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Iron Thumb, Beavers, and Me

Beavers started building a dam against the upstream openings of three five-foot diameter culverts where Lone Pine Creek flows under the dirt road that winds up the ranch I took care of for The Girl Scouts in the Rocky Mountains of northern Colorado. I visited the culverts several mornings to see how much the beavers had built during the night and to see if their slowly-rising pond created problems for the road. The fourth morning, water flowed over the dam and down the outside of one culvert three feet up the culvert. If it ran that way for long, it would wash the culvert and the road out.

To lower the water level, I removed willows beavers had cut and floated into place in their dam. Smells of willows, cut willows, growing plants, clean water, dust from the road blew around me as I worked. Water sang softly, inexorably, toward the sea. Birds sang in mountain sunshine, and breezes blew their songs to me.

I drove back down the ranch and phoned Iron Thumb, a trapper and historian and asked him to come up, look the situation over, and see if he could trap and move the beavers.

Iron Thumb performed at schools, festivals, scout events, and fairs, dressed as and carrying the equipment of and doing the work of a Mountain Man, teaching by his performances how early trappers worked and lived in these mountains. Early in his career, he worked a design of porcupine quills into moccasins. He jabbed the sharp quills painfully into his thumb many times. He thought he would have to develop an iron thumb to continue his work, and he adopted his nick name.

Iron Thumb drove up the mountain just after sunrise and parked his car in front of my house. We climbed into the Girl Scout truck and drove up the ranch through forest and meadow. Granite rock thrust toward mountain blue sky both sides of the decomposed-granite road. We drove into open meadow, stopped, climbed down from the truck, and looked at the beginning of a beaver dam against the culverts.

Iron Thumb said, "Department of Wildlife will move beavers, but I don't know anyplace that needs beavers right now. You got to move 'em spring of the year to give 'em time to build their lodges and store food.

"These'll be young beavers. Their parents are kickin' 'em

out of the lodge somewhere downstream. They explore upstream every night, but they go back to the lodge during the day. They're trying out this part of the creek. They cut willows and let 'em drift in the current. Willows stopped right there, against the culvert, so they looked it over, 'Yeah, that's a good place, so we'll build a dam there.' If you convince 'em it isn't a good place, they'll move upstream. Any beavers above here?"

"I don't think anybody's maintained dams and ponds above here for at least two years."

Iron Thumb said, "Let's take a look." We walked through meadow grass to where willow bush began. We struggled through dense willows so we could stay close enough to the creek to see it. Spring sunshine warmed the morning at 7,700 feet. A granite ridge forested with juniper trees, ponderosa pine trees, fir trees, brush, grass, and flowers rose steeply to our right. The creek, eight feet wide and two feet deep, crowded close to a steep, red granite bluff and forced us onto the trail worn into meadow and forest by scouts and their leaders and by wild animals. The other side of the creek, bluffs rose steeply toward the sky.

I said, "I vote we climb this bluff and see the creek from up on top." I couldn't keep up with Iron Thumb along the creek, ducking under, stepping over, struggling between willows. Injuries I suffered when a drunk driver hit me 28 years before had begun catching up with me as I aged. Diminishing strength and stamina and a deteriorating sense of balance slowed me down over rough ground.

Iron Thumb said, "Yeah. Let's try that."

White, black, green, grey lichen, red and pink lichen grew from the red granite we climbed. Bushes, flowers, grass, and small trees grew from every crack in stone.

Iron Thumb scrambled to the top of the bluff and stood in mountain sunshine. I followed him up, walked past him, and sat down on a boulder. Lone Pine Creek, below us, flowed oceanward and reflected mountain sunshine. The canyon spread wider between ridges upstream from us. Willows grew densely along the creek. I said, "Three years ago, beavers lived along here, but every place I've gone to the creek since then, they're gone. All the dams washed out."

"Tularemia. An epidemic spread up this part of the creek and killed the beavers."

"More reason to encourage beavers to come farther up the creek."

Iron Thumb said, "Beavers do good work. They keep the

willows thinned down, and their ponds and marshy areas around the ponds create habitat for a lot of other wildlife.”

“Yeah, you have a soft spot in your heart for beavers. Me too. The culverts weren’t packed in tight enough. Keeps washing down the outside of the culvert like that, it’ll wash the road out. If it comes to saving the road or saving the beavers, my supervisor’s going to tell me to kill the beavers and save the road. Girl Scout motto is, ‘We care for the earth,’ but roads are expensive to build. The way my supervisor see it, roads win if it comes to a choice between roads and beavers. I’ll see who’s more persistent, me or the beavers.”

We walked back to the truck, and I drove back down the ranch. I said, “I’ll pay you for your time.”

He said, “No you won’t. Call me if you need me.” We shook hands. He got in his car and drove back into the world. I got the All Terrain Vehicle out of the shop, rode up the ranch, and took the beaver dam out.

