

Star Power in Oregon's Fifth District

Candidate Craig Schelske and Country Music Star Wife Sara Evans Draw National Attention to Oregon Race

by Jim Pasero

January, 2002

In David Brooks' December 2001 cover story for *The Atlantic Monthly*, the author contrasts life in Blue America/Gore (suburban Montgomery County, MD) and Red America/Bush (rural Franklin County, PA). Writes Brooks: "When I drive to Franklin County I take Route 270. After 45 minutes I pass a Cracker Barrel-Red America condensed into chain-restaurant form. I've crossed the Meatloaf Line;

from here on there will be a lot fewer sun-dried tomato concoctions and a lot more meatloaf platters."

Ah, yes, the Meatloaf Line. Only in America.

If David Brooks were forced to draw a Meatloaf Line in Oregon (a Blue state, barely, Gore beating Bush by a few thousand votes) he'd probably find it just south of Wilsonville, somewhere between Langdon Farms Golf Course and Aurora. This area also happens to be right smack in the middle of Oregon's Fifth Congressional District, the district in the state that represents the best mixture of the two Americas-a district with the high-tech suburbs of Lake Oswego and Wilsonville, a district that stretches from the farming community of Tillamook on the coast to the natural resource communities of Lebanon, Turner and Stayton, as well as being home to the state capital in Salem and Oregon State University in Corvallis. And this year, after the Democrats' redistricting plan takes effect, the district will even be home to a couple of sun-dried tomato restaurants in the trendy Portland neighborhood of John's Landing. That's quite a swing, from the flood-drenched dairy farms in Tillamook to the latte shops on Macadam Avenue. Welcome to Oregon's Fifth Congressional District. Welcome to Oregon's Meatloaf Line.

Here in the Fifth District the split between Red and Blue America, rural and urban America, is most pronounced. And the district, unlike Oregon's other four congressional districts, swings with the trends of the nation. Call it cliché: But as the Fifth District goes, so goes the nation. Bush carried the district over Gore in 2000, 48 percent to 46 percent. But it's the makeup of who has represented the district since its creation in 1982 that shows just how much the district swings with the nation's changing political moods.

In Ronald Reagan's America of the 1980s, Republican and former Vietnam fighter pilot Denny Smith represented the Fifth District. In 1990, as a precursor to the Clinton years, Democrat Mike Kopetski upset incumbent Smith. Four years later, on cue with the nation and the Gingrich Revolution, the district swung back Republican, with a victory by conservative Jim Bunn. Bunn's tenure in Congress was about as short-lived as the Gingrich Revolution. He was defeated in '96 by the district's present incumbent, West Linn resident Darlene Hooley. Hooley, according to Michael Barone's *Almanac of American Politics* has "a mostly liberal record," with support for campaign finance, light

rail, free trade, cutting the estate tax, abortion rights and Oregon's assisted suicide law. Hooley's record fit the district perfectly in Bill Clinton's America.

Writes Charlie Cook, the nation's top congressional forecaster: "Hooley is one of the luckier members of Congress. Though she sits in a very marginal district that has a history of ousting incumbents, she has won her two reelection bids easily, due in large part to the fact that Republicans have failed to recruit a top-tier challenger against her."

But, redistricting could make this district even more marginal in 2002 and, if Republicans were ever to find a serious candidate, Hooley would have her hands full."

Cook could be wrong about redistricting helping Republican chances in 2002, but what may help GOP chances is the changing national mood post-September 11 in a district so sensitive to the national climate.

Suddenly, not only does Hooley have one quality opponent in 2002—she has two. They are Republicans Craig Schelske and Brian Boquist. Suddenly, the Meatloaf Line may not be a static line in Oregon's Fifth.

Who are Craig Schelske and Brian Boquist? Let's begin with Craig Schelske.

David Brooks writes in his cover story about those things that Blue America does and doesn't know about Red America: "Don't ask us, please, what life in Red America is like. We don't know. We don't know who Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins are, even though the novels they have co-written have sold about 40 million copies over the past few years. We don't know what James Dobson says on his radio program, which is listened to by millions. We don't know about Reba or Travis."

