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Not So Lame: Reporter shares experience of Conan craze, Page 5D

# Arts & Life

SECTION D

Life: Heather Haysborn, (503) 589-8920, life@statesmanjournal.com

Sunday, April 18, 2010



With hills like this one (clockwise from above), it is quicker to run errands by foot than via car (if you have one). In el ojo de agua (the town's natural spring), women would spend their evenings washing clothes, and sometimes they would have to wait in line. "It could take my mother hours to come back home with her laundry done," West Salem teacher and former El Varal resident Carlos Ruiz said. "The feedback from teachers was critical, given the lack of literacy levels or low literacy levels by parents at home."

# El Varal

## An unofficial sister city

This Mexican city in the state of Michoacan is one that many in the area call home. Local principal Phil Decker recently traveled there to see where so many of his students hail from.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PHIL DECKER  
 PHOTO CAPTIONS BY CARLOS RUIZ  
*Special to the Statesman Journal*

**Phil:** "Hello. Welcome to (insert name of Salem-Keizer school). Are you from Mexico?"  
**Parent:** "Yes."  
**Phil:** "What state?"  
**Parent:** "Michoacan."  
**Phil:** "Puro Michoacan! (Pure Michoacan!) OK. Which town? Let me guess ... Las Zarquillas or Las Ranas?"

**A**s a bilingual teacher and principal in Salem-Keizer since 1996, I have had this conversation, in Spanish and English, by the dozen. Although Salem residents can trace root to states all throughout Mexico, there seems to be a predominance of folks from Michoacan.

Among those with ties to Michoacan, specific towns have a long history of contributing to the Salem community and economy. The neighboring towns of El Varal and Las Zarquillas, located in northwest Michoacan, tucked into the rolling mountains between the cities of Sahuayo and Zamora, have been connected to Salem for several generations, ever since the "Bracero Program" during WWII.

For years I have been curious about these towns, as significant places of origin for so many Salem residents. This spring break, I finally got my opportunity to visit.

My wife, Irma (a teacher and a native of Mexico), and I flew to Guadalajara, rented an Attitude (the car) and drove about four hours along a two-lane highway that cuts through the foothills of arid rolling mountains that border a lush agricultural valley.

As jarring speed bumps snuck up on us, we passed through dozens of villages and small cities until we arrived in the town of Las Zarquillas.

I consulted my hand-drawn map of the town, created by a school district colleague who was raised there. The map helped me navigate through the town to a fork in the road by the soccer field. We turned left, picked up a young couple asking for a ride (the gentleman had recently



At the top of la Santa Cruz (holy cross), one can see all the houses that are part of the town. hear the music people listen to or perhaps the voice of mothers yelling their son's name.



"The month of May is a month I loved because it's the season for the best tasting fruit I've ever had, called the pitaya," Ruiz said. Here you see the sprouts of a pitaya.

### Share Your Travels

Would you like to share your latest vacation, or are you planning a trip you'd like to tell others about? Call Heather Haysborn, (503) 589-8920, or e-mail her at haysborn@statesmanjournal.com to be part of our travels.



"Before leaving to my elementary school," Ruiz said, "my mother would make sure to feed me the best-tasting homemade tortillas. They were so delicious. I would enjoy eating them simply with salt along with a glass of milk."

See Your Travels, 5B

### ONLINE ONLY

See this story online for a photo gallery and video by Phil Decker at [StatesmanJournal.com/Life](http://StatesmanJournal.com/Life)

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# (Not So) Lame

By K. Williams Brown

## Conan O'Brien tour kickoff was a daze of classic Conan, media rage and bouncing red hair

Like nuclear energy, Sarah Palin and sweet pickles, Conan O'Brien is polarizing.

Granted, I like Conan a lot — and when I say a lot, I mean "would give a kidney or even liver" — and am at best on the fence for those other things. But I understand that he isn't everyone's cup of tea. Anyone who has a skit about an onanistic ursine might be a bit much for some people.

But I am not one of those people, and my mania is nothing compared with most Conan fans.

And so it was with a deep, deep joy and pants-peeking excitement that I headed down to Eugene on Monday night to cover the opening night of his "Legally Prohibited from Being Funny On Television Tour."

I'd already heard that there were going to be quite a few media outlets there covering it, as it was the kick-off of a hugely anticipated, sold-out tour: let alone that Conan announced that morning he would have a new show on TBS.

For one glorious evening, all eyes were on Eugene — not Portland, not Los Angeles, not New York — and Wavy Gravy wasn't involved.

But I wasn't fully prepared for the circus of reporters and camera crews that converged in downtown Eugene from outlets local and afar. "Inside Edition" was there, and for some reason, I felt compelled to tell them I like their show even though I don't.

