

Ligertown

In September 1995, sheriff deputies shot nineteen large cats, African lions mostly, at the rural compound of Dottie Martin and Bob Fiebert, located a mile east of Lava Hot Springs, Idaho. The incident made national news. Followup stories can be found on the Internet, some of which have the streets of Lava running red with cat blood. Dottie and Bob were charged with more than a hundred misdemeanors, many related to animal cruelty. A couple of the charges were for picking up two hawk feathers from alongside Highway 30. A few of the charges stuck.

I didn't know, prior to hearing about the killing of the cats, that Bob Fiebert was in Idaho and living only a dozen miles from me. I have known Bob since 1964, when we were together at Oregon Tech. He was a neighbor at Siletz for five years: 1969-74. I told *Bob Fiebert stories* for the twenty-plus years between when I moved to Alaska and Bob made national news. And while he has had his fifteen minutes of fame, he deserves more.

There were five of us from Lincoln County attending Oregon Tech the school year of 1964-65. Mike Jones and I had graduated from Taft High two years previous. Tom, Clark, and Bob had graduated from Toledo High a few years before. Bob and Clark shared a house a few blocks from where I shared a basement apartment with a fellow from Massachusetts. Tom lived in a camp trailer at the edge of Klamath Falls, and Mike had a family: Mike had married in high school for the most common reason why.

Tom, Clark, and Bob were attending OTI on GI benefits. Mike was receiving a little support from his parents. I was on my own. For all five of us, optimism clinked louder in our pockets than our shekels. On most days, we had to take a collection to buy five gallons of twenty-four cents a gallon gasoline.

By deer season, Mike, Clark and I were hunting together. We were all living on ducks and venison, a lot more ducks than venison. But by the middle of deer season, I had been eating ducks for nearly every meal for six weeks. I was beginning to find it difficult to put another piece of duck in my mouth. I had killed a forked horn early in the deer season, but I had shared it with Mike, his wife and son. It was gone. Clark and Bob were out of groceries, and Tom was about out.

It would be nice to never have to admit to wrongdoing: the five of us lived on venison the rest of the winter. I did all of the shooting. Mike usually drove, but Clark or Bob would on occasion. Tom was the oldest and the most cautious.

After that school year, I lost track of the others. I have seen Mike once since: he stopped by my shop one day, said he was a superintendent of a sawmill in Corvallis, and we remembered an evening, when playing Hearts, I shot the moon five times in a row. I have seen neither Tom nor Clark since leaving Klamath Falls.

But when I returned to Lincoln County, I knew Bob was around even before he became a neighbor. When I first worked in the pulpmill, I worked with a big fellow, much larger than I am, named Don Frost. He had a reputation as a fighter; he had even knocked down a state police officer and had sat on the officer's chest (on that occasion, he was extremely lucky not to have been shot by the officer's partner). And during the months we worked together, Don went home one afternoon and found Bob Fiebert in bed with his wife. Bob said later that he thought he was dead. But Don merely packed his clothes in a bag while his wife and Bob remained petrified in bed, then Don left, divorcing his wife within a few months.

The next day at the mill when Don told me what happened, I asked if this was the same Bob Fiebert I knew from OTI. Don didn't know, but when Don described Bob I knew he was.

Bob did some logging, made a little money, and acquired acreage across from the VFW cemetery there east of Siletz. The place was fenced and had a decent barn. It was actually a desirable ranch. But instead of running cows as the previous owner had, Bob wanted to raise buffalo.

A fence that will hold a cow will, most likely, prove inadequate for buffalo that lean against fence posts. They rub their backs against fence posts. Then after knocking that fence down, they seem huge when they stand in the middle of the road on dark, rainy nights, just waiting to total a car.

Bob used railroad ties to replace the broken cedar posts. He set them close together. And the buffalo were still on the road. He put in taller timbers for posts, and six foot, then seven foot high fencing before his buffalo stayed where they belonged.

Everything finally seemed to be going well for Bob. Then his wife left him. Something to do with his philandering. And Bob went to town and got drunk.

Stormy night. High winds. Driving rain. One side of Bob's barn was built on pilings, a common practice along the Coast. His buffalo, to get out of the storm, were under his barn and amongst those pilings.

Bob came home much too drunk to drive. His immediate neighbor was surprised he made it as far as his lane.

As Bob turned his Toronado into his half mile long lane, he hit a timber fence post and totaled his car. Now he had to walk in that wind and hard rain. He sobered some, but he also came down sick. But most importantly, after he reached his house and went to bed and just before he passed out, the barn collapsed, killing all of his buffalo.

