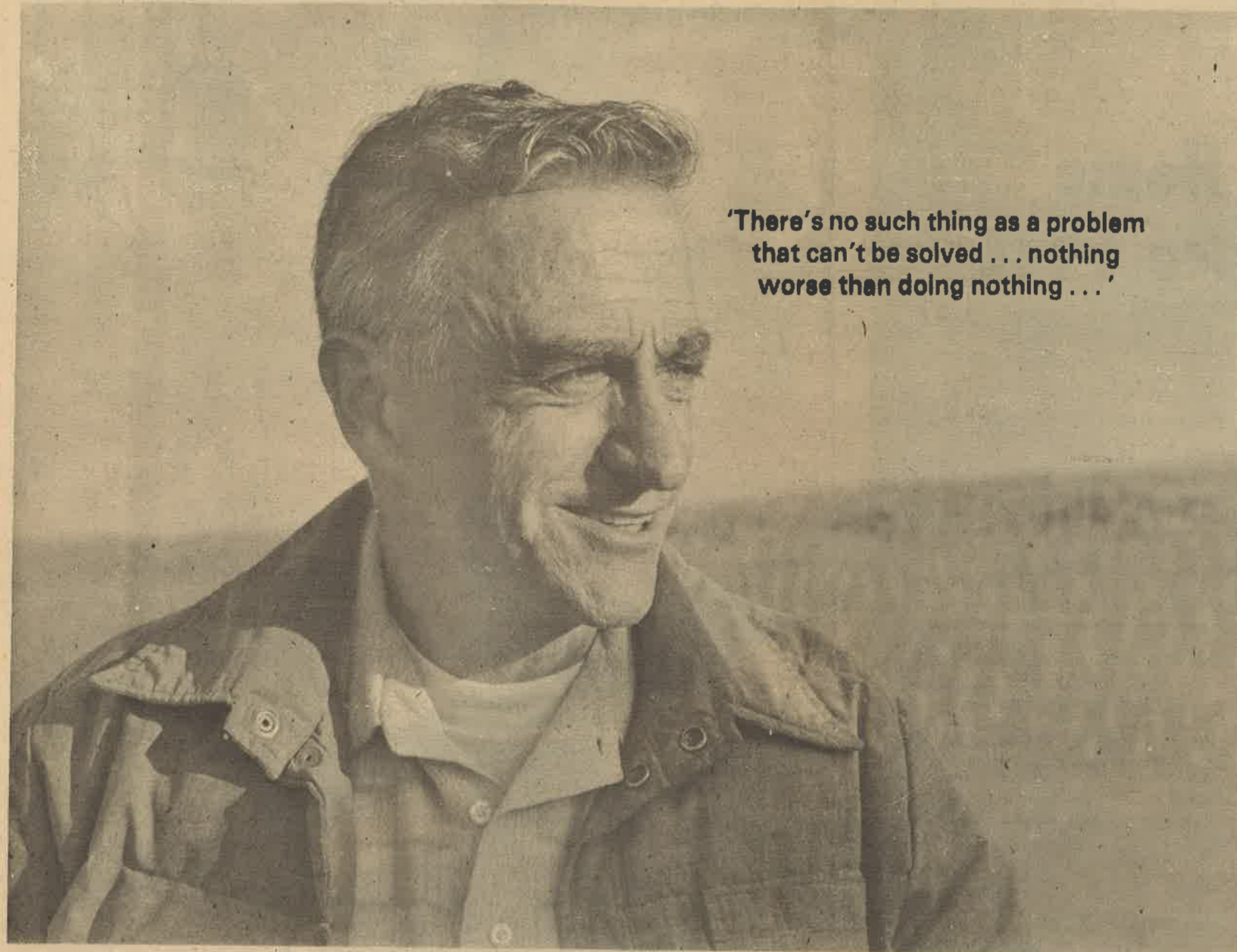


# Wilbur Ternyik: Sand, the sea . . . and politics



**'There's no such thing as a problem that can't be solved . . . nothing worse than doing nothing . . .'**

Port commissioner Wilbur Ternyik, expert on beach grass.—World Photos by Linda Meierjurgan.

