

The JOB Messiahs – 2nd edition interview

Questions and Answers:

Wim de Vriend: – The 2nd edition of “The JOB-Messiahs.”

While having a look at the second edition of Wim de Vriend’s wave-making book, I noticed that the newest edition had grown to over 500 pages.

QUESTION: What made you publish a new, even bigger edition?

WIM: The main reason was that I was running out of books to sell, always a happy event for an author. That’s because authors want to be read. So I started preparing the manuscript for a second printing by correcting a minor flaw here, a minor typo some place else; in a book that covers so much ground there are always some.

But I had also received comments about more significant problems, not what I would call errors but omissions. Richard Knablin was very helpful that way. He thought the book should have included an Index, and he was right. In fact, I know the Coos Historical Museum put somebody to work creating an Index for the copy of the first edition that I had given them for their collection. I don’t mean to denigrate that man’s effort, but a look at his work convinced me that the author is the one most qualified to create an Index. He knows the material like nobody else does, and he knows what’s important. So I set to work; it took me three weeks, but it was worth it. It’s about fifteen pages of small print, but now everybody in town who wants to know what “The JOB Messiahs” says about them can find out in a hurry. ‘Course, I don’t know if that will be a comfort. Open the closet, and a lot of skeletons come tumbling out.

QUESTION: Why make it so easy on them? Wouldn’t it be better to make them read the book to find out?

WIM: That’s how I rationalized publishing the first edition

without an Index. Let them find out for themselves, I thought, and I didn't want to spend any more time. But I ignored the average reader's need to refresh his memory of who did what and when, and where this problem or that issue occurred before. Lionel Youst, a local historian himself, thought the book was "an important and significant contribution to our history." Well, if that's the case, an Index will make it even more important, now and in the future, because it will be more accessible.

QUESTION: You've convinced me; an Index is an excellent idea. But doesn't that leave owners of the first edition a bit handicapped?

WIM: Actually, no. If any of them would like an Index for the edition they already have, I'll be happy to email it to them. And my email address is on the book's title page.

QUESTION: What else is in the second edition that made it fatter?

WIM: Instead of twenty chapters, it has twenty-one. Richard Knablin was disappointed that I had not covered the story of the Nucor Steel mill, back in 1997-1999. To be honest, after already putting in so much work I had decided to gloss over Nucor because it followed the same pattern as all the other grand but failed industrial development schemes for Coos Bay. And of course it did, but yet a book that claims to cover about thirty-five years of such failures should have included it. First I was just going to add a few pages about Nucor, but that didn't do justice to the story, so I ended up creating an entirely new chapter, Chapter 18. It's called "Nucor Spots the Streetwalker."

QUESTION: I thought Nucor was a steel company.

WIM: It was, and it is, but some of the people who had been at the very well-attended public meetings promoting the Nucor mill were disgusted with all the fawning over this company, and they thought it made Coos Bay look like a streetwalker, ready to sell her assets to the highest bidder. I'm not entirely sure I agree with that, but it was a striking image.

QUESTION: So how did you see it?

WIM: To me it seemed that Nucor was playing the part of the streetwalker, and the people of Coos Bay were the horny Johns cruising the gut, cash in their hot little hands. That's because Nucor had absolutely no shame in trolling – trollopping might be a better word – for the highest bidder. In the summer of 1997 the Oregon Legislature had approved a subsidy program for Nucor that by some estimates would have cost the taxpayers \$127 million, for a mill that would employ about 230 people. It was by far the biggest corporate giveaway in the history of the state, and some of the politicians in Salem called it obscene. But they justified it with that perennial magic word: JOBS. Jobs for Coos Bay. And guess what: the ink was not yet dry on the bill when Nucor approached the Washington Legislature, asking if they couldn't do better than Oregon in the Corporate Welfare Department. As it turned out, the politicians in Olympia turned them down, which seemed to surprise Nucor. You see, up till then they had built most of their plants in the South, and when it comes to corporate welfare, nobody can beat the Southern states.

