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Backdoor Bentgrass

By: Pat Wilkins

In Sublimity, Oregon legend has it that the state's multi-million dollar grass seed industry might have got its start from Bavarian china.

Seems it was just a few years into the 20th Century that a new grass was spreading everywhere around the town of Sublimity. And the farmers didn't like it one bit. They knew where it came from too. The Ditter's General Merchandise store, right there on the corner of Center and Main streets. They called the grass a lot of things: Ditter grass, of course, but generally prefaced by an expletive. Dare we say damn Ditter grass? A nuisance!

In horse and buggy days you could drive from Ditter's store for a couple of minutes in any direction and be out of town. And you were sure to see the spread of the nuisance grass. But the Ditters didn't deliberately aim to displease their neighbors. Those neighbors were, after all, customers too. The grass was an accident. Now, there are several stories about what happened. And even Ditter family members today don't seem to be sure of all the details. But the favorite one is that the grass infected the Sublimity landscape because of Bavarian china. Crockery!

So the story goes, the china shipped from Germany was packed in straw; that straw was kicked out the back door of the Ditter's store and the resulting piles of straw and seed were wind-whipped to scatter across the fields. Delbert Ditter, last of the family to own the store until 1995, says family tradition has it that a lot of the straw packing was also dumped out there east of town along Coon Hollow Road, a mile or two from Sublimity. The grass also flourished there. Hundred-year-old former farmer Tony Beitel who still lives on Coon Hollow Road says in time farmers began to see the Ditter grass in a different light, saw it as a crop and actually cultivated it. Beitel says the

first of the farmers to determine the Ditter grass' commercial potential was Henry Tate who called it Highland Bentgrass and sold its seed. And today, Beitel declares, Highland Bentgrass is one the grasses that helps make the state of Oregon the nation's leader in production of grass seeds. An industry that in 2008 totaled sales of some \$500-million.

But the story doesn't end there. Delbert Ditter put me on to a major grass seed grower named Bob Doerfler. "Listen to Bob," said Ditter, "he's got an interesting different take on the legend." Doerfler has heard all the stories. He says there is a Seaside Bentgrass, and an Astoria Bentgrass, both native to Oregon. And he believes Highland Bentgrass has also always been native to the state.

However, he says the Ditter legend has merit. Doerfler says the grass which grew within a ten-mile radius of Sublimity probably started from the discarded straw root sure enough, but was a grass called German Mesquite. A perfect fit for . . . Bavaria.

Sublimity has grown considerably in recent years but still is of a size that even today you can drive for little more than a couple of minutes from Ditters store and be out of town. And into the country that is now rolling grass seed fields, maybe some of which is that doggone Ditter grass. Today, though, we have to include a sorry footnote that there is an intruder on such a wonderful legend of farming success. The current economic turndown, recession if you prefer, has among other things, precipitated a drastic reduction in demand for lawn seed for planting at homes and golf courses. It now is estimated that the grass seed industry take for 2009 will be reduced to just \$300-million.