People who live in Blue America may not know about Reba and Travis, but those in the urban areas of the Fifth District are going to soon learn about the woman who spent last summer touring with Reba McEntire (appearing in late July at the Rose Garden in the concert series "Girls Night Out"), who entertained and then prayed with the farmers last August in Klamath Falls, who sang for then-nominee and now President Bush in his campaign stop at the Rose Garden in October 2000, and who entertained our troops—the 101st Airborne Division—at Fort Campbell, Ky. with the President on the day before last Thanksgiving. That woman's name is Sara Evans, and she's a country star, a big country star, nominated in 2000 for seven Country Music Awards (including song of the

year, and album of the year). She won the award for Music Video of the Year for "Born to Fly" and her recent CD of the same title went double platinum, with three Top-10 singles. Her best friends just happen to be Martina McBride and Faith Hill, and she just recently moved back home to Oregon, to the Fifth District, to Aumsville, so that her husband and former manager Craig Schelske could run for office. Congress that is.

Set a spell...take your shoes off...and we'll tell you the rest of the story.

People magazine recently said about Sara Evans' career and about her phenomenal success with her third album "Born to Fly": "Her distinctive voice has made an impression. Singer Bruce Hornsby, who played piano on "Born to Fly," says she has the good looks to rival Shania Twain or Faith Hill—the good looks, great voice, great personality."

That's star power, Red America-style star power, but some in Oregon political circles are still discounting Craig Schelske's chances, because as one political consultant put it: A) You've got to live here, and B) It works better when you're the famous one, like Fred Grandy (Gopher on "The LoveBoat"), and not your spouse. Darryl Howard, the chairman of Oregon's Republican Party isn't buying that naysaying:

"I've got a great interest in Craig as a candidate," says Howard. "He has great assets; he's knowledgeable on the issues, and he under-stands why he believes what he believes." Howard is also impressed with the potential star power that Craig could bring to Oregon Republican politics. "I've worked with high profile candi-dates before, like Jim Ryun (track and field star) of Kansas and you know you start with an advantage. Because of who Craig's wife is, everybody's interested."

Craig Schelske, 38 years old and handsome, seeking office for the first time, knows he will have his critics for having returned to live in Oregon for less than a year and for running with the backdrop of a famous spouse. But the native of Stayton doesn't care.

"For those who say I'm a carpetbagger," says Schelske, "I say bring it on. Yes, I was gone for a few years, but all of my ancestors are buried here, every molecule of my body is made out of the dirt of Jefferson, Oregon and the water of the Santiam River."

It might be easy for a somewhat jaded political Oregon press to dismiss Schelske's candidacy as too young, too new, and the wrong spouse. After all it has been quite awhile since Oregon voters took young candidates like Mark Hatfield and Bob Packwood, both of whom were younger than Schelske when they were first elected (Governor and U.S. Senator respectively), and gave them high office. But that would be dismissing the success story of two people who followed a dream against, as always in the entertainment business, long, long odds. It also discounts the riches to rags to riches story of Craig Schelske's life.

On the day that Craig Schelske graduated from college in 1987, his family's farm in Stayton was foreclosed on by the federal government. Like many farmers across America, the Schelskes got in financial trouble when they took loans from the federal government's Farmer's Home Administration during the 1970s. During the latter part of the decade inflation ran in the double digits. In the early 1980s American farmers found their loans impossible to service, once Reagan and Paul Volker decided to clamp down on a too, too liquid American money supply.

Schelske recalls what those years were like for a family of seven children whose parents had both grown up on Willamette Valley farms:

"During those years power was shut off; there was no money for food. My parents went on food stamps. They were prideful, proud Americans. It was humiliating."

