

Taking the Long Way Home

As was always the case in northeastern Oregon's Whitney Valley, flurries of snow punctuated spring. Open ground that had almost dried was muddy again, with the slick and sticky mud that the clay-based soil builds there.

Sunshine in the morning, and a warm day develops. Later, I'll drive out to far-flung fences and repair them. I'll need to stabilize some of the fence, so I'm working in the barn, splitting western larch for materials to build rock jacks, structures built of wood that I'll fill with large rocks and nail fence wires to.

Juniper and Amanda went by the barn, an hour or two ago, headed up the hill north of the barn, and now Laura calls them from the house. I step out where I can see them and relay the call, and they respond, okay, they're on their way. I slip and slide through the slick mud in the corral back into the barn and start nailing rock jacks together. After a while, I'm aware that Amanda and Juniper are taking a long time coming back, and I walk through the barn and out the north doors to see what they're doing.

They're coming by a circuitous route. They walk along one ditch bank and turn onto another ditch bank. Since they are, generally, headed home, I return to my work.

Laura calls them again. I holler over and tell her they are on their way. After a while, their busy, happy chatter tells me they've almost reached the barn. They start working their way across the corral complex by walking along the tops of corral rails, or feet on the lower rails, holding to the upper rails, when the top rails won't bear their weight.

Laura calls again, and they call back, "We're coming."

I hear the edge of impatience in Laura's last call, so I walk out of the barn and say, "I think Mama's starting to get irritated. It has been quite a while since she first called you, so maybe you'd better quit playing and just get on over to the house. It's time to start school."

"Daddy, we are not playing. We're getting there as fast as we can, but Mama told us not to get our shoes muddy. This is the only way we can get there without getting our shoes muddy." An admirable goal,

steeped in obedience.

However, it seems there is a need for communication to alleviate any further irritation at their time-consuming route. I'm not under instructions to keep my boots from getting muddy, which is just as well, since they are already heavily coated. I walk directly across the corral and to the house. Muddy boots aren't allowed indoors. Laura sees me and comes to the front door. "Where are those girls? I've called them and called them."

"They're on their way. They came down the hill, then along the big ditch bank. That high ditch cuts off and runs halfway to the river. By following that, they got to that area of dense grass, and they cut across it to the ditch that runs down into the willows. Most of it, you can't see from here, but it has dense grass along its banks. That put them to the rail fence up to the corrals. They walked along the rails, and where the fence is down, there are all those boards down in the grass. Coming across those takes some time, because you have to watch for nails. Then you can get back on the fence, but that's slow going, because you have two gates to navigate. I think they had to get the gates fastened better before they could walk along them. Then they have to go almost clear around the corral to the chute, then along the top of the chute, and I think they'll go around behind the shop and around the garden."

"Why are they taking such a long way around? I want to start school."

By then, I had my boots and socks off and barefooted into the kitchen to see if there was any hot water for a cup of tea. "They're avoiding the mud, and that takes some real doing. They'll be here in a few minutes. They're just trying to obey admonitions about no muddy shoes."

I had almost finished my cup of tea when they thundered up onto the porch and in the front door. Their shoes were not totally clean, but they were free of any caked-up mud. Dirty, a little, and wet, but no caked-up mud. Laura said, "Take your shoes off, and let's get going on school."

And me, though I would have to walk a direct and muddy route back to my necessary adult work soon, I finished drinking my tea, lost in reverie, thinking about my own time, long ago, when time and distance meant nothing to me in the face of goals that might not make

sense to staid adults but knit the world together in a very sensible fashion to my unfailingly logical child's mind.