By LINDA MEIERJURGEN  
Staff Writer

FLORENCE — It has not been a normal winter on the ridges near Goodwin Peak and on the clear, warm night the trap lines are stretched on bobcat paths in a forest almost as dry as summer. The night is like spring except for the lowness of the Big Bear on the horizon and the position of Orien — the Hunter — in the sky. There are only three things to spoil the stillness hanging about the crests and steep cuts, a rig struggling upward on logging roads, a modern .22 caliber rifle, and the traps. Wilbur Ternyik moves quickly in the darkness, whipping down through the low brush and trees by the roadside to the trap site. As quickly he returns to the

rig and loads the gun. "There's a cat there." Back through the night — like a coyote. That cat's eyes glare in the dark from where it crouches but in an instant they are lifeless. No more cats or beaver are taken that night, nor, surprisingly are any deer seen; not even the herd of 20 elk that sometimes flee across the roads; only the first porcupine of the year. Coyote was the chief god of the Clatsop Indians — Ternyik's tribe — and in many ways the Florence city councilman and port commissioner resembles this animal. With movements much like the coyote, Ternyik's face has been carved by years spent outdoors stabilizing dunes with beachgrass plantings and his wiry, greying hair looks as though the wind

has been its only comb. There's something about the piercing gaze of the eyes and the assessment they make that looks a lot like Indian drawings of the great Speelyai. By legend, coyote made the Indian tribes by scattering the remains of a beaver he had slain at the mouth of the Columbia — where the pieces fell the tribes sprang up. Coyote had the qualities of the animal and of humans: He was cunning, sometimes violent, and sometimes took unfair advantage. He was wise and helpful, sometimes full of folly and sometimes childish. But he was a friend to the Indians, whose other gods exercised their wrath on man. He could see or sense all. But, above all else, coyote was a loner.

**On north coast**  
The 50-year-old social critic and activist was born in Warrenton on the Northern Oregon coast to a family with Indian ancestry. His mother was a descendent of Celiast, the daughter of Chief Gobway of the Clatsops. Celiast was married by Jason Lee, Oregon's first preacher, to Solomen Smith and they became the first farm family on the Clatsop plain. A product of his Indian past, Ternyik is a master outdoorsman, and he and his wife, Joyce, collect a variety of artifacts ranging from baskets and carvings to antique books relating to Indian history. Ternyik also is a well-known antique gun collector. He has carved a replica of what could one day be his burial canoe. "I'm looking for a cedar log now . . . it has to be big

enough so I can take all the things I'll need with me," Ternyik says with a wry grin. But he's serious about teaching his sons the ways of the woods, including hunting and trapping. Ternyik carries his knowledge of nature and the ways of man to his work and community activities. Possibly no other man on the Oregon coast has had as much experience with sand and sea and the effects of politics on them. At 16, Ternyik worked on the giant U.S. Soil and Conservation Service dune stabilization project at Warrenton and has been involved in the field — one-way-or-another — since then. "The Pacific coast is probably the best place in the world, under normal conditions, to grow beach grass," Ternyik notes. He has a nursery currently which produces the grass, and handles stabilization and other planting contracts, too. The planting season for beach grass is from November to April, but with the dry weather this year planting has been delayed, so Ternyik has had time to add to his children's education fund by trapping.

Grass "combs" are planted and harvested to obtain further combs in two years. Usually three spikes of grass, with only the bud-end remaining are punched about a foot-deep in the sand by workers bending over the rising dunes. Plants are fertilized about two weeks after planting and it takes about 58 million plants to stabilize an acre of dune, Ternyik said. He ought to know. In his lifetime he's helped stabilize more than 5,000 acres of dunes throughout the United States. Each year, his nursery handles about 70 million plants. He wrote the specifications the USGS now uses for contract bids on dune stabilization nationwide and is a frequent consultant offering expert testimony to all levels of government and industry.

### Public service

Ternyik punctuates these outdoor pursuits with hordes of hours spent weekly in public service. And it's here that some of his critics can't figure Wilbur Ternyik out. For a man who loves nature, who knows its cycles, and who understands what man has done to it, Ternyik comes across in public as an enigma. He is a constant, articulate and vocal critic of land and resource management in Oregon and in the nation and frequently he sounds like the rallying, cries of others who haven't the knowledge to back up their objections. An example should suffice: Ternyik feels the runway extension at the North Bend Airport is a must. He realizes that the fill required to extend the runway may environmentally harm the Coos Bay estuary. But he is a constant foe of "mitigation" the state wishes to enforce to minimize this harm — not like others who oppose the concept, however.

Ternyik notes that an environmental impact statement was required on the proposed fill, but one hasn't been required on the proposed mitigation — removal of a spoils island at the end of the current runway.

"We don't know what removal of that island could do to the estuary and no-one's even willing to study that," Ternyik notes.

And, in typical Ternyik fashion, he has sharp words for both political sides in the issue. The state, he feels, has been letting resource agencies drag their feet in finding a solution to the problem. But he's quick to add, too, that North Bend city officials have been slow to see opportunities for movement — possible funding, for instance.