Craig remembers his father selling crops on the side for cash without telling the government so that the family could survive, only to have the federal government clamp down on the family. His father responded by taking the money and buying his mother a gold ring. "My parents had a horrible quarrel about that ring but it was my father's way of showing defiance." His parents would later separate because of the stress of losing the farm. Years later they would eventually reconcile. "Losing the farm hurt my mother even

more than my father. She was decimated. It was the home she raised her kids in. It was her American dream.”

In desperate need for cash after losing the farm, Craig, his father, and one of his brothers went to Alaska to fish. “I picked up my diploma (from Oregon State) and flew to Alaska. After a couple of days I could see that my father and brother were stressed out, and I said ‘give me a sense of what we’re dealing with here,’ and my dad said we’ve got \$120 to our names. It was a low point. “Fourteen months later we were doing \$1.2 million in the seafood processing business in Alaska and my father had put enough together for a down payment on a house. We could come home.”

In 1989 Craig and his brothers formed a country music band. They were hoping to emulate the hit group Alabama which is made up of cousins. In ’91 they left for Nashville and that summer Craig met Sara, a Missouri native, while both were working as room service waiters at a Nashville Holiday Inn.

“Sara and I had a lot in common from the start,” says Craig, “Like me, she is the third oldest from a family of seven children, and our grand-parents coincidentally share the same first names.” Sara, like Craig, had also known hard times as a child. When she was eight she was run over by a car going 75 mph on a road adjacent to the family farm in New Franklin, Mo. and broke both her legs. Her parents divorced when she was young. Now 30, Sara told CMT (Country Music Television) that when she met Craig at the Holiday Inn, because she was nine years younger, it took a while to convince him he wasn’t robbing the cradle.

In the summer of ’91 Craig talked Sara into coming to Oregon, and as Sara told People magazine, when she met Craig “my career plans went right down the toilet,” at least as far as Nashville was concerned. From ’92 to ’95 Craig and Sara formed a band and lived in Oregon, mostly in Wilsonville.

What was Sara’s reaction to being an Oregonian?

Not happy with the weather. “The rain made the biggest impression,” says Sara, “and the gray. It took some getting used to. And the Oregon mentality also took some getting used to. I’m from Missouri, a religious state. It’s very different here. People are afraid to spank their kids here.”

Along the way from 92-95 Sara and Craig and their “North Santiam Band” played the local I-5 haunts. “We probably played at the T & R restaurant in Albany more than 20 times,” says Craig, “and The Drum on Division (Street) in Portland more than 100 times.”

Sara remembers those days this way: “We played five nights a week and I worked days at Incredible Universe. It was always raining, and working a day job, I was homesick. When I left, I thought, I’ll never come back to this place, ever.”

Did Craig know that Sara had the talent to become a big star? “All I knew was that when she sang, people cried.”

The other person who knew a little about Sara’s talent was Willie Nelson who saw her perform one summer in Sisters, Ore. Craig remembers Willie telling Sara, “I’ll just tell

you this—you need to get to Nashville and give this thing a go. I haven't heard many voices as good as yours—you can compete with the best of them."

It's a little ironic that Willie Nelson would happen to hear Sara sing in central Oregon and then advise her to go to Nashville. Because more than 35 years earlier, in 1959, Willie Nelson had been a disc jockey at KVAN in Vancouver, Wash. when another songwriter passed through the North-west and gave Willie the same advice he would give Sara more than a generation later. The woman's name was Mae Axton and the song she was promoting in Vancouver was Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel." Mae spent more time telling Willie to go to Nashville than she did promoting her hit. Two years later Willie Nelson would be in Nashville handing Patsy Cline the material for the legendary hit, "Crazy." Nice of Willie to return the favor.

And Sara was ready to go. "I wanted to go to Nashville so bad. There is only so far you can go in country music in the Northwest."

Back in Nashville, Sara and Craig met veteran songwriter Harlan Howard, author of another Patsy Cline smash, "I Fall To Pieces." Howard helped Sara get a record deal in '97. Craig remembers the meeting: "Harlan came up to hear Sara sing. He sat down on the couch while she was cutting the songs...the man drinks and smokes 24 hours a day. When she came out he was smoking a cigarette and he said, 'Hey, were you that little girl in there singing? Sit down; I want to talk to you. I want to tell you something. You remind me of Loretta Lynn.'"