I checked the culverts every few days. I took the dam out every time the beavers rebuilt it. I didn’t give them time to pack mud over the willows they built into the dam. I climbed down in front of the culvert, stood on the dam, grabbed a willow, pulled it free from the tangle, and threw it up on the shoulder of the road as far away as I could, so there’d be room for more later, grabbed the next willow.

Willows still growing beside the stream hung into the running stream and crowded me when I worked. The culverts are five feet in diameter, and I had to work inside to get some of the branches. I’m five eleven. Pulling branches out of a tangle, stooped over, unable to stand up straight and stretch back muscles, wore me out fast. But part of the reason I took care of that ranch was to protect wildlife.

The third time I wrote, “Took out beaver dams.” on my weekly work report, Nancy said, “You can’t use any more of your time taking out beaver dams. You’ll have to come up with another solution.”

“Do you have a suggestion?”

“Don’t you want beaver coats for your daughters?”

Before we moved to Magic Sky ranch, where the beavers dammed the culverts, we took care of Tomahawk Ranch, farther south in the Rocky Mountains. Swallows built 56 mud nests on the house Girl Scouts provided us. We loved watching the swallows catch insects from the air in their swooping, dodging, darting flight. We watched them pick up mud by the pond, fly up to the eaves of the house and build their nests, a

regurgitated swallow of mud at a time.

When Nancy, property manager and my supervisor, saw the nests, she said, "Put a nozzle on your hose and wash those nests down. The swallows make a mess."

"Not me," I said. "There's babies in those nests. They'll die if I destroy the nests."

"You shouldn't have let them build on the house in the first place. They make a mess."

"Nobody told me to keep swallows from building nests on the house. I like having them there. For one thing, they keep the insects down. We clean up the mess as we go along. If you have a policy like that, you have to let me know about it ahead of time. I'm somewhat psychic but not that much."

"Okay, I didn't tell you before, but I'm telling you now. Wash the nests down and keep the swallows from rebuilding."

"When the young fledge and leave the nests, I'll wash them down. Nobody's going to remove those nests until then while I'm ranch manager."

Nancy gave in and said I could wash the nests down after the young fledged, but her friendship with me and my wife and our two daughters ended then and never got started again, though I worked for the scouts another eight years. She never forgave me for crossing her. She often made our work and our existence more unpleasant than it needed to be after that, but we only saw her once a month, and she didn't push unpleasantness hard enough to be a large problem. She knew good site managers for the ranches weren't easy to find.

She didn't like my forthrightness, but she did like my reliability and the quality of my work. My family and I lived in beautiful country and felt in contact with the earth and the abundant wildlife around us, so working for the scouts was still a good experience for us.

We kept goats, horses, donkeys, rabbits, chickens and ducks at Tomahawk Ranch. At a staff meeting early in our time with the scouts, I said the goats needed their hooves trimmed. The program manager, said, "That isn't part of your job, Jon, to interfere in managing the animals. Those goats are on lease, and we're not going to pay for hoof trimming. You just do your own job and don't worry about the animals."

I said, "You can't tell me that anymore than you can tell me to mind my own business if I see someone abusing one of the campers. If nobody trims their hooves, the goats can't stand or walk right, and that causes deformity of their bones. It's abuse to neglect animals and allow them to suffer deformity. If you

aren't going to call anyone in to trim their hooves, I'll do it."

I did. We made it a family job. Laura, Juniper, and Amanda held the goats down while I trimmed their hooves. I wrote the time down on my work sheet, and nobody objected, possibly because I was working sixty hours a week without overtime pay, so if a small part of my time went to work I thought was necessary while no one else did, who could object? But I wasn't as popular with the management as I had been.

I rarely saw women from the Denver office, even less after we moved to Magic Sky Ranch, farther from the Denver office. The halftime job at Magic Sky gave me more time to write and allowed me to keep working through more and more trouble with old injuries causing me problems and trying to interfere with the completion of my work.

I kept taking out the beaver dams, but I did it on my own time, and I didn't write it on my work report.

Many mornings, I strapped my rubber boots, pitchfork, and shovel onto the ATV the scouts provided for my work and rode up to see if the beavers had built anything new where the culverts let Lone Pine Creek flow under the road.

Beavers didn't want to understand what I tried to tell them, "Don't build your dam here. Move upstream." They built. I unbuilt. They built again. I pulled willows from the dam and threw them onto the bank. I shoveled out decomposed granite at the bottom of the dam.

When the stream ran unobstructed, I climbed out of the water, up the steep bank, mounted the ATV, and rode farther up the ranch. I left the ATV, climbed granite, looked miles in all directions, east through low areas in mountain ridges to the plain, a concrete plant down there twenty-five, thirty-five miles, the only sign of humans from where I stood high in sunshine above steep rock canyons, rough rock ridges.

