

Preacher Roy Masters brought controversy, uproar to Josephine

Between 1979 and 1985, he urged his followers to move here, fought the county for church tax exemption

By Edith Decker
of the Daily Courier

He was seen as a menace, a crackpot, a windbag not to be worried about and a genuine prophet — depending on who you talked to. But there's no doubt that Roy Masters was a newsmaker in Southern Oregon during the 1980s and '90s.

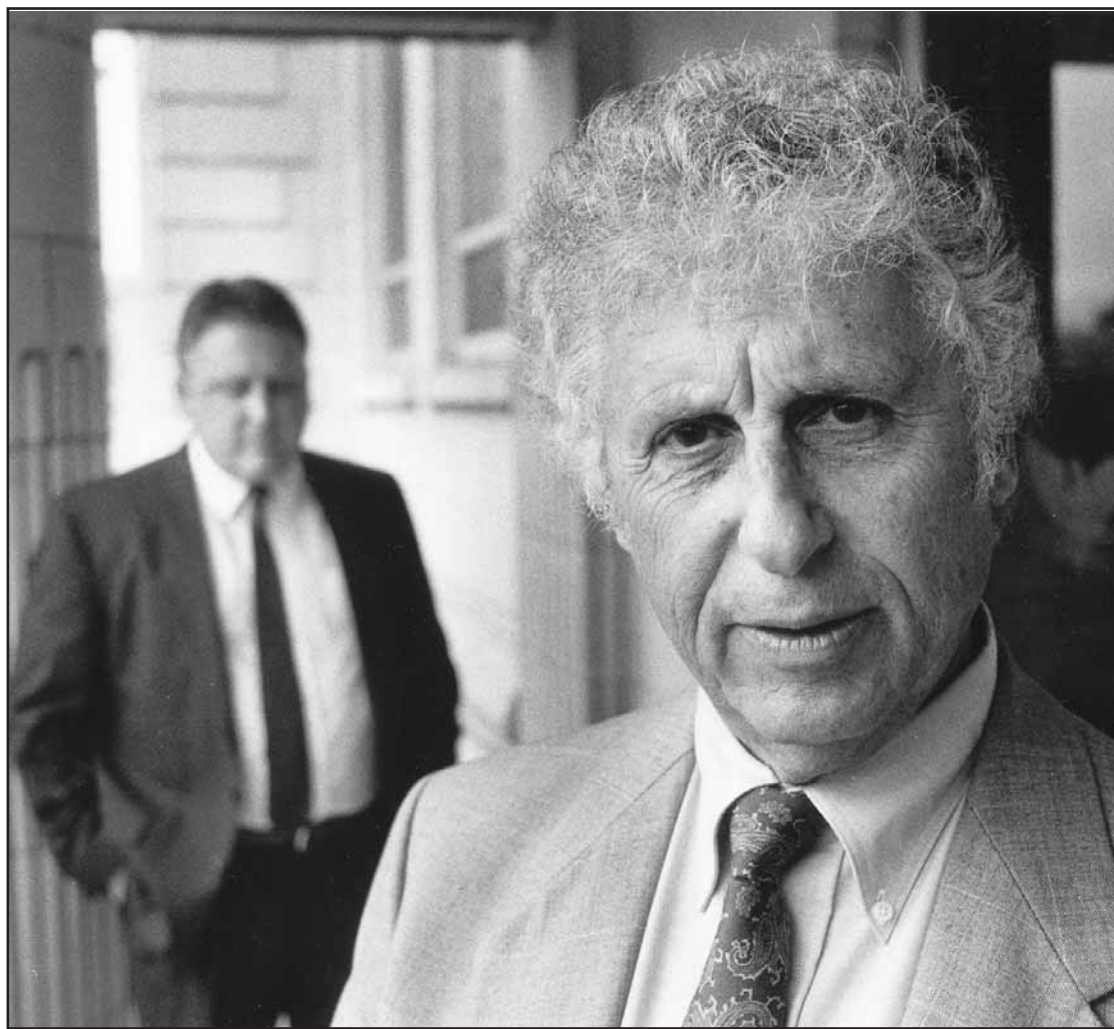
In the milieu of fear over cult leaders like Jim Jones and the Bhagwan Rajneesh, and at a time when equal rights for women were being demanded, not asked for, Josephine County was in an uproar about Masters and his Foundation of Human Understanding.

Masters, whose original name was Ruben "Roy" Obermeister, was a British citizen and professional hypnotist who developed a method of meditation and a philosophy of life and religion that he promoted on his nationwide radio shows beginning in 1961, and through the sale of tapes and books.

Originally based in Los Angeles, Masters moved his foundation to Josephine County, first buying the Tall Timbers Ranch in Selma in 1979, which remains the headquarters for the foundation, then the former Seventh-day Adventist Church at 111 N.E. Evelyn Ave., and next the building that would become Brighton Academy.