From there, Sara's deal with RCA was launched. She released her first album, "Three Cards and the Truth," in '97. But it was her second album, "No Place That Far," that went gold, and the title track went No. 1. Another big hit from the album was "The Crying Game."

In '99 Craig and Sara became the parents of a baby boy, Avery. Last year Avery played at the RCA studio every day while his mother recorded the double platinum smash hit "Born To Fly," with the hit singles "Born To Fly," "I Could Not Ask For More," and "Saints and Angels" (released on video 11/09/01).

Sara's career has hit the big time. And that kind of success doesn't happen that often. So how does she feel about taking time off from the Nashville glitter to help her husband run for Congress? Sara answers, "My manager says I'm crazy, but Craig is like William Wallace(Braveheart) to me. He can sway people. He's the ultimate optimist. He just has a way to make people feel positive. He's the reason I stay sane. He talks me off the ledge daily."

And just why is Craig Schelske running for Congress in Oregon?

Because, as he says: "We left Oregon in '95 and went out in the nation and had success and I'd like to bring a little of that back home. Oregonians are by nature independent, but there are times when independence leads to isolation, and this is not a time to champion our isolation. This is a time to champion our unity and to plug in our vision with that of the rest of the nation. I believe that many of the leftist policies on the political landscape in Oregon are realizing their mortality.

“Night after night touring with Sara I’ve seen the faces of America, and the young people have made me realize that we’re not descending as a nation, that we have an incredible future, and it inspired my sense of patriotism and made me realize that I had a role to play. My heart remains with Oregon. I’d like to help.”

Sara for her part remains a little cautious of the Oregon media and the liberal nature of the state. “I remember watching the press at a George W. fundraiser in October at the Rose Garden (Sara sang the national anthem). There were a lot of people there and a couple of times W. would say something and they (the press) would roll their eyes.”

Welcome to Oregon’s Fifth District. Can Brave-heart expand the Meatloaf Line?

When the Stars Align—(The Once and Future Challenger)—Brian Boquist

“As one lobbyist recently told me,” says Brian Boquist, “when the stars align, they align, and for you they’ve aligned in the Fifth District.”

That lobbyist isn’t the only one talking about the renewed possibilities aligning around Republican candidate Brian Boquist who two years ago lost a not-so-very-close race to incumbent Democrat Darlene Hooley, 57 percent to 43 percent. Two years ago, Boquist, whose politics might be described as somewhere between Ronald Reagan and Bob Barr, might have been thought of as too conservative for Oregon’s Fifth District, much in the way that Winston Churchill was thought of as too bellicose for a 1930s England. But September 11th changed America, and it may have changed the politics in Oregon’s Fifth Congressional District. Changed it enough for Boquist to be elected. September 11th may have just made it possible that a candidate with as diverse, sophisticated and complex a background as Boquist’s could be the right fit for Oregon in wartime America.

After all:

No other candidate in Oregon was taken hostage in 1996 by a nine-year-old boy with an AK-47 when his company, International Charter Inc., was on a peacekeeping mission in Monrovia, Liberia. What other candidate so understands the modern face of war—children with submachine guns?

No other candidate helps run a civilian aviation company that operates on six continents, specializes in humanitarian and peacekeeping missions and has 15 employees in Oregon and 40 worldwide.

No other candidate’s company helped administer elections in Haiti, and peacekeeping efforts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria, and the Sudan, and was awarded contractor of the year by the United States Department of State.

No other candidate in the Fifth District has more than 24 years experience in the U.S. Army as a Green Beret, a Lieutenant Colonel, Special Forces, U.S. Army Reserve.

No other candidate spent late September at an American army base in Italy lecturing our troops on bio-terrorism and then went on to brief members of Congress with a paper entitled Asymmetrical Attack on America & Possible Responses.

