

4/28/2021

My name is Dr. Jeffrey Olenick. I am married to Amy Donna Shapiro, prime mover of an effort to change the lyrics of the State Song "Oregon, My Oregon". This is my attempt to explain what I believe is being proposed and why.

"Oregon, My Oregon" was chosen State Song in a contest in 1920 and its lyrics reflect the times in which it was written: it contains verses that are clearly unacceptable by today's standards.

The principal objectors to changing the song usually cite a reluctance to alter history as their primary objection. Let me make this point clearly: the intent of the current bill before Oregon's legislature is an effort to preserve Oregon's historical song as much as possible, while changing only that which is now seen to be offensive; the melody (which is perfectly acceptable) is untouched and only 8 words are changed.

While people of good will may disagree about the acceptability of the old lyrics, there is no doubt whatsoever that they represent an outdated world view, glorifying attempted genocide against the native population and celebrating the white privilege of the conquerors. They also contain veiled and misleading messages and references and are truly awful to sing or teach to children.

Here are the original lyrics and why each specific line proposed to be altered needs to be changed:

#### **Land of the Empire Builders,**

Reference in the very first line is made to the "Empire Builders". This refers to the early (white) settlers in the American Northwest who often got there on the railroad built by tycoon James J. Hill who was nicknamed "The Empire Builder" and whose train was also called "The Empire Builder," as it still is to this day. In this way, this line is a virtual commercial for a man and his railroad, and for American colonization of Oregon and the Northwest. In 1920 this was considered acceptable, but it would not be today.

(changed to: "*Land of majestic mountains*")

#### **Land of the Golden West;**

The "Golden West" referenced in this line is a clear reference to the state of... California, not Oregon. California had been called the "Golden State" since it was "discovered" by white men in sailing ships who were struck by the sight of fields of gold-colored poppies growing there. And, of course, actual gold was later discovered in California. Reference to the "Golden West" was likely meant to conflate the two states in an effort to increase the appeal to "Empire Builders" to come west. Although this line is not racist, it is misleading and needs to be changed.

(changed to: "*Land of the great Northwest*")

**Conquered and held by free men,  
Fairest and the best.**

These 2 lines are the glorification of conquest (and murder) of the indigenous population of Oregon by white invaders. While “fairest” might be interpreted in several ways, the phrase “free men” makes it clear that these lines are a reference to Caucasians – not Natives, and not any dark-skinned people, who for a long time were not welcome in Oregon.  
(changed to: “Forests and rolling rivers, Grandest and the best.”)

*Onward and upward ever,  
Forward and on, and on;  
Hail to thee, Land of Heroes,  
My Oregon.*

*Land of the rose and sunshine  
Land of the summer's breeze;  
Laden with health and vigor,  
Fresh from the Western seas.*

The above lines are acceptable. Some may argue that use of the word “sunshine” may not be fully accurate, but remember that most of the state is indeed very sunny most of the year. Also, the “vigor” fresh from the sea probably means rain. I'm just sayin'...

**Blest by the blood of martyrs,**

Two early white missionaries in Oregon Territory, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman were murdered in 1847 and their deaths were famously attributed to Natives: they were widely called “martyrs” and are likely the “martyrs” referred to in the song. In any event, can there be any doubt that the “martyrs” referenced in the song are white? Besides being inaccurate, racist and inflammatory, these words are just really creepy to sing.  
(changed to: “Blessed by the love of freedom”)

*Land of the setting sun;  
Hail to thee, Land of Promise,  
My Oregon.*

So, by changing a few words, our state song becomes singable, without racist overtones or misleading subtext, but keeping the overall thrust. I urge you, whatever your political point of view to support this change.

Thank you.