

## Good-bye Lane County – Peter Laufer

The sordid racist history of Lane County – and Oregon – is epitomized by my county’s namesake: Joseph “Joe” Lane. A newcomer to the state a decade ago, I first learned about Lane’s ghastly career when I was researching my book, *The Elusive State of Jefferson*. The settler my county was named after came to Oregon with Southern roots and via Mexico. There he rose to the rank of Brigadier General, invading our southern neighbor as an enthusiastic warrior in President James Polk’s Manifest Destiny-fueled war of conquest, the war that stole half of Mexico and expanded U.S. territory across the Southwest to the Pacific. In return for his service, Polk appointed Lane governor of Oregon Territory. But Lane continued to fight, now against native Oregonians and in some of the most brutal battles brought by white settlers stealing the lands we all live on today.

When Oregon Territory became a state in 1859, Lane went back to Washington as one of its first senators. A year later he was on the ballot as vice presidential running mate for Kentucky slave owner John Breckenridge. The pair ran a proslavery campaign. Abraham Lincoln beat them and Stephen Douglas. As a U.S. senator Lane defended the Confederacy’s right to secede from the Union, and his son John quit West Point and headed for the South, signing up with the Confederate army. During Lane’s political career, both the territorial and the state constitutions forbade the residency here of what those documents termed “Negroes and mulattoes.”

That is a brief summary of the sorry, sorry heritage of living in a county named after Joe Lane.

Ours is an era reconciling such heritage from coast to coast and border to border. From statuary to place names, from flags to song lyrics, our society is – correctly – reevaluating symbols of our past and what they mean to our present and future. What might those of us living in Lane County do, burdened by the crimes, politics and beliefs of Joe Lane? Change the name of our county is a natural answer.

But a name change is a burdensome thing. It’s a logistical nightmare and expensive. Just changing signs and letterhead would cost a bundle during these times of substantive budget cuts. Besides, especially for those blissfully unaware of Lane’s biography, there undoubtedly exists some embracement of the Lane County identity. We’re comfortable with it. We’re used to it. And that name surrounds us: Lane Community College, Lane Transit District, Lane Events Center, Lane Electric Cooperative, etc., etc. The list is long.

A natural fix is to replace the county's namesake with another Lane. I first stumbled on this obvious solution reading a letter to the local newspaper editor that suggested replacing Joe with Lois Lane! A fun and funny idea, but probably too frivolous even for our alternative slice of Oregon.

I decided to look further for a different Lane. A quick search combining "Lane" and "Oregon" introduced me to Harry Lane – an Oregonian whose lifeworks were diametrically opposed to those of the racist, war mongering Joe Lane and his son, the Confederate soldier.

Harry Lane, as the Oregon Historical Society's encyclopedia notes, "epitomized the spirit and activism of Oregon's progressive reform era." He was a physician who advocated for government's role in public health. As director of the Oregon State Hospital, he investigated corruption in the facility's administration. There's nothing new about changing names of places. When Dr. Lane ran the hospital, it was still called the Oregon State Insane Asylum.

Harry Lane continued to fight corruption after he was elected mayor of Portland. He was an early supporter of women's suffrage, an advocate for Native American rights and – representing Oregon in the U.S. Senate from 1913 to 1917 – an opponent of America's participation in World War I. That's just a hint of Harry Lane's impressive public service biography. His progressive credentials are impeccable.

Not only is Harry Lane an ideal role model for our county's name, here's the coup de grâce: Hero Harry Lane is the grandson of villain Joseph Lane. Harry Lane broke the family chain of racist, imperialist brutality. It would be an honor to live in a Lane County named after this impressive Oregonian.

And with a nod to Eugene's 60s-era counterculture days, wags could always refer to the new Lane County not as named after Harry Lane but as hairy Lane. Which would allow for an apolitical acknowledgement of granddaddy Joe Lane, described in his later years by an *Oregon Statesman* reporter as a man who might pass anonymously among us today, unnoticed: "His hair so twisted, tangled and matted that it would have frightened the teeth out of a curry comb, and set all tonsorial operations at defiance."

But don't expect Joe Lane to disappear fast. Lane County Commissioners at this stage are merely considering establishing a task force to study the possibility of changing the name of Lane County to Lane County.