Between 1979 and 1985 in particular, Masters urged his followers to move to Josephine County to start businesses, be independent, send their children to his school and the ranch to learn hands-on rather than out of books and be part of the growing foundation community here.

Masters had connections with survivalists. He taught that women should be subordinate to men and that it was the mother of a family who was typically at fault for any family problems. He performed exorcisms.



Roy Masters is seen with his then-attorney Jeff Boiler in background in July 1991.

Almost immediately, the presence of Masters and the foundation caused controversy, not just philosophically, as one would expect, but politically.

Josephine County government — in the form of a succession of tax assessors — resisted declaring the foundation a church and denied tax exemption. A long series of suits and judgments ensued, with flare-ups reappearing as the foundation added other properties and projects through the years. By and large, Masters won that battle in 1986 as the foundation was declared a church and therefore nearly all properties became tax exempt.

Masters had other battles with Josephine County commissioners and another ongoing issue with the Josephine County Sheriff's Office over his

license to carry a concealed weapon. The license was revoked in 1983 when Masters' original name was discovered and the sheriff found three previous arrests, while Masters claimed on his application for the permit that he had never been arrested. Eventually Masters lost this battle.

Although a church cannot be involved in politics and retain its IRS tax-exempt status, ministers of the foundation, including Michael and Mark Masters, Roy's sons, formed political organizations like Citizens for Common Sense Government in 1983 which supported a recall of anti-Masters County Commissioner Bill Ford. Another son, David Masters, signed recall petitions and Roy Masters himself bought ads about issues at the Sheriff's Office.

Foundation members packed a Grants Pass city budget meeting in July 1983 demanding no cuts in services but fewer taxes — although it was pointed out the group's leaders all lived in the county, not the city. Later, the foundation was linked to the group A Few Good Men, which espoused conservative politics in the county and met at the Tall Timbers Ranch. The foundation was also linked to People United for Responsible Education, a group against school levies.

Masters kept his lawyers busy with suits against Us magazine for libel, against the state for allowing a candidate to suggest the foundation was a cult in the Voters' Pamphlet, against Sheriffs Jim Carlton and Jim Fanning over the con-

cealed-weapon permit, and against the Daily Courier to obtain the release of documents about its sources for stories.

But the granddaddy of them all was a \$2 billion suit filed in 1988 against a huge list of people ranging from Gov. Neil Goldschmidt and state officials Dave Frohnmeyer and Barbara Roberts down to local school board members and even Daily Courier reporters, for maintaining a "good old boy" network that denied Masters his rights.

Masters was not as fortunate with these suits as he had been in proving his foundation was tax exempt. But he did gain publicity.

Meanwhile, many locals avoided businesses owned by Masters' followers, and the word "Roybot" became part of the local vocabulary. It was a word Masters himself coined, he said in an early Courier article, but he was referring to one of his followers who took his teaching too far, while around Josephine County, it became a general term for all of his followers.

Several former believers were speaking out against the foundation and Masters by 1991 when a series of investigative articles appeared in the Daily Courier.

In April 1991, the main church at 111 Evelyn went up for sale, as did the foundation's zoo in Cave Junction, run by Master's daughter and son-in-law. In 1992, Masters sold his Los Angeles headquarters for over \$1 million. KOPE radio was sold to a Kentucky company, mainly because personality Art Bell was a top draw. Masters can still be heard via the Internet.

A schism in the family and health problems for Masters have unsettled the foundation. In 2001, the IRS began an investigation of the foundation and ultimately revoked its church status retroactively to Jan. 1, 1998, a decision confirmed in July 2009. The foundation remains registered as a 501(c)(3) charity.

While quiet locally, the foundation continues to receive donations and fees for books and materials from around the country. Tall Timbers Ranch remains open to followers.

From the pages of the
Courier

APRIL 25, 1990
While National Organization for Women President Molly Yard spoke in the Women's Club Auditorium Tuesday, a pair of rival crowds, divided by a row of uniformed police, chanted slogans outside.

"Molly go home! Molly go home!" shouted hundreds of protesters who swarmed around the building and lined both sides of Sixth Street.

"You go home! You go home!" cried a smaller, pro-choice crowd on the steps.

DEC. 12, 1992
Grants Pass men tended to support Senator Bob Packwood in his current sexual harassment scandal, whereas women condemned him in an informal on-the-street survey Friday, but few saw the issue in black-and-white terms.