Covering events with tons of other media people around is kinda hilarious because everyone is nervously watching everyone else, worried that they'll get some brilliance that you overlooked. And so, when, say, someone rushes over to the woman who is playing bagpipes in a leprechaun outfit, EVERYONE grabs their boom mics or notepads and rushes over. And then someone else sees something shiny or interesting, and then it's time to rush over there, and thus the circle of unimaginative media coverage life continues.

Inside, I searched for Salem people. I spotted my physician — side note: It's weird to see your doctor at Conan O'Brien — and it turned out he'd come with his sons, Kory, 19, and Joel, 17, who were waiting in a long, long line for merchandise.

Joel described himself as one of Conan's biggest fans.

"Oh, man, he's just entertaining to watch — I'm almost out of videos. He's the most entertaining guy."

And that is but one odd thing about Conan fans — they're really young. Joel, for example, was an infant when Conan started at NBC. Also, many fans seemed stoned and alarmed when I tried to interview them, which I attribute to Eugene.

Signs posted at the door encouraged people Tweeting the event to type #jubjub (a nod to a pet iguana on "The Simpsons," named by Conan when he

was a staff writer).

Twitter is somewhat essential to Conan fans. First, his Twitter account is one of the only ways he has of communicating these days, being prohibited from performing on television, radio or the Internet.

Typical Conan Tweet, from April 1: "Man, I am so tired. APRIL FOOL/S! I'm NOT tired. (I'm kind of tired)"

In fact, Salem fan Brant Walsh bought his tickets for the show minutes after seeing an announcement on Twitter.

"As soon as I saw a Tweet — I've got a system here at work where it pops right up on the screen — I didn't even think about it," he said. "I just clicked and clicked and clicked. I went to the site; I got two seats as fast as I could."

And his enthusiasm was pretty typical. Maybe even restrained, compared with many in the audience.

I have, in the past, djsided Oregon audiences for being quiet and non-participatory, but there was not one iota of that in evidence Monday.

Right before Conan came out, people were freaking out. It was like 12-year-old girls and The Beatles. Some were literally wriggling.

After 17 years of getting him for an hour every night, all Conan fans have had is tiny Twitter updates. They miss him. And at that moment, when he was almost, almost here, and there's a dude running through the aisles playing a trumpet. It seemed a good time to scream. And then Conan ran on — same red hair; same gangly build, new beard — and people lost it.

All the Conan trademarks were there. Sidekick Andy Richter? Check, entering to "Trololo." The string dance? Check. Triumph the Insult Comic Dog, heaping insults where the local details were dubbed in with a computer voice? Check.

Apparently, Portland Mayor Sam Adams is the state flower of Oregon.

Conan included tons of local nods to Eugene, though he never fully explained why exactly he kicked his tour off there.

He mentioned his new job — "Starting tomorrow, I'm the assistant manager at the Eugene Banana Republic," before asking what the audience thinks of his new beard? Eugene, needless to say, is pro.

Richter did a few Eugene-centric commercials, including one for Jungle Juice and one for Burrito Boy.

The evening wasn't perfect: some jokes fell flat, skits that could have appeared once kept coming around, and musical numbers dragged. A stand-up bit from comedian Deon Cole was tough; a routine about race in a room full of white Oregonians engenders more nervous laughter than actual laughter.

But mostly, it was a spectacular that included everything from an inflatable hat from Meatloaf's "Bat Out of Hell" tour (which led to much, "Inflate the bat!" "Deflate the bat!" dialogue) to a painted-on-looking-pink leather suit that O'Brien said used to be Eddie Murphy's.

He ended the night with several upbeat, customized songs. And then Conan did a goofy, kicking dance off the stage, and the audience kept screaming. Will there be an encore?

Of course there was an encore, one that involved giant beach balls with Conan faces, the Self-Pleasing Panda, Kenneth the Page and Conan running out into the audience and nearly causing a riot, his red hair bouncing through the aisles.

And then he was gone. Everyone spills out of the theater, dazed and smiling.

K. Williams Brown is an entertainment reporter for the Statesman Journal. There was something in the air that night; the stars were bright. (Conan)



## Travels

Continued from 1D

returned from Salem) and snaked up and over the next hill, avoiding potholes for a couple miles until we reached the town of El Varal.

My connection to El Varal dates back to 1996, when Carlos Ruiz landed in my "newcomer" class at Waldo Middle School in eighth grade as a tall, smart, skinny kid fresh from that town. I had the pleasure of teaching Carlos "survival English" and then watching him grow into an exemplary young man who is now a Willamette and George Fox grad working as a Spanish teacher at West Salem High School. I'm very proud of Carlos; he's come a long way.

