

Living Lightly

After 30 years, Ponderosa Park's environmental statement still strong

By Jeanie Senior

It's time for the monthly community potluck at Ponderosa Park, and the folks there are circling. That is, they have linked hands and formed a big circle, made easier by the fact the building is circular, too.

Circling is an opportunity for newcomers—new residents or visitors—to introduce themselves. It's a time to pause before joining the potluck line and sitting down to eat.

Among the diners are Ponderosa Park residents Betty Long-Schleif and Ken Schleif, who attended their first potluck about nine years ago before they bought their property in the sprawling, sparsely settled subdivision.

They liked the concept of sustainable living advanced by the founders of Ponderosa Park, Larry and Meg Letterman and her brother, William Kershaw, who bought a 1,089-acre cattle ranch five miles north of Goldendale in 1977.

Larry, Meg and Bill platted the property into 5-acre parcels, but "We feel like we are a community, not just a subdivision," Meg wrote in 2005, describing the place for the book "Bluelight to Pucker Huddle."

She described Ponderosa Park as "a pleasant



Above, longtime resident Tobiah Israel walks the foundation of the new eco-friendly house he and his wife are building. Below, Betty Long-Schleif walks to the round community building in the environmentally conscious Ponderosa Park community.

living area based on environmental consciousness, voluntary cooperation, self-responsibility and respect for others."

Thirty years later, the "pleasant living area" at 2,300 feet elevation among the scrub oaks and pine trees still is governed by a homeowner's association, which is responsible for maintaining the nine miles of gravel roads winding through the property's 189 lots.

There is a community well, but the water system has been managed by Klickitat PUD since 1998.

Larry and Meg are deceased, and Bill no longer plays an active role in

the community. An estimated 80 to 90 residences remain in Ponderosa Park, not all of them year round.

Many of the new residents are retirees attracted by the idea of owning a place in the country, rather than by the opportunity for an alternative lifestyle.

It was Meg's aspirations for the settlement that attracted longtime residents Tobiah and Adar Israel. They were part of the "second wave" of settlers when they moved there about 16 years ago.

Their 5 acres exemplify sustainable living. The couple, who have raised four children at Ponderosa

Park, say sustainability—finding a way to consume as few of the earth's resources as possible—is their continuing goal.

"Even before we came here my wife and I decided to create a nonprofit foundation to kind of be the foundation of our experiments," Tobiah says.

First called the Institute for Sustainable



Technology, it evolved to the Institute for Sustainability, then the Creative Living Institute.

"We're actually talking about changing the name one more time," Tobiah says. "The latest is the Living Lightly Institute. That kind of hits the nail on the head as far as what we're trying to do."

When Tobiah and Adar bought their land they referred to it as the sustainable homestead project. More than a decade later, their property is dotted with a yurt, several stucco buildings built of straw bales—including a bathhouse and the round yurt-shaped community building where potlucks are held.

There is a composting toilet, which Tobiah designed, and which was approved by the county building department.

The family cans and dries the produce from a flourishing garden.

Thanks to solar power, and a backup generator, the Israel family lives off the grid—which is to say they are not connected to electric power lines.

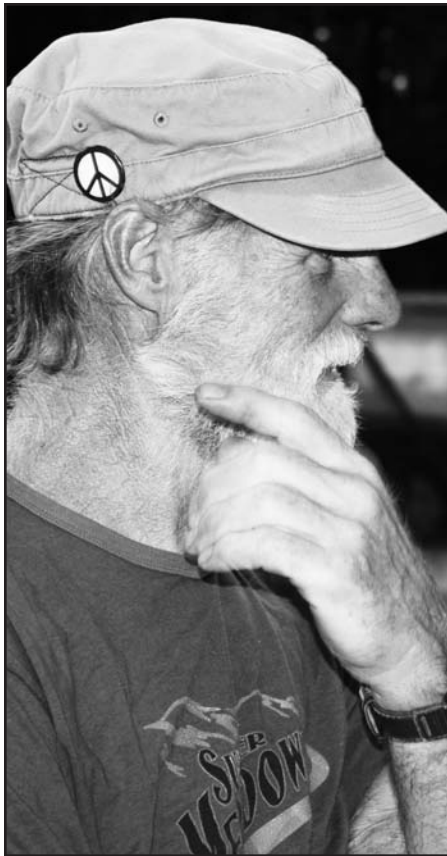
Tobiah, who has led workshops on solar power, solar hot water and hay-bale construction, says he also would like to add wind generation on his property, "if we can get the towers up high enough."

Along with a new house, he envisions a rooftop greenhouse to allow them to grow produce all year—another step toward sustainability.

"Sustainability has to be a change in our lifestyle," Tobiah says. "I've got a little project going in my backyard, and if it works the way I think it will work, it's going to move us in the right direction."

The Israels are one of a handful of households at Ponderosa, including Betty and Ken, and Chris Wells and Heather Robinson, who are off the grid, using solar power to generate electricity.

Other homeowners have installed solar panels, but are connected to Klickitat



Above, Tobiah was part of the "second wave" of Ponderosa Park residents. Below, a few of the diverse structures at the site.

PUD power lines. On days when solar production is high, excess electricity goes back to the grid, which generates credits on their power bill.

In addition, they earn a Washington state tax credit of 15 cents per kilowatt-hour of electricity generated by their solar system, up to \$2,000 annually.

Sylvia and Lewis McFarland,

who bought property in Ponderosa Park in 1995, installed a grid intertie solar system about 18 months ago, when they retired and moved to the community full time. Should there be a power outage, Sylvia says, the solar system disconnects from the grid so there's no risk to utility workers.

There's a lot more diversity at Ponderosa Park today, Tobiah says.

"Retirees move here to try to get away from the city to a rural experience," he says. "They like the community because it gives them more security and the social life. There are a lot of reasons people are moving here now. Because I see the change, sometimes I feel like an oddball left over from a failed movement."

Ponderosa Park was not envisioned as a commune or an experiment in Utopian living, but early on it was the source of a lot of wild rumors. Residents still joke about the stories: "Naked men with chain saws!" one said at the potluck, eliciting laughter when he quoted one piece of over-the-top gossip.

In recent years, the number of conventional houses at Ponderosa Park, whether site-built or manufactured, has grown. The community includes at least two geodesic domes and several more recently built straw bale, passive solar and earth-bermed structures.

Ponderosa co-founder Meg, a Philadelphia native and Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Wellesley College, started the annual Earth Day celebration in Goldendale.

Not all of the founders' goals have survived through the years, Tobiah adds, but one of their central ideals was community.

"There's enough community here for people to be happy," he explains. "and happiness is a big part of the equation of sustainability." ■

Learn more about the Living Lightly Institute on the Web site: www.reinventthehouse.org.