QUESTION: Can you remind us how the Nucor story ended?

WIM: Officially the company was interested in Coos Bay for about two years, but unofficially I think their interest, if it ever existed, was very brief, and it's obvious from the things they did and didn't do that they started looking for a way out, possibly quite early on. They simply were not very serious, and this has been seen before and after Nucor. The smelter promoter of 1986, the Daishowa pulp mill scheme of 1989, the Maersk container terminal of 2007 – what they had in common with Nucor was that Coos Bay was merely one of several alternative sites, and by no means the most promising one. In fact, I'm convinced that it's the credulousness of the people of Coos Bay, and their insular self-deception, that enable these scams. Some big company comes to town, promising JOBS. Everybody gets excited and starts throwing money at them. In the meantime the company secretly knows where it would like to build, and it's not in Coos Bay. But using Coos Bay as an alternative is very useful, because they always play one town

against another.

I'm sorry, I stand corrected; usually they play at least three different towns. But Coos Bay never ends up being the bride. Coos Bay always ends up the forlorn bridesmaid left at the altar, with no bouquet to console her.

QUESTION: How can you be so sure this is true?

WIM: Look at the reality of our location. For 160 years Coos Bay has been busy convincing itself that it's a potential global industrial center, and a potential world Port. It's all nonsense. Shipping has become more and more concentrated in bigger ports, with the smaller ones falling by the wayside. Look at what's happened to Eureka, Newport, Astoria, and many more once-active ports. We're too far off the beaten path, we don't have good inland connections, and our harbor only existed to ship out local products, first coal and then lumber. No local products, no port. And economically, the idea of importing things through Coos Bay has always been ludicrous. And yet you still have irresponsible dunderheads like that Frank Williams and Ingvar Doessing running around, proclaiming that if we only build those multi-million-dollar docks, the shippers will come. That kind of thinking only works in movies about mythical baseball fields.

QUESTION: You mentioned JOBS. People need jobs. Everybody talks about creating jobs. So what can be done?

WIM: Start by junking the idea that jobs can be "created." Jobs are a by-product of business enterprises, but no businessman in his right mind starts a business in order to create jobs. Nevertheless, if he's successful he will create jobs, just like a booming, productive economy will create better and cheaper products, in short, a better life for everybody. But to get such an economy you have to be open for business. That doesn't mean you go out and throw money at promoters like Nucor or Daishowa or Maersk, and you fund an endless number of economic-development agencies that do nothing but waste money. But here, in Coos County, we are in an excellent position to be open for business. Yet we're ignoring Coos County's potential, and amputating it, and

suppressing it, every step of the way.

QUESTION: That's a big claim to make.

WIM: But it fits. All you have to do is look around while you drive through Coos Bay/North Bend. Rotting docks, rusty railroad tracks, tumbledown buildings, and vacant, weed-overgrown industrial sites. Why isn't this waterfront being re-developed, as has been done successfully in so many places around the world? Because the entire waterfront is being choked by a noose. I'm talking about the old railroad track to Coquille that runs along it, the one that hasn't been used for five years. But, we are told, we have to have it "to survive as a port," and if anybody wants to develop the waterfront they will first have to shell out \$350,000 for an official railroad crossing. It's preposterous.

QUESTION: But the Port of Coos Bay says the railroad is needed to haul lumber for Georgia-Pacific, and plywood for the Roseburg mill in Coquille. And how does re-developing the waterfront create jobs?

WIM: First things first. Way before the railroad quit running in 2007 those two mills, especially Roseburg, were saying that without trains to haul their products they'd shut down. But miraculously they're still here, even in this very bad economy. It's not the only case where you have to be skeptical of what the lumbermen tell you.