No other candidate can draw on such a wide breadth of experience as helping in humanitarian relief work in Afghanistan while at the same time serving on the school board in Perryville, Ore.

Brian Boquist's experiences are in sharp contrast to incumbent Hooley's—sharper even after September 11. Says Darryl Howard, chairman of the Oregon Republican Party, "Hooley cast four votes out of four to cut our intelligence capabilities in the last two sessions of Congress." Boquist, on the other hand, "would be a great member of Congress at this point in our nation because there are too few members of Congress who have served in his capacity in the military and understand the military theatres of the world... You talk to him one day and a week and a half later he's been to Africa, met with a general, and he's back in this country and he doesn't miss a beat. He's got a depth of background that does not come along every day—a Lt. Colonel who knows what he wants and where he wants to go... And Brian calls them like he sees them."

You can certainly say that again. Ask Boquist a question and you're likely to get a Boquistism, and none too politically correct. You also just might get a lecture.

Here's a sample:

- On his opponent Craig Schelske: "He's a great guy, but we're at war, our economy is in the toilet and our education system hasn't improved."
- On the federal role in education. "We saw on Sept. 11 how D.C. did with defense intelligence. We need local control for education."
- On the United Nations: "Most corrupt agency in the world."
- On American reliance on oil: "It may be that this administration needs to say that if we're going to survive, we need to tell the Saudis to sell sand."
- On Denny Hastert closing the House during the anthrax scare: "Mr. 'I'm running home to Illinois.' Members of Congress have to lead when they are at risk. Do our infantrymen have the option of running away?"
- On his military service during the Carter administration: "We called it McHale's Navy."
- On America abandoning its allies: "We have a good track record of it."
- On the change in America post-September 11: "In the year 2000 I knew I was ahead of my time. You recognize the problem; you know the trains are coming down the tracks; you just don't know the schedule. All of this was predictable—the terrorism, the economy. It could have arrived in October 2000, or March 2001, or September. You just don't know when it will break."
- On Clinton's effort to fight terrorism: "We spent more money on a phony war on drugs in Colombia than we did fighting terrorists."
- On Darlene Hooley's refusal to debate him in the 2000 election: "I just asked her to keep her promise to debate the issues."
- On the people of the Fifth District thinking he's Mormon because he's got six kids: "That's when I like to order a beer—I'm Catholic, not Mormon."

Boquist says he's looking forward to a primary fight with Schelske. The two know each other well and exchange emails about once a week. Two years ago, Craig and Sara even did a campaign advertisement for Boquist's race against Hooley, and Sara appeared in a

campaign brochure as well. Boquist would rather have Craig Schelske on his side than in a primary fight, but he says he's ready this time. "You've usually got to run twice to win. We knew going into the second we would fit the district better." And he does.

Where Were You On September 11? (The Incumbent)—Darlene Hooley

"I was sitting upstairs in a budget meeting at the Cannon House Office Building and I'd just heard before I went into the meeting that one of the towers had been hit by a plane. But we thought it was an accident," says Oregon's representative from the state's Fifth Congressional District, Darlene Hooley. "Then my cell phone rang and we heard that the Pentagon had been hit, and I knew it was time to get out of there. I left the building with my chief of staff, Joan Mooney. On the drive away from Capitol Hill to Anacostia we had such an eerie feeling. We saw the smoke from the Pentagon and heard for the rest of the day the sounds of police vehicles and ambulances, and the sounds of fighter planes flying low overhead.

"That afternoon we went back to the Hill for briefings and then the members went out of the steps and sang 'God Bless America.' Nobody planned to sing, it just happened. When we sang, all my emotions came out about how much I loved and cared for this country, and the sadness of the day."

Nine days later the Congresswoman was sitting in the House Chamber listening to the Pres. Bush address a Joint Session of Congress on America's War on Terrorism.