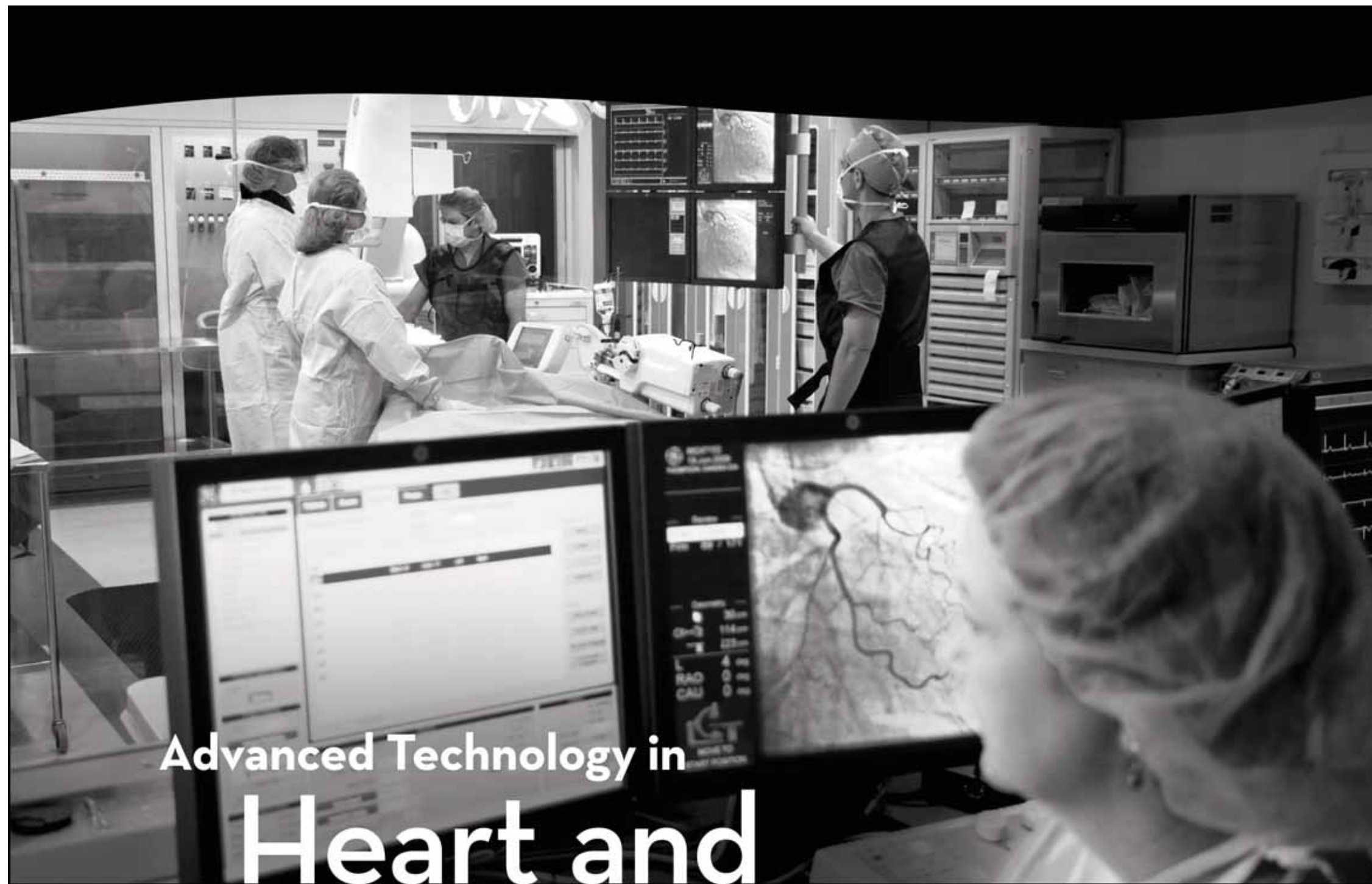
MAY 27, 1994
A prayer for salmon will be held today during the second Takilma Salmon Ceremony.

Agnes Baker Pilgrim, elder spokeswoman of the Rogue Band Takelma Indians and a member of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz, will perform the salmon ceremony beginning at 6 p.m. at Out 'N' About Bed and Breakfast, 300 Page Creek Road.

JAN. 11, 1996
A jury took only 2 1/2 hours Wednesday to find Jack Harelson guilty on all charges relating to Indian artifacts dug up and stolen from a Nevada cave on public land.

The conviction leaves the door open for Indian groups and the Bureau of Land Management to pursue civil charges against Harelson, who dug up artifacts, including baskets that contained the bodies of two children, from BLM land in the early 1980s.

Harelson, 55, of Grants Pass could face jail time and be fined more than \$2 million in restitution.



Advanced Technology in

Heart and Vascular Care

Our new Cardiovascular Lab allows a team of highly trained specialists to assist your physicians in evaluating your heart and vascular system—creating better outcomes through better medicine.



**THREE RIVERS
COMMUNITY HOSPITAL**

www.trch.org

EXCELLENT CARE
in our community