I drove by the next morning. Bob's Toronado was still against the post. The barn was down. I didn't know about the buffalo until later in the day. And I have used this story to illustrate when things go wrong, they can get worse, especially with a little help.

Financially, Bob was wiped out. He had already logged the timber on the farm so he had no readily available source of capital. His wife had cause for divorce, and the farm was community property. Bob couldn't afford adequate insurance, and like myself and most everyone I knew, he was either under-insured or uninsured. Plus, his buffalo were then considered exotic animals; thus, they weren't covered as livestock.

But Bob is resilient: he worked hard at being *Bob*. He logged some, and he recovered. Before I left for Alaska, I heard that he wanted to create a drive-through game farm like the one on the Umpqua. I also heard he had obtained a lion, and that the lion was running free on the hillside above his barn. I don't know the truth about whether the lion was actually loose, but I know that two fellows who had poached deer on the benchlands above Bob's farm reformed their ways and became semi-respectable citizens. They told me about the lion being loose. I guess the lion added a new dimension to spotlighting.

Maybe if the buffalo hadn't been killed, Bob would never have gotten that first lion.

Sometime after I left Siletz, Lincoln County officials nixed Bob's plans for a game farm. They brought charges against him. And if newspaper reports can be believed, in the middle of the night Bob moved his lions to Idaho, to Kooskia, where the South Fork joins the Middle Fork of the Clearwater River.

When I asked Bob about leaving Siletz, then later Kooskia, all he said was that both places were too wet for lions. Probably true. But not the truth.

One of Bob's lions was shot by a Kooskia neighbor when the neighbor claimed it was loose and was stalking his horse. County officials again brought charges against Bob. They also didn't want him to operate a drive-through game farm.

Unbeknownst to me, Bob, now teamed up with Dotty Martin the paralegal who helped him beat the earlier charges, purchased five acres of rocky hillside east of Lava Hot Springs about the same time as I arrived in Idaho to accept a Doctor of Arts fellowship from Idaho State University. . . . I like Russian novels in which characters come together, then part, going their separate ways only to have their paths cross again. All humanity is linked together and to the land and landscape from which we have

derived. Life is entwined with life like beanstalk runners climbing strings. A few of us grow too fast and swing around to catch a distant string and grow there for awhile before swinging somewhere else.

Bob's lions were pets, or as much *pet* as their instincts allowed them to be. They had become his reason for his continued existence, the reason he worked. His hopes, his dreams, his plans--all revolved around his lions. And if nothing else, Bob was truly resilient. His dreams compelled him to keep going when good sense said he was defeated, that he should give up, surrender.

Bob was as tough as any logger. If you were going to war, you would want him with you. He could make do with nothing; he could get by in whatever circumstances he found himself. And as in a true tragedy, his strengths are also his undoing.

Along the way, Bob had also acquired a few tigers for his still planned drive-through game farm, which, by 1995, remained little more than a twenty-year-old dream. He had no money, no financing, no backing. His dream was unrealistic given his financial history.

But with his and Dotty's purchase of five otherwise useless acres outside of Lava, Bob believed he had enough property to finally lay out his game farm. He drew up plans, platted drive-through trails which would have been difficult to travel even by ATV, and he even had enough animals to start. All he needed was this chance. All he required was just a little bit of support, and a change in his personality.

Lava Hot Springs is a relatively tight knit community. Before I knew Bob was in the area, I became well acquainted with a Wyoming bootmaker who had purchased a downtown storefront in Lava; I became aware of his problems in gaining acceptance and conducting business. After a couple years, this bootmaker relocated to Montana and is much happier. Perhaps Bob should have done the same.

Bob's continuing string of moves had left him penniless. He had no money for pens so he recycled old pallets and used-fencing, purchased a small amount of poultry wire; and by using juniper posts he poached off surrounding hillsides, he build cages that would have been entirely inadequate to contain emus. If his lions hadn't been pets, the 1995 disaster would have occurred five years earlier. To outsiders, these pens were so inadequate they were unbelievable.

Bob and Dotty needed a place to live since their five acres were raw, undeveloped hillside. They didn't have financing, didn't have credit, didn't have much employment. They certainly couldn't afford to build. They couldn't afford a modular home at \$350 down and the same a month. What they could afford was a thirty-year-old camp trailer, which they moved into the middle of the compound Bob had begun to create.