But more important, re-developing the waterfront would send signals to all those millions of people driving through town that we're serious about welcoming both people and businesses. People are the key; it's people who start businesses. Which businesses create the most jobs? Start-ups and small businesses. Old, established industries don't create many jobs; in fact, many are net job-losers. Now, coming back to the people, the people who may start new businesses, Coos County has huge assets that could work to its advantage. It's very scenic, it has a pleasant climate, it has the best public services on the coast. If the place looked better you would see a large influx of new people, both retired people and younger folks who first saw the place as tourists and then

decided to settle here. The retired folks will create jobs with the money they spend, and the younger folks with the businesses they start. And some of those businesses will grow, creating even more jobs.


QUESTION: But people object that jobs catering to tourists don't pay enough.

WIM: Actually, a waitress job pays a lot better than a job at a call center. But people who talk like that have blinders on. The final purpose of making the town attractive is not to create waitresses' jobs. It will set a process in motion where more people settle permanently, and those people will create jobs, as I just said. We don't know, of course, what kinds of jobs those will be and that seems to bother the people who are always denigrating tourist jobs. But they want the kind of certainty that cannot be found in this world. We cannot control our future. If anything has been proved in my book, that's it. But what we CAN do is to remove our self-created obstacles to sensible, sustainable development. That kind of development won't cost fortunes for corporate welfare and tax breaks and urban renewal and endless numbers of economic developers and bureaucrats. Did you know that by the year 2000 we had eighteen economic development agencies in Coos Bay?

QUESTION: Is that in your book?

WIM: In the second edition, yes. I decided to re-work chapter 17, which is about "creating jobs," by listing all those agencies. That chapter also has a more complete history of all the industrial closures in the area during the 1990s.

QUESTION: Where is your book being sold?

WIM: At Books-by-the-Bay in North Bend, at the Blue Heron  in Coos Bay, and at The Sentinel's office in Coquille. At \$35, it's the bargain of the century. Imagine, all that work, over twenty years – if I end up making a nickel for every hour I put into it, I'll be doing very well. But the real success of the book will consist of local change, change for the good, change that will get us out of that old, unproductive rut we've been stuck in for 35 years.

To my surprise, the other day at the restaurant a man from

Olympia, Washington, bought my book. He was quite taken with it, and agreed that this same garbage has been going on where he lives. That same day I sold one to a student from New Mexico who is studying "economic development." She told me that the methods to "create jobs" in my book are now considered outmoded and ineffective by the scholars. So I'm in good company; it just seems that Coos Bay is like a very ineffective coffee pot. It takes forever for fresh ideas to percolate.

QUESTION: What do you think will happen to the Port of Coos Bay's development schemes of recent years, the LNG plant, the Maersk container terminal, and now the coal-export notion?

WIM: I cover the first two in chapter 19 of my second edition. What's most amazing to me is the third one, the coal-export idea – we have been through all that before, in 1980. Back then a promoter came to town with the notion of exporting coal from Utah, to be brought in by train and mixed with local coal trucked in from Eden Ridge, near Powers. In due course it was proved that none of it would ever work, because of transportation costs. We do have a lot of coal in the U.S., but our major western coal beds are located a thousand miles or more from shipping ports. That means expensive train transportation, which means coal that will cost an overseas buyer too much. You can find all that in chapter 7 of my book. In the end, the whole coal export mania of 1980 was a scam, and the coal promoter's real agenda seems to have been stock speculation, something that was also likely true of the 1986 smelter promoter. There's been some softening of domestic coal prices lately, and a supposedly tremendous demand for coal in China, but there are many factors liable to shrink that demand, with time and market forces deflating the coal idea as they have done to so many industrial-development schemes before. In any case, Coos Bay's disadvantages vis-à-vis Columbia River ports have not gone away. Somebody would have to pay for a major overhaul of the Eugene-Coos Bay railroad line; no way is that suitable for mile-long coal trains, and much of it may need to be double-tracked, as may be true of

the line from Portland to Eugene as well. So how can be we competitive for shipping coal? I know, miracles do happen, but not very often.