Rock wears away, breaks, tumbles and slides, seeks lower ground. Trees grow, brush grows, currants, rabbit brush, low bush juniper and juniper trees, pine trees, firs, aspen, spruce, grass, flowers, Indian paint brush, lupine, wild roses; all seek mountain blue sky.

The elk herd browses grass and brush in a slow circle through rough canyons, open meadows and forest, far down the mountain and then back up to high country and down again, long legs, beautiful colors, wild wisdom of a kind rarely touched by humans. Sometimes I watched them. Sometimes I didn't see them during my explorations.

Fool hens froze, blended into background. Grouse and

partridges got the name “fool hens” from the mountain men Iron Thumb teaches about. The birds’ wise practice of becoming totally still protected them from predators for millennia but would not protect them from hungry human vision. Mountain men saw them standing very still and killed them with a rock or a club and ate them. I saw them move, then lost them against their background. They became lichen-covered granite. Were I starving, I would find them. They blended into background, and I walked away from them.

I could no longer walk all the way up the ranch. Sometimes, I walked from our house down to the lodge and then up through the low pass in the granite ridge and part way down the trail near the stream in the small canyon. Tiredness interfered with my control of my legs. I had to stop and rest, and I had to reserve enough energy to walk back home.

Scout leaders wanted a picnic table moved, I told them, “Gang up on the table. Make it part of your Girl Scout training. Do heavy work with small hands in groups.” Six small Girl Scouts on each side of the table, a twenty-four-legged wooden caterpillar, crawled through tall grass. The scouts who came up from the city would do things like move a picnic table once they understood they could. Learning to work well as a group was part of what they wanted to do.

I crawled under the lodge and replaced part of the kitchen drain pipe. I squeezed under the floor joists under the kitchen, cut pipe, and pushed it out of my way, glued in new plastic pipe. A two-by-twelve joist compressed my chest. Cold, hard rock pressed into my back, hips and butt while I worked. I was sore when I crawled from under and tested the plumbing. Soreness slowed me down on other work, but I gradually exercised it away.

I cleaned, waxed, sanded, and refinished floors. More and more, working on a floor on my hands and knees hurt like crazy, my knees, lower back, thighs. I wired my electric sander and then my paint brush to a long stick. I sanded and varnished the sunroom floor in the lodge while I sat in a chair, scooted the chair along and worked from sitting down.

Fierce, early spring wind scoured the mountain. In tent site two, wind picked up a picnic table, slammed it into a pine tree and smashed the table to broken pieces of wood and splinters. Wind blew the door off the latrine. Wind roared across two hundred yards of open meadow, slammed into trees in tent site two and blew down the biggest ponderosa pine tree. Roots blew up toward the sky, threw dirt a hundred feet up into the wind.

Branches smashed into the ground and broke. Branches, pieces of branches, splinters and pine needles blew in violent wind.

A month later, I cut the wind-thrown pine into firewood lengths, loaded eighty-pound rounds onto the truck, hauled them to the woodshed, and split them with the hydraulic splitter. Raven stood in the top of a pine tree, watched me work, and made hoarse comments. I thought Raven said something like, "Silly human. Look at me. I neither spin nor toil nor split wood into woodsheds, but I meet my needs every day in joyous existence."

With the Girl Scout's yellow tractor, I bladed the packed, decomposed-granite ranch road smoother while spring, summer and fall allowed the work. Winter days, blading snow off the road can be pleasant, heater in the truck blows warm air, and music plays from the radio if I want it. I roll the window up or down according to where the snow I cast into the air flies, but hitting a rock and bouncing the blade or slamming the truck to a stop isn't fun.

I shut the tractor off, stepped down in dusty sunshine, and my knee gave way, hurt like crazy as I fell. I hit the dirt I'd dragged smooth and dusty in hot summer sunshine.

I'm afraid to climb a ladder very high lately. If I get up there, and my knee gives out, I might fall. I can climb a ladder safely if I hang on with both hands. Hard to get any work done when I'm hanging on with both hands.

I rolled onto my back and lay in warm sunshine. Pain in my knee eased. I smelled granite dust and damp dirt from beneath the surface, hot oil and gasoline from the tractor. The tractor clicked and popped as the motor cooled. My rake, shovels, and a bar to pry out rocks leaned against a fir tree and waited for me. It soaked into my awareness like sunshine soaking into my physical existence: *It's time for me to leave physical labor behind. I've done what I can. This time, I ride insurance, worker's compensation, whatever there is, out of this physical labor I've been doing.*

It took a while. The doctor said work but wear a brace. The plastic, cloth, and metal brace encasing my leg and holding my knee straight threw me so far out of balance, pain in my knee spread. Exhaustion overwhelmed me. I wore the brace if people from the Denver office came up. Otherwise, I quit using the brace.

