

Trailblazers

Noun: plural of trailblazer; trailblazers; noun

People who make a new track through wild country: pioneers, innovators.

Synonyms: pioneers, innovators, groundbreakers, spearheads, trendsetters.

It's rare that definition so closely matches not just one person but three. John Hayes, Joy Schwab and John Sunderland are three of the most influential people with respect to shaping the landscape of the Methow Valley and the permanence of the trail system. This is part of their story as told to Methow Trails by one member of the group, John Hayes. With our opening question of, "Tell us your story", here are some incredible highlights of what we learned over next two hours.

"We all had something to do with the Aspen Ski Corporation and their quest to build an alpine ski area in Mazama. This is how I first came to the Valley in 1973 to work for officers of the ski corporation. It was a short-lived job when the ski area did not happen. Joy, John and I met because we had a shared vision to keep the Methow Valley from looking like a giant subdivision. We wanted to preserve open space and ensure access to trails. At this time, there were trails in place, but none were deeded, therefore they were not permanent. We saw the trails as an amenity that really should be permanent, and open space as an important element for long-lasting wildlife and beauty, so we conspired to figure out how to do it.

The three of us formed a non-profit, charitable institution called the Methow Institute Foundation which had the ability to take and hold deeds and real property. All of us agreed in the beginning that there would be no paid employees or paid directors. It was really a three person volunteer show. Joy was the one that keep the whole operation together, including keeping John and I patient and on track. We started talking with landowners about open space and trails. As their neighbors heard about what we were doing they started coming to us and asking for more information and that's when we would pitch them our vision. For some landowners it took just one meeting, for others it might take thirty, but we were patient, honest, and always appreciative of the landowner. There were a many of landowners involved but they owned big tracts of land. It would be much harder to do today as there are even more landowners now as lot sizes are smaller.

The biggest challenge to convincing a landowner that this was a good idea was to ensure it will be managed properly and that it will not become a pain in the future. The landowner agreements include that the landowner has the ability to move the trail location as long as the ends are connected, thus never breaking the trail connection. We worked with lawyers to do in-depth landowner liability analysis and worked with the state legislative to provide incentives to landowners who provided public access and open space. You should see the filing cabinets to understand the significance of our work. It covers all the documentation of each landowner. It is more than some large corporations would have.

The Forest Service, of course, was the largest landowner and a key stakeholder in this process. Luckily, the Forest Service staff at the time, Ardis Bynum in particular, aligned with our vision and worked closely with us to make it all happen. She completed all the countless required Forest Service permits and grants. I'm not sure we could have done it without her and some of her peers at the time.

This collaboration with Joy and John, through the work we did at the Methow Institute Foundation, Ardis Bynum and others was just wonderful and resulted in some crowning achievements for the Valley like the 3.8 miles of magnificent open space and trails at Big Valley and the Tawlks-Foster Suspension Bridge which really allowed the Community Trail from Winthrop to Mazama to come to be.

To clarify, we didn't create the trails. Don Portman, Dick Roberts and Larry Tobiska did that with their own money and sweat equity. We joined with these individuals to ensure the trails were properly deeded. We took inspiration and learned from models in Europe where footpaths are often created by neighboring landowners because it is easier and cheaper to create a footpath than to pay taxes to widen roads; not to mention, a more pleasant place to walk. Don had the vision to connect the trails in the four areas of Sun Mountain, Winthrop, the Rendezvous, and Mazama. It took us over eighteen years to get the deeded trail system as it is today.

I don't think any of us could tell you the how many meetings this took or the number of hours that we have spent. The three of us, Joy, John and myself probably have some mental deficiency, some lack of a vitamin or mineral that caused this aberrant behavior. I know I don't care about being recognized for it, I just don't want what we did to go to hell. Who cares who gets the credit for things as long as it gets done. This kind of vision can happen only when you have people who are not afraid to act and do something bold!"