

Hugo Home

Mike Walker, Storyteller

Hugo Neighborhood Association & Historical Society

March 11, 2001

Returning Home The rural Hugo region is snuggled in a small valley mostly surrounded by mountains forested with the conifer brothers fir and pine, and the hardwood sisters oak and madrone. It covers about 5,000 acres in northern Josephine County, Oregon and is bounded in the north by Grave Creek Hills, in the east by Mt. Sexton, Red Mountain, and Walker Mountain, and in the west by the Centennial Mountain complex. The southern boundary is approximately the stream of Jump-off Joe Creek and the community of Merlin. The Hugo area used to be famous for its cherry and pear orchards. It is still known for its soils which are in large part derived from decomposed granite. Rattlesnakes do not like decomposed granite, at least that's what local folks say.

Little second-grader, Mike Walker, ran away from his rural Hugo home for the first time in 1951. Emotionally he nervously traveled a far distance as this was his first major act of defiance against his parents. However, as the crow flies he was still in sight, nearly spitting distance, of his home when he came to rest in the ditch on the other side of the main granite road in the area. The pot-holed right-of-way did not have a real name in those days; it was just known as Route One. Later the road would be paved and become Three Pines Road. After a couple of hours his mother, "Billie" came out of the house and walked to the edge of the Route One, still across the road from her son, and asked him if he was all right. Haltingly Mike said he was, and his mother said, "O.K" and walked back into the house. Mike did not feel good about this turning point as had wanted his mother to ask him to come back, but instead he was still sitting alongside the road looking at his house. Finally, reluctantly, he got up and slowly walked back to his house; he was glad to be home after the afternoon in the ditch. Nothing was ever said by his mom or dad about that day.

Raising Chickens Mike's dad, Jesse, retired a "Chief" from the U.S. Navy in 1955 and soon the family was raising white Leghorn chickens for eggs at their small make-shift farm. This was the same year Mike started fifth grade at Hugo Elementary School. The scale of the neighborhood school was small and you had intense relations with your neighbors and no one was a stranger for long. When Mike attended the school it had great tough football teams and fast basketball teams (i.e., at least he knew they were the best!), and beautiful girls who chased boys. But, most of all the children and families of the Hugo community had togetherness and caring. Many felt it was impossible to separate the school from the community.

It was a big day when the family started its chicken business after three dozen little chicks arrived on a Southern Pacific Railroad train about a mile away at the Hugo depot. They came in those little cardboard boxes and they were so small, and chirping, chirping, chirping. When the weather turned cold they had to be protected with heat from a large electric bulb. A problem was the unreliability of electrical power in the rural areas during winter storms. Many times the power would be out from a snow covered tree that had fallen on the line, and the little chicks would soon start to huddle together because they were getting cold. They didn't peep so much

when they were cold. Mike and his younger brothers, Dale and Jon, and their dad would go out to the pig pen where the chicks were confined over a layer of sawdust, and light a Coleman lantern to provide warmth for the babies. They would also play cards while they watched the chicks which was terrific fun, except it seemed like dad always won.

I-5 I-5 was built through northern Josephine County in 1960 and Mike could not understand why they needed the huge interstate highway. The area was still very rural and sometimes when driving to church in Grants Pass, a distance of about 10 freeway miles, they might see only two or three cars. He can distinctly remember that on two different Sundays they did not see even one other vehicle on the freeway.

Hugo Roots It was 1962 and 18-year old Mike was going to start college in a few weeks at far away Oregon State College at a place called Corvallis, Oregon. No one in his family had ever been to college, except his mother for a year of community college. He had never been away from home before on his own and was nervous, but also excited about being independent and making his own decisions. Would he succeed or flunk? By the time he was a Junior his folks were considering moving to Eugene so that his dad could make good money by managing a large chicken farm. After much discussion his mom and dad decided to stay in Hugo where they still reside. Thirty-five years later Mike is quite happy that his folks did not move as he could return anytime to his roots in the granite of Hugo. Family and the land or "place" in his community was important.

Floating The Rogue River Navy pilot Mike Walker came home from the Vietnam War for a visit and he wanted to go rafting the Rogue with his friends. His idea was met with some resistance as it was April and cool, but it was a sunny day and he finally talked his brothers, Dale and Jon, and another friend, Clay Dickerson, into making a float. Wrong...it showered, they got soaked and miserable. It became so cold their knees clattered. They stopped at the gravel bar above Old Man Riffle to whizz and had a few problems. Their hands were numb and they had difficulty getting their jeans unzipped. And when they finally did, they couldn't find their peters. They were hiding somewhere. It's tough to whizz when you have a very tiny whizzer, and it's also painful. Another lesson was learned. This time the lesson was about the dangers of initial hypothermia, a dangerous situation. Now Mike has a farmer-john which is a wet suit that looks like coveralls. After that was over, the end of a wet day was a rainbow in the bright mist bending toward the bar across the river. Mike would remember that home day many times after he went back to Vietnam.

Retired In Hugo Mike was employed 30 years with the Feds from the humidity of Florida and Texas to the coolness of Alaska and Nevada, the jungles of southeast Asia, and back again to the green trees of Oregon where in 1997 he retired to the mountain solitude of Hugo. It is here where his wife, Cindy, and he built a new home together. Well, it was actually his brother Dale that built the home, but Mike and Dale argued over the details of its design. Most of Hugo still feels relatively rural if you don't count the 18-wheelers traveling by the Hugo I-5 exit, and they live a spitting distance from his old home and still his folks' place. Ironically, their new home is

located on land that he had helped his dad install field wire for a fence to corral cattle and pigs during the winter. It was a winter operation because there was no water on the land back then during the summer droughts. Mike would have lost another bet if someone had said he would someday be living on that patch of land he had forty years earlier helped his dad fence — that beautiful patch of oak and madrone, poison oak, ticks, and wildflowers.

Mt. Sexton is in the frame of his kitchen window every morning after he gets up to make several cups of instant coffee — aroma roasted, mountain grown Folgers. Each morning Cindy and Mike's dogs, Wilma and Fred, obnoxiously say hi with their wet noses and tails going. He is home again in Hugo and after all those years he has only seen one small rattlesnake in its granites.