"I don't think the speech came across as dramatic on television as it did in person. All the members thought he was on target, saying the things that we wanted him to say, and giving the speech the country needed to hear."

That same week she visited Ground Zero in New York. "It was something I will never forget—the smell, the sound, and a lot of smoke still coming out from the site. We had to wear gloves and masks. There was a wash basin on every corner for people to wash their hands, and there were still body parts at the crime scene." And the Congresswoman reiterates what so many have said who have seen Ground Zero in person: "You don't get the vastness of damage until you see it in person. My memories of the damage are why I've spent the last three months in Congress just working on terrorism issues."

Three weeks later the nation's Capitol was anthraxed. Where was Darlene Hooley this time? "I was sitting in the Capitol at the time and the members were told that an anthrax letter had been sent to Daschle's office in the Senate and was being tested. I stayed in my office the rest of the day because that morning the House leadership had met with the President and decided we would leave at the end of the day. Later the Senate would decide to stay and we took criticism for leaving."

Hooley recalls working late into the night of the day of the anthrax attack because she wasn't sure when her office would be open again. "At one point I thought, why are we staying the rest of the day if we are going to close the House the next day? At the time, we didn't know that the anthrax was on the House side."

The next day the Centers for Disease Control found anthrax spores in the Longworth House Office Building, where Hooley's office is located. The building was closed for a

week, and members needed to improvise if they wanted to keep working. Hooley says of her improvised office, “I remember sitting around my tiny apartment that week on Capitol Hill with members of my staff, watching them use their cell phones and laptops all around my kitchen table.”

It was during the anthrax attack that Hooley started to get calls from friends across the nation and back in the district about her new life in the war zone. “I got lots of calls from a lot of friends who said they just wanted to know if I was okay and to tell me they were worried about me. I told them I was fine. I’m not much of a worrier.”

For a congressional member who works most closely with Democratic leaders like Rep. Steny Hoyer (MD), and ultra-partisan, liberal Democratic Whip David Bonior, (MI), and who specializes in domestic issues, could it be frustrating to be serving now in a wartime America and not in Bill Clinton’s America? “Yes, it is frustrating to be in a war culture,” admits Hooley, “but there’s been a general agreement to put aside our domestic agendas until next year and come together to fight terrorism. That’s why I’ve worked on my committee (Financial Services Committee) to help pass a bill to stop the flow of money to terrorists and a stimulus package to help the economy.”

As for whether the Democrats will recapture the U.S. House in the year 2002? “It’s not a question that’s been on the forefront of my mind this year.”

And as for her thoughts on President George W. Bush, the congresswoman is pretty emphatic: “He’s done a really good job of handling this war.”

Dislodging Darlene Hooley

If Darlene Hooley, elected in ’96 from Blue America sounds now like she is ready for life in wartime Red America, veteran political watchers are not surprised. Scott Ashcom, an Oregon lobbyist for the nurserymen says, “Darlene has always listened to her constituents, rather than acting in an ideological manner. She did this when she served in the legislature in Salem. It’s hard to dislodge a politician who takes care of her constituents.”

Dislodging Darlene Hooley from Congress is now the full-time occupation for two Republican candidates in Oregon’s Fifth Congressional District, Craig Schelske and Brian Boquist. Will they be successful? The question has two parts. First, how much can a Blue state politician like Darlene Hooley morph into a Red state politician? And, second, just how much further north toward the Portland suburbs will the new wartime America move the Meatloaf Line that divides the district’s urban and rural cultures?

David Brooks concludes his Atlantic Monthly cover story with a summation of what has changed in America since Sept 11. “If the attacks rallied people in both Red and Blue America, they also neutralized the political and cultural leaders who tend to exploit the differences between the two. Americans are in no mood for a class struggle or a culture war.”

True, Americans are in no mood for extremist domestic politics, but they’ll also admit that much of Bill Clinton’s America is now, post-Sept.11, “Gone With The Wind,” and those politicians too stuck to those times will depart as well. So far, Hooley is proving adaptable, but the time’s they are a-changing.