



Leonard Wortman is a strong and principled man who is always willing to listen. Here he speaks at the Jefferson County Lincoln/Reagan Dinner in Montana City in 2020.

Common Sense

The School of Hard Knocks always offers the best education.

By Dan Happel

When it comes to decision making and common sense in politics, the best leaders are unquestionably those who got the lion's share of their education from the School of Hard Knocks. Americans used to pride themselves in being the best educated and most literate people on the planet, but that is no longer true. Like everything else that comes too easily, education has been watered down by well-intended liberals who think everyone deserves a trophy for participation whether they earned it or not.

Public schools and universities have become incubators for social engineering, not places where we learn English, history, mathematics, and science. Consequently, a college degree today has less value than a high school diploma had 50 years ago, or an eighth-grade education had 128 years ago. [www.snopes.com/fact-check/1895-exam] Although a well-rounded education is essential to function in modern society, far too much emphasis is put on the number of degrees and where you get them, and far too little on what you actually learned and

retained. That's why so many young adults are still living in their parents' basements and can't seem to find gainful employment after graduation from highly acclaimed universities.

What's my point? Some of the more ignorant people I've ever met are often the most "educated," while some of the smartest gained their wisdom under fire in the School of Hard Knocks. There's something about the necessity of making a living through hard work, thrift and enterprise that dispels all sorts of liberal notions that shift blame to someone else because you are an overeducated, unemployed flop. When I was a county commissioner in Madison County, Mont., I had occasion to work with commissioners from all over the state, including from Jefferson County, which was blessed with several of the best in the state, but a real standout was Leonard Wortman who had what some would call a "misspent youth"—cowboying and riding bareback and saddle broncs on the professional rodeo circuit.

Being a no BS kind of guy and much more attuned to a fifth of Jim Beam than Beethoven's Fifth, Leonard had more than his share of fistfights and run-ins with the law during that misspent youth. But he also made a lot of friends among those who valued his honesty and affinity for hard work.

A Montana boy, Leonard discovered rodeo at an early age when his dad, who rodeoed himself, went to work for a rodeo stock contractor named Mike Quinn on Quinn's ranch near Boulder. Leonard's newfound friends on the ranch were a little older and already hard as nails. "I had to get tough in a big hurry just to survive with those guys." He rode his first bull at 12 and by 15 had already crushed three discs in his lower back and torn up a knee, but he loved to rodeo and thrived on the competition. In high school he tried every rodeo event and got hurt so many times that an acquaintance told him every time they called his name for an event, they started the ambulance.

After high school, Leonard got married, had three boys, worked construction, and ran a fencing business. Rodeo was in his blood and he was good enough at riding bareback and saddle broncs to stay in the money traveling the rodeo circuit and experiencing his wild side until a divorce, several back fusions,

The locals were up in arms because Northwestern Energy was trying to save money by using eminent domain to cut across private lands—some of the most pristine in southwestern Montana and the most productive farmland in southern Idaho—to sell “green energy” to California.

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and a whole lot of pain got him so crippled up and hooked on pills and booze that he eventually quit rodeo and got sober once and for all in 1983.

He went back into the fencing business and was moving cattle down the road one day when several of his neighbors stopped and asked him to run for Jefferson County assessor. He ran against eight others including a 19-year deputy assessor and won handily, spending the next four years learning as much as possible about the position, determined to be the best assessor in Montana. That determination and hard work made a big impression on Jefferson County folks, and when Leonard decided to run for county commissioner four years later, he again won easily because folks knew they could trust him and he would work hard to keep that trust.

He admits that before he became a commissioner, he didn't realize the time commitment and personal responsibility that went with the job, but he was determined to be the best he could be and researched and read everything he could get his hands on about the office, including Montana law and what his constitutional responsibility was as a servant of the people.

Being a strong and principled man, he was never afraid to tackle tough issues head-on and prided himself on his willingness to listen to his constituents and share his honest opinion, even when it didn't always make everyone happy. He did the research and spent time studying issues thoroughly so that his decisions were rational and could be justified in the court of public opinion.

I met Leonard in 2010, shortly after I decided to run for commissioner in Madison County. A project called the Mountain State Transmission Intertie (MSTI) was



COURTESY THE BOULDER MONITOR



FROM TOP: Power Transmission lines in southwestern Idaho. ► Jefferson County Courthouse in southern Montana. ► Boulder, Mont., population 1,100, elevation 4,990 feet above sea level. ► Bird's-eye view of Boulder, Mont. ► Leonard Wortman won the Montana High School Bareback title in Kalispel in July 1967.