Thanks to Carlos' family in Salem and to his Aunt Maria and his Uncle Chema still living in El Varal, Irma and I were able to call the small rural village "home sweet home" for the week.

El Varal claims about 50 houses, an elementary school with four classrooms, a church under renovation, a basketball court with "Corona" backboards, a fresh water spring that runs 24/7 and a few little stores carved into residents' homes.

El Varal is surrounded by rocky hillsides where corn for tortillas grows and where cattle graze amongst the thorny "guisache" bushes.

Before embarking on this trip, Carlos gave me a crash course on life in El Varal and Las Zarquillas. I was fascinated to hear



From newborns to the elderly, Sunday mass is a congregation of the town and a day where everything is focused solely on faith and family.

how his warm memories of these towns and his visits to his "pueblo" are still core to his identity.

Although residents struggle with poverty, as evidenced by subsistence farming, rutted stone streets and sparse classroom resources, the town is rich in tradition, family life and neighbor support. For instance, it's custom to greet and chat with everyone you pass while walking on the streets — or while driving.

I also witnessed how life in El Varal is inspired by the close connection to the harvest, the rocks, the birds, the flowers, the cattle, the pitayos (prickly pears), the warm sun and the breathtaking views from the mountains of the valley floor below.

On a final note, while Irma and I were roaming the streets of El Varal and Las Zarquillas, we ran into kids on Spring Break from Richmond and McKay. We met the parents, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents of kids from Hallman, Highland, Lamb, Miller, Mary Eyre. I popped in on

the families of a couple of my Four Corner students. Folks told us about their Oregon jobs in canneries, Christmas tree farms, cherry orchards and



When friends don't have a ball to play with, kids always have the creativity to come up with their own games to spend an evening of fun.

construction. They described where they live or had lived, by WinCo, behind Normans Farmer's Market, near the big post office, close to Chemeketa.

It was amazing to have so much in common with folks so far away.

Phil Decker works as the principal at Four Corners Elementary.

School in Salem. He also is a documentary photographer who studied at the International Center of Photography in New York City. Carlos Ruiz works as a Spanish teacher at West Salem High School. He has lived half his life in Mexico and half in the U.S.

## CROSSWORD PUZZLE SOLUTIONS

The New York Times

Premier crossword

4-18

UMPS	CADY	POWER	FRAIL
POOLCUTIE	ELENI	LASSO	
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SEMI	SNAPON	ACTIFED	
	CAPON	IDAHO	
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HANNABARBARITY	TEHRAN		
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ENRON	FINDOUT	WOES	
KEEPINGPASTY	COCKS		
SDI	COLOR	SLIER	CSA
	HAGUE	SANTACLARITY	
PLAY	EMPEROR	MAMIE	
OILPANS	STATUTE	EDINA	
OLINDA	RABBITWARRANTY		
HITORMISTY	ORE	ROSE	
	TEENA	EDESSA	
UNBINDS	OSMENT	ROAM	
TERZA	TORTOISESHELTIE		
ARIEL	INCUR	UPTOPARTY	
HOODS	READY	ESPN	FATE

PALAYER	AHA	ASP	MIDST
ALAMEDA	RESIDUE	ARENO	
WADING	COMMANDER	TILER	
SSE	TIER	TED	WISHES
	DUE	RADIO	JANEIRO
ASPERSE	RENT	SAXES	
THECATS	SMEADOW	PIE	HST
TUSK	PEAL	IVAN	GEAR
IST	PAIL	TURNING	PRADO
CHIMERA	POOD	AIDED	
	LITTLE	WHITE	LADIES
FREER	ROAN	LENGTHS	
RUNNING	DRYAD	ICES	OAT
ABCS	DRES	ONEA	ANDA
NEE	STE	EVAD	HPRESENT
	CACTI	IWIN	PURISTS
AINTS	SHADES	SWEET	LDA
PLUSHY	INC	ACED	TAU
LORCA	ADVICE	PRESIDENT	
UNSA	BIODATA	CONVENE	
SAENS	STY	BAY	ENGINE

## KING FEATURES SUDOKU

Fill in grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1-9, with no numbers repeated in any row, column or box.

8	3	4	7	5	2	1		
9	1	2	4	6	3	7	8	5
2	4	3	8	6	1	7	5	9
5	5	3	3	5	7	2	1	4
6	7	6	6	4	2	8	9	3
9	5	7	2	1	4	6	9	8
4	8	8	7	5	6	1	5	2
6	2	1	8	5	9	4	3	7

Yesterday's solution

## Conceptis Sudoku

By Dave Green

		8	9		2			
		9			5	4		
3			6					
8		9		7		1		
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5	2		1					
		3			7			
9	4			1				
	2	4		7				

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