

Central Oregonian--

Dead Line' takes readers into the region's range issues during early 1900s

Attention book worms and local history buffs: 1903-era Prineville and its environs are featured in a new novel by Portland author S.L. Stoner. "Dead Line" is the fifth and latest book in Stoner's series featuring fictional detective Sage Adair.

The story begins with Adair on a stagecoach in Cow Canyon, having taken the train from Portland to Shaniko, with Prineville as his destination. Under-cover as a gold prospector, Adair has set out to investigate the increasing conflict between cattlemen and sheepherders in Central Oregon and the recent disappearance of a shepherd. Adair's mission is to find out what is going on in the sheepherder community while his colleague, Charlie Siringo, does the same among the cattle herders.

Many local readers will be familiar with the locales described and with historical details such as the smallpox outbreak which is just petering out when Adair arrives in Prineville. That is where the love interest comes in.

Adair's former girlfriend, Lucinda, for whom he still carries a torch, is in Prineville caring for the sick in a quarantined former brothel. It is the hope of seeing her again that ultimately convinces him to head to Prineville.

As Adair and Siringo gather information, the trouble continues to escalate. When another sheepherder is murdered, the sheepmen talk of arming themselves and Adair and his partner must find the murderer quickly to avert all-out war in the region.

Though the detective's first name — Sage — evokes the high desert, he is well out of his element in this episode. Adair is the wealthy owner of an upscale Portland restaurant who, using the alias John Miner, undertakes detective work on behalf of the growing labor movement in Portland. He does so not to make money but because as a former Appalachian coal miner, his heart is with the working people.

In the previous books, Adair takes on timber barons, child sex trafficking, corrupt building practices and an assassination plot against President Theodore Roosevelt, who visited Portland in 1903.

Adair's interest in social justice echoes that of his author's. Stoner, who goes by Susan in real life, is a retired labor union lawyer who has represented employees all over the state of Oregon. Her last position was with the Amalgamated Transit Union, Division 757 in Portland.

Stoner has also been very involved in citizen activism. Most recently she sued the city of Portland to stop it from abandoning its open-air reservoirs in favor of underground reservoirs.

Born and raised in Portland, Stoner has lived in a lot of different places, including Las Vegas, New Orleans, and Houston, where she got her law degree at age 35.

Stoner said she first got interested in history when she was a student at Portland State University. She had a job working for the head of the Criminal Justice Department, who asked her to do some research on the first sheriff of Portland.

The story she uncovered was so fascinating that Stoner got hooked on history, especially the personal stories of ordinary people. "I am most inspired by the people who, against incredible obstacles, managed to survive and raise a family," Stoner said.

While working as a labor lawyer, Stoner noticed that many union workers knew very little about labor history. She started writing the Sage Adair books as a way of imparting information to people in an entertaining format.

All of the books in the Sage Adair series are based on real historical occurrences. Stoner often uses the names of real people she discovers during her extensive research and she incorporates the significant themes and trends of the time period into her plots.

Stoner says she was enticed to set one of her books in Central Oregon because of the landscape. "The land was what got me here first," she said. "My husband and I had started heading over to that part of the country and I could see why people loved it."

Then she got wind of the conflict between sheepherders and cattlemen in the early 1900s. "I was stunned to find out we almost had a range war in Oregon," she said.

Stoner came to Prineville to conduct her research, primarily reading back issues of the Crook County Journal. "I spent about four days in the Bowman Museum, going through stuff," she said. Prior to that, Stoner had been reading up on and making visits to Central Oregon for about a year and a half.

Stoner says that what she found most interesting about the Central Oregon range conflict was how much of it was driven by outside forces such as the Homestead Act and the availability of railroads and public land. Home-steaders were fencing off their property against livestock, sheep were being herded into the region by the thousands because Shaniko was the nearest railhead, while the federal government's conservation efforts reduced the amount of available grazing land. All these pressures intensified the competition between sheep and cattle.

Stoner does an admirable job of weaving all of this information into the storyline while keeping up a fast, action-filled pace worthy of the genre. History buffs will be impressed with the level of historical detail and others will simply enjoy the story. For those who read the book and wonder which elements are factual and which are fiction, Stoner provides extensive historical notes at the end of the book.

Despite Stoner's interest in Central Oregon, she says in the next book Sage Adair will be back in Portland and the story will center on the development of wage and hour laws. Stoner said she hopes to continue the series up until the beginning of World War I.

"Dead Line" is available at the Crook County Library.