the amount we needed for two years. I then fully understood why Gerry was often referred to as Oregon's third senator.

"This project would have never happened without the support of Gerry and Senator Hatfield. They were true statesmen, the likes of which this state could use again. I often refer to Gerry as the Saint Peter of Oregon politics. He was the gatekeeper. Gerry is a dear friend, and at the age of 97, he is still approached for guidance and support."

Chuck said as with any project, there are naysayers who feel that these kinds of efforts are a waste of time.

"That happens," he said, "so to boost community support we had regularly scheduled meetings and updates for the public so questions could be asked and suggestions made. People from Governor Goldschmidt's staff attended some of the meetings, and we had Debbie Kennedy, who was the director of tourism for the State of Oregon come in. We wanted everyone informed. At the same time Mike Wooters was doing brick sales and generating funds. The local buy-in gave it credibility, and that was essential to the project."

Mike Wooters took care of the local fundraising, and Chuck took care of the state

and the federal fundraising as well as working with the Oregon Community Foundation, the Meyer Memorial Trust, the largest foundation in the state at that time, and with the BLM and Warne Nunn who had been chief of staff when Hatfield served as Oregon's governor and helped get his office up and running when the former governor was elected to the United States Senate. Once Hatfield was established in Washington, Nunn returned to Oregon, where he worked for Pacific Power and Light Company and served as a trustee of the Meyer Memorial Trust.

"I was concerned about the other three proposed Oregon Trail interpretive facilities," said Chuck. "Their project leadership were contacting us regularly for advice on how to generate support and funding for the respective projects. They were all conceptual at that time. There was the Tamásistlikt in Pendleton, the Discovery Center in The Dalles, and the end of the Oregon Trail in Clackamas.

"On one of my visits with Warne Nunn, chairman of Meyer Memorial Trust board, I shared with him a concern that there was no coordinated effort to develop and fund these three proposed centers. It seemed that the three projects would be much more successful if they were looked at as one project, which would benefit the entire state. Warne agreed and said the man to talk with was Don Frisby, who was the CEO of Pacific Corp. Warne picked up his phone, called Don and set up a meeting for 2:00 p.m. that same day.

"I went over to his office, and about 10 minutes into our meeting Don called Tom Young, who was president of the Oregon Historical Society. He came right over to join us. After about 30 minutes of conversation they both agreed the proper development of the three proposed facilities would definitely be a benefit to the state and their design and funding should be coordinated, statewide effort.

"Don and Tom agreed to call a number of CEOs and presidents and encourage them to attend a meeting to discuss the prospects of taking this project to fruition. I was not able to attend the meeting due to family issues, but the meeting was a success. The concept was proposed to the governor and the Oregon Trail Coordinating Council was formed as an entity reporting to the governor."

Chuck explained that the

group looked at the potentials of the four planned interpretive centers and then proposed their idea of the size and the budgets. Chuck was asked to go to Washington D.C. and he recalled, "Long story short, all three centers were funded. The focus on Tamásistlikt was to talk about the trail as it related to the Native American community and the role they played. The Discovery Center would talk about the geology of the Gorge and how it was formed, and then there is the End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, located in Oregon City, Oregon.

Chuck's educational and career background helped to prepare him for the task of fundraising at the national level for the interpretive center. After he graduated from college, he had been offered a commercial sales job with Mobil Oil Corporation, and while it was not the job he would have chosen, it turned out to be an ideal job from a development standpoint. With Mobil, he was sent to some of the best training available spending 12 weeks in Belmar, New Jersey in sales training as well as engineering training. It enhanced his abilities to go out and compete for contracts with Weyerhaeuser Company, Pacific Corp and Kenworth Trucks, who were ultimately some of his accounts when he was based in Seattle.

It all went together to provide a foundation that helped him in fundraising efforts at the state and national levels for the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center project. When Chuck and Rosemary moved back to Baker, Chuck managed Farmerials and soon opened Rouse Home Furnishings in Baker. He also served as president of the Baker County Chamber of Commerce and was involved in a variety of community volunteer projects over the years.

It was with some hesitation that Chuck Rouse agreed to tell his abbreviated story of the role he played in the grassroots beginning of the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center as well as the brief mention of the work he did for the three additional interpretive centers.

"There were so many people and entities involved in this project. It couldn't have happened without the tremendous involvement of all of them.

It is with gratitude to Chuck Rouse and the others who are graciously telling their chapters of involvement so the most complete story possible of the NHOITC's origins can be told.

*To be continued...*

## Cultural Coalition Seeks Grant Applications

The Baker County Cultural Coalition (BCCC) is encouraging grant applications for arts, culture and heritage projects from now to December 15. The application is very simple.

BCCC receives a grant annually from the Oregon Cultural Trust to support local heritage, arts and culture projects in the county.

is December 15 for grants given in January; the second stage is May 15 for grants given in June for projects taking place before the end of 2022. Grant applications and instructions for reports can be found on the Baker County website [https://www.bakercounty.org/cultural\\_plan/contact\\_us.html](https://www.bakercounty.org/cultural_plan/contact_us.html).

is encouraging applications from throughout the county to receive help for cultural projects in 2022.

"This is an extraordinary gift every year from the people of Oregon who donate a match to the Oregon Cultural Trust of their other donations to non-profit arts and cultural organizations in Oregon and