

the ragged edge

Profile: Bob Vickaryous and Julian Bucher

A range of opinion

Two Boundary County ranchers live off adjoining land, but have cultivated divergent political views



Rancher and political activist Bob Vickaryous pans to graze cattle on public land, but complains that Forest Service wildlife biologists are more concerned about wildlife habitat.

By Craig Welch

At first glance, a lonely creek and 14 years are all that separate Bob Vickaryous and Julian Bucher. They live side-by-side two miles from the 40th Parallel - closer to Canada than to the nearest pay phone. The weathered ranchers, both Boundary County natives, give cattle on nearby forest allotments.

Similarity ends there. Bucher, 65, campaigned for a recent \$14.7 million bond to expand Bonner Ferry High School. He believes public land grazing fees are low and thinks entry over gates blocking forest roads is "irrational overreaction." The Democrat worries his community is "coming snafup."

Vickaryous, 49, spearheaded a tax rebellion that helped defeat the high school bond. He's fighting to amend new development laws and started a recall petition against the county prosecutor for refusing to put a new zoning code on the ballot. The John Birch Society member frets about one-world government and a loss of liberty.

In this isolated county, political paths - even among lifelong neighbors - often fork like logging roads.

On a rainy October evening, Vickaryous sits in his mobile home eating a steak from one of his own cattle. He scans a recent "New American" magazine. The John Birch Society magazine cover shows an American soldier who refuses to wear U.N. blue.

The county's abandoning its logging, Vickaryous says. Americans could lose "complete control over our government."

Huddled in a dim light in Korea's demilitarized zone for 13 months in 1966 and 1967, Vickaryous had plenty of time to wonder: "Why did Korea lose half its country to the communists?"

These days he points to the U.N. declaring Yellowstone National Park a "World Heritage Site" as leading American soldiers into battle. "When you control the power to enforce the laws, you control the power," he says. "It's really scary to me."

Vickaryous grew up in this valley that splits the Selkirk and Purcell mountains 20 miles north of Bonner Ferry. He finished public high school and began logging and tending cows on the family's 160-acre lay ranch.

In the mid-1970s, his brother passed along John Birch Society literature picked up from some loggers.

Vickaryous read about the Council on Foreign Relations, international bankers and politicians and studying the Constitution. In 1983, an airline crash killed Georgia Congressman and John Birch Society leader Larry McDonald. It had had.

Sovets shot down the plane as part of a plan to kill the articulate

leader, Vickaryous believes. "It demoralized a lot of people." Then, before the Persian Gulf War, President George Bush gave his "new world order" speech. Boundary County school kids about how many people a music teacher can instruct at home. The number of gates blocking forest access to protect grizzly bears and caribou climbed to 118.

Vickaryous could take no more. People clearly had forgotten their heritage, he says.

He founded a local property rights group to rein in local, state and federal government. He led a letters-to-the-editor war on school funding.

"Do we need public schools anymore, and if we do, how do we pay for it?" he asks. "I don't think we need them."

Public schools could be replaced by market-driven private schools and home schooling, Vickaryous says.

He battles the federal Endangered Species Act, the county's drainage zoning plan, and the ELM's grazing fees he pays monthly for each of his 51 cow-calf pairs.

"If more people paid attention, it'd stir them into action, too," he says.

Across Smith Creek, Julian Bucher crochets in dusty overalls over

an smoldering stump. He has his own theory about why people here are bitter about government. Shame.

Cash-poor farmers, ranchers and loggers were raised to bond independence like penance, Bucher says. Instead they directly benefit from government farm subsidies and below-cost timber sales.

"We feel guilty about handouts," he says. "When you accept their power, their rules, their demands, you give up freedom. Deep in our hearts we feel we're going too far."

So, he says, "we're coming about for enemies."

Bucher learned 40 years ago how anxiety and fear evolve into conspiracy. Sen. Albert McCarty "made a big deal here," he says, adding "it sounded like the entire government was infiltrated."

But, he says, "30 years in the Air Force, including seven years in Asia, opened his eyes and convinced him that 'McCarty was a loser and a slunk and utterly unrepentant.'"

He learned about the dangers of polarization and hate outside an Arkansas movie theater in 1954.

He asked a black man for a match to light his cigarette. The man obliged and Bucher responded, "Thank you, sir." A group of white men turned and threatened Bucher for showing respect.

"That was a turning point for me," Bucher returned home in the mid-1970s, and now tends to 40 head of cattle on his 80-acre ranch. He watches Boundary County "double-clanking" into a new economy and struggling with social changes.

Rocky Mountain Academy, a school for troubled youth with a tuition of more than \$3,500 a month, drew "tree-huggers and educated folk who make us uncomfortable," Bucher says. He's seen conservative retirees come to Boundary County only to be dubbed "wandering pickers" by more conservative natives.

Instead, he says, county residents need to come together. They have history.

When the late Robert Miles, a Michigan racist, planned to move here a decade ago, Bucher and 37 others formed a human rights group and wrote dozens of letters telling him he wasn't welcome. Miles didn't come.

"We have a deep, ingrained sense of fair play," Bucher says. "There's a bio-ethic law law feeling here that makes us vulnerable."

When Miles of Montana patriarch John Trochmann tried to join the county's human rights group, the group refused to make a motion to include him.

Agnostics shouldn't be encouraged, Bucher says, or politics will fracture further.

"I just won't believe this county - or this country - will go that route."

Across Smith Creek, Julian Bucher paints a Forest Service road

with his dog.

Photography by Dan McConell

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