DENNY RATHBURN PHOTOGRAPHY, GLENDALE, MONTANA

being proposed by Northwestern Energy to transfer the power being produced by the big wind-generator complex near Harlowton, Mont., into the California power grid. The problem with the plan was that an ener-

gy transmission corridor already existed in the I-15 right-of-way, but instead of following that corridor, Northwestern Energy was trying to save money by using eminent domain to cut across private lands in Jeffer-



ABOVE: Leonard Wortman won the Bareback event in Longview, Wash., in July 1973. BELOW: Leonard gets his turn to speak at a Jefferson/Madison County coordination meeting in Whitehall, Mont., in January 2020.

son and Madison counties and parts of Idaho to sell “green energy” to California.

This had many of the locals up in arms because the proposed new corridor went right through some of the most pristine watersheds of southwestern Montana and some of the most productive farmland in southern Idaho. Wortman and the Jefferson commissioners had been the first in Montana to adopt “coordination” as a county policy earlier that year and had subsequently filed suit with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, the BLM and Northwestern Energy for failing to “coordinate” through the NEPA process with the county prior to issuing preliminary permits.

Leonard was appointed as spokesman for Jefferson County and I was appointed to represent the Madison County Commission. I was immediately impressed by Leonard’s work ethic and ability to jump right into the fray, but also by his willingness to hear other people’s ideas and his natural ability to separate fact from fiction. We worked together on this project for more than two years, ultimately stopping the project by enlisting citizen support and providing indisputable facts about its viability. To Northwest Energy’s credit, it funded the MSTI Liaison Group to study the proposal, appointed Leonard Wortman chairman, but abandoned the project when it became clear that the public relations’ black eye wasn’t justified by the cost savings.



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Together we also battled attempts by environmental groups to get the state to relist the Canadian gray wolf as endangered, fought to stop wolf range expansion, demanded predation compensation for livestock producers, sought a statewide coordination policy, and led the effort to stop the expansion of rewilding programs by the feds/state/radical environmental groups. Leonard developed cooperative relationships with sensible environmental groups to promote legacy mine waste pile cleanup by private contractors for profit, instead of wasting taxpayer dollars on Superfund sites.

If an idea made sense, Leonard would lead the charge to get something done and knew

how to garner support from those he shared the burden of leadership with—by example, not coercion or intimidation. In Jefferson County, as in most Montana counties, commissioner races are nonpartisan, mainly to keep the sense that local government is still truly local and representative of all the people...and that suited Leonard just fine.

“If you look at the national political situation right now,” he says, “partisan politics as usual are tearing our nation apart. The current administration listens to no one or nothing that puts the best interests of our nation ahead of a radical progressive political agenda. Most federal agencies are led by carefully selected ideologues who never worked a day in their lives in the private sector and couldn’t balance a budget if their life depended on it. Most congressmen and senators are lawyers; special interests, NGOs and lobbyists own Washington, D.C.; and politicians belonging to the Demican/Republican Uniparty spend 365 days a year begging for more campaign money that goes untaxed and ends up in their personal bank accounts when they retire or get voted out of office. What could possibly go wrong in this toxic environment? No wonder we’re in the mess we are as a country.”

It’s amazing what a little more common sense could do to make the world a better place. Sometimes an old rodeo cowboy and fencing contractor from southwest Montana can make more sense in one little paragraph than all the overeducated experts on the planet and do it with the humility that comes from personal experience and respect for others. Sometimes the wildest ponies do make the best horses. ■

Dan Happel is a retired businessman, former county commissioner and volunteer legislative consultant. Three times a week he hosts a podcast called “Connecting the Dots” via danhappel.com from his ranch in southwest Montana. Leonard Wortman is now retired, lives with his wife, Carole, near Garrison, Mont., and occasionally works with his sons, Dennis, Shannon and Bill, who took over the fencing business. In 2019 Leonard was inducted into the Montana Pro Rodeo Hall and Wall of Fame. With his help Jefferson County recently opened the Western Legacy Center at the Whitehall Interchange at I-90. You can check www.facebook.com/westernlegacycenter/