

Applegater

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WINTER 2020
Volume 13, No. 4

Applegate Valley Community Newsmagazine
Serving Jackson and Josephine Counties — Circulation: 13,000

Celebrating
~26~
Years

Long-lost story of pioneer blacksmith re-emerges

BY SUZIE SAVOIE

Benjamin Johnson lived for at least two years near Ruch in 1868 and 1869, just long enough to leave a lasting legacy in the Applegate Valley.

Ben was born into slavery in Alabama in 1834 and eventually made his way to Uniontown, Oregon, as a freed slave. Uniontown was at the mouth of the Little Applegate River during the mining era. Ben worked for Theodor Cameron, the founder of Uniontown, built a blacksmith shop, and prospected at the base of the mountain that would become known as “(racial epithet) Ben Mountain.” By all accounts he was respected in the community and was known as a skilled blacksmith.

Ben eventually moved north to Albany, and on New Year’s Eve in 1870 he married Amanda Gardner Johnson, a former slave who had come west with the Deckard family in 1853 when she was 16. Although



Ben and Amanda Gardner Johnson, Oregon pioneers and among Oregon’s first Black citizens. Photo: Courtesy of the Lane County History Museum.

the Deckards had freed their slaves, according to the Lane County History Museum Digital Collections, “Amanda postponed her marriage to Johnson for five years while she cared for her former mistress, Elizabeth Deckard Snodgrass,

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Crafts, music, and theater during the pandemic

BY DIANA COOGLE

In spite of the pandemic, Peg Pragg, co-founder of Pacifica Garden in Williams, was reluctant to cancel Pacifica’s annual Winter Arts Fest. “I think right now people need a big fix of ‘community,’” she said, so she and others figured out how to make it work: only 15 vendors, masks required, numbers limited, and no food or live music, and for just seven hours on one day, November 29.

An abbreviated Winter Fest. No Jacksonville Market last summer. Closed or coronavirus-adjusted local markets, stores, crafts fairs, and festivals. These changes have not been easy for Applegate artists and musicians.

“The hit has been substantial,” admits Williams musician Barbara Mendelsohn, who plays music with Kevin Carr at dances, festivals, music camps, and

pubs—venues now mostly unavailable. Kevin estimates he has lost a third to half of his income. The loss for the English Lavender Farm, on Thompson Creek Road, is around 40 percent. Shanna Rose, also in Williams, who makes “wear the forest” clothes, estimates a \$10,000 loss. Clothing vendors were hit especially hard because, Shanna says, “COVID restrictions excluded textiles.”

Food vendors were luckier: theirs is an essential service. Sales at By George Farm, on Yale Creek, were down about 10-20 percent.

Into the gap have stepped good-hearted people. More customers than usual have been buying directly from Williams artist Serene Dussell, who makes hemp clothing, since the pandemic forced the closure of the store that carried her wares. Grocers

wanting to support Oregon food during the pandemic have patronized By George Farm.

While most theaters have had to close, Wanderlust Theater, at LongSword Winery, was doubly lucky because (1) their shows are moving, outdoor spectacles, so audience members can be safely distanced on the twenty-two acres of LongSword Vineyard, and (2) their next show, *Dracula*, was already scheduled for spring 2021. Auditions were socially distanced, with masks.

Many crafts-fair vendors have begun looking for outside jobs.

Some, like musician Kevin Carr, who is also a licensed counselor working online, have put more energy into already existing

side jobs. Barbara Mendelsohn, an artist as well as a musician, is “trying harder to

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Serene Dussell at work.

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