The piping for Lava's city water system ran through their five acres. In exchange for trespass, the city supplied water to the property; so Bob and Dotty had water, but no sewer, septic tank or cesspool or ground in which a drain field could even be dug. They put in a power pole, but then couldn't afford to pay their electric bill. By 1995, Bob and Dotty had lived for more than two years without electricity.

Bob kept his cats in old cars, a bus. And he continued to build with pallets and salvaged lumber, working long hours, working harder than a person should have to. He fed his cats roadkilled deer, rabbits, even a hawk, for which he would be charged. And his cats continued to breed, making his situation even more desperate.

Bob knew how to castrate cows. He could have afforded rubber bands; so, yes, he should have taken care of his tom cats.

To the thrifty ranchers east of Lava, Bob Fiebert became the neighbor from hell. And they set about trying to get rid of him.

Bob had no work: nobody would hire him. He was being shunned in the religious sense of the word. He wasn't L.D.S., and he was on the political fringes; he was close to being certifiably whacko. And he didn't help himself by winning in court the first two times Bannock County tried to shut him down. By this time, Bob and Dotty were pretty good attorneys themselves.

But things were tough for Bob and Dotty. Despite all of his resiliency, he was being pushed to his limits and perhaps a little beyond. The shunning was having its desired effect. With their electricity turned off, the cats were all Bob and Dotty had and they withdraw farther into their compound. They didn't have money for the laundromat, for barbered haircuts, for those things we regarded as the essentials of life in America. They shared their trailer with their cats: their cats sat on their couch with them, watching the TV that didn't come on without electricity. And Bob continued to build, continued to plan for their game farm, and the cats continued to breed. Bob had five ligers (tiger-lion crosses), perhaps more than existed anywhere else.

Then in September, 1995, the incident that made national news: Bannock county didn't intend to lose to Bob and Dotty a third time.

Bob's cats were upset about something. They were carrying-on as if prowlers had entered the compound. And when Bob went to quiet them, one of his cats nipped at him. Yes, I've read the stories of how Bob was attacked, and, in one account, killed. Yes, his injuries required medical attention. But his injuries were very minor, and he had been nipped before. It was what was causing his cats to be upset that troubled Bob. He insists that someone was in the compound cutting the wire to the cages that night. But with the razing of his compound, whether that was so will never be known.

The kindest thing that can be said for Bob and Dotty's compound is that it was an eyesore. The most common word used in newspaper accounts to describe their compound is *ramshackle*, but that signifier is entirely inadequate to convey the sense of squalor, dilapidation, filth, and shoddiness of the compound. It was worse than deplorable. It shouldn't have ever existed, and it was entirely held together by Bob's determination to succeed. And in his wackiness, Bob had spray-painted words and phrases on the outside of the compound's boardfence that indicated he was a political extremist.

What are *extremists* is they aren't individuals who won't quit an idea when everyone else does. We were founded by extremists. We honor extremists like Jefferson, Lincoln, Martin Luther King. They are now politically correct extremists whereas Aaron Burr remains vilified. Well, I suspect Bob Fiebert will remain vilified for all time.

To officials of Bannock County, nearly all consisting of law-abiding, government-supporting descendants of Mormon pioneers, Bob Fiebert had to go.

I sat with Bob and Dotty when they were arraigned. His cats had been certified healthy, but the whole case was never really about the cats. It was about maintaining standards, expectations, the status quo. Bob had failed to appear prosperous. He had presented some small danger to his neighbors. He was an Outsider, thought of himself as an Outsider, behaved like an Outsider, and refused to quit when a reasonable person would have. He didn't fit into the community, the county, even into the last quarter of the 20th-Century.

Bob had kept hanging on when he really had nothing to hold. Taking the cats away from Bob was painful for him, but his cats had become shackles that prevented him from doing something else.

Since Ligertown was razed, Bob has made news again in Oregon. He probably will never quit pursuing his dream.

Therein lies why Bob Fiebert should be remembered and his story told: outside of the entertainment world, there are too few examples of dreams being pursued to failure, too few examples of optimism run amuck.

There were five of us together there at OTI, five of us living on poached venison and what we salvaged from grocery store dumpsters, five of us pursuing vocations. If a person were to search the Internet for our five names, mine and Bob's will be found. Neither of us for the vocations we were then studying. Neither of us representing the best and brightest the Oregon Coast could produce. But Bob's breeding of ligers (he had success crossing these natural enemies because both his lions and tigers were pets that had been raised together) and me asking that his story be remembered typify the

optimism we took to class every day, optimism that put Americans on the moon within that decade.

So what happens when optimism becomes our enemy, and our innate character our destruction? Do we then become like everyone else?

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