Ternyik says he's now washed his hands of the issue, after his offer to help obtain study-funds from the federal government was turned down by the city.

But he expresses, again, frustration with the ways of politicians and bureaucracies.

He knows whereof he speaks: Ternyik spent four years as chairman of the Oregon Coastal Conservation and Development Commission and points with pride to federally-funded resource inventories done by the agency which will now be part of the backbone of the state's Coastal Zone Management program. He likes to get things done, he says.

But once again, the political situation of the defunct OCCDC brought frustration and Ternyik remains bitter over what he considers the state's co-opting of a good program and the loss of local government input.

Talking to Ternyik about representing constituents — he holds two elected posts and lost a race for a third in the Oregon House last November — is challenging.

"I feel I have to represent their interests. But if I couldn't live with the decision inside myself I'd have to resign. Maybe that's why I lost state office." Maybe because he sees too much of both sides of an issue.

But port and city duties still keep him in the line of fire. He wanders around with bits of lawsuits, negotiations with the Division of State Lands, Lane County planning statistics and portions of 50 other agencies and governments spilling from his head like most people exchange gossip. In fact, gossiping with Ternyik is likely to be a heady experience charged with environmental questions, personalities and years of toil on the battlefields of decision-making.

### A family man

Such a person still finds time to be what down home folks call a family man. The Ternyiks have five children; three, Matt, Mike and Kathy, still at home. At one time or another, Ternyik has

# When not outdoors, Ternyik spends hours serving public



Ternyik and his wife, Joyce

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found time to hunt, trap, camp out, bowl, skin dive, fish, golf and take part in almost every kind of recreation known to coastal man.

He's a tender-hearted soul who can say when the going gets heavy, "I've got more important things to do . . . there's my children."

Ternyik is a great story-teller, too, injecting just the right amount of color (and sometimes suspense) into a talk.

Take the time he rescued a baby seal. Ternyik and a friend discovered a baby seal washed ashore near Florence and evidently abandoned by its mother.

They immediately adopted it and gave it a splendid new home on the shores of Woahink Lake.

Soon the sounds of flapping of seal flippers could be heard throughout the house and a little seal head would peak from behind doors.

Each night Ternyik faithfully got up to bathe the critter's eyes (they dry out, out of water) and, when called by a noisy bark, to escort the little fellow down to the lake for a bathroom dip.

One clap of the hands and the seal would return to Ternyik.

The situation went on for some time, until the four or so pounds of fish filets the critter consumed each day became a

bit too much for the pocketbook.

Soon seal had a new home in a California aquarium where it waved to visitors passing by on the road outside.

A trip past the agricultural inspector on the Oregon-California border seemed to be the only evidence of the nasty side of seal's character: Housed in an orange box, it took exception to being "inspected" and bit the inspector, Ternyik recalls. "It was his fault. We had assured him we weren't illegally importing fruit."

It is growing dark along South Jetty Road near the city. The dunes are a faded gold and a small wind has sprung up to wave the blades of lush beachgrass by the roadside.

More than 70 whistling swans feed in the marshes nearby, sometimes stretching their great wings and rearing back to show their stark white breasts.

Ternyik squints behind a pair of binoculars to get a closer look. "My philosophy? I have to be on the coast."

"There's no such thing as a problem that can't be solved. Man has had a drastic effect on the world. We caused the problems, so we have to figure out the answers."

"There's nothing worse than doing nothing."

### Before it's too late

Ternyik says he wants to get things done — mostly to get some basic research into resource management done before it's too late. But his essential see-it-both-ways and conservative approach comes out when he says "you've got to go slow enough, though, so you know what you're doing."

In all this Ternyik stands alone. He doesn't trust many and says his test of character is whether he'd want a person with him in battle, a feeling he carries with him from serving in the Marines in World War II.

But the bottom line is inside: "If I think something's wrong, then I can't go along with it. I don't care who says it or what it is."

"The measure of a man is whether he can admit he's wrong. If you can't do that then you don't amount to much," Ternyik says.

What makes him keep battling? Quickly: "Well, maybe it's my Indian stubbornness." Silence. Much later: "It's my children."

The sun has set now and the road winds back to town where Ternyik faces an evening city council session. In the last week he has driven hundreds of miles and spent almost every evening in meetings. His eyes are weary and he takes a last, lingering look at the swans.

Maybe it's imperceptible, maybe it's not, but it seems as though Ternyik turns back to the road with a slight squaring of shoulders, a set look about his craggy face.

"I guess I'm a loner," he says.

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