The doctor said, "It's a medical miracle that you've been this active this long, as messed up as you are. I never saw a leg so messed up." He called in fellow doctors and students and

pointed to my leg. "Isn't that a mess of a knee?" I didn't tell him he was over the line on personal sensitivity. I figured he was doing the best he could and didn't know any better.

He referred me to an orthopedic surgeon. The orthopedic surgeon asked me, "What about the brace they gave you? Does it help?"

"It cripples me worse."

"Yeah. I don't think they help. Don't use it. Start physical therapy."

Beavers completed their work shift before I drove up the ranch, early morning. Summer frost clung white to trees, brush, grass, stone, refracted sunlight into crystalline rainbow colors radiating into morning. I pulled the beavers' new work apart, threw willows up on the bank. "Come on, you guys. Move upstream. Get your act together. I'm leaving soon. For all I know, the new caretaker will follow suggestions and kill beavers. I'm doing my part, now do your part."

I checked in scouts, told them rules and recommendations for use of the ranch. Spring, fall, and winter, scouts usually only came up for weekends.

When the scouts were ready to return to the city, I inspected the facilities they had used. If necessary, I asked them for improvements in cleaning and leaving everything in order. Troops headed back toward Denver in a convoy of automobiles, gone by noon, and quiet on the ranch.

I cleaned, painted, built window screens, tried to get the engineer to use common sense to get the new reservoir filled with water from the creek and to stop the leaks from the reservoir.

The orthopedic surgeon said, "You have to get out of physical labor."

Paperwork. Wheels turned slowly. I spent a lot of my time up the ranch, far away from people, closer to elk, deer, hawks, eagles, partridges, grouse, bluebirds, trees, grass, wildflowers. I saw a beautiful rattlesnake, green, tan, and white, with deeply radiant yellow eyes. The snake crawled away from me into deep grass. I smelled grass going sere, trees getting ready for winter.

I don't want to leave this beautiful place, 750 acres of meadows, forests, huge formations of Rocky Mountain granite. National Forest on three sides. No motorized access to that part of National Forest. Few people go there. Juniper and Amanda finished their home schooling on this ranch and loved their adventures here. They fledged and flew away to college, then

into the world from this ranch.

I climb the high granite formation. Huge boulders erode from parent rock. Trees, low ground cover, cacti, flowers grow from eroded rock. Every summer, in dry times, I climb up here after lightning storms, stand in mountain wind and sunshine and look miles all directions for smoke from lightning strikes. Now, I look across forest and meadows, across the aspen-filled drainage, dry this late in summer, to the tall spires of granite Juniper named "Wizard's Fingers." Smells of granite eroding to dirt drift in wind, along with sharp smells of Juniper trees.

Intense tears from the core of my existence flow down my face. Deep melancholy tries to overpower me.

I reach to joy, appreciation, and peaceful, beautiful memories, gratitude for everything we've experienced here. Tears dry on my face in sunshine and small mountain wind. Breezes blow smells and soft sounds of the wild mountain to me. Sunshine soaks into me and fills me with fluid power.

Two weeks pass, no dam in front of the culverts. I walk up the meadow from the culverts, beside the running stream. Tall, dense grass drags at me, tries to trip me, tries to tire me out. No hurry. I keep going.

I walk up the creek above the meadow, into dense willows. A new beaver dam spans the creek. Water seeps through tangled willows coated with mud and wood chips. The beavers have made a good start on a second dam, a hundred yards upstream from the culverts.

My legs are too tired and out of control to dance, but I do it, I dance in tall grass growing in dense willows, a wild, beaver-dam jig. "Whoopee, whoopee, you guys finally got the message and saved your own lives, and I am so pleased, you better dive deep and stay down, because I could kiss a wet beaver, buck teeth and all, just grab you and hug you and give you a big, sloppy, happy kiss. Whoopee, whoopee, whoopee," until I've about overdone it.

I lie down in tall grass in hot sunshine, rest, and drift into sleep. I dream beavers swim through millennia of streams, forest, and meadows, build dams and ponds since before humans walked these mountains. I wake, get up from the earth, and walk back toward the road.

Hard times ahead of me, I know that. It turns out harder times than I can imagine from where I walk through tall meadow grass in Rocky Mountain sunshine, but a long time later, a thousand miles from the beavers of Lone Pine Creek, I make it through hard times. I never lose complete touch with

joy, thanks to power of the life force, thanks to my memories of wildlife, wild mountains the wild earth, beavers

Sometimes now, I see in my memory the new beaver dam of willow limbs, mud, bark, wood chips, beaver dung, and leaves, ponding Lone Pine Creek. Mountain water falls over the dam and flows down the mountain toward the plain. Beavers live uncounted centuries in wild mountains. Memories, images